

Being Toward Birth: Natality and Nature in Merleau-Ponty

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BEING TOWARD BIRTH: NATALITY AND NATURE IN MERLEAU-PONTY

a dissertation

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2009

Abstract

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By Kascha Snavely

This dissertation articulates Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature in relation to the existential condition of "natality," as defined by Arendt. Where Heidegger emphasizes mortality in his post-metaphysical ontology, these investigations follow Merleau-Ponty and Arendt who emphasize that humans are not only mortals but "natals," beings who begin. The project has a twofold aim: 1. to present an exegesis of Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre with a special emphasis on the Nature Courses and 2. to sketch out a natal ontology in its own right. This ontology depends on Merleau-Ponty's methodological advancement beyond genetic phenomenology to generative and "poetic" phenomenology, a practice that incorporates historicity and expressivity. He offers a critique of science, particularly of evolutionary biology, that is shown to be relevant in a contemporary context. His natal ontology co-emerges with an ethical standpoint; he shows that a natural prereflective relation to a plurality of others, rather than only a single other, fundamentally conditions human existence. In a natal ontology, knowledge depends on being born with others, through a *co-naissance* of one's worldly situation.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Jeffery Bloechl for his patience and guidance in this project. My thanks also goes to Richard Kearney who has offered invaluable advice, and to my outside reader, Galen Johnson. I could not have completed this project without the help of my mother Roxanne Semon and the support of my husband, John Snively.

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Introduction: Of Being Numerous

“Shipwrecked by the singular
We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous”
– George Oppen

Natals and Plurals: Toward a Natal Ontology through Merleau-Ponty

We are not born alone, nor do we live alone. That will be basic assertion of this project. This is not a novel suggestion. But it is one that I would like to situate in a particular philosophical history. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this history is for the most part a Cartesian history. In his courses on nature, Merleau-Ponty describes how the Cartesian project marks a certain origin of modern and contemporary thought on being and nature and, perhaps more importantly, the beginning of a method for approaching the origin of one’s self and other selves. Following Merleau-Ponty, let us return to that beginning.

In his famed *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes reflects on his origin, reinitiating philosophy as a sort of naval-gazing: philosophy as reflection, as a turn toward interiority. Descartes considers his origins, but he considers these origins without regard to his exterior. Descartes ask himself: “From what source, then, do I derive my existence? Why, from myself or from my parents, or from whatever other things there are there are that are less perfect than God” (32). Initially, it seems to Descartes that his parents *caused* him: he recognizes that his parents brought him into the world. Yet this moment of appearing in the world does not satisfy Descartes’s quest for his origins. Parents, human lineage, and generation do not define sense of origin that Descartes intends; behind particular parents must lie an infinite series of other parents, and other

causes that began these other people (Descartes 34). In order to escape this evident infinite regress, Descartes returns to the classical Scholastic postulation of a metaphysical God as the absolute site and source. This God not only sets in motion the chain of events leading to Descartes's birth, but also preserves Descartes's and others existences (Descartes 34). In the third of his Meditations, Descartes proves God and thereby shows himself that he is "not alone in the world" (Descartes 29). Locked in his interiority, withdrawn from his senses, without flesh, Descartes required a metaphysical God to secure him access to the world and to company in that world.

But if, following Merleau-Ponty and his phenomenological contemporaries, we abandon the Cartesian appeal to metaphysics as the absolute origin, then we find ourselves in a post-metaphysical era searching for our origins. No longer does an appeal to classical formulations of God, the soul or freedom suffice to describe either our beginnings or our aims in life. With the end of metaphysics, philosophy no longer poses the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Instead, we look at where we stand in relation to that question, to its appearance in our tradition. We might then, as Heidegger suggests, ask instead, "How does it stand with being?" (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 27) Or, how is being disclosed? That is, how is being for the one who poses the questions? Heidegger offers these alternatives to traditional metaphysical questions which cannot address the phenomena of life's appearance for us. For Heidegger in *Being and Time*, being discloses itself to the mortal being, to Da-sein. It is the human condition of mortality that first and foremost discloses being. This Heideggerian turn follows a long philosophical tradition, perhaps first instantiated with Plato's record of Socrates's death in the *Phaedo*, persisting through Kierkegaard's double

emphasis on selfhood and fear of death, and continuing into Heidegger's own work which emphasizes mortality over natality. Provocative and formative as this revelation of existence in relation to mortality has been, such phenomenology risks preemptively foreclosing and overlooking the very phenomenal appearance of life in birth.

In this project, I repose Heidegger's question and consider another post-metaphysical response, one oriented toward beginnings. This response is suggested by the work of Heidegger's contemporaries, Hannah Arendt and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Perhaps death is not the phenomenological event par excellence as Heidegger implies (Dastur 183). Perhaps birth, perhaps natality not mortality, discloses being. As Heidegger would no doubt affirm, death eludes experience: "One could say that death is the event par excellence, except that it is never present, it never presently happens. It does not open up a world, but rather closes it forever" (Dastur 183). After death, I cannot reflect on death in this world; after birth, I can reflect on the ramifications of that event, if not the event itself. Given this non-appearance of death, perhaps phenomenology might pursue birth rather than death as the paradigmatic event, bearing witness in phenomenological reflection to the opening and initiating of worlds.

If we begin a philosophical meditation on Heidegger's question but without Descartes's rejection of exteriority and flesh, we see new possibilities. We ask similar and related questions: When did we, and do we begin? Do I begin or do we begin? Do I begin with my own birth? If I give birth, when does the other person begin and when does the child cease to be a part of me? Yet the answers to these questions differ profoundly when we admit our exteriority – our corporeality, our visibility – into consideration. We notice a certain fragility and passivity inherent to corporeality; we

note that while we begin, we cannot do so with absolute agency and freedom as the Cartesian subject might. I might ask, when I begin an action, how much of it actually originates in me? I notice that in my natality, I am motivated and caught in a momentum of existence. When we attend to our exteriority and corporeality, we also find that this momentum and flesh indicates that we are not alone as we act. When we gaze at our navel, we see our navel: We see the mark in our flesh of our connection to other bodies. We see a literal reminder of what Merleau-Ponty calls our “umbilical bond” to being (VI 107).

Hannah Arendt found birth to be the paradigmatic phenomenological event for the political philosophy described in the *Human Condition* (HC 9). As she puts it in the *Life of the Mind*, Arendt suggests that we think of ourselves as “natals” as well as mortals (2 109). In the *Human Condition* Arendt argues that humans distinguish themselves as beings who begin: “With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but now before” (HC 17). Our human actions, far from passive effects, initiate new and unpredictable trajectories of movements, events, and thoughts.

Arendt’s description of human being in terms of natality contrasts sharply with that of her eminent teacher Heidegger who shaped post-metaphysical phenomenology and ontology. Their agreement in rejecting anthropology and “human nature” as a philosophical category notwithstanding, there are important differences between these two thinkers – indeed between the natal and mortal approaches to phenomenology and ontology – in their assessment of the etymological origins of “nature.” Heidegger prefers

the Greek, *physis*, to the Latin *natura*, which means “‘to be born,’ ‘birth’”(Introduction to *Metaphysics* 11). For Heidegger “*physis*,” roughly translated as “growing,” appears everywhere, from the rising of the sun to the growth of plants or humans, and all “Roman translations” mar the authentic Greek philosophical perspective (Introduction to *Metaphysics* 12). Arendt, by contrast, values the Latin etymology: the Romans were the most respectable of people, the people who knew that to be alive as a person was “to live among men” and to die was “to cease to be among men” (HC 7-8). Like many of her contemporaries – including Sartre, Beauvoir, and Heidegger himself – Arendt rejects a metaphysical account of “human nature” as the ground of philosophy, but she nonetheless emphasizes the Latin etymology of natality in *natus*. This significance of this choice is twofold: first, *natus* directs us toward natality, and second, Arendt thereby allies her ontology with a political people and emphasizes life as properly lived, like the Romans, among other people. Human life which is fullest in its most political expression cannot be understood as mere “*physis*,” mere being in contrast to non-being. The birth of a human differs profoundly from the natural processes surrounding it because it initiates new, unpredictable actions. As capable of initiation in its rich Augustian sense, we might define persons “not, like the Greeks, as mortals, but as ‘natales’” (LM 2 109).

Merleau-Ponty has a similar preference for the Latin etymology of nature, yet for reasons all his own. For Merleau-Ponty, to be a human life is to be *natus*, born (NC 3). Human life originates from birth; this origin links it to other animal life, without reducing human to animal life. In the words of Michel Henry, “Coming into being, is a fact for all being, of stone, of air, of water ... neither being born nor dying except metaphorically. Birth is a quality of life and life alone” (“*Phénoménologie de la naissance*” 124, my

translation¹). In this turn toward a view of human life as born, Merleau-Ponty unlike Sartre or De Beauvoir² commits himself to the attempt – unexpected in a post-metaphysical and post-humanist discourse – to admitting human *nature* in phenomenological discourse. Where Heidegger’s ontology considers being itself with attention to its mortal end, Arendt and Merleau-Ponty suggest an alternative ontology: a natal ontology that emphasizes human being as born and as beginning. Merleau-Ponty alone suggests that this ontology might make recourse to a study of nature.

We find this intention at the core of Merleau-Ponty’s well-known work on perception. Summarizing it in a talk given at the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty writes: “The perceiving subject is not this absolute thinker; rather, it functions according to a natal pact between our body and the world, between ourselves and our body” (PrimP 6). In this passage, Merleau-Ponty defines the perceiving subject through a natal pact. Let us take this passage on its own terms: Merleau-Ponty argues that subjectivity “*functions according to*” this pact which itself occurs between “*our body, ourselves.*” It seems that, in short, natal being is best understood in this mode of the first person plural. The natal pact therefore occurs not between an isolated subjectivity and another subjectivity, nor even between one subject and one world, but between bodies and world. In that sense, for Merleau-Ponty, perceiving happens according to a latent pact inherent to natality, a natality always situated in a plurality of selves and bodies. For Merleau-Ponty as for Arendt, the state of natality is an ongoing condition, not a moment or event

¹ The original reads as follows: “*Venir à l’être, c’est le fait de tout étant, de la pierre, de l’air, de l’eau, et pourtant aucune de ces choses ne procède d’une naissance, ne naît ni ne meurt sinon métaphoriquement.*” Note that in French “coming into the world” – literally “*venir au monde*” – is a synonym for birth. It is worth nothing that although Henry discusses *naissance* and *connaissance*, he addresses neither the work of Merleau-Ponty nor that of Claudel from whom Merleau-Ponty takes his playful emphasis on *co-naissance*.

² Bonnie Mann has suggested that de Beauvoir may likewise be read as incorporating nature and naturalness into phenomenological discourse. (See “Beauvoir and the Question of a Woman’s Point of View.”)

equivalent to birth: the incarnate, natal subject renews its natality with each action. Unpredictable and yet promising in its liveliness, the natal is “like a new language; we do not know what works it will accomplish, but only that, once it has appeared, it cannot fail to say little or much, to have a history and a meaning” (PrimP 6). Natal life is not predictable and yet it promises meaning. It does not promise just *any* meaning, but a meaning dependent on the contingencies of its situation. Nats are born with a world and with others and cannot be understood outside of this situation. Yet this situatedness – between bodies, selves, and world – constitutes the natal’s very freedom. Merleau-Ponty writes: “The very productivity or freedom of human life, far from denying our situation, utilizes it and turns it into a means of expression” (PrimP 6).

The natal is free, productive, and situated in relation to a plurality of bodies and selves in the contingencies of the world. For both Arendt and Merleau-Ponty, an ontology that turns toward natality equally turns toward plurality. In thinking of ourselves as nats, we might then equally think of ourselves as “plurals.” For Arendt, plurality is the condition of human action (HC 8). Merleau-Ponty agrees and in his work we see a similar simultaneous reorientation toward both of these conditions. In particular, he shows this in regard to knowledge: to know is originally to be born into a knowing with others, into *co-naissance* of one’s worldly situation. This is apparent as early as the *Structure of Behavior*, where knowing is best understood as *connaissance*: a knowing through familiarity, like the knowledge we have *of* people and as people, of their *comportement*. For Merleau-Ponty, as for Paul Claudel, “*Toute naissance est une connaissance*” (*L’Art Poétique* 149): all knowing is co-knowing, a co-existing, emerging from birth. We are born into a world already full of beings like ourselves; we give birth

to others like and yet unlike ourselves. Acting in concert, we initiate projects, and we speak, across differences, to those who can understand our speech.

Arendt explicitly identifies natality and being natal as definitive of the human condition. In Merleau-Ponty's work, by contrast, natality, birth, pregnancy, and related themes are frequent tropes, but not explicitly declared to be constitutive of his ontology. Merleau-Ponty offers no evidence that he had read Arendt's work, although she had read his by the end of their lives; I remark on a similarity in their responses to their philosophical and historically situation but do not recount an active exchange between these two thinkers. Nonetheless, I argue in this project that when clarified by the terminology defined by Arendt, Merleau-Ponty's work expresses a natal ontology rooted in a phenomenology of nature and human naturalness. As Arendt herself stresses, she is primarily a political thinker; if a philosopher, she would be a political philosopher, rather than an ontologist or a phenomenologist per se, however much she may contribute the latter fields. In the context of her political project, however, Arendt did identify natality as a domain of study for phenomenology, a phenomenology that Merleau-Ponty himself began to perform. I argue that phenomenology is still in need of investigations that complement our appreciation of mortality with a study of plurality and natality and that the resources to develop such a phenomenology and ontology are found in Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre.

The aim of this investigation is thus twofold: to present an exegesis of Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre in terms of natality with a special emphasis on the Nature Courses and to sketch out a natal ontology in its own right, taking a cue from Arendt's work and

developing it through Merleau-Ponty. I require *both* their work to establish this ontology: Arendt for her emphasis on difference and the political and Merleau-Ponty for his discussion of nature and the atmosphere of humanity that conditions existence. I use Arendt's work to highlight the theme of plurality in Merleau-Ponty's work, yet I also depart from Arendt, in shifting the emphasis and concerns of a natal ontology toward the issue of nature. In particular, I am interested in how natality directs existential phenomenology to our natural prereflective orientation to a plurality. I will try to elucidate just one mysterious claim that he makes in the précis of his work, given at the Collège de France (See PrimP). He claims that, if we adopt his ontology, "there is a type of doubt concerning man, and a type of spite, which become impossible" (PrimP 27). Has Merleau-Ponty thereby suggested that his ontology entails an ethical turn or even a new sort of humanism? If so, does he make this ethical stance explicit? How can a phenomenology of perception lead to an ethical ontology?

This inquiry is, therefore, as much about "Nature" and "plurality" as about "natality." We will find that these terms are conceptually and practically inseparable, though not identical. This, moreover, is true not only in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Arendt but of human experience itself. Human experience is conditioned by an orientation toward others: not *an* Other, but others in general and in the plural. In the following pages, I approach our situation in such a plurality by way of the condition of natality. When I speak of natality throughout this project, I refer to this complex of conditions, not merely to the "fact" of birth per se. Natality here serves as a code word for a certain dialectical and chiasmatically complex relation to Nature and each other. We are both born *from* Nature and give birth to Nature, as we are born from others and

give birth to others. We are naturally born and our sense of ourselves is born from a concept of Nature; at the same time, we give birth to both the concept of Nature and to other natural beings. In that sense, “natality” merely serves as a concise reference for this complex chain/series of events. But more importantly, speaking of “natality” ties these reflections on Nature to the existential phenomenological tradition. This tradition understands that “mortality” refers not only to the fact of death, but a consciousness of that fact and the meaningful structuring of a life in relation to that fact. Likewise, when I speak of human natality, I indicate these facts of birth, as well as the meaning of a life structured in relation to them.

I show how natality points “backwards” toward others and “forwards” toward others. Our natality points us backwards toward our birth and to the birth of action in perception, and natality points forward toward projects to which we may give birth, forward to the expression that arises with perception. Barbaras has described Merleau-Ponty’s work as a rethinking of consciousness and nature by “starting from below” (Barbaras 3). Barbaras traces this descent in Merleau-Ponty’s thought and then postulates a later ascent toward the ontological in the *Visible and the Invisible*. Perhaps this terminology of descent and ascent inserts an unnecessary and here unwanted hierarchy into Merleau-Ponty’s thought. I prefer the terminology of “backwards” and “forwards,” hoping to avoid the impression of sequence of privilege. This formulation echoes Husserl’s own “*Rückfrage*” – questioning back – as the method of phenomenology. Rather than ascending from prereflective thought to the peak of reflective ontology, phenomenology must turn and return, spiraling toward its origins and toward the very question of what constitutes “origin” itself (the question that Descartes, in his

metaphysical appeal, foreclosed). This spiraling unfolds temporally, and thus avoids the vicious, repetitive, and endless circling around a question.

When we turn back and phenomenologically reflect on the beginnings of our actions as natals, we find that passivity conditions the actions of natal beings. Natality shows that “one begins, but coming from elsewhere,” as Bernard Waldenfels has put it (*Experience of the Other* 34). Natals are both motivated by the world and caught in a momentum that that exceeds and precedes each individual existence, yet does not prescribe the trajectory of that existence. Natality shows us to be beings defined not only by interiority but exteriority: as appearing in a world of appearances for others. I will argue that through a natal ontology, when we properly understand ourselves as natals, we find that we “begin elsewhere.”

Nature, Naturalism, and Natural Science

This project arose from a sense of the dominance of biological science in contemporary imagination, from the sneaking suspicion that phenomenology was being edged out by cognitive science, that philosophy in general was being encroached on by cognitive studies from one direction and critical theory³ from another. What could a truly phenomenological perspective, a philosophy of existence and ontology, offer? What is there left for phenomenology to say about human nature in the face of contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science? What could we phenomenologists offer besides defensive exhortations that one must preserve the first

³ Under the broad rubric of “critical theory” I include studies conducted in, for example, literature, sociology, cultural theory, and art history departments that excavates discursive or power structures in cultural artifacts. What critical theory does not offer, that I think phenomenology does, is an account of what experience is like for those who live among such artifacts and theories.

person perspective? How could we formulate a *positive* project rather than a merely negative, critical view of life science from the outside? I felt sure that phenomenology offered more than an intuition that “science isn’t enough”; we need to provide not only the criticism and the critical apparatus, but a positive program of research content and method. Merleau-Ponty’s work, with its consistent engagement with the natural sciences of his day, appeared as the most appropriate place to address this troubling *écart* between phenomenology and philosophy of mind.

A note of clarification before I proceed: In what follows, I will refer frequently to the category “life science.” I include both phenomenology and biology under that heading. Both of these disciplines study life. Their differences lie in their approach to that topic: the former studies the meaning of belonging to life (with certain qualities) and the latter studies the definitions and qualities of life. We might describe this difference – as many have – as that between the first and third person. Biology can say “A life is like this” and phenomenology can say “For me, life is like this” or “my life is like this.” But I will suggest that between and within these two perspectives hides another perspective: the first person plural. We can say “our life is like this.” In this mode, we subjectively implicate ourselves in the sort of life studied but also assume that a view on that life is objectively available to many others. That is, to use Arendt’s terminology, we situate ourselves in a plurality. In one sense, to speak of phenomenology as a “life science” is, as Arendt points out, “as redundant as ... ‘botany’ is for the study of plants,” yet, as she continues “[i]t is, however, not coincidence that the word ‘existence’ has taken the place of the word ‘Being,’ and in this terminological change one of the fundamental problems of modern philosophy is contained” (*Essays in Understanding* 164). What Arendt describes

as a shift toward “existence” and thus existential philosophy, I here describe as the shift from ontology in metaphysics to post-metaphysical ontology. In the latter context, phenomenology conducts its research in life science.

Working on the cusp of the rise of psychology and yet before the explosion of philosophy of mind with cognitive science, Merleau-Ponty offers a unique perspective on the intersection of these domains with phenomenology, particularly in regard to nature and naturalism. In Barbaras’s words, he struggles throughout his work with “understanding the relation between consciousness and nature” (3). Merleau-Ponty offers a positive project, not merely a critique of life science for its failings. He both points to problems with certain views of “nature” and “naturalism” and also suggests an alternative view of nature and naturalism. Let me briefly point out some basic claims about naturalism that reappear throughout his work.

1. First, “naturalism,” when used in its most reductive, dualistic sense, does not work as human life science which necessarily depends a pre-extant understanding of what life is like.⁴ I will look briefly – though not entirely recapitulate – the manner in which Merleau-Ponty demonstrates this in the *Structure of Behavior*.⁵ There it is argued that a non-dualistic method that attends to the total situation in which life emerges will succeed better as a life science. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this conclusion is pursued particularly in regard to human affective life. As Merleau-Ponty approaches the issue of nature in relation to human life, he faces a new problem: the relationship between the

⁴ In the words of Thomas Nagel, “Any reductionist program has to be based on an analysis of what is to be reduced” (167). In this case “what is to be reduced” is human experience itself.

⁵ Rather than dwelling on this problem, I will expect a certain complicity in the reader as to the value of the phenomenological project in lieu of a reductive naturalism. While this complicity certainly cannot be expected, I cannot also here embark on a full justification of the phenomenological method per se. That said, I shall try to show, indirectly in practice, the particular effectiveness of phenomenology in describing aspects of the human experience, particularly our situation in a plurality or in the “atmosphere of humanity,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

method of naturalism and ethics.⁶ The problem is this: as traditionally formulated, naturalism does not come with an ethical orientation. As he puts it in the *Adventures of the Dialectic*: “Naturalism is a philosophy vague enough to support the most varied moral superstructures” (AD 75). Naturalism in this sense would view humanity as only an effect of nature, allowing humans to abdicate responsibility for action.⁷

Clearly, if he hoped to be considered an ethically-minded philosopher, Merleau-Ponty could not thereby consider himself to be a naturalist. Or, if he would accept classification under this term, he would find that classification as uselessly tautological as being named “a philosopher.” Yes, he might agree, I am a philosopher, I am a naturalist, but what you should ask is, “What is your philosophy?” and “What is nature?” Merleau-Ponty reminds us of the limits of a naturalistic stance per se. Calling on nature for explanation means nothing if we do not consider the means by which we call.

2. Second, traditional definitions of nature have divided its study from the study of ethics. I hope to show that Merleau-Ponty has described an alternative definition of nature that appears with an ethical orientation. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty’s project contrasts with and offers a corrective to an implicit ontological position assumed by certain working life scientists along with the explicit ontological position of Heidegger. Although I put aside the project of a detailed mediation between these thinkers, I think a useful contrast can be made concerning their ontological differences on the status of nature and the relation between ethics and ontology. Heidegger values the Greek vision

⁶ Certainly, one could encounter the issue of ethics in relation to animal as well as human life. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty does not dwell on the ethical treatment of animals per se. c.f. Bryan Smith, 2009.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty points to Trotsky as one who – problematically – saw historical progress as like natural selection. With his Darwinian view of history, Trotsky found a “basis for humanism in the naturalist myth” (AD 75). Such a humanism, however, risks not only a reductive but ethically misguided view of the person. As I address in chapter 5, the relationship with naturalisms presents methodological and not only ethical problems for phenomenology

of nature as *physis*, that appears in contrast with *ethos*, differing from the Latin and standard contemporary opposition of nature/*natus* with non-living things. For Heidegger, *physis* referred to an original ordering, growing, and coming to be, whereas *ethos*/mores denoted an agreed upon, conventional ordering (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 13).⁸ *Ethos* is determined by reflective, human putting into order. Heidegger thus situates the problem of life as the difference between human life and all other beings. By contrast, nature, for Merleau-Ponty, should also be understood in its Latin origin as *natus* (NC 3). Understanding nature in terms of birth unites natural beings as beings who are born; in other words, Merleau-Ponty allies human life with animal life in a manner absent in Heidegger's thought.⁹ Where Heidegger imagines that emphasizing the Latin *natus* could only entail the opposition between life and non-life, Merleau-Ponty shows it as a positive alliance of human life with life in general. But his emphasis on nature in this sense of birth has further consequences if we consider the possibility of opposing *ethos* and *physis*. If human life is natural life, then perhaps human ways of living together, of establishing an *ethos*, might find their roots in human nature, despite the on-going critique of human nature by many early twentieth century thinkers. In what follows, I will try to show how it is our nature in the sense of *natus* that initiates us into a world of others, tying us to Being through the "umbilical bond" (VI 107). Whatever *ethos* we form will draw upon rather than oppose this natural, natal connection.

I should make clear that Merleau-Ponty himself does not explicitly address this connection between nature and ethics, nor even offer an ethics per se. This lack of an

⁸ This is clear already by the 1929 course on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty gradually moves in this direction. As I show in chapter 1, in the *Structure of Behavior*, he resists fully associating human and animal life. By the Nature Courses, however, he does ally these two modes of being. For an explicit statement of this position, see my chapter 7-8 and NC 271.

ethics may seem strange in an author who was both politically active (in World War II) and politically reflective (in his many essays in *Les Temps Moderne*, *Signs*, as well as his books, *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*). Merleau-Ponty's final work is notably incomplete due to his early death, but this abrupt end does not necessarily excuse or alter twenty five years of publications that do not present an ethical treatise. And indeed this ethics *manqué* is all the more striking given the attention Merleau-Ponty pays to the issue of the other. Renaud Barbaras has even claimed – supported by Merleau-Ponty's own commentaries recorded in a radio broadcast – that the issue of the other can be said to define Merleau-Ponty's project (19). How could a philosopher so concerned with the other not offer an ethics?

I think Merleau-Ponty does not offer an ethics separately from his phenomenology and ontology because an ethical standpoint inheres in these positions. In fact, far from an *ethics manqué*, I argue that we find a nascent ethical ontology running through Merleau-Ponty's entire oeuvre. This ethical ontology is nascent in two senses: it is an ontology of *naissance*, of birth and natality, but also an ontology in the processing of being born, but cut short, in Merleau-Ponty's own life. I hope to aid in its birthing, hermeneutically enlivening this unthought in Merleau-Ponty. Where Heidegger saw the possibility of ontology prior to ethics, Merleau-Ponty's ontology describes a relation to being that is umbilical and ethical. In rejecting of a prioritization of ontology over the ontic and the ethical, Merleau-Ponty shares the concerns of his contemporary Emmanuel Levinas who explicitly critiqued Heidegger's ontological turn from the ontic and ethical.¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty would no doubt agree with Levinas that the ontological must

¹⁰ I leave aside close work on comparison between Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. Such comparison is certainly possible. I only point out that to my knowledge Merleau-Ponty never explicitly engages with

not forget the ontic, that as Levinas puts it, “fundamental ontology presupposes the *factual situation* of the mind that knows” (“Is Ontology Fundamental?” 2). Ontology instead must describe a relation to being that appears in that very factual situation for Merleau-Ponty; he would also agree, though no doubt in his own way that, “ontology is not accomplished in the triumph of human beings over their condition but in the very tension where this condition is assumed” (“Is Ontology Fundamental?” 3). Yet while these two French thinkers share a rejection of the Heideggerian division between ethics and ontology, they differ in the manner in which they avoid this division; Levinas turns from ontology and towards ethics while Merleau-Ponty attends immediately to ontology through his posthumously published final texts.

Let me sum up these issues. For Heidegger, ontology can and must be first philosophy prior to ethics;¹¹ for Levinas, by contrast, ontology should be rejected in favor of ethics. But for Merleau-Ponty, ontology – our being toward being, our comportment and *connaissance* – already comes with an ethical orientation.¹² To offer an ethical treatise independent of a natal ontology would make redundant the claims of both. We can no more separate ontology from ethics than we can separate perception from action

Levinas’s thought despite the shared situation and philosophical concern shape their work. Levinas does address Merleau-Ponty’s work in “Meaning and Sense,” yet this article was published after Merleau-Ponty’s death and primarily discusses Merleau-Ponty’s work in relation to structuralism, not in terms of ontology or ethics.

¹¹ Certainly we must acknowledge the complexity of the relationship of ethics and ontology in Heidegger and the wealth of study on the topic. Authors such as – to name just two – Lawrence Vogel and Joanna Hodge have attempted to show the importance of *mit- Sein* and even *das Mann* as reflective of a fundamental relation to the other even in *Being and Time*. I think, however, that even if a relation to the other is described by Heidegger’s ontology, he himself would put the philosophical pursuit of ontology prior to the pursuit of relations to others per se.

¹² The same might be said for Levinas who writes “this existence is interpreted as comprehension. From now on the transitive character of the verb to know (*connaitre*) is attached to the verb to exist” (“Is Ontology Fundamental?” 4).

for Merleau-Ponty. That said, a primary concern of this dissertation will be to show just *how* an ethical orientation toward others appears in his natal ontology.

Note on Content: Order and Scope

At the conclusion of this introductory material, I will present in more detail Arendt's uses of the terms "natality" and "plurality," then transfer these terms to Merleau-Ponty whose work will form the focus of the majority of this dissertation. In the investigations in the chapters that follow, I locate the theme of natality in Merleau-Ponty's work, starting with his earliest published text the *Structure of Behavior*, select several key themes in his major work the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and bear out the investigation his latest work the "Eye and Mind" and the *Visible and the Invisible*. Chapter 1 reflects on Merleau-Ponty's own philosophical beginnings in the *Structure of Behavior*; I point out the fundamental importance of the terminology of *connaissance* and *comportment* in Merleau-Ponty's turn from dualism. Chapters 2 through 3 focus on the representation of natal being in the *Phenomenology of Perception*; I consider how and whether Merleau-Ponty argues that natals are natural and yet free and then how a *connaissance* appears in being with other selves. These preliminary studies in chapters 1-3 aim to situate in particular the work in his courses on Nature given at the Collège de France. In chapters 4 through 5, I trace Merleau-Ponty's work in these Nature Courses.

Between 1956 and 1959, Merleau-Ponty gave three courses on the concept of nature. The first course examined the concept historically, devoting special emphasis to the Cartesian definition of nature; the second course continued this investigation, again revisiting the Cartesian definition; the final course, given over a year later, gestured

toward a new notion of nature.¹³ This course material notably overlaps with the well-known essay “Eye and Mind” as well as with the unfinished manuscript of the *Visible and the Invisible* in which Merleau-Ponty cryptically claims that he will perform a “psychoanalysis of Nature” (VI 256). The material in the Nature Courses thus co-emerges with Merleau-Ponty’s nascent ontology in the *Visible and the Invisible* and with the critique of science and aesthetics in the important contemporary essay “Eye and Mind.”

Everything thus suggests that we consider the Nature Courses to pave the way for the full-fledged ontology that would have appeared in the *Visible and the Invisible*. Yet the courses, derived from notes by Merleau-Ponty himself and by his students, follow rough transcriptions; likewise, while the manuscript of the *Visible and Invisible* is more complete than the courses, it was never vetted by its author in final form. Thankfully, Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on nature began well before these unfinished works. As early as the *Structure of Behavior*, he tacitly expresses concern over the status of nature. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, his longest and most widely received work, he begins to unpack the concept of nature in relation to freedom and to culture, and in the context of an ongoing reception of the human body and the natural world.

Through close consideration of his claims and allusions in these texts, I hope to illuminate the connection between his description of nature and natality. Though I begin from Arendt’s early work, I do not focus on her vision of natality per se; however, in the penultimate chapter, I do return to connections between her later work and Merleau-Ponty’s own later work. In their un-finished later work, they each turn toward a discussion of visibility and plurality rooted in our natal entrance into the world,

¹³ See Translator’s Introduction to NC for more on the timing and format of the courses.

emphasizing exteriority in relation to human and animal nature. More specifically, both Merleau-Ponty in his *Nature Courses* and Arendt in *Life of the Mind* refer to the work of German biologist Adolf Portmann's work on the sexual display of animals for one another, and it is in these final discussions that connect natality with plurality and appearance for others that the implications of a natal ontology become most clear. Merleau-Ponty claims that we might restore an "ontological value" to the term species. That is, we can give ontological value to our prereflective orientation to others that grounds and elicits our *connaissance* of this world and action in that world.

Note on Method: Archeology, Dialectic, Dialogue, Interrogation, and Analysis

In order to sharpen a sense for what might be Merleau-Ponty's own commitments in the *Nature Courses* as distinct from the readings of his students, I will show the origins of his later natal ontology and view of Nature in his early work. This method matches both the form and content of a natal ontology as a return to beginning. Although a natal ontology might initially seem to entail a turning toward the future, to new beginnings, in fact natality also turns us to the past. But turning toward beginning by no means suggests a turn toward novelty or newness. According to Arendt's account of natality, natality turns us toward origins, *archai*, beginnings (HC 177): Mortality, by contrast, orients us toward future, endings, *telos*. Associating phenomenology and indeed Merleau-Ponty's work in general with beginning is not a novel decision. As Michel Henry puts it, reflective philosophy's beginning, however radical, "is not the new. Rather it is the ancient, the most ancient" ("Videre Videor" 11). John Sallis has called Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole "return to beginnings"; Lawrence Hass sees Merleau-Ponty's work

as oriented toward expression as a project of “endless beginnings” (Hass 10). As Barbaras shows, following the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty engages in an increasingly regressive method.¹⁴ Perhaps more importantly, Merleau-Ponty himself describes his method as archeological. Phenomenology’s proper work, he argues, “is to unveil the pre-theoretical layer,” work that involves a “descent into the realm of our ‘archeology’” (SI 165).

As we retrace Merleau-Ponty’s beginnings, we shall have to consider Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with Kant, Schelling, Bergson, and Husserl. In particular, I will emphasize Merleau-Ponty’s affinity for Schelling, and the aspects of Kant’s Third Critique that attract Merleau-Ponty as they did Schelling. An explication of Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Kant or Schelling per se is not necessary here,¹⁵ but I will make repeated allusions to these influences and connections as they appear throughout this project. This is important because it demonstrates Merleau-Ponty’s deep commitment to hermeneutic engagement with the history of Western thought, as well as his tendency to disrupt and revise the dominant hierarchies and dualism inherent to that history.

I find this interrogative, dialogical method of explication to be appropriate to both the form and content of Merleau-Ponty’s work. That said, this is not without certain risks – including for Merleau-Ponty’s interpreter. The risk in writing on or through another (discipline or author) is always that one might conflate this other’s thought with one’s own. Merleau-Ponty often reflects on the work of others and uses these works as a

¹⁴ Barbaras argues that having rethought the body and the dualistic relation of consciousness and object, Merleau-Ponty then rethinks language (*Signs, Prose of the World*) and then rethinks all cultural endeavors (“Eye and Mind”), gradually regressing to the very ground of culture in nature (*Nature Courses*) and finally, in ontology (*Visible and the Invisible*) (Barbaras 60). NB: I have filled out the texts to which Barbaras implicitly refers.

¹⁵ This has already been accomplished vis à vis Schelling by Patrick Burke in “Creativity and the Unconscious in Merleau-Ponty and Schelling” and viz a viz Kant’s Third Critique by Galen Johnson in “Merleau-Ponty and Kant’s Third Critique” and *The Retrieval of the Beautiful*.

mouthpiece to express his own position. Those familiar with Merleau-Ponty are familiar with his ventriloquism: One can at times lose track of Merleau-Ponty's thought in contrast to that of the author he interprets. His readings of Husserl, perhaps most famously, so generously give voice to his predecessor that the student of Merleau-Ponty must take great pains to untwine the threads of this French thinker from that of the German. Merleau-Ponty himself is conscious of this problem and yet at the same time finds the struggle to speak with other thinkers to be the very task of philosophy:

Between an "objective" history of philosophy (which would rob the great philosophers of what they have given others to think about) and a meditation disguised as a dialogue (in which we would ask the questions and give the answers) there must be a middle-ground on which the philosopher who is speaking [is] ... present together, although it is not possible even in principle to decide at any given moment just what belongs to each. (SI159, cited in Barbaras 69)

Within philosophy, we must find a way to address our philosophical predecessors without uselessly repeating their words yet also without distorting them to fit our own meaning. How can we know when we, or Merleau-Ponty, have managed a true dialogue – for example, with Schelling or, perhaps even more challengingly, with Darwin – rather than a meditation disguised as such? How can the phenomenologist be certain Merleau-Ponty has presented the work of the biologist, the German idealist, or the poet, rather than merely bent this work for his own purposes? Rene Magritte, in fact, claims something quite like this with regard to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of painting in "Eye and Mind." According to Magritte, "Merleau-Ponty's very brilliant thesis is very pleasant to read, but it hardly makes one think of painting – which he nevertheless appears to be dealing with" (*Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* 336). Does Merleau-Ponty go beyond ventriloquism to something much more troubling? If he has failed to speak of painting per se, or at least

to speak of painting from the painter's perspective, then one may ask if he actually engages with that "other" of philosophy at all.

Without necessarily ruling out the purchase of Magritte's charges, Barbaras points out that Merleau-Ponty does take quite seriously the complexity of actual dialogue.¹⁶

When I speak with another actual person,

I do not communicate to another a thought possessed elsewhere. I think with him and make myself in his image; moreover, his thought comes to itself only by formulating itself and offering itself to me, so that there is no clear-cut distinction between what would belong strictly to an author and what the interpretation projects onto the author. (Barbaras 69)

This ambiguity does not mark a law of authentic meaning but rather the ground of new meaning. Merleau-Ponty imagines himself in conversation with Husserl as he writes his own phenomenology. This conversation solicits meaning from Husserl, but also infuses Husserl's statements with meanings that Husserl himself may not have expected or fully deployed. Merleau-Ponty takes this attitude not only toward Husserl but toward all the authors he approaches. Thus, as I recount in the following pages, Merleau-Ponty's relation to such authors – whether Husserl, Schelling or Bergson – we must keep this rich

¹⁶ Barbaras claims that interpreters prior to 1970 failed to understand Merleau-Ponty, having lacked access to a careful reading of the *Visible and the Invisible*, the text in which Merleau-Ponty's dialogical method becomes most explicit. Barbaras cites Paul Ricoeur's 1969 *Conflict of Interpretations* as exemplifying this pre-*Visible and the Invisible* position: "As Paul Ricoeur notes, 'our relation to the greatest of French phenomenologists has perhaps already become what his was to Husserl: not a repetition but an appropriation of the very movement of his reflection.' This explains the state of the commentaries [up to 1969]" (Barbara xxxi). Barbaras attempts to remedy this misunderstanding by providing a reading of Merleau-Ponty "as a classic," performing a close-reading rather than offering merely an "intuition" of Merleau-Ponty with Ricoeur-like hermeneutic distortion. While I agree with this need for a close reading, I do not agree with Barbaras's claim that hermeneutic interpretation problematically distorts the classic author for some extra-textual goal. In fact, I would argue that Ricoeur's position holds, no matter how many unpublished texts become available to 'correct' the close reading. Philosophy must proceed while conscientious of its own productivity, a point that Barbaras himself and Merleau-Ponty each make. That is, as readers of Merleau-Ponty – or indeed any classic author – we must take responsibility for our reading as a productive appropriation of the this author. To seek a "final" position for that author to "merely" recapitulate the position of this author at any point in his career would be less an impossibility than an unnecessary and unphilosophical exercise. While this may sound like a harsh critique of Barbaras, I think his work is successful precisely because he himself accomplishes such an insightful and productive appropriation of Merleau-Ponty's thought.

ambiguity in mind. Rather than repeatedly asking whether Merleau-Ponty has “got Schelling right” as Schelling would have himself, we should imagine Merleau-Ponty and Schelling in a room, conversing. Merleau-Ponty, a skillful interviewer, engages his interlocutor in a lively conversation, drawing on various comments Schelling has made over his career and tempts Schelling to ‘say’ things that Schelling did say but perhaps could have or should have. Such is always the result of a successful, journalistic interview, or indeed any conversation.

If we are to follow Merleau-Ponty, then, we cannot merely mimic his words. Rather, we must, in some way, adopt his method, treating him as a subject with whom to interact and thereby letting him teach us to respond to our own times. To do so, we must appreciate Merleau-Ponty’s responsiveness to his own historical cultural environment.

We must address Merleau-Ponty as he addresses Descartes. Merleau-Ponty writes:

The reason why Descartes is present is that – surrounded by circumstances which today are abolished, and haunted by the concerns and some of the illusions of his times – he responded to these hazards in a way which teaches us to respond to our own, even though they are different and our response is different too. (SI 128)

Merleau-Ponty’s circumstances are similar to and different from our own, as his were from Descartes. Merleau-Ponty’s intellectual and cultural world centered on – to name a few – Proust, Claudel, Gide, Cézanne, Marx, Kojève, and the Gestalt theorists. Only some of these still matter greatly to us, and perhaps none matters quite in the way they did to Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s diverse commentaries can serve merely as an intellectual and cultural barometer, as a tool to clarify any of these individuals, issues or schools. But we can better read Merleau-Ponty as he suggests that one read Descartes: as

a model of how to respond to the hazards of any author in her or his cultural, historical situation.

That said, I have wherever possible taken steps to verify Merleau-Ponty's citation and basic interpretation of each author. In the discussion in the *Structure of Behavior* and in particular in the studies in the Nature Courses, I have researched the scientific issues and texts mentioned by Merleau-Ponty to ascertain the minimal correctness of his readings; I offer resources for further verification where necessary. I assume little familiarity by my readers with these scientific issues and texts. I do assume, however, that my audience shares a familiarity with the European philosophical tradition. In the cases of Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Descartes, Schelling, Bergson and others, I have attempted to present Merleau-Ponty's view alongside some supporting citations from the text of the original authors to reassure the readers of the appropriateness of Merleau-Ponty's comments. I do this not only for the sake of scholarly thoroughness but in order distinguish more clearly the activity of Merleau-Ponty's own thought in contrast to these predecessors. I have generally set aside the problem of deliberating between Merleau-Ponty and his eminent contemporaries Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, although references and contrasts nonetheless appear as clarifications. When these authors' works intersect with Merleau-Ponty's, I have elucidated the latter's position, but it would be another project entirely to work out the relationship among these three thinkers. When I do address these authors, I do so by way of contrast or to elucidate Merleau-Ponty's own claims about their respective positions.

Beyond the question of *whether* Merleau-Ponty has engaged in a dialogue with others, we might ask *why* Merleau-Ponty works in this dialogical manner. I suggest that

Merleau-Ponty speaks through other thinkers and through other disciplines because he has abandoned a classical model of interiority and exteriority. Not only must we see our own flesh as permeable by the world, we must see philosophy itself as permeable and permeating its exteriority. Likewise, philosophy must refuse to preemptively delimit and objectify other disciplines, such as visual art, and rather interrogate them from within. To learn what it is to paint, we attempt to see according to the style of Cézanne – *insofar as this is possible* – in order to think through the production of his work as he lived it, rather than study his painting as an object in the museum. The proper, truly respectful approach to Husserl's thought is not to witness it from the outside as a historical artifact – as an object – but to live within it, to think with Husserl as a subject. By so doing, we make that which seems to be 'elsewhere' into something effective here and now.

The result is an expressive, creative discipline. Rather than prophesying an end to philosophy, à la Hegel, Merleau-Ponty envisions philosophy's endless beginning. Philosophy can begin endlessly because it is a creative act, an act of expression. So described, philosophy is allied with other expressive activities: artistic, poetic, spiritual, and scientific creativity. Merleau-Ponty not only sees a permeability between philosophical practice and other expressive practices, but he borrows methodologically from other sciences and the arts. Truly abandoning a representational account of cognition and adopting an embodied model of perception also entails rethinking the methods at work in philosophy. Instead of describing cognition, phenomenology becomes conscientious of its own productive and expressive activity. As Barbaras has shown, this shift toward rethinking the philosophical practice as expressive upsets even the vestiges of duality in Merleau-Ponty's own thought (49). Insofar as he retained a model of the

phenomenology which viewed the phenomenologist as capable of pure reflection and absolutely active, Merleau-Ponty remained with a dualistic phenomenology and phenomenological method. Moving beyond dualism entailed a new – poetic – methodology, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

This expressive project presents itself as “an endless task, but not a futile one” (Hass 10). Representational Cartesian thought has attempted to resolve the problems of cognition and expression rather than admit that such representative reflective thought itself is a sort of expression. Leaving behind the traditional representational model means that philosophy must also leave behind the expectation that it can unambiguously resolve its problems. Merleau-Ponty puts it clearly: “Questions can indeed be total; but answers, in their positive significance, cannot” (SI 3). Philosophy cannot provide complete, systematic answers. Rather than retreating from this intimidating range of possibility, philosophy should profit from this open-ended realm of significance.

The expressive practice of philosophy co-emerges with the perception of the incarnate subject. If we preemptively separate our philosophical vision from our everyday vision – if we have one eye on being and another on nothing—we can never successfully coordinate philosophy with our everyday practices. Nonetheless, this does not reduce philosophy to everyday, prereflective expression. As John Sallis has shown, Merleau-Ponty’s exhortation to return to beginnings does not entail a turn from *logos* or reflection, but a return to the very ground of *logos* and *physis* themselves (*Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings* 10-11). But how should philosophy proceed if its reflective thought truly arises from perception? Merleau-Ponty has gained a reputation as one of, if not the most highly regarded twentieth century Western thinkers

of perception and embodiment. But what is it to *think* according to the body? What is the natural vision to which we would return?

Merleau-Ponty suggests that we ought to see a philosophical vision akin to our natural, binocular vision. Rather than looking at the world through a dualistic “strabismus”¹⁷ – to use Merleau-Ponty’s archaic term – we aim for a binocular philosophy appropriate to the incarnate subject (NC 127).¹⁸ Actual visual strabismus, a pathological condition, occurs when the left and the right eye do not properly coordinate so the person’s left eye seems to turn in one direction and the right eye in the other; Jean Paul Sartre famously suffered this condition. By contrast, in normal binocular vision, the left and right eye work together prereflectively to focus two retinal images into one, apparently seamless, experiential image: When I look across the garden, I do not see the eastern side and the western side in two distinct images, but see the them together as part of one world which I inhabit.

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, Descartes instituted a strabismus into philosophy – into the *theoria*, the vision of philosophy – when he split mind from body, essence from existence (NC 134). Having identified this pathological situation instituted by Descartes, Merleau-Ponty suggests that phenomenology should find a more coordinated, natural vision: phenomenology should attempt a “binocular philosophy” (SI 134). Human

¹⁷ The word comes from the term for squinting, but particular refers to the coordination of the eyes and can be used metaphorically as well. From *The Oxford English Dictionary*: “a. An affection of the eyes in which the axes of vision cannot be coincidently directed to the same object; squinting, a squint. Convergent or internal strabismus, a turning inward of the eyes, cross-eye; divergent or external strabismus, a turning outwards of one or both eyes... b. fig. Perversity of intellectual perception...1881 E. CAIRD *Ess. Lit. & Philos.* (1892) I. 193 A review which supposes man to be afflicted with a kind of intellectual strabismus, so that he can never see with one of his mental eyes without shutting the other.”

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty revisits the charge of strabismus in the *Visible and the Invisible*, in a note that says his project will include “Reflection on Descartes’s ontologies – the ‘strabism’ of Western ontology” (VI 166). Le Forte comments in a footnote, in a 1957 course, Merleau-Ponty also called this “ontological diplopia,” the formulation that Barbaras takes up (83).

beings exercise binocular vision in concert with certain actions: upright posture, grasping hands, general motility. Vision and action co-develop. Binocular vision does not eliminate the problem of two eyes but assumes a prereflective coordination: Likewise, a properly practiced philosophy would not eliminate the problems of mechanism and finality, being and nonbeing, but face them in a unified and coordinated way.

Philosophy can take its cue from artists who practice binocular vision, allowing the circuit of eye and mind, hand and vision, to remain open. As I will show in Chapter 5, this methodological shift toward the arts naturally accompanies Merleau-Ponty's turn from static to genetic, then to generative, and finally to what I call poetic phenomenology. As Anthony Steinbock has pointed out, when we understand existence only in terms of a monodic self-constitution, we find a symmetry of past and future: history, personal or collective, does not matter. That is, if we restrict phenomenological study to a static or even *genetic* study of the emergence of the subject, we find a symmetry of the past and the future. However, when we include birth in the range of topics under phenomenological study, we find that an asymmetry appears. How does this happen? How does turning toward natality so fundamentally alter the aims and methods of phenomenology? If we take birth and death as "constitutive occurrences," then "the scope of phenomenological analysis must extend even beyond genesis" of a single subject (Steinbock "From Phenomenological Immortality to Natality" 34, hereafter cited as "Natality"). Birth points us beyond even a synchronic intersubjectivity and towards a diachronic intersubjective community. As Steinbock puts it, generative phenomenology points toward "geo-historical, social, normatively significant lifeworlds" ("Natality" 34). The smallest unit of this intergenerational homeworld, for Husserl as Steinbock teaches

us to read him, is the home “of mother or parent and child” (“Nativity” 35). Natality points us beyond an Other that faces us now, and beyond a community of multiple others among whom we grow and live. Natality points us beyond a synchronic community of others toward a diachronic community of others.

This practice of what I call “poetic phenomenology” does not merely negotiate across an already established division in the subject. Far from it: “the subject” or “consciousness” or “the individual” per se does not suffice to describe the phenomena under study. Rather than finding a compromised “middle way,” Merleau-Ponty avoids the traps of intellectualism and empiricism by going to the limits of these two domains.¹⁹ To borrow a frequent metaphor, Merleau-Ponty avoids that particular Scylla and Charybdis, not by threading between them, but by choosing another passage altogether. Traditional efforts to navigate this passage have failed the moment they start from within a dualism, assuming that one must choose *either* empiricism or intellectualism or some combination of the pre-established, inherited limits of these schools of thought. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty’s third way lies not in the “middle” of philosophy but rather at its limits or margins. These limits are not outside philosophy but within it; we can never step outside philosophy, nor find its “circumference.” In the words of Barbaras, Merleau-Ponty shows that “the truth of phenomenology resides *at the very place of its limit*, in

¹⁹ Readers of Merleau-Ponty have often described him as navigating between intellectualism and empiricism (See for example, Richard Kearney’s *Movements in Modern Philosophy*). We might be tempted to think of Merleau-Ponty’s work as a “middle” way in the sense of a *compromising* third path between these two extremes. But binocular vision is not an *a posteriori* bringing together of or compromise between two separate visions. Rather, binocular vision assumes a radically different prereflective coordinating perception in which depth and movement co-emerge with vision. Viewing Merleau-Ponty’s work as a “middle” way in this sense fails to give enough credence to the revolutionary shifts that Merleau-Ponty suggests that phenomenology, and indeed philosophy in general, ought to make. A compromise between existing philosophical terminologies does not always suffice to help us escape systemic problems, such as Cartesian mind-body dualism or Kantian sensation-understanding dualism. Attempting to mediate within a dualist structure does not help us out of inherent antinomies.

what motivates and stops simultaneously its enterprise of understanding” (77). Merleau-Ponty redirects philosophical thought toward its prereflective ground in lived experience. It is thus Merleau-Ponty finds that “philosophy’s center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere” (SI 128). Yet he can only make this declaration after having truly stepped beyond traditional delimitations of philosophy; only after having thought according to Cézanne or Claudel or Marx as well as Descartes can Merleau-Ponty claim that philosophy can also be oriented from a center in these disciplines.

Poetry and art are not the only practices to have drawn Merleau-Ponty’s attention. I have remarked upon his engagement with proto-cognitive scientific studies and philosophy of mind, yet he also engages with psychoanalysis. This move may seem unsurprising when we consider the importance that the psychoanalytic practice attributes to personal origins and connection to generations. Merleau-Ponty makes explicit this connection to the psychoanalytic practice as he understood it. In a working note from 1960 in the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty counsels himself: “Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother” (VI 267). Though that text and project remain incomplete, he in fact began the preparatory work for that “analysis” in the first of the Nature Courses, where he traces this history and analyzes its meaning for our current condition. He suggests that if we undertake an analysis – in the therapeutic sense – of our use of the term Nature, we uncover a peculiar trauma inflicted by Descartes.²⁰ It is on that history rather than the sketches in the *Visible and the Invisible*

²⁰ In chapters 4-5 I retell the history that Merleau-Ponty tells about Nature and natality, but I should caution that this is not the *only* history that can be told about Nature. For example, Michel Henry draws very different conclusions from Descartes’s stance on nature. What Merleau-Ponty identifies as significant in Schelling, for example, is not a mere rehearsal of Schelling but a statement of Merleau-Ponty’s own method and content. I will consider the implications of the lacks and gaps in Merleau-Ponty’s history as indicative of his conclusions. Likewise, what I adopt and accumulate from Merleau-Ponty indicates my own commitments.

that I focus. Beginning with a historical overview of accounts of nature, starting from the Greeks and covering figures all the way to Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty traces a certain trajectory our sense of Nature has taken.

In one sense, Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that his work functions as a "psychoanalysis" is undoubtedly a heuristic metaphor; he does not explicitly adopt methodology from any of the schools of psychoanalysis of his time, though he was familiar with them. On the other hand, we should note that Merleau-Ponty devoted time and textual attention to psychoanalysis.²¹ Alphons de Waelhens, noted scholar of psychoanalysis, wrote the introduction to the *Structure of Behavior*, setting Merleau-Ponty's earliest work in proximity to psychology. In addition, we must acknowledge a positive shift in Merleau-Ponty's attitude toward Freud in the Nature Courses; in the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty dismisses Freudian psychoanalysis as a form of determinism, but in the later texts he declares that Freud "truly saw" his vision of "the flesh with its double sense" (NC 226). In the *Visible and the Invisible*, in a note titled "The problem of analysis," he tells himself: "Solution: recapture the child, the alter ego, the unreflected within myself by a lateral, pre-analytic participation." In the child hides "the common tissue of which we are made" (VI 203).²² In the psychological terms "alter ego" and "pre-analytic" Merleau-Ponty hints that his regressive pursuit of the child within perception echoes that of psychoanalysis. All this suggests that we should take this

²¹ Lacan and Merleau-Ponty were quite close, though Merleau-Ponty never became the 'philosopher of the movement' that some have suggested Lacan may have hoped for; apparently, one of the only times Lacan was seen to cry publicly was at Merleau-Ponty's funeral. Merleau-Ponty would have attended Lacan's talks and Lacan certainly attended Merleau-Ponty's (c.f. Roudinesco 227, 351, 335).

²² In the *Visible and the Invisible*, this interrogative method stands out in the chapter titles of each working section: "Reflection and Interrogation," "Interrogation and Dialectic," "Interrogation and Intuition." In each case, "Interrogation" describes Merleau-Ponty's own phenomenological method as contrasted to Descartes, Sartre, and Husserl, respectively (See Barbaras 88).

metaphor of “psychoanalysis” quite seriously, while at the same time acknowledging its status *as* metaphor.

The overarching metaphor of psychoanalysis reaffirms Merleau-Ponty’s hints that the study of Nature is something accomplished through dialogical study. Generative and post-generative poetic phenomenologies presuppose a certain hermeneutic awareness at work in the phenomenological practice. Merleau-Ponty’s hermeneutic style of study – and my own similar style – arises from deep ontological commitments, not because of critical literary conventions. As I trace this unthought natal ontology through Merleau-Ponty, I also perform a poetic phenomenology, risking ventriloquism, yet I do so in the services of making us familiar with his thought, offering a *connaissance* of Merleau-Ponty’s thought on being and Nature, following the method of the artist and the poet who both admit their own productive relation to Nature. That we should so “know” a text, an author, or Nature is appropriate to the ontology expressed herein. Nature, as we shall see, is ambiguously interior and exterior, subject and object, in short, much like we ourselves who give birth to Nature.

Natality and Plurality from Arendt to Merleau-Ponty

Before embarking on the discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre that forms the main body of this project, let me clarify these two important terms – natality and plurality – as described by Arendt.

Plurality: Plurality refers to the condition “of being numerous,” to use the words of the poet George Oppen. As humans, we are not alone: We find ourselves to belong to a certain type of being, each of whose members is also unique. As beings

conditioned by plurality, we are both like many others and different from others. As Arendt puts it concisely in the *Human Condition*, “we are all the same ... in that nobody is ever the same” (8).²³ We have to speak and engage in actions to communicate with others because we are not identical; we cannot know exactly what other think or experience. On the other hand, we *can* communicate: we share enough with others that we can initiate actions and speech that are comprehended and taken up. Arendt goes on:

Human distinctness is not the same as otherness... Otherness in its most abstract form is found only in the sheer multiplicity of inorganic objects, whereas all organic life already shows variations and distinctions, even between specimens of the same species. (HC 176)²⁴

Despite our human distinctness, we can nonetheless communicate. Indeed difference forms the very motive for communication and political action. As I will show, Merleau-Ponty, like Arendt, affirms this initial communicability and shared world inherent in the condition of plurality.

Natality: For Arendt, the human condition of natality is the condition of both having a beginning and of beginning. Not only are we born, but we give birth to others, to speech and projects. Like “mortality,” “natality” connotes not merely the fact of these events but a consciousness of their unfolding. When, as natals, we begin, we do not merely react to our world, but initiate an *action*. “To act,” writes Arendt, “in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, ‘to begin,’ ‘to lead,’ and eventually ‘to rule,’ indicates), to set something into motion” (HC 177).

²³ Arendt offers the following longer definition: Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. (HC 175)

²⁴ For more on this issue of personal identity and change, see Paul Ricoeur *Oneself as Another*.

Human beings, for Arendt, excel in that they can *set actions in motion*; we can plan, discuss, and coordinate events that will unfold in the future and build on the past. Unlike plants, beetles, or dogs, human beings *act* with each other and for the future.

Arendt confirms the definitive shift Merleau-Ponty identifies in our view of ourselves caused by Descartes. For her, Cartesian philosophy caused us to lose a view of ourselves as *natales*: The loss of emphasis on natality means not the loss of nature or naturalness, but a loss of world, of orientation toward a plurality. Descartes instantiated a peculiar withdrawal from the public world toward the self. Arendt writes: “Cartesian reason is entirely based on the implicit assumption that the mind can only know that which it has itself produced and retains in some sense within itself” (HC 283). After the Cartesian withdrawal, what people “have in common is not the world but the structure of their minds” (HC 283). With this loss of world, philosophy is reduced to “theory of cognition and psychology” (HC 293), a concern Arendt shares with and no doubt inherited in part from Heidegger. Descartes placed cognitive structures at the center of philosophy, a place that – in Arendt’s view – the public sphere ought to have occupied, and thus post-Cartesian modernity lacked a “*sensus communis*”: “the sense that orients and unites all of our five senses: [This sense] fits the sensations of my strictly private five senses ... into a common world shared by others (*Life of the Mind* 50).²⁵ Descartes turned us from the public world in which our knowledge takes its orientation from the others who are always already there from our birth. Natality, by contrast, turns us toward plurality.

²⁵ In her later work, Arendt declares that “what Merleau-Ponty has to say against Descartes is brilliantly right” (*Life of the Mind* 49).

In calling attention to plurality, Arendt objects to the way questions pertaining to the Other have been traditionally asked in existential philosophy. She suggests that if the question existential philosophy asks is “Who am I?” then the question is badly posed. Rather, we should ask “Who are we?” As she puts it, “[e]xistence is, by its very nature never isolated. It exists only in communication and in awareness of others’ existence” (*Essays in Understanding* 187). For Arendt, “not Man but *men* live on the earth and inhabit the world” (HC 7). In other words, our existential and phenomenological descriptions are doomed if they begin with a single person or even only two people. We always already find ourselves in relation to *many* unique others: Phenomenology would miss something essential in the human condition were it to turn from this aspect of facticity.

Significant in Arendt’s definition as well as in Merleau-Ponty’s work is the association of plurality with “organic life” (see above, HC 176). There is something about being a *natural* life that inherently means that one belongs to a plurality. While avoiding a discussion of birth and naturalness per se in the *Human Condition*, Arendt herself emphasizes this association between plurality, natality, and nature. Nonetheless, for Arendt neither plurality nor natality can be understood as attributes of human *nature*. In the beginning of the *Human Condition*, Arendt makes clear that the title of her book does not at all mean she is undertaking a study of human nature (HC 10). Claims about human nature make metaphysical assertions, but Arendt assumes that metaphysics has come to a close (c.f. *Life of the Mind*). It is unethical and simply presumptuous to claim to know the essence of a person the way you might know the essence of other natural facts (HC 10). Defining human nature is not only a dangerous project, but an impossible,

circular one. As Augustine knew, human nature must be phrased as a question, not assumed as a premise (HC 10). Arendt concludes that we ought to avoid the political claims based on human “nature” all together.²⁶ As Peg Birmingham has pointed out, Arendt does admit human facticity into her account of human existence, but in a peculiar, obscure way. By way of illustration, Birmingham cites this passage from *Origins of Totalitarianism* – also one of the first mentions of natality – in which the condition is described as including “this mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds” (OT 301, cited in Birmingham 71). For Arendt, naturalness like birth belongs to the private sphere of the household, as the Greeks would have it, which must be established before we move into the political public sphere. The only response to this mysterious given is to say, with Augustine, “*Volo ut sis* (I want you to be)” (OT 301, cited in Birmingham 71). In short, in Arendt’s view, a natal ontology affirms our mysteriously given facticity, but does not appeal to it for rights.²⁷

As natals, humans are not merely passive ‘natural’ creations, but capable of initiating new actions, of making beginnings in the world. These actions release us from the cycle of natural processes (HC 323). For Arendt, both the problem with and promise of beginning, as with natality, is “its inherent unpredictability” (HC 191) and its fragility.

²⁶ As Peg Birmingham well describes, although Arendt rejects accounts of human nature on the grounds that it might lead certain races or groups to claim a privileged access to some “natural law,” Arendt nonetheless remains a humanist of sorts (Birmingham 8. See also OT 298).

²⁷ For Arendt, natality is a political category and possibly an ontological category, but it is never equivalent to factual birth (Birmingham 9, HC 9 and 246). Nonetheless, Birmingham shows that while it may seem that Arendt simply “equates the given with *zoe*, mere life, which she then relegates to the realm of the private” (75), in fact, Arendt is always “preoccupied with the double miracle of the event of natality, both the miracle of the given and the miracle of beginning” (76). Birmingham then elucidates the political ramifications of this trend in Arendt. I here point out only the connection between this affirmation of givenness by Arendt and her emphasis on the unpredictability of natality. Arendt excludes “human nature” as a political category. However, she does not exclude the possibility that our given nature contributes to the unpredictable irruption of natal life from the private into the political world. We simply cannot appeal to nature to determine or to secure political rights.

When we begin – a life, a speech, an organization – we cannot know the result. If we knew the result, life would be one great game of dominos played by more or less skillful planners. Instead, life in a plurality is quite unpredictable; we just never know what other, distinct people, are going to do. For Arendt, this is not because of our “nature”:

The fragility of human institutions and laws and, generally, of all matters pertaining to men’s living together, arise from the human condition of natality, and is quite independent of the frailty of human nature. (HC 191)

Life with other humans is unpredictable not because we are weak, fragile, passive, or unpredictable naturally. Rather, life is unpredictable because we cannot know what others will do.²⁸ For Arendt, the question becomes how we can act, understanding our distinctness from others and the fragility of action, and yet not lose faith in potential of actions organized in concert with others.

Having established this terminology by way of Arendt, let me make some initial distinctions between her work and Merleau-Ponty’s, each of which I will discuss at length in the following chapters. The most obvious point of contrast between Merleau-Ponty and Arendt is the former’s discussion of nature and the body. For Merleau-Ponty, as for Arendt, our natality initiates us into a plurality – into a relation to *multiple* others –

²⁸ Many political efforts, for example, have been made to ensure a stabler political sphere. Arendt shows how with, at the latest, Aristotle, the Greeks began to think of politics as sort of craft so that it resulted in “a tangible project, and its process has a clearly recognizable end. This is no longer or, rather, not yet action (*praxis*), properly speaking, but making (*poesis*), which they preferred because of its greater reliability. It is as though they had said that if men only renounce their capacity for action, with its futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome their could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs” (HC 195). The Greeks, like many politicians after them, wanted to make life with other people stable and secure. They wanted to not merely act but to leave a trace of their actions. They wanted to set something in motion – to act – and to insure that things continued along just that trajectory. Unfortunately, not every person who lived after these first Greeks agreed with their vision of the political sphere.

but for Merleau-Ponty this occurs first and foremost by way of the body.²⁹ He argues that we can see “the body as organ of the for-other” (NC 218). But this emphasis on the body, or on a type of body, comes perhaps dangerously close to associating a plurality of humans with a natural species. (In fact, as I will show in chapters 5-7, at the end of the *Nature Courses*, Merleau-Ponty does speak of the human species in a non-reductive way.)³⁰

Merleau-Ponty unhesitatingly connects our natality to our nature. For Merleau-Ponty, the fragility of our natality – our conditioning of beginning and having a beginning – is dependent on our nature and the Nature in which we find ourselves. When we begin actions, we initiate them, but our initiation depends on a prior initiation into the world. Beginning means being receptive to beginning. Rather than a flaw or failing of the human condition, the fragility inherent in natality is its very potential for creativity. Were we not receptive to the world – permeable, affected by the world – then we could not act. As I will show, from the *Structure of Behavior* through the *Phenomenology of Perception* to “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty emphasizes our active-passive receptivity to our world of other things and other selves. This natal receptivity and fragility depends quite directly on our natural, incarnate bodily situation in the world. All life is “auto-

²⁹ In discussing the topic of plurality, I approach the broad and long discussed topic of the Other. To put it bluntly, there are many ways to talk about Others and encountering others: Hegel with the Other who constitutes self, Levinas with the (primarily) singular Other that transcends and claims the self, Heidegger with a work world that indicates Others and the modality of *das Man* that conditions the self according to Others. I cannot do justice to all these accounts; for an overview of one path onto this problem see Vincent Descombes, *Le même et l'autre*, translated as *Modern French Philosophy*. In emphasizing plurality, I merely want to highlight that when we find ourselves related to others through birth, we find a relation to many others rather than a singular other(s). A natality ontology describe life as oriented toward such a plurality.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty speak of the species as a project before us, rather than a fixed and finished category based on morphology. The key to avoiding reductive errors in speaking of “species” will be, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, to notice that “there is not a spirit of the species, but a dialogue” (NC 198). In other words, “It is not a positive being but an interrogative being which defines life” (NC 156).

poetic,” self-making. But human life is poetic: we make products, ideas, and institutions that outlive us and exceed us as individuals. These products include even philosophy itself. We must understand philosophy as a poetic action – with all the associated fragility and unpredictability of any natal venture – rather than as a mere effect or fixed condition.

Despite the anti-naturalism in earlier works such as the *Human Condition*, in her later work Arendt actually makes some interesting comments about natural species and their orientation to others which at the very least qualify her earlier position and open toward a natal ontology that she shares with Merleau-Ponty. Like Merleau-Ponty, Arendt notes a marked turn from exteriority to interiority in Descartes’s work, and both Arendt and Merleau-Ponty find that phenomenology – and even ontology – must turn toward appearances: toward literal and metaphorical presentations of exteriority rather than over-emphasizing invisible, interior of experience.

These later connections between Arendt and Merleau-Ponty point toward two themes that reoccur through the following study: exteriority and our relation to others. We might distinguish ourselves from non-living nature in terms of the finitude of our mode of being: our mortality. A living being enjoys a period of life that concludes in death; consciousness of this finitude might prompt activity that offers some immortality or evasion of this death. Connections to other generations would appear in relation to this project of death-evasion (See Arendt, *Human Condition* Ch 1 on immortality, and Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Div II). Or, we might also distinguish ourselves in terms of our interiority: as beings who are born, living things distinguish themselves as being with an interior life. Living things are subjects, not mere objects (Henry “*Phénoménologie de*

la naissance” 126-127).³¹ We find there is “something like” being a human, a chimp, or a bat, to use the words of Thomas Nagel. Certainly, there is a truth to the claim that humans enjoy a certain reflective interiority, not accessible to rocks and less accessible to amoebae. Yet, there is also a risk in over-identifying with our interiority. In his *Nature Courses*, Merleau-Ponty points out that since Descartes, there has been a peculiar turning away from nature as interior to nature as *entirely* exterior; human, subjective life becomes defined almost solely in terms of its interior reflective activity

For Merleau-Ponty both “exteriority” and “totality” have decidedly different definitions and connotations than they have through the history of philosophy.³² For Merleau-Ponty, it is our very particularity, our very contingency and perception rooted in natality that redirects us toward our exteriority, our displaying for others as I discuss in chapter 7. Far from abstract discussions of “the other” or “the gaze,” Merleau-Ponty grounds his work in investigations into the very structure and activity of the gaze, offering studies of the optical nerves of monkeys and the intrauterine development of infants (See SB Ch 1, and my Chapter 1 and 6). By emphasizing contingency, Merleau-Ponty expresses a continuity between human life and natural life in general. Merleau-Ponty presents an ontology, but it is an ontology with an ethical orientation, an ontology that claims that our relation to being is fundamentally conditioned by *connaissance* and *comportement*, our knowing and being born with others and with a world. In the pursuit

³¹ As Henry puts it, a rock merely exists in the world, whereas a snake, a mountain lion, or human appears with birth. The rock has a “blind, opaque” mode of being (Henri “Phénoménologie de la Naissance” 126).

³² It would be an interesting project to compare in-detail Merleau-Ponty’s notions of “totality” and “exteriority” to those of Levinas in his “Essay on Exteriority,” as *Totality and Infinity* is subtitled. For Levinas, totality with its Hegelian rational order has dominated the public sphere, a dominance that leads Levinas himself to a turn from the tradition of prioritizing the individual, privacy, and autonomy in favor of quite the opposite., skirts detailed engagement with facticity and corporeality in its particularity. Levinas suggest that “ethics is an optics,” but it is specifically an optics of a vision “without an image” (*Totality and Infinity* 23). Merleau-Ponty would no doubt agree with Levinas in some sense of these terms; an excellent project would be to develop the point of their divergence on the issue.

and presentation of this ontology, Merleau-Ponty never leaves the ontic world, devoting meticulous attention to the details of facticity, from the neural structure of the axolotl to the historical role of Trotsky in communism. This generality always describes a multiplicity of others. Instead of depending on the experience of *an* other to re-direct us toward exteriority, for Merleau-Ponty and Arendt, the very fact of visibility itself implicates us in a network of others, both present, past, and future.³³ Arendt shows us a vision of the *true* public sphere as the site of unpredictable natality. Merleau-Ponty shows the unpredictability of natality conditioning existence at many levels, from the perceptual to the personal. The very movement of history depends on contingency at a prepersonal, “natural” level. A totalizing, rational Hegelian history is simply not a possibility in a natural, natal world such as ours. Erasing the line between nature and culture allows the unpredictability of natality to permeate through all orders of existence.

³³ Although I cannot accomplish it here, it would be interesting to pursue the contrast between these two thinkers regarding the *il y a* and the mode of *l'on*. For Levinas, what exists first and foremost is the “*il y a*” (as for Heidegger the *es gibt*), the prepersonal fact of being and *ilyeite*; for Merleau-Ponty, the ground of the fact of being is better described as the anonymous mode of the “one,” “*l'on*.” Perhaps the mode of the one, though prior to a name and particular subjective qualities, still retains an personal quality not found in Levinas’s general fact of being-there. Although “*l'on*” is third person neutral, it nonetheless seems more “personal” than the *il y a* of Levinas.

**Ch1 Of Being Born:
*Connaissance, Comportement and the Structure of Behavior:***

“The intention of the organism is to know its life. ‘Is that right?’
says the dead man.” – Alice Notley

Co-naissance: Natal Knowing

Our natality initiates us into nature and culture, into a world of things and of others. But this world does not entirely precede us, and we do not simply step onto the world as onto a stage. As natals, we are not born *into* the world but *with* the world; insofar as we understand other living beings, we do so through a particular mode of knowing conditioned by that co-natality. As Paul Claudel says, “We are not born alone”:
“Nous ne naissons pas seuls. Naître, pour tout, c’est connaître. Toute naissance est une connaissance” (149). As early as the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that this natal fact – that we are born with others, into a plurality – structures our entire mode of being and knowing.

In this early text, to distinguish the sort of knowing that arises through prereflective perceiving and acting, Merleau-Ponty follows Claudel and chooses the noun *connaissance*.³⁴ The subtlety is lost in the English translation so I reproduce the French, followed by the standard translation, here:

Connaître quelque chose, ce n’est pas seulement se trouver en présence d’un ensemble compact de données et pour ainsi dire vivre en lui; cette << co-naissance >>, ce contact aveugle avec un objet singulier, cette participation à son existence seraient comme rien dans l’histoire d’un esprit, et n’y laisseraient pas plus d’acquisitions et de souvenirs disponibles qu’une douleur physique ou qu’un évanouissement, s’ils ne contenaient déjà le mouvement contraire par lequel je me détache de la chose pour en appréhender le sens. (La structure du comportement 213)

³⁴ I am grateful to David Morris for pointing to this passage in the *Structure of Behavior*.

To know something is not only to find oneself in the presence of a compact ensemble of givens and to live in it as it were; this ‘co-nascence’ [*connaissance*], this blind contact with a singular object and this participation in its existence would be as nothing in the history of a mind and would leave no more acquisitions and available memories in the mind than would a physical pain or a fainting spell if the contrary movement by which I detach myself from the thing in order to apprehend the meaning were not already contained in them. (SB 198)

What does not survive translation is the connotation of natality contained within the French term for knowing. “*Connaissance*” connotes the manner in which one knows a street, a person, or the words to a song through familiarity, rather than the way one knows, as in *savoir*, an answer to a question in mathematics or the question “When did the second World War begin?” Merleau-Ponty uses these various terms over the course of his text,³⁵ but in the *Structure of Behavior*, we find a particularly striking distinction and emphasis on *connaissance* and on *comportement*. The emphasis reappears throughout his work until the *Visible and the Invisible*. Playing on Claudel’s use of the term, Merleau-Ponty sketches out a connection between knowledge, comportment and natality. This connection, made in his earliest work, sets in motion his natal ontology. In each permutation, *connaissance* takes on a wider application, exceeding the previous. In the *Visible and the Invisible*, he cites a passage from Claudel that suggests we even encounter time and space – the very First Critique Kantian categories – through *connaissance*:

From time to time, a man lifts his head, sniffs, listens, considers, recognizes his position: he thinks, he sighs, and, drawing his watch from the pocket lodged against his chest, looks at the time. *Where am I?* and

³⁵ For example, he uses “*apprendre*” : *C’est à la fois dans la psychologie et dans la biologie que l’appréhension des structures doit être reconnue comme un genre de savoir irréductible à la compréhension des lois (La Structure du Comportement 169)*. Alternatively, of the same type of understanding of the vital order, he uses “*comprendre*”: “*Mais de toute manière, comprendre ces entités biologiques, ce n’est pas note une série de coïncidence empirique*” (*La Structure du Comportement 171*).

What time is it? – such is the inexhaustible question turning from us to the world?” (C Claudel, cited in VI 121)

Already in the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty has begun the project of re-envisioning existence according to natality that carries through his later ontology. In what follows, I will point out how in this early text, Merleau-Ponty bolsters the epistemological and ontological shift associated with human natal knowing with examples from the animals world, connections that he will continue to draw in the Nature Courses..

Rethinking knowing as *co-naissance* entails a radical epistemological and ontological shift. As mortality for Heidegger circumscribes and redescribes existence, so does natality profoundly condition existence and experience for Merleau-Ponty. Natality destabilizes our concepts of “nature” and “culture”: Merleau-Ponty shows that knowledge – which seems to be the cultural acquisition par excellence – has arisen from birth, from our *natus*, our natural emergence into the world. As Merleau-Ponty later says of painting, natality “scrambles all our categories” (EM 130). When phenomenology admits that we are not complete, absolute subjects but born into existence, the standard terminology of phenomenology fails existential description. In the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty points out that attending to natality revises even the most basic categorical distinctions of Kant: “as soon as nascent consciousness is taken as the object of analysis one realizes that it is impossible to apply to it the celebrated distinction between *a priori* form and empirical content” (SB 171). Understanding knowledge as *connaissance*, as rooted in natality, means rethinking the very dualisms of “nature” and “culture,” “physical” and “personal,” dualisms under which we so often categorize human life and animal life.

Comportement: Behavior as Bearing-With

The French title of *The Structure of Behavior – La Structure du Comportement* – hints at the ambiguous totality of nature and culture that Merleau-Ponty pursues throughout this and future projects. “*Comportement*” etymologically suggest a bearing with, a “*com-portement*,” alluding to the co-development of the living organism in its world that is the subject of the text. The roughly translated English equivalent “comportment” gives a similarly subtle connotation in which the physical and the cultural are inseparable; for example, one’s comportment at a party includes both one’s physical movements and the cultural appropriateness of those actions. Rather than “behavior,” I will use the English “comportment” whenever possible to highlight the ambiguous, dialectical unity that Merleau-Ponty finds definitive of living organisms.³⁶ For Merleau-Ponty, to understand comportment – whether in practice or in a laboratory – we require a very special sort of knowledge, different from the sort we use when understanding physical systems. This is a knowledge not of categories and laws, but of structure: “both in psychology and biology, the apprehension of structures should be recognized as a kind of knowing which is irreducible to the comprehension of laws” (SB 156). It is a knowledge of the lifeworld. In short, our *connaissance* helps us understand *comportment*. Natal perceivers exercise *connaissance* as they comport themselves and as they understand the comportment of others.

At the time that he wrote the *Structure of Behavior*, printed in 1942 but completed by 1938, materialism and vitalism were still at a stand-off (Sallis “Merleau-Ponty:

³⁶ Eventually, we will return to the terminology of “action” rather than either “behavior” or “conduct,” but only after we establish how action is grounded in conduct. Speaking of an action suggests a choice or movement in a specific temporal instance rather than the ongoing, overall movement of life, and this extended, on-going, and holistic sense of living behavior is central to Merleau-Ponty’s position.

Perception Structure, Language” 1). In a 1933 preparatory study for the *Structure of Behavior*, the young Merleau-Ponty found that “the present state of neurology, experimental psychology (particularly psychopathology) and philosophy” were such that his work on the nature of perception was required (Sallis “Merleau-Ponty: Perception Structure, Language” 7). The state of research in the sciences diverged so dramatically from the sort of philosophical work in the Neo-Kantian Parisian schools that Merleau-Ponty felt this demanded an investigation.³⁷ As he saw it, the crux of the conflict was how philosophy could follow the progress of critical thought but still absorb the work of natural science. That is, phenomenology should ask itself: “Is there nothing justified in the naturalism of science?” (SB 4). If so, how can phenomenology improve to respond to the discoveries of naturalism and natural science? For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology could address this debate in a way that much critical philosophy cannot. In the present century, many working phenomenologists still struggle with just these issues, at once affirming research in, for example, neurological accounts of perception, but needing to match these results or contest these results with lived experience.³⁸

What Merleau-Ponty saw already in these early studies was that in order to resolve the work of natural science with the work in philosophy, one would have to address the status of nature itself. By nature, in relation to natural science, we usually, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, mean “a multiplicity of events external to each other and bound together by relations of causality” (SB 3) This was the case in Merleau-Ponty’s milieu, and his definition still fits many working definitions of scientists, as innumerable articles in popular press display. But critical thought – by which he means the post-Kantian

³⁷ See Johnson, “Merleau-Ponty and Kant’s Third Critique.”

³⁸ For just a few examples, see *Naturalizing Phenomenology* ed. by Petit, Varela et al, or the March 2008 issue of *Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, ed. by Shawn Gallagher and Dan Zahavi.

tradition, broadly construed³⁹ – has shown that nature as a system of pure physicality, of part on part action, does not appear: “There is then no physical nature in the sense we have just given to the word; there is nothing in the world which is foreign to the mind” (SB 3). But what, then, is natural science studying? And what is one referring to when one says “nature” in phenomenology?

Dissatisfied with this détente between phenomenology and natural science, Merleau-Ponty attempts to find an alternative. To borrow a frequent metaphor, Merleau-Ponty avoids the Scylla of empiricism and the Charybdis of intellectualism, not by threading between them, but by choosing another passage altogether. Traditional efforts to navigate this passage have failed by starting from within a dualism, by assuming that one must choose *either* empiricism or intellectualism or some combination of each: that is, by assuming the pre-established, inherited limits of these schools of thought. Without veering from the Scylla of materialism to the Charybdis of idealism, phenomenology must make the passage the Gestalt theory could not. To avoid the dichotomy of idealism and realism, phenomenology must see what other epistemological options are brought to light by rethinking ourselves as natals bearing ourselves and born with the world.

Beginning the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty offers, as alternative to these dualisms, a dialectical version of our knowledge of Nature. This knowledge is a natal knowledge, dialectically emerging between organism and environment, action and perception. No previous theorists, not even the Gestalt theorists, fully understood “the thought of relating the content of human perception to the structure of human action” (SB

³⁹ As John Wild notes in the translator’s introduction, by “critical thought” Merleau-Ponty intends the post-Kantian tradition in general, but not all the thought of Kant himself. For example, in an important footnote which we will consider in detail, Merleau-Ponty indicts Brunschvicg and even the Kant of the First Critique, but not the work in the third critique (see SB x and SB 248 note 41).

165). A theory of perception must change when it is “brought ... closer to action” (SB 165). Bergson, for example, did not understand that these two theories must dialectically emerge; thus, for Bergson, “beyond biological action, there remains only a mystical action” (SB 163). In lieu of a “mystical” account of human action, Merleau-Ponty proposes a rigorous phenomenology of the dialectical appearance of our knowledge of Nature.

He begins this project through a phenomenology of the dialectical emergence of *connaissance* and *comportement*. To describe his dialectical alternative to dualism, Merleau-Ponty turns to metaphors and similes, crossing between the domains of aesthetic and scientific knowing. He argues that *comportement* resembles a “kinetic melody gifted with meaning” (SB 130) or even more precisely, “a melody which sings itself” (SB 159). *Comportement* is “no more composed of parts which can be distinguished in it than a melody (always transferable) is made of the particular notes which are its momentary expression” (SB 132). He even argues that even the entire “world, in those of its sectors which realize a structure, is comparable to a symphony” (SB 132).

Neither Gestalt theory alone nor behaviorism, neither the orders of the “*pour soi*” or the “*en soi*,” nor that of idea nor thing reveals *comportement*: “Behavior (*comportement*), inasmuch as it has a structure, is not situated in either of these two orders” (SB 125). Gestalt psychology mistakes the terms of this analogy between *comportement* and the melody. The Gestalt theorist Koffka, cited by Merleau-Ponty, suggests that knowledge of this world-symphony could be acquired in two ways: by either diachronically or synchronically tracking the notes played by each instrument (SB 132). Analogically, this suggests that knowledge can be had by matching *comportement*

to the movement of parts in time and whole systems to the set of parts engaged at any one time. That is, Koffka suggests that a biologist could study animal comporment by simply tracking an abstract pattern of movement. But Koffka forgets that in order to begin such research, the biologist would already have to have identified the animal *as* animal, as alive and meaningful for her project of study. In oversimplifying the analogy in this claim, the Gestalt theorist misses the “Gestalt” of the analogy. A symphony does not have *meaning* when viewed simply as a pattern; before looking for any instruments or players, one would have to have a sense of what a symphony in general is doing. Gestalt psychology remains trapped in materialism, forgetting the meaning of the situation that motivates the working scientist. Merleau-Ponty solicits a particular epistemological shift in working scientists and philosophers toward recognizing the living significance of action in its situation (SB 161).

Theorists like Pavlov claim to have understood behavior purely in physiological terms according to a stimulus-response model that, although more complex, is still a “chain of automatic reactions” (SB 52). In fact, Merleau-Ponty argues that despite Pavlov’s claims of accessing pure physiology, even Pavlov started with a study of comporment. Before Pavlov entered a laboratory, Pavlov had encountered dogs and any number of other living, moving, intending animals. Pavlov was born in and with a world of animals that comport themselves. Pavlov began his study of physiology after his initiation into a natal world. Merleau-Ponty argues that Pavlov could not start with pure physiology because “nobody can in fact start with physiology” (SB 60). The purely physical is an abstraction that appears only in reflection, not in the living experience that

initiates scientific inquiry. Nature in itself does not appear even in the laboratory; it is an artifact of reflection on the processes witnessed therein.

Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that he is definitely *not* “constructing a metaphysics of nature” (SB 161). Rather, he makes an argument about the emergence of knowledge from natal beings through a prereflective bearing-with (comportment in) the world. This natality of knowing conditions understanding not only at the moment of birth, but into the laboratory; our *co-naissance* and comportment motivate us to enter the laboratory. In understanding the total activity of living organisms, we cannot neatly separate the physical and mental, natural and cultural. That is, “one cannot discern in animal behavior something like a first layer of reactions which would correspond to the physical” (SB 129). The “purely” physical does not appear in animal behavior; if Nature were equivalent to the purely physical, then pure nature is not discernable in animal behavior either. If Nature does appear, then it is not equivalent to the purely physical.

Merleau-Ponty offers much more than criticism in the *Structure of Behavior*. As Alphonse de Waelhens points out in his forward to this text, one might be tempted to say that “The *Structure of Behavior* is above all a negative work which attempts to show the inanity or the inadequacy of the answer to the problems of our behavior which are contributed by laboratory psychology” (SB xxv). But this oversimplification of the text “would be to restrict outrageously the scope of this book” (SB xxv). In this early text, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with showing the structures of the life world, with showing that a scientist, like *any person*, “spontaneously thinks in terms of an ontology” (xxvii). The scientist has grown into this ontological position from her birth; she does not set it aside when she walks into the laboratory. But – to return to de Waelhens’s point – this is

not a critique of the scientist per se, a suggestion that she ought to forego all knowledge as *savoir* for *connaissance*, but it is an argument that philosophy, reflecting on the activity of science, should view the scientist as natal and consider the activity of science as a natal project.⁴⁰

The *Structure of Behavior* not only refutes Pavlovian theory of behavior as stimulus and response, but proposes an alternative view of an organism as natively 1) situated in an environment and 2) *motivated*. The reason that an organism's "pure" Nature cannot be located is that an organism naturally appears in an environment, an *Umwelt*. The organism maintains a dialectical relation with its environment; nature occurs in this dialectic, not in abstraction from it. Pavlovian behaviorism assumes that it can understand an organism's nature outside of the world. The behaviorist assumes that the environment acts on organisms in a straightforward way: a stimulus from the world evokes a response from the organism. The world acts, and the organism re-acts. But this is where living beings differ from non-living systems. Living organisms do not come with ready-made, innate perceptual and action apparatus; the world elicits perception and action together. Natural sciences study not things set on top of the world like pieces on a game board, but organisms born in environments (SB 129). An environment, an *Umwelt*, is a meaningful surrounding but it is not totally pre-given or pre-established: in its natality, the organism elicits from and is solicited by its environment. Conduct is not like "a key with its lock," nor is it an "effect" of the world (SB 130). A physical system tends toward rest (SB 147) and can withstand disruption and displacement in space and time.

⁴⁰ M.C. Dillon argues that Merleau-Ponty's later explicit ontological project can be seen as implicit in the *Phenomenology* (85). I extend this claim to include the *Structure of Behavior*.

Unlike physical systems, living organisms pursue and sustain dialectical relation with the environment (SB 148).

Motivated organisms seek out their world rather than simply reacting to it. Rather than viewing organisms as passive objects stimulated by other external objects in a one-way causal relation, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we ought to understand the organism as engaging “prospective” action (SB 9). Such animal “prospective action” refers to what we might also call more broadly “motivated action.” This sort of action differs from the “neutral” action that behaviorism sees; it is the difference between, for example, the event of being presented with a glass of water and the event of going *looking for* a glass of water. If you go *looking for* a glass of water, the action bears out some total signification of in your world; you desired water for some reason. You did not merely react to the presence or non-presence of water in your environment. A frog grabs at a fly because he wants to eat the fly. This presents a sort of Meno’s paradox⁴¹ to behaviorism: Prior to the frog seeing the fly, the fly has not “stimulated” the frog. How could a frog be stimulated by a fly unless it was stimulatable by flies? Only prospective action describes that the frog does not look neutrally about itself – scanning indifferently for any thing – but it *looks for flies*. Merleau-Ponty describes this example:

If I am in a dark room and a luminous spot appears on the wall and moves along, I would say that it has ‘attracted’ my attention ... Grasped from the inside, my behavior appears as directed, as gifted with an intention and meaning. (SB 7)

This “gift” of intention is the motivation with which an organism is born. We cannot understand this motivated movement without looking at the environment in which it appears. While it is hard *not* to focus on a light in a dark room, by contrast it is “very

⁴¹ Dillon presents Meno’s paradox as paradigmatic of the sorts of problems that strict empiricism and intellectualism fail to address (1-34).

difficult to fixate an object in a landscape illuminated by daylight for very long” (SB 36).

In each case, the environment alters our very perception of the situation and likewise our motor action. A few more examples from *Structure of Behavior* should help to clarify what motivated, “prospective” action is like. If

in a monkey, the internal muscles of the eyeballs are connected with the nerve fibers which ordinarily govern the external muscles and these latter, on the other hand, with the nerve fibers which habitually govern the former, when the animal is placed in a dark room it [still] turns its eyes correctly toward a luminous spot (SB 38).

That is, despite the rearrangement of its visual anatomy, the monkey performs the same comportment. The monkey’s physical construction is not like a key in the lock of the environment. Not only is the monkey motivated by the world, but a certain *momentum* carries through the monkey’s comportment. The momentum of the monkey’s comportment carries through changes in its physical structure. This momentum is what a materialist behaviorism cannot well-represent. It would seem, according to a Pavlovian model, that with a different physical construction, the monkey would simply re-act differently to its context. Instead, it seems that the monkey’s comportment is more closely associated with its environment; the monkey, in a dark room, has a tendency toward a sort of comportment. Consider another case: if the legs of a certain beetle are removed, the stump of the beetle will continue to walk, finding “a new mode of locomotion” (SB 39). The anatomy does not predetermine these animals’ conducts: rather, the global structure overrides the local anatomical functions. Conduct is like a piece that is being played on the piano before the moment of the experiment and carries on after. Pavlovian behaviorism cannot describe how *new* – yet relevant –comportment is possible. The monkey and the beetle do not simply play a pre-given piece; rather, like a

jazz musician or a violinist reaching a cadenza, the monkey and beetle can improvise with in a range of relevant comportment. How is it that, through new physiological and neurological patterns, an organism generates new methods for existing behavior? This is the question that a natal perspective raises.

With a host of examples that I will not repeat here (See SB, Chapters 2 – 3), Merleau-Ponty shows how stimulus-response theory has failed as a scientific theory for describing behavior. He summarizes the research in this passage:

Thus the reflex – effect of pathological disassociation characteristic not of the fundamental activity of the living being but of experimental apparatus which we use for studying it or a luxury activity developed later in ontogenesis as well as phylogenesis – cannot be considered as a constituent element of animal behavior. (SB 45)

In a laboratory, it seems that the only thing prompting an animal to act is a stimulus and that the *only* thing an animal can do is passively respond. But this is a result of the restricted environment of the laboratory.⁴² As the other experiment cited above shows, the organism actually has a momentum of comportment that carries over into many situations. Given a different environment, the animal realizes its general bearing toward the world through different physiological means.

From a simplistic teleology or pseudo-evolutionary biological perspective, we might think that organisms have developed to follow certain simple behaviors. For example, people tend to walk on their feet and grasp with their hands; it seems “simpler” to do this. But that oversimplifies the situation – and I mean, precisely, the totality of the *situation* – in which a person walks and grasps. This situation forms the environment – the *Umwelt*, the world-context – in which the organism was born. The momentum of

⁴² I am grateful to Noah Moss-Brender for clarifying this point; he describes the stimulus as an “artifact” of the laboratory.

behavior means that “an order without anatomical guarantee is realized by means of continuing organization” (SB 207). It is not that “simple behaviors are preferred but that preferred behaviors are simple” (SB 147). That an organism was born into an environment conditions its entire bearing, its comportment at all times. The organism always *com-ports* itself: it always bears itself with the world into which it was born. It never “just behaves,” passively reacting to an arbitrary external world. The animal’s forms of comportment accord with a general style of activity, not because certain physical “parts” made a whole action easier or because some action required particular parts.

In his refutation of Pavlov, Merleau-Ponty expresses a crucial insight that informs all his later work, and indeed ought to inform our current response to either overly empiricist or idealistic descriptions of human nature. In living beings, perception and action are *inseparable*. In actual living situations, “the sensorium and motorium function as part of a single organism” (SB 36) and not like two static systems running parallel; these systems coevolve. Thus, if what we intend to do is to “think what we are doing,” as Arendt put it, and perform a phenomenology of action, then we cannot do this properly without a phenomenology of perception. Moreover, these two theories cannot be formulated independently but must co-emerge; we cannot let “science” take care of perception while ethicists deal with “action.” Neither a Cartesian dualism of mind and body nor a first critique Kantian dichotomy of an understanding completely distinct from sensation is possible in this model.⁴³

⁴³ This is a radical revision of the relation between perception and action; many recent studies bear out the correctness of these insights (c.f. Nöe *Action and Perception*), but perhaps fail to take on the ethical implications of these revised theories of perception.

Human Natality and *Connaissance*

Though *Structure of Behavior* includes many examples from the animal world, Merleau-Ponty also pays close attention to human natality. Merleau-Ponty always maintains a distinction between animal conduct and human conduct. As he clarifies later, he has “expressly said that man perceives in a way different from any animal” (PrimP 25). Nonetheless, details from animal and prereflective human life reveal “to us the permanent data of the problem which culture attempts to resolve” (PrimP 25). As living organisms, animals and humans are both natural, *natus*, born. For Merleau-Ponty, affirming this continuity of human life with other life forms is very important to the progress of phenomenology; to fail to see the differences between conscious living beings and all living beings is to make the same mistake as not seeing the fundamental difference between living and non-living beings. At the same time, he never loses sight of the fact that humans do complicate their comportment and world-relations in ways that animals do not, through, for example, language and tool-making.⁴⁴ Human beings have not only environments but worlds. Gestalt psychology failed to see this difference of kind and not only in degree. Consciousness is just one more natural structure for Gestalt theory which stays within “the tradition of materialism” (SB 136). This materialistic model does not distinguish the total worldview shifts that happen at various orders of being, from physical to biological to human.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ In the Nature Courses, as we shall see, Merleau-Ponty makes a slight shift from this attention to the uniqueness of the human order per se and turns again to the uniqueness of the living order in general.

⁴⁵ For Gestalt theory, “the fact of becoming conscious adds nothing to the physical structures” (SB 136). The essentially problematic assumption of the Gestalt theorists for Merleau-Ponty is the postulation of a linear continuity from the physical, molecular level to the level of consciousness. If there is continuity, it is like the continuity of geometrical space between point and point, line and line, and plane and plane; but as we add each dimension to this analogy, we find that postulating continuity hardly suffices to describe the new possibilities of relation and structure.

Human existence makes such intergenerational, interpersonal natal conditioning possible in a way not possible for animals. Humans, for example, make tools intended to train future generations or “for preparing others” (SB 175). These tools meaningfully and prereflectively structure the activity using them. Humans can perceive two orders of being at once and retain them. We can perceive a stick as a stick and also the stick as a tool for doing something else; when a chimp has finished using a stick as a tool, the stick returns to a single order of being (SB 175). We might think of the classic Heideggerian example of the hammer in a workshop as meaningful first as a tool at hand rather than some pure object in-itself. Merleau-Ponty offers his own example of the meaningful situation of a football field for the play; the field is not just grass, but a meaningful domain of action (SB 168). The field is meaningfully structured *for* the player; the grass as nature “in-itself” fades in favor of the meaning of the game being played.⁴⁶

But for Merleau-Ponty, better than all these examples of *adult* perception is the perception of children. The perception of children exemplifies this double vision. Heidegger, in overlooking this example, misses some of the epistemological shifts that Merleau-Ponty will make by understanding how judgment is rooted in “nascent perception.” What is under revision in these investigations is not “child psychology” per se; rather, studying children’s nascent perception entails an overall modification of our views of action and perception in general. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “we propose to show that the descriptive dimension of nascent perception demands a reformulation of the notion of consciousness” (SB 169). Just as the Heideggerian mode of being-at-hand appears for all Da-sein, nascent perception conditions all human action and existence, not just that of childhood. The childhood “mode of aesthetic perception which appears

⁴⁶ See also Thompson 76-77 on how work changes the milieu of the organism.

absurd to so many adults should not for this reason be made a part of primitive perception” (SB 167). Our natal perceptual entrances into a world conditioned by a plurality conditions all proceeding existence.

Children’s perception exemplifies the sort of natively conditioned knowing that Merleau-Ponty sees happening in all sorts of adult human activity, from everyday perception to scientific judgments. To children’s perception, the so-called “purely natural” or purely physical hardly ever appears: “Nature is perhaps grasped initially only as that minimum stage setting which is necessary for the performance of a human drama” (SB 168). Nature in itself does not appear in perception because perception happens with action; we do not first *need* “pure nature” and thus it does not appear. We need comfort, food, affection, learning, all of which we reach out for with our little fists. When children, especially infants, look around the world, they are first and foremost concerned with other humans. Even more specifically, infants concern themselves with the nearest human, often the mother: “infantile perception attaches itself first of all to faces and gestures, in particular to those of the mother” (SB 166). Before a child can differentiate particular colors, recall names, or generalize concepts, a child can identify a face as meaningful. Human perception orients itself, “has as its original object, not the ‘unorganized mass,’ but the actions of other human subjects” (SB 166).

In living experience, humans encounter others first not as a set of qualities or characteristics, but as already meaningful living wholes, soliciting action. Children do not need to imaginatively vary and transpose, part by external part, the actions of the adult before them onto their own body. Instead, the body schema of the adult naturally

matches their own. Instead of re-presenting parts of an adult body and inferring meaning, a child absorbs meaning in the perceptual action of imitation:

It is not the resemblance of our own gestures to the gestures of other persons which can give to these latter their expressive value: a child understands the joyful meaning of a smile long before having seen his own smile, that of menacing or melancholy mimicry which he has never executed and to which his own experience can furnish no content. (SB 156)

Merleau-Ponty here begins to establish a thesis that carries forward to the later work:

prior to reflection and prior *even to reflective vision* of her own body, a child can understand the *meaning* of an other's smile. That is, a child acts on a prereflective, natally given sort of knowing: a *connaissance*. By the sheer fact of having been born, a child can access an anonymous mode of being that gives meaning to an other's face and presents the child herself with a possible range of meaningful actions.

In the *Structure of Behavior*, he makes only the above, brief but far reaching claim about childhood; beyond this paragraph he does not develop the implications of this prereflective tendency to mimicry. We will have to trace these nascent thoughts into later texts to see the full implication of this attention to child behavior, not forgetting to address the fact that we encounter not only meaningful gestures of other people, but we encounter *speaking* others. For the moment, however, it is important to note that by virtue of our natality and prior to reflection, we see another in ourselves and vice versa, and the world calls out for action. To defer the problem of relating to others – to see it as posterior to the intellectual piecing together of linguistic structures – ignores a more fundamental openness to the other and the world. The world – and our immediate environment – *interests* us: not only are we caught up in a momentum initiated before our natality, but we are motivated to act by others. We understand people not as a collection

of qualities that we categorically compile together; rather we understand people through a total invested attention to the whole, meaningful movement of human life. We know – *connaître* – people differently but also *earlier* than we know – *savoir* – the answer to a test question. This sort of knowing appears not all at once, out of the blue with clarity and distinctness like Cartesian ideas, but from a history of familiarity with a certain situation.

When I reach for my coat at a party, signifying my readiness to leave, my partner responds to my natural and cultural gestures as one meaning; in this gesture the dialectic of nature and culture, part and whole, appears in the total action of comportment. She or he understands my comportment through familiarity. This action does not appear at the molecular level of synapses, but at the level of macroscopic motion in the world. For example, both of my physical hands and the activity of “grasping” dialectically depend on one another and a world: I have hands because I grasp and grasp because I have hands, because I was born into a world that admits of grasping. As Merleau-Ponty puts it more clearly later, “we discover between the situation and the response an internal articulation that we understand, but that we cannot reduce to its elements” (NC 140). Perhaps most importantly, I do not have to reflect on my comportment in order to bear myself toward my world. We receive the environment and orient ourselves in the environment through an odd combination of passivity and activity (See SB 249).

Phenomenological attention to childhood helps show our relation to the world that is covered over with adulthood and, more broadly, by objectifying scientific perspectives. As adults – whether we are at a dinner party or in a laboratory – when we exercise knowledge of other living beings’ comportments, we draw on this *co-naissance*.

***Connaissance* and Judgment: From Dualism to Dialectic**

Like other natural beings, we are born; our *connaissance* of living comportment is thus no coincidence, nor is it illusion. In Merleau-Ponty's view, we do not simply project meaning structures on the world of living organisms or the physical world. In fact, he argues:

Every theory of 'projection,' be it empiricist or intellectualist, presupposes what it tries to explain, since we could not project our feelings into the visible behavior of an animal if something in this behavior itself did not suggest the inference to us. (SB 156)

Something in the comportment of an animal calls out to our understanding. But if something in the animal comportment *in itself* calls out for attention, must it not have some principle immanent to itself? That is, are we not returning to an Aristotelian-like teleological model of understanding comportment?

To return to the symphony analogy, are we suggesting the meaningful world is orchestrated by some creator? To extend the analogy in that direction would push Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective to one of divine creation and teleology, in its most simplistic of an Aristotelian or medieval finalism. The world has a certain order and meaning because it was *put here*. But Merleau-Ponty clearly states that he does not advocate a traditional teleological model: the structure of comportment is not in the world but *for* a perceiver (SB 142). The world has form when we perceive it. He explicitly rejects "both mechanism and finalism," because "the organism does not conspire to actualize an idea, and the mental is not a motor principle *in* the body" (SB 184). This simplistic sense of "finalism" fails to understand that we cannot locate behavior in the object or organism: the structure of behavior *appears to* human

consciousness. The phenomenological method helps us escape from an Aristotelian teleology. Gestalt psychologists, failing to grasp the profundity of their own theory, slipped into a nearly Aristotelian model of nature; because they did not grasp the total shift that happens with living organisms and saw total continuity between the physical and vital order, they suggest “that structures can be found *in* a nature taken in-itself (*en soi*) and that mind can be constituted from them” (SB 138). Gestalt theorists did not make the Kantian Copernican turn. They forgot that natural forms appear *to* us.

But has Merleau-Ponty, in making this turn, then not turned toward a Kantian idealism? In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Kant, particularly on this issue of our judgment of natural forms, is a complex one. As Galen Johnson as shown, Merleau-Ponty does indeed reject the Kantian position of the First Critique; nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty actively and consistently engages with Kant’s Third Critique throughout his career.⁴⁷ This engagement, as Johnson argues, points to an affinity between Merleau-Ponty’s epistemological position and that of Kant’s later position.⁴⁸ Consider Merleau-Ponty’s own comments on the subject as early as the *Structure of Behavior*: he remarks that while rejecting a classical teleology, he does believe that “Kantian philosophy... particularly in the *Critique of Judgment* contains essential indications concerning the problems of which it is a question here” (SB 248 nt. 41). Those problems are the relation of “causal thinking,” “the transcendental attitude,” “signification,” “structure,” and “Gestalt” (SB 206). Thus, while the Copernican turn as expressed in the First Critique

⁴⁷ For such a complete study, see Johnson *The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics* and “Merleau-Ponty and Kant’s Third Critique: The Beautiful and the Sublime.”

⁴⁸ My interpretation of Kant here assumes that the Third Critique is disruptive of the Kantian system. This is not a novel reading of Kant but it is not the only position one might take on the status of the Third Critique. I am selecting the second among basically two camps: 1) the Third Critique is consistent with the First and Second (e.g. Henry Allison) and 2) the Third critique is innovative and/or disruptive (e.g. Jay Bernstein, John Sallis, Paul Guyer). I do not have the space to fully defend my position here, but for a full study of the reasons to see the *Critique of Judgment* as a radical departure, see Guyer and Sallis.

might restrict us to an unmediated idealism, the model in the Third Critique addresses just the sort of knowing we exercise when apprehending natural forms, including comportment. Just as the connection between the first half of the Third Critique, on beauty, and the second half, on nature, has profound implications for Kant, the connection between the melody and comportment is no mere passing analogy for Merleau-Ponty; rather, it suggests that in understanding comportment, we exercise a sort of knowing akin to aesthetic judgment.

Like Kant's in the Third Critique, Merleau-Ponty's position in the *Structure of Behavior* suggests that human perception apprehends an aesthetic stylization in comportment. Any one moment of comportment indicates a certain principle that exceeds and precedes that moment. Comportment, like the beautiful, points beyond itself. Johnson writes:

Kant's doctrine of an aesthetic common sense posits Nature as a system whose principle we do not find anywhere in the categories of the understanding, the principle of purposiveness. Kant wrote: 'Under this principle, appearances must be judged as belonging not merely to nature as governed by its purposeless mechanism, but also to [nature considered by] analogy with art' (Kant, 1987, §23, p. 99). (Johnson "Merleau-Ponty and Kant's Third Critique" pp. TBD).

When I apprehend a beautiful object, according to Kant, I know that its form appears to me subjectively, and yet I claim that others must see this form and judge it as I do.⁴⁹ I do not find the conduct of an animal merely agreeable, I find it purposive: the animal's comportment suggests a principle that others can apprehend. What Merleau-Ponty adds to Kant's position – among many things – is an identification of this sort of knowing, our *connaissance* of natural forms, with our natality. Our natality initiates us into a world

⁴⁹ For a more detailed and relevant summary of Kant, see Johnson *Retrieving the Beautiful*.

apparently prepared for our judgment; our natal connection to our world and to others suggests to us that others ought to understand the judgments we make of our perception.

What receives only a few sentences of reference in this text expands into chapters in the *Phenomenology*. Merleau-Ponty struggles to find a way out of Kant's epistemological dualism in the First Critique; the alternative to dualism depends on viewing knowing as rooted in natality, as *connaissance*. Already in the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the *connaissance* we have of an animal's *comportement* is not limited to understanding animal comportment per se; instead, we exercise *connaissance* in many orders of the life world. He explains:

This method of organization of experience is not exclusive to biological knowledge. In history, to understand is also to break up the global ensemble of concrete events according to categories, then attempt to rejoin the real unity from which one has started. (SB 152)

He even extends this epistemological and ontological shift farther than biology, psychology, and history. He makes the broad claim that the *connaissance* of living beings relies on “a general attitude toward certain categories of objects, perhaps even toward all things” (SB 158). He also call this general attitude of apprehending general living activity a “determination of essences” that “is practiced all the time by scientists although it is not *recognized* as such” (SB 244 note 69).

In order to escape Kantian dualism – and indeed any dualism – Merleau-Ponty argues that phenomenology must rethink knowledge of natural forms as dialectical. Natal knowing, *connaissance*, like comportment, emerges dialectically between an organism and its environment.

Having redefined natural knowing in terms of a dialectic, we might then ask whether Merleau-Ponty has not simply followed critical thought beyond Kant and

through Hegel. If we have left idealism for a dialectic, have we not adopted a sort of Hegelianism? Merleau-Ponty does acknowledge that “the notion of ‘Gestalt’ has led us back to its Hegelian meaning” (SB 210). But while Hegel provides an essential critique that makes a move toward the dialectic possible, it is not Hegel’s dialectic that describes Nature for Merleau-Ponty. For Hegel, “Nature ... is the exterior of a concept” (SB 210). Merleau-Ponty affirms that the analogical relation between a living organism and consciousness of Nature is likewise analogical to the relation between word and concept (SB 210). But in his model, words are not mere clothing for concepts; the concept as concept “has no exterior” (SB 210). Consciousness “experiences its inherence in an organism at each moment” (SB 208).

Echoing Hegel, Merleau-Ponty might say “*Here is the rose, dance here*” (Hegel Introduction to *Philosophy of Right*). We must attend to the problem of the world as it appears to us, *here* and now, under these historical conditions. But Merleau-Ponty would add further emphasis to the phrase: we are to *dance* here. We dance with hips, shoulders, and body, not only with “consciousness.” Phenomenology understands the importance of the lexical, of “this” world, this life, in which “reference is included in meaning” (SB 212). Phenomenology converts worries about knowing particular objects and objectivity to emphasis on a general “knowing about the world” that exceeds perception of particular objects (SB 212). From this generalized stance of being in the world, “when I pronounce the word ‘this,’ I already relate a singular and lived existence to the essence of lived existence” and “these acts of expression or reflection intend an original text which cannot be deprived of meaning” (SB 211). I cannot find way out of the world in order to encounter only single objects, single consciousness. Further, phenomenology notes the

mode of givenness and not only the objective content as given. We take up a transcendental attitude in reflection, but it is a phenomenological transcendental attitude which does not presume that it can exhaust its subject. History is not behind us, as for Hegel, but before us (SB 206). And this is the history not of a movement of world spirit but “intelligibility in the nascent state” (SB 207).

Neither has Merleau-Ponty turned from Hegel to a simplistic naturalism. In a concluding chapter of the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty asks explicitly, “Is There Not a Truth of Naturalism?” He responds that there *is* a truth of naturalism, but it is true only insofar as we have reconceived nature as a dialectical whole (In the later work, Merleau-Ponty will re-envision this dialectical whole shift to a dynamic principle and eventually to the “flesh”). Where the Hegelian dialectical awakening of consciousness happens once and for all in history, the phenomenological dialectic between nature and culture appears in all action. Philosophy cannot rest in its maturity, like Hegel secure in a reflective vision of its past. Phenomenology must return to the prereflective life, the birth of thought and action. Phenomenology, performed and written by natal beings, cannot define and comprehend “nature” once and for all any more than we can comprehend another person friend or partner “once and for all.” Rather, Nature defines a sort of conversational relationship that, as a natal phenomenologist, I cannot finish but must continue to take up. I am drawn into a co-existence with Nature:

As we have seen, the behavior of another expresses a certain manner of existing before signifying a certain manner of thinking. And when this behavior is addressed to me, as may happen in dialogue ... I am then drawn into a *coexistence*. (SB 222)

This prereflective, affirmative natal co-existence establishes the *ethos* in which Merleau-Ponty’s natal ontology appears. Again, as Claudel says, we are not born alone.

El Greco's Freedom

Bound as we are to this co-existence, we might begin to wonder what freedom we have in Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Does our natality give us so much momentum that we cannot change our path? Do the others with whom I am born *compel* me to action? In the conclusion of the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty considers a pathological condition and the possible conclusions one might draw from it regarding perception and freedom in general. These conclusions – regarding freedom and natality – in the *Structure of Behavior* are less conclusions than signposts that point in the direction of the human order and associated complications. This text is only preparation for the rest of the philosophical work to be done, applying the revised theory of perception more and more widely.

Working in broad strokes, in only a few pages, Merleau-Ponty identifies the scope of ideas he intends to come under revision: moral theory, death, love of life, and what he calls the “staking of a life,” or what we might see as ethically or politically committed action (SB 224). His theory of perception cuts so deeply that he believes “If one understands by perception the act which makes us know existence, all the problems which I have just touched on are reducible to the problem of perception” (SB 224). Perhaps instead of “reducible to,” he might better have described the problem of perception as “expanded to” include all these other problems; in either case, he intends the vision expressed in the *Structure of Behavior* to ramify to all corners of philosophy.

For example, with this new perspective on perception, he claims that phenomenology can revise “moral theory” which had, until his work, generally attributed

some a-situational, a-cosmic freedom to the acting subject (SB 223). Though Merleau-Ponty hardly offers an entirely new moral theory in these pages, he does begin to sketch out how his natal ontology would entail a different notion of freedom. Freedom, like nature and culture, understanding and sensibility, often appears as part of a dualistic division of the subject; such dualisms are all disrupted by a natal ontology, freedom and nature not excepted.

How then might we begin to rethink freedom in a natal ontology? Merleau-Ponty offers an excellent anecdotal problem that cuts across the various disciplines and domains under consideration: the origin of El Greco's paintings. El Greco infamously painted elongated and distorted figures; scholars attempted to attribute the cause of his strange style to a certain pathology of vision. They argued that El Greco's extreme astigmatism "caused" him to see people as stretched out and thus to translate that vision directly to the canvas.⁵⁰ In this case, we have to ask ourselves if El Greco was *free* to paint as he did: Was he free to paint distorted bodies or did he *have* to paint this way if he was to paint at all? Was his painting revolutionary because he was a great artistic visionary or simply because he had strange vision and an ordinary-sized artistic talent for reproducing it on the page? To return to Arendt's question in the *Human Condition*, how can we *think* what El Greco was *doing*? Could El Greco himself *think* what he was doing or did he only do what he had to do?

⁵⁰ In fact, as recent scholarship has shown, El Greco did not likely have astigmatism; his early work shows an artist capable of representing "normal" perception at the same time that he drew the elongated figures (c.f. Davies *El Greco*). While this does not exactly bear out Merleau-Ponty's thesis that assumes with his opponents a pathology of the visual field, it does sync with his overall position and his later aesthetic theory in which painting is always self-portraiture and presentation of perception. What El Greco painted was his perception of his subjects *as* he perceived them, but this "perception" includes his general style and history of being in the world, not just his visual perspective (normal or pathological) onto that world.

The standard scholarship of Merleau-Ponty's day would argue that it is "nevertheless the body ... which in the final analysis explains El Greco's vision; his liberty consisted only in justifying this accident of nature by infusing it with a metaphysical meaning" (SB 203). But this would leave us with a poor account of both freedom and the body.

If El Greco suffered this restriction on his liberty by his body, then we all suffer it, Merleau-Ponty concludes. In Merleau-Ponty's view it is not "a paradox to say that 'El Greco was astigmatic because he produced elongated bodies'" (SB 203). Whatever the actual facts of El Greco's physiology, this statement does seem to paradoxically invert many standard views of the body. It would seem that our physical structure to some degree decides for us our action; in El Greco's case that would mean his physiology decided how he would paint. But Merleau-Ponty disputes this position: There is not a "physiological explanation" for his paintings. As he has demonstrated throughout his work, the purely physiological never appears. The purely physiological level of vision is a "stereotyped unity" (SB 203). This does not mean that we dismiss the role of physical eyes in seeing, but it does mean that we see the activity of vision as part of a larger prospective and expressive activity of the human organism. El Greco was already motivated to paint before the problem of his vision was seen in reflective scholarship. If we do not take into account this broader relation to his milieu, then we can see freedom in any activity. In that case a person could be considered free under any external conditions; we might even say that subject "realizes unity in slavery" (SB 203).⁵¹ The body enslaved El Greco, if we see it as an external condition imposed on a mind; in that

⁵¹ In the concluding chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty returns to this example of the mistake that could lead one to consider a slave as free.

case, we could only be free if we could leave our bodies (SB 204). Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues, if we are ever free, then we are free as bodies in the world.

Via this new vision of the natural body, Merleau-Ponty believes that phenomenology has arrived at a new vision of freedom. In fact, Merleau-Ponty has only gestured at an account of freedom in this early text. But even in his brief concluding remarks, he fully recognizes the momentum of his work, although he only begins to discuss the consequences in the final pages of the *Structure of Behavior*. He sees that his theory of perception ramifies into a theory of action: we cannot stop the discussion here, but rather are drawn into a discussion of as he puts it here “moral theory” or as I would put it, into a discussion of ethics.

How does a natal ontology open into ethics? We will not fully answer that question here. But let us consider what Merleau-Ponty sees as a possibility, as of the *Structure of Behavior*. He frames his new action-perception theory in relation to critical tradition’s historical stance on freedom. In the critical tradition, one “founds moral theory on a reflection which discovers the thinking subject in its liberty behind all objects” (SB 223). With an embodied phenomenology, philosophy relinquishes access to such a subject but also to the sort of moral theory built on that model of subjectivity. In an embodied phenomenology, human existence can no longer expect, like the Kantian subject of the Second Critique, to freely act according to the categorical imperative. Instead, “if one acknowledges. . . an existence of consciousness and of its resistant structures, our knowledge depends upon what we are,” and in that case,

... man is not assured ahead of time of possessing a source of morality; consciousness of self is not given in man by right; it is acquired only by the elucidation of his concrete being and is verified only by the active integration of isolated dialectics. (SB 223)

Upon letting go of idealism, phenomenology lets go of certain classically formulated moral theories. In order to avoid the passivity of empirical theories of morality, phenomenology must also attend to human action as occurring as a Gestalt, *comportment* based on *connaissance*, rather than a simplistic causal reaction to the environment. According to a natal ontology, we cannot secure “ahead of time” a morality; moral systems, like all ideas, must co-emerge with our birth. But, having let go of idealism, are we at risk of relativism? Are we not assured of any moral system?

Merleau-Ponty does not answer this question here, nor does he ever directly address it. But, in order to make our natal ontology responsible, we shall have to keep it in mind. We will begin here by reformulating the problem in terms of ethics, rather than morality, turning from the domain of rules and regulations toward the domain of intersubjective connection. What we will hope is that a natal ontology will offer, if not a moral prescription for action, then direction toward a ground of being that permits ethical relation to others. While we may not know *what* to do in relation to others, we will find that we are not isolated from them; we will find that we are not at risk for the ethical pitfalls of solipsism or of skepticism.

Conclusions: Toward the *Phenomenology of Perception* and Other Selves

In the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty shows that to be a natal is to acquire a mode of knowing that co-emerges with the world and with others. As nats, we are familiar with our world: we know through *connaissance*. Through *connaissance*, we understand the conduct of other living beings as *comportement*: a bearing with the world.

That said, Merleau-Ponty overextends himself in the *Structure of Behavior*. The transition from the level of the organism to the level of human practice is not a smooth one. With each level of complexity, the situation is irreversibly transformed. As Barbaras sees it, Merleau-Ponty requires the *Phenomenology of Perception* to carry out, at a human level, the project begun at an animal level in *Structure of Behavior*. The *Phenomenology*, Barbaras argues, “comes about in order to confirm on the human level this self-exteriority, this obscurity which the analysis of animal behavior revealed” (5). Merleau-Ponty will return again and again to orders of complexity introduced by higher levels of life and human conduct. These higher orders introduce a totality that exceeds *connaissance* and yet which motivates it. Human nats, unlike other natal beings, can participate in linguistic and cultural worlds, not only environments. While Kant gestures toward the significance of the *sensus communis* for aesthetic judgment, he does not ever explicitly connect this shared community to the linguistic or cultural world. Nor does Kant ever postulate that the *sensus communis* conditions our emergence and development into that world. For Kant, we judge beautiful art and nature *as if* others would find them so, but the reason for passing this judgment lies within the faculties of an individual person.⁵² Merleau-Ponty points out that we emerge into a world of others.

Following the publication of *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty served in World War II. The texts which were published following the war – and written in part during the war – such as the *Phenomenology of Perception* and his many later courses, follow through on the questions posed in the conclusion of the *Structure of Behavior* but with increasing attention to the ethical and political implications of phenomenology’s

⁵² Dillon points out that to assume that everything is “my” experience is a Kantian mistake while Merleau-Ponty shows the need to admit anonymous and general experience (88).

task. As he remarks in the conclusion of the *Structure of Behavior*, he has yet to address the “affective perspective” (SB 214); the *Phenomenology of Perception* develops an account of the affective life, applying the Gestalt view of human action and perception to subtle situations like sexuality. In the following chapters, we will consider these reflections on the affective life, the progression of the definition of Nature in light of these discoveries, and Merleau-Ponty’s explicit discussion of our relation to other selves.

Ch 2 Of Being Moved: Motivation, Momentum, Freedom, and Nature the *Phenomenology of Perception*

“To act in, its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin ..
As the Greek word *archein* ‘to begin,’ ... *to set something in motion.*”
– Arendt, HC 177, my emphasis

“I’m now who I’ll be, as I say, but
there’s something, therefore,
lost to me.” – Alice Notley

Natality as Momentum and Motive

In the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty showed that living things are motivated to act. From the first pages of the text, he offers many examples – of vision following a light in a dark room, of a beetle following the melody of its behavior despite amputation of its limbs – of life being prompted, being motivated, by its world. As he summarizes in his précis, the aim of this text was to demonstrate the “prospective activity in the organism” (PrimP 3). Merleau-Ponty returns again and again to this theme of motivation through the Nature Courses and “Eye and Mind,” but in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty focuses on motivation in human affective life; it is in the affective life that we can see how *our* human life, like all life, is motivated. Not only are we motivated, but we are carried by a momentum; this includes the initial forces set forth from our natality and the on-going forces of generality, a plurality of others into which we are born.

Merleau-Ponty describes the role of natality thus: When he was born “one day, once and for all, something was set in motion which, even during sleep, can no longer cease to see or not to see, to feel or not to feel, to suffer or be happy, to think or rest from thinking” (PP 407). He describes this motion as a sort of destiny, alluding to a sense of

being carried forward by a force beyond what one has initiated personally. Having been born, he writes, “I feel destined to move in a flow of endless life” though he can experience neither its sources nor its end and an atmosphere of birth and death accompany all the way (PP 364). A “deep-seated momentum of transcendence” defines my existence (PP 376). From birth, natal beings find themselves carried toward “a pre-objective aim of life” (PP 79) and a “moment of existence” (PP 137).⁵³ Perception of depth, for example, happens through a tacit motivation: we cannot synthesis the world from two eyes but must already tend towards perceiving it as a unity (PP 259). My gaze traces an object because it is “called forth or motivated” (PP 264). My act is not primary or constituting, but called forth or motivated” (PP 264).

Let us imagine a natal human being as a skier – among a fleet of skiers – heading down a hill. The skier – a skillful telemarker – navigates obstacles, follows others ahead of her through particular routes, and executes turns. She is moving quickly; she does not have time to reflect on each and every one of her actions. She learned to ski better by watching others, by mirroring their motions, by trying to catch up. Particularly hidden are her first actions: she cannot remember her first slip down the hill, she cannot remember how she picked herself up or who taught her the first slippery steps. Our existential skier has always been skiing; it is as if she woke up one day and found herself already skiing. But, safely gliding on her trajectory, with some moments of leisure, she might reflect on her movement. She might ask herself how much of her movement she is

⁵³ In the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty has already provided extensive evidence that biological science must attend to motivation in order to understand the behavior of an organism; a simple stimulus-response theory simply cannot account for the tendency of an organism toward certain styles of behaving despite violent changes to the physical structure (examples of the dung-beetle moving despite amputated legs, etc).

responsible for. But she is a downhill skier: her meditations accompany her motion. No sooner does she reflect than she makes another choice.

What is the source of the momentum of natality described in our analogy? If we were literally skiers gliding down a hill, the force would be roughly the force of our initial push plus that of gravity (minus friction). In natal beings, this moment appears to include our initial “push” out of the womb, the own kicking life force we each bring, plus a sort of general “gravity” of the plurality into which we are born. We both carry ourselves and are carried along by this force of generality; yet Merleau-Ponty emphasizes a strange mix of activity and passivity inherent to natal beings. Natal existence entails both an activity and passivity: “our birth or ... ‘generativity’ is the basis both of our activity or individuality and our passivity or generality” (PP 128). The passivity of passive synthesis does not equate to mere acceptance of our situation (PP 427): even putting on a pair of downhill skis does not mean you give up control of your existence entirely, but it does mean that you active-passively admit into your momentum a force beyond yourself. To carry this analogy perhaps too far, natal beings are metaphorically born “with their skis on”: always already on their way downhill with a group of other adventures.

It seems that Merleau-Ponty has described natality as a very powerful momentum. How free, then, is our skier? How much of her action is due to her nature? Does the hill force her course or does she choose her route? How does the cocktail of freedom and nature that she received with birth, with natality, determine her action? These questions occupy Merleau-Ponty throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception* toward its culminating chapters on freedom and being with others. In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-

Ponty only begins to redefine the dualistic terms needed for his natal ontology. (The aim of this chapter is *not* to describe a final position for our natal ontology through this text, but rather to identify the problems that a true natal ontology must address, and which Merleau-Ponty better addresses in the Nature Courses and “Eye and Mind.”) Perhaps the most troubling dualism Merleau-Ponty must re-envision in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is the dualism of nature and freedom. With our natality, are we merely given two parts freedom, one part nature and set off down the slope of the world to manage as we can?

Far from it, Merleau-Ponty would reply. Rather, freedom and nature continue to interplay and to vary over time; like nature and culture, these terms appear in a dynamic, temporally unfolding dialectic. Natality sets this play into motion. Our natality situates us in a momentum that carries through our many actions and defines the field of action. Birth sets us in motion within the field of freedom. The prepersonal experience of human life, animal life, or life in general can be understood as “prejudice in favor of being.” This prejudice happens not only at birth but throughout life (PP 254). This metaphor of momentum reminds us that natality does not refer to one moment or an isolated event. Natality is an on-going, ramifying event. Natality is not equivalent to the moment of emerging from the womb but is an on-going conditioning of life:

The event of my birth has not passed completely away, it has not fallen into nothingness ... for it committed a whole future, not as a cause determines an effect, but as a situation, once created leads on to some outcome. (PP 407)

Birth pushes us forward on a general trajectory, yet the momentum of natality must be renewed. In distinction to a classical teleological view, beginning in natality does not lead to a *specific* end. A clarification in relation to Kant is helpful. Merleau-Ponty sees

that Husserl identifies this strength of Kant, taking up the *Critique of Judgment*, in terms of “a teleology of consciousness” (PP xvii).⁵⁴ This teleology does not equate to an Aristotelian teleology of articulation of pre-given goals: that would be a “duplicating of human consciousness with some absolute thought which, from the outside, is imagined as assigning to it its aims.” Rather, we see “consciousness itself as a project of the world, meant for a world” (PP xvii) and as a movement of life towards the world that draws it, a “preobjective aim of life” (PP 79).

Like a person gliding down a hill on skis, as natals we cannot go anywhere – the force is too strong – but we can redirect our course, adjust our original path. Of course, we have much more control than the figure in this analogy; our “skis” are self-propelling and can move in many dimensions. But our trajectory must still fall within a certain range of action. Not anything is possible, and “I do not choose to come into the world, yet once I am born, time flows through me” (PP 427). The skier may learn something of her possibility by reflecting on her actual empirical entrance on the hill, but she will learn more if she considers the ongoing play of this momentum with her current movements.

Like the skier, we are not only caught up in a momentum, but we are motivated. In order to act, Merleau-Ponty writes: “I must be inclined to carry on, and there must be a bent or propensity of the mind” (PP 432). The skier *likes* skiing; even as she struggles through a squall or over a flat plain, she must follow some desire, some motive. The dialectic of freedom and nature appear in her motivation. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, both intellectualism and scientism overlook motivation (PP 448). He identifies two possible descriptions of motives by intellectualism and empiricism respectively: empiricism gives

⁵⁴ Husserl distinguishes between a “telos” resulting from a historically contingent accident and an “entelechy,” that inheres in a being. See *Crisis* 16. The latter formulation reappears in Merleau-Ponty’s work in the Nature Courses.

a “strong” view of motives and intellectualism a “weak” view. To use our momentum analogy, empiricism suggests that the skier is flying down the hill with such a strong momentum that she has no power to redirect herself; for the intellectualist, by contrast, the skier does not set off with any momentum, but chooses actively each step, like a cross-country skier on a flat plain. If motives are strong – undeniable instincts, for example – then we are not free (as in determinism); if motives are weak – things only noted in reflection, but not felt as compulsions – then they do not restrict us and we are absolutely free (as for Sartre) (PP 434). In the latter case, for a being with absolute Sartrean freedom, motives are so weak as to be irrelevant to understanding responsibility for action. The cross-country skier has chosen her own path across the plain; we can learn nothing by looking at the natural geography because it contributed no momentum and did not restrict or guide her course.

In a natal ontology, by contrast, motives are profoundly important but at the same time, not deterministic. We must attend to motivation as part of the general momentum that carries us along as natal beings. We did not set ourselves in motion; rather we found ourselves – since our births – in motion in a world and with others. Any particular motive reflects our general momentum and inherence in the world. When we look at our motives, we notice the momentum of our natality: the fact that the world calls us to act, that not all appearances have the same meaning, that some meanings call us toward particular actions. For the normal person, the world motivates him to act: “the normal person does not find satisfaction in subjectivity, he runs away from it. He is genuinely concerned with being in the world” (PP 343). Being in the world gives us the

“momentum which carries us beyond subjectivity which gives us our place in the world prior to any science” (PP 343).

Merleau-Ponty states clearly that to be motivated does not mean you are not free: “motivation... does not do away with freedom” (PP 447). To return to the metaphor of going skiing, the skier does not give up her freedom merely by admitting that gravity affects her momentum. Both her freedom and her momentum contribute to her movement. So for a natal being, both the momentum of natality and the freedom of a natal being condition action. Natal, natural existence carries forward along a general movement toward a range of possibilities falling within certain parameters that appear with birth. We must remember that “motive and decision are two elements of a situation” (PP 259). Our “motives do not cancel out freedom, but at least ensure that it does not go unbuttressed in being” (PP 454). We may not be able to do *anything* we wish, but this does not mean that we cannot have wishes and sometimes pursue them in the world. The world offers us the choices to which we apply our freedom; this is simply a condition of incarnate existence.

The Field of Freedom on the Slope

In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty makes some specific clarifications in relation to Sartre on the status of our freedom as he develops his emergent ontology. As Galen Johnson points out, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre profoundly differed in their views on the importance of natality in conditioning a life. In *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

There are two ways of being young which are not easily comprehensible to one another. Some are fascinated by their childhood; it possesses them, holding them enchanted in a realm of privileged possibilities. Others it casts out toward adult life; they believe that they have no past and are

equally near to all possibilities. Sartre was of the second type. (SI 25, cited in Johnson “The Voice of Merleau-Ponty: The Philosopher and the Poet” 88)

Johnson suggests that Merleau-Ponty was of the first type: a person whom childhood “possesses.” Sartre confirms this, writing in his elegy for Merleau-Ponty that the latter once told him, “he had never recovered from an incomparable childhood” (“Merleau-Ponty *Vivant*” 566). This difference on the issue of childhood goes beyond mere personal squabbles between these thinkers, however, and points to profound philosophical differences on the issue of freedom. For Merleau-Ponty, only natal beings, by virtue of the very contingencies limiting their natality, are free.

For the absolutely free Sartrean being, we are always free, even to the last minute, no matter how many habits or tendencies we may seem to have acquired. Although a person tends to be a sadomasochistic and has been for twenty years, he is always free – in Sartre’s view – to his deathbed to change into a gentle lover; moreover, he is completely responsible for whichever mannerism he chooses. Thus, for this absolutely free Sartrean being, tendency, probability, and generality mean nothing (PP 442).

By contrast, for Merleau-Ponty, “generality and probability are not fictions but phenomena” (PP 442). It is not an illusion that your uncle who has been a drunk for years and beaten his children will tend to do so again; no more it is an illusion that your friend who has listened generously and warmly to your problems will probably do so again. Likewise, you can see in your own experience a tendency toward a range of action; this tending-towards does not limit you to particular actions or even to a definitive range of action. Rather, we simply experience the anonymous generality of perception,

and we experience our tendency toward a particular field of action. To see that field of action is to be free: “There is no freedom without a field” (*Il faut avoir du champ pour être libre*) (PP 439). One must have the room to be free – have a field – but this freedom must be in relation to the bounds of the field.

But what is this field? How restricted is it? Merleau-Ponty suggests that we have an infinite range of possibilities open to us as free beings. But we might think of this infinity as the infinity between 1 and 2 rather than the infinity of all real numbers. There is an infinity of numbers within a range. But the range of our freedom is not as clearly bordered as this numerical range: the field of freedom is “without traceable borders” (PP 454). We might think of it as the line in a chaotic system: the edge of a wave is distinct from the air, but its border permutes infinitely at various scales, changing over time. Though you cannot trace the border of a wave crashing in the ocean, you can perceive the wave as distinct from the air and the sky and even from other waves. The natal being’s field of freedom is like this wave. It is not absolutely defined, but neither is it arbitrary (PP 45).

Unlike Sartrean beings, we cannot expect absolute freedom, but we should not mourn it. From birth, perception initiates us into action; we cannot un-initiate ourselves or wipe clean our personal slate. Our freedom depends on this perception history, but it is not reducible to it: “My first perception, along with the horizons which surrounded it, is an ever-present event, an unforgettable tradition; even as a thinking subject, I still am that first perception, the continuation of that same life inaugurated by it” (PP 407). For Merleau-Ponty, if freedom appeared equally in all actions – if there were no delimited field of freedom – then it would be worthless. To have freedom inherently in all actions

would make freedom equivalent to nature. We would be *naturally free*. No action would be less free than another. It would be literally impossible to lose your freedom. Taking this concept to its logical end results in several absurdities, according to Merleau-Ponty. First of all, a slave is would be free as the master. He asks us to consider the difference between a slave who stays within his chains and one who breaks them; if these two possible actions – staying in the chains or breaking them – are equally expressions of freedom, then freedom seems meaningless (PP 437). Not only would the slave be as free as the master, but any individual would be as free earlier in time and later in time. He writes: “a freedom which has no need to be exercised because it is already acquired could not commit itself” (PP 436). There are two parts to Merleau-Ponty’s statement: 1) We acquire our freedom: it is not given to us “by nature,” and 2) We are free insofar as we exercise our freedom. To say that nature does not “give” freedom should be taken in the same sense that nature does not “give” us knowledge. Our natural emergence in the world does provide us with some cognitive structures for acquiring knowledge; it does set us in motion in a world of other knowers, but nature does not offer us a box labeled “knowledge” packed with empirical facts on the way out of the womb. Likewise, nature does not give us freedom; we must learn to act freely.

In order to distinguish *some* actions as less free than others, we must restore risk to action. Freedom requires the risk of commitment: once you plunge down the hill, you cannot walk back up; once you swerve right around the tree, you will have to lean in to compensate for that choice. You are free enough that you have choices. That said, you cannot expect that making a choice will have no effect on your future freedom. Once you make one choice, not all future choices will be equally open. As Bachelard says of

Bergson in his positivism, Merleau-Ponty might say of Sartre: such a philosophy can say “nothing of risk, absolute and total risk ... the strange emotional game that leads us to destroy our security, our happiness or love” (27). For Bachelard, Bergson’s philosophy of plenitude is so full, it cannot account for difference or absence and thus for new action. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty might say of Sartre, he cannot understand the risk of commitment because he does not acknowledge the continuity of action carried through a life. Not all choices *will* be open in the future; once you make many bad choices to abuse a loved one, you will tend to do it in the future. You will be less likely to do good. You will still have choice, of course; habit does not take us from the realm of probability into the realm of determinism. But if you have tended to argue with your mother for thirty years, you will tend to argue in the next situation with her. If freedom were a passive, natural possession, there would be no risk in choice.

Not only does freedom require commitment, it requires ongoing commitment. Instances of coming to awareness “are real only if they are sustained by a new commitment” (PP 455). An intellectual awareness of one’s capacity to save a friend is real only if you sustain the revelation by committing to saving the friend. If you could not actually save the friend despite your best efforts, then you were not actually free to do so; if you only thought about saving the friend but did not— your character was too selfish to let you risk yourself – then you were not actually free to do so. Freedom happens, consciousness happens; we cannot *think* these events, we can only accomplish them.

The Steepening Slope: Sleep, Sex and the Affective Life as the Site of Dialectics

Accomplishing our freedom is not equally easy in all situations. In certain situations – for example, in which we slip or fall into love or sleep – we find ourselves dealing with the forces of natal momentum. The natural slope along which we move steepens; the source of our movement seems to come less from ourselves than from our world or from others. It seems our only choice is to pull up sharply – *not* to fall asleep – or to give ourselves up to the moment: take the plunge and be carried into sleep or to love.

Merleau-Ponty focuses on these moments in the affective life when the slope grows steep. In these moments, the question of what nature – in contrast to freedom or culture – contributes to existence is raised because we must act and yet our action follows a certain passivity. We must choose how to proceed, but we are not entirely in control of our momentum. Such a choice made in the speed of the moment may not be completely well informed – the skier cannot stop to do a geological survey of the slope or a physical retracing of each curve in her trajectory – and so in reflection, we call into question the contribution of our motive and momentum. These moments of the affective life – falling in love and into sleep – exemplify the dialectical intertwining of nature and freedom and nature and culture. If we want to see what nature actually is, then we must look at it in time, in human life: we must witness the “birth of being” that is “*only* for us.” This sort of being that is *for-us* appears in affective life (PP 154).

For Merleau-Ponty, just as childhood offers insights into the natality of our cognitive life, our erotic life offers insights into the affective life in general. Looking at moments in which people are erotically engaged enables us “to see how a thing or a being

begins to exist for us through desire or love” (PP 154). When we are prereflectively motivated by sexuality, we cannot disentangle physiology and psychology, nature and culture. Like the patient who experiences a phantom limb, we find ourselves *generally* affected both psychically and physically, unable to say where the limits of our natural body and our psyche lie.

Being in love “summons all the subject’s resources and concerns him in his entire being” (PP 379); like sexuality, love is “dramatic” because it requires our whole life’s commitment to it (PP 171). Merleau-Ponty says the question is:

But just why do we do this? Why is our body, for us, the mirror of our being unless because it is a *natural* self, a current of given existence, with the result that we never know whether the forces which bear us on are its or our – or with the result that they are never entirely either its or ours. (PP 171, emphasis in the original)

Yet again, Merleau-Ponty draws our attention to the powerful momentum of our natality – the “current” of our “*natural* self” – and the fact that we can never cease to be carried by it. Within each whole, committed life, both freedom and nature are at work; in the moment of action, we can never discern how much of each affects us. When I tell someone I love her, I do not “decide” it abstractly; rather, I find a movement carried forward almost without my permission. Thus I can say that “when I told her that I loved her, I was not ‘interpreting,’ for my life was in truth committed to a form which, like a melody, demanded to be carried on” (PP 378). If I am playing a violin sonata and I am directed to complete an improvised cadenza, I cannot play just *anything* in carrying out the piece. I can, however, play an infinite variety of notes. Yet as I play, I commit myself to the preceding notes, and new notes follow from these notes. Likewise, when I fall in love with someone, I follow through a momentum already rushing through life; I

do not “imagine” that momentum any more or less than the patient with the phantom limb imagines the missing leg. The real and the virtual, psychic and physical codetermine my experience. Love works “out its dialectic through me” (PP 381). Love engenders momentum that carries forward, and which I may find various techniques for expressing. But I cannot doubt its force. Love is not a mere thought but a force affecting me and expressed by me; I can be certain of it because “I perform” it (PP 383). Not only in the case of love but in the case of meaning in general, “there would be neither thought nor truth *but for* an act” (PP 385). Merleau-Ponty does not mean a “thought act,” some abstract intending consciousness, but an *act* in the world expressing truth. Even a hysteric who reimagines her world *experiences* it as if it required a certain type of commitment; she hears a different sonata playing and commits herself accordingly.

In the section on sexuality in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty describes a young woman who loses her voice after her mother forbids her to see her beloved. The girl has lost not merely physical contact with her lover; she has lost her *whole* lover and indeed her own self who loved that person. She has lost a whole world that called out for her to express herself. Her loss of speech is not actively or consciously self-imposed. She loses her speech “as one loses a memory” (PP 163). She can no longer speak; she passively lets herself lose the ability to express herself. Can we hold her responsible for this action? Was she free to choose it? Merleau-Ponty connects the passivity and activity in this moment to a similar active-passivity in sleep, comparing her prereflective loss of speech to the experience of falling asleep. When we fall asleep, we coax ourselves into losing our conscious selves. We tell ourselves that we are asleep and we gradually let ourselves be asleep; like Dionysian dancers, we gradually become one with

the myth we speak (PP 163). Falling asleep, like sexuality, exemplifies the passivity that inheres with our freedom in certain actions. We must train ourselves to give ourselves up to a general way of being in order to fall asleep (PP 163).

On the one hand, to sleep is natural: our very bodies, our very facticity requires that we sleep if we are to live. Yet we sometimes fail to coincide with this apparently “natural” desire. Sometimes we are free to sleep or not to sleep; sometimes we are *not* free to *not* sleep. Our freedom to fall asleep depends not on some absolute agency but on our being in a situation: “We remain free in relation to sleep and sickness to the exact extent to which we remain always involved in the walking and healthy state, our freedom rests on our being in a situation, and is itself a situation” (PP 164). By pretending to fall asleep, we may eventually fall asleep. By coaxing ourselves into the anonymous mode of existence – sleep – we are no longer receiving or perceiving the world in the same way. In a similar but not identical situation, the hysteric changes her very experience of the world through her comportment of fear.

The conclusions from these claims about the affective life are wide-ranging. Merleau-Ponty claims that we cannot separate perception from action, action from truth; I see a car coming and I leap aside. My leap means it is true that the car was coming. Thus, “the only way ... into sincerity is ... taking a blind plunge into ‘doing’” (PP 382).

But here we approach the aforementioned problem: sometimes I choose to fall asleep and sometimes I merely fall asleep. Sometimes my natural tendency toward sleep takes over. Does acknowledging the powerful participation of subjectivity in constituting nature mean that we cannot distinguish natural, preconscious actions from conscious ones? Do we have the ability to lose ourselves, to lie to ourselves, and to change our

reception to the world in relation to these categories as well? If we can so fool ourselves that we change our very *perception* of the world, perhaps we are not responsible for our actions. This seems like a dangerous possibility. If we can be as pathologically confused about, for example, our political world as the hysteric is about her sexual world, or Schneider is about the state of his limbs, how can we be politically responsible?

Merleau-Ponty seems to recognize this and yet, accommodating the issue, he seems to recant some of his basic claims about the relation of nature and culture in a natal ontology. Consider the following example in which Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between certain personal acts and acts of sensation. He argues that seeing blue is not like deciding to be a mathematician: “I can see blue because I am *sensitive* to colors, whereas personal acts create a situation: I am a mathematician because I have decided to be one” (PP 215).

Does this not suggest that we can distinguish some basic biological nature from a more complex, cultural, and personal level of intentionality? Does not our affective life, our sensitivity to the world, still condition our actions outside of the realm of personal control? If so, we could understand ourselves as more or less responsible for certain personal acts than certain acts of sensitivity. It seems we would be natal, gliding along with our momentum, but occasionally capable of defeating the momentum. How are we to sort out this contradiction in his text and perhaps in experience?

There are at least two issues at play in this apparent contradiction. On the one hand, within the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty troublingly *does* retain a certain dualism in his use of “nature” vs. “culture”; on the other hand, his efforts in this text point toward his new description of “Nature” developed in the Nature Courses and later.

Let us consider the latent dualism first. In this early text, Merleau-Ponty retains not only the terminology of “consciousness,” as he critically points out in his own later working notes in the *Visible and the Invisible*,⁵⁵ but a firm distinction between nature and culture. More importantly, for a natal ontology defining itself by understanding “nature” though its etymological connection to birth, Merleau-Ponty appears to use the terms “nature” and “natural” inconsistently. On the one hand, in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty makes some comments that suggest a pointed rejection of naturalism on all grounds. For example, he remarks that Gestalt psychology fails to fulfill its potential because “it has never broken with naturalism” (PP 47) and that phenomenology will not succeed until it avoids “unhelpful reversions to causal thought and naturalism” (126). He declares that “man is a historical idea and not natural species” (PP 170), as if to banish naturalness from the discussion of human existence. This would seem to suggest that naturalism per se must be abandoned. Reductive, simplistically causal naturalism is certainly something to avoid. On the other hand, in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty also uses the term “nature” and “naturalism” in a positive way, associated with his own method. He implicitly begins to hint at his own definition of nature in contrast to the standard use associated with reductionist or empiricist naturalism. For example, he identifies his aims as attending to the “natural translation” of eye movement and the “natural formations” of the subject and the “natural context” of perception (PP 48). Again, in the “natural attitude of vision ... I make common cause with my gaze” (PP 227). He mentions the positive goal of rediscovering “the *natural* and antepredicative unity of the world and our life” (PP xviii). Also, he tries to understand the “natural situation” of which we are conscious (PP 62).

⁵⁵ See Barbaras 17 and VI 183.

In one sense, he suggests that we can never distinguish this “basic” nature from our total nature. The body “is a *natural self*, a current of given existence, with the result that we never know whether the forces which bear us on are its or ours – or rather that they are never entirely either its or ours” (PP 171). We can never sort out natural behavior” from cultural comportment: “It is impossible to superimpose on man a lower layer of behavior which one chooses to call ‘natural,’ followed by a manufactured or cultural world. Everything is both manufactured or cultural in man” (PP 189). In another sense, however, he occasionally seems to suggest that “nature” refers to some basic condition of human existence that we must exceed or transcend. He argues, for example, that “speech is the surplus of our existence over natural being” (PP 197). Although he notes that we do “fall back” into the natural existence we were attempting to outstrip, he suggests that speech is a movement “beyond nature.” He comments also that “I never live wholly in varieties of human space, but am always ultimately hooked in a natural and non-human space” (PP 293). He even suggests that the “natural world ... can always be discerned underlying the other [human world], as the canvas underlies the picture” (PP 293). So it seems there *are* two levels of space, natural and human. But, on the other hand, he imagines that the very positing of two levels of space causes trouble for our understanding of space: “human spaces present themselves as built on the basis of natural space” but they are *not* (PP 294). Perception manages to at once present nature as apparently in-itself and simultaneously hide the act of presenting it so. Again, he notes that the body can give “significance not only to the natural object, but also to cultural objects,” as if we could clearly distinguish cultural objects from natural ones (PP 235).

He says that “a conventional algorithm ... will never express anything but nature without man” (PP 188).⁵⁶

Whence this confusion? Is there nature *and* culture or only perception? Has Merleau-Ponty simply failed to notice how inconsistent his use of the terms is? Or is he consistently using the terms in more than one way? I would argue that frequently Merleau-Ponty does indeed ambivalently employ the terms “nature” and “natural” in this early text – as evinced above – and that this is not an instance of rich ambiguity of language, but rather representative of a transitional period in his thinking of Nature. Barbaras confirms my view – developed below – that in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty remains tied to dualistic terminology (16).⁵⁷ On the other hand, if we look closely at certain uses of the term “nature” in these studies of the affective life, we find that he does provide hints toward a new use of nature that he pursues in the later course on nature.

Nativity Happens Temporally: Beyond Dualism to Dialectic

Although the terms “nature” and “culture” trouble us with their historical opposition, we do not need to eliminate these terms in order to think through Merleau-Ponty’s natal ontology. Rather, we should recognize that they collectively form not a

⁵⁶ Here his later work provides a hint that this is a pejorative, limited sense of nature that he will reject: in *Prose of the World*, he devotes a chapter to showing the natural emergence even of mathematics and algorithms.

⁵⁷ Barbaras points out that Merleau-Ponty remains within a Cartesian framework insofar as he gives special priority to the appearance of *my* body for me. That is, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, “everything depends on how one’s own body, on which intentional transgression is based, is apprehended” (36). It is Cartesian to see our body as the only part of Nature to which we have access. While Merleau-Ponty has been known as the phenomenologist of the body par excellence, in a sense, we foreclose his later project if we over-emphasize the personal body, especially as we attempt to understand Nature. Nonetheless, in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty begins the project of opening up the body, finding it permeable to its world and others. The next chapter, for example, will focus on his efforts to open up the personal body to the bodies of others.

dualism, but a dialectic (PP 237), as he already outlined in the *Structure of Behavior*. In the *Phenomenology*, he situates this dialectic in time.

At times one pole or the other of the dialectic can overwhelm experience: nature can overtake culture or culture, nature. There can be a “sublimation of biological into personal existence” and vice versa (PP 84). Not only does the nature-culture dialectic work in this way, but so do all relevant dialectics: nature-freedom and personal-prepersonal. There are times when the prepersonal body might overwhelm the motivations of the personal body and vice versa. Again, moments of the affective life with the “slope grows steep” clarify the issue at hand. For example, when bombshells in World War II exploded around him, Saint-Exupéry completely identified with his body, but only as a “source of life” with no motivations contrary to that impulse (PP 84). Saint-Exupéry’s momentary battlefield experience, however, contrasts sharply with his experience in daily life. During his daily life, walking the streets of Paris, the body’s problems demanded attention (PP 84). Sometimes his prepersonal life dominated; other times his personal acts commanded his life.

Essential in this example is how the dominance of the biological or cultural could change *over time*. Temporality makes this sublimation and oscillation – i.e. the movement of the dialectic – possible. According to the *Phenomenology*, to avoid dualism we must understand that as temporal beings, we can comprise not only acts in which the personal rules, but acts in which the biological rules. That one pole of existence can dominate does not mean that we can precisely distinguish or disentangle the biological or natural from the cultural. “Biological” life always has meaning: “even reflexes have a meaning, and each individual’s style is still visible in them” (PP 85).

Natural or biological life does not appear “in itself” but in time with culture. Merleau-Ponty retains the distinctions between nature and culture, but he does not thereby suggest that we can ever access one without the other. This dialectic is not an illusion philosophy can get past to achieve access to pure nature, nor does the dialectical emergence of a concept make it arbitrary. To call, for example, sexuality “dialectical” does not reduce it to an illusion: “the dialectic is not a relationship between contradictory and inseparable thoughts; it is the tending of an existence towards another existence which denies it, and yet without which it is not sustained” (PP 168). In Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical view of nature and culture in action, an action can have many meanings but not arbitrarily any meaning. Some meanings can dominate: we can see “one gesture as ‘sexual’ , another as ‘amorous,’” etc. (PP 173). As he says only a few years later in *Humanism and Terror*, “[a] dialectical world is a world on the move where every idea communicates with all others ... all the same, it is not a bewitched world where ideas operate without any rule, where at any moment angels become devils” (HT 120).

Merleau-Ponty adopts this dialectical model of nature as he rejects dualism, but it is not only a dualism inherited from Descartes, but also from Kant and Spinoza. He rejects not just a dualism of mind vs. body, but of activity vs. passivity, of nature vs. mind. He explicitly poses this problem to himself and his readers in Spinozistic terms: He argues that “the dualism of *naturata* and *naturans* is ... converted into a dialectic of constituted and constituting time” (PP 240). This dialectic is particularly apparent in perception. When we attend to perception, we are directed toward our natality, to the very natality of “the constituted,” of whatever is constituted for us. Instead of a constituting *naturans*, we find “a dialectic of the *naturata* and of the *naturans*, of

perception and judgment” (PP 45). As he puts it in his précis of the *Phenomenology*, “I am not a universal thinker [*naturant*]. I am a thought which recaptures itself...which *feels* itself rather than *sees* itself... which creates truth rather than finds it” (PrimP 22). The problem of a Spinozism results from beginning with a dualistic notion of thinking as action and sensing as passive. In lieu of this clean break between activity and passivity, Merleau-Ponty offers a receptive *perceiving* being. As he puts it: “The perceiving subject is not this absolute thinker; rather, it functions according to a natal pact between our body and the world” (PrimP 22). In this natal pact, the perceiving subject appears between the world and the body, drawn out of herself into the world and drawing the world into herself. Thus, it is by admitting natality into ontology that Merleau-Ponty avoids a split between *naturans* and *naturatus*. Our sensitivity, our tendency toward the world, and our temporality all depend on our natality.

As in the *Structure of Behavior*, admitting our natality takes us out of a dualistic relation to nature. Objective thought can never grasp this first step in avoiding Spinozism. For objective thought, “it will never be intelligible that the subject should be both *naturans* and *naturatus*” (PP 365). Merleau-Ponty rejects this dualism as he rejects a dualism of nature and culture, for itself and in itself (PP 215), subject and object, or a priori and a posteriori (PP 220). Why must he reject dualism? As in he showed in the *Structure of Behavior*, a dualistic division between matter and mind – between behavior and meaning – does not serve life science either in the guise of the working biologist struggling to explain what Pavlovian behaviorism cannot, or the working phenomenologist struggling to explain what Cartesianism cannot. From the perspective of the working scientist, for example, it is impossible to understand how the subject

“should be both *naturans* and *naturatus*, both infinite and finite” (PP 365). But in experience, Merleau-Ponty argues, we simply find this to be the case: we are both finite and infinite, active at the very moment of passivity. He goes so far as to state that beyond this paradox “there is nothing to understand” (PP 365). However impossible overcoming dualism might seem to objective thought, or Spinozistic thought, contemplating this is the task of phenomenology.

For Spinoza, the active, divine productivity of *naturata* occurred once and eternally. But, Merleau-Ponty argues, in human existence this productivity is not accomplished once and for all. Rather, as human beings we participate in a continual effort over time. In human existence, although we may aim toward the eternal, the timeless, we are in fact caught up in time:

There is here [in human existence] indeed the summoning, but not the experience, of an eternal *natura naturans*. My body takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and future for a present; it is not a thing, but creates time instead of submitting to it. But every act of focusing must be renewed, otherwise it falls into unconsciousness. (PP 240)

Again, like the skier we find that the momentum of our natality echoes through the whole movement of our life. We cannot entirely perceive this momentum, but we do enjoy some understanding, though it is never absolute:

It is true that I find, through time, later experiences interlocking with earlier ones and carrying them further, but nowhere do I enjoy absolute possession of myself by myself, since the hollow void of the future is forever being refilled with a fresh present. (PP 240)

As natural beings, we are “not... in Hegel’s phrase, ‘a hole in being,’ but a hollow, a fold, which has been made and which can be unmade” (PP 215). We are made of the same stuff of nature, and yet we struggle to make nature appear “over there.” Just as our

molecules gathered together at our birth and disentangle themselves on our death, so our existences coil and contract around an order and then relax. We must make a continual effort to keep a grip on the world: “the perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth; at each instant it is something new” (PrimP 6).

The effort of this continual birth hides from us, as invisible as our ability to remain upright and oriented to up and down. But without that effort on the part of our whole being we would lose that sense of a world. Therein lies the revelation and pathos of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology: as natals, our beginnings are lost to us. We discover ourselves to be beings whose origins indicate a momentum and an inherent motivation; but in the same moment of discovery, we realize that a view of our original nature, of our origin, is forever unattainable. Like Proust, as he turned toward his childhood, we find that we do not coincide with our beginnings – the new experience of the madeline not only reminds the narrator of his childhood, but points to the distance of the narrator from the first experience. At the same time, our ever-elusive natal begins to occultly influence each present action, each perception.

Yet the fact that we participate in the birth of the world does not mean that we are the author or inventor of the world. Like the skier, as natals we participate in our movement through the world, but we also realize that we do not make the world possible: we are “not the condition of its possibility.” Instead, perceptual structure “is the birth of a norm and it is not realized according to a norm” (PP 61). This norm transcends each individual subject and points beyond each toward a movement initiated before birth. What objective science misses when it posits a “natural geometry” is the “original relationship of *motivating*” that happens between selves and the world (PP 265). Our

naturalness – natural self, natural space – impels and compels us: “existence rushes towards it and being absorbed in it, is unaware of itself” (PP 287). Phenomenology studies the “*advent* of being to consciousness,” the gathering of this momentum behind and around us (PP 61).

Again, we return to our theme of natality. Phenomenology properly practiced attends not to static structures, static norms (of nature or culture), or static consciousnesses. Rather, phenomenology bears witness to the birth of these norms in an individual: that is, to the genesis, the natality, of personhood.⁵⁸ In bearing witness to the birth of the norm in the individual, phenomenology finds that this birth – like literal birth – points beyond itself toward a life already in motion with others and with a world.

Phenomenology, in attending to this perpetual beginning in perception, shows that natality conditions our being throughout our lives, not only at their factual beginning. In perception appears our natal moment and also our freedom, also continually reborn. This freedom – like nature – does not appear in itself, in one moment. A natal being finds her freedom over the course of many actions; her freedom cannot be understood in terms of one isolated event. Freedom has to carry forward along the natal trajectory. The trajectory corresponds to what Merleau-Ponty calls “a bent or propensity of the mind” (PP 432). (Later, he will associate this trajectory with “style,” with all its artistic connotations.) This emphasis on continuity and commitment in relation to freedom, takes the discussion of action from an understanding of a single action toward an understanding of action over the course of a life. Our choices appear in the whole of our lives (PP 438).

⁵⁸ And as shown later in Chapter 5, even more carefully practiced phenomenology witnesses the historical emergence of such norms across time. At the time of the *Phenomenology*, however, Merleau-Ponty had not yet fully made this turn toward generative phenomenology.

This emphasis on wholeness conditions Merleau-Ponty's entire ontology; in the Nature Courses, he devotes many lectures to considering and reconsidering "totality" in living beings. But this is not the "bad" totality that Levinas critiques in Hegel or even Heidegger. Rather, totality for Merleau-Ponty is precisely what escapes and exceeds attempts at totalizing thought. We have missed the phenomenon of totality – always excessive – if we think that we have total access to it. We will return to this excess and the problem of totality in the discussion of the Nature Courses: we have only embarked on this theme so integral to the permeable and integrated life of the natal. For the moment, let us imagine that in the case of freedom in action, we might see Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on wholeness as describing the wholeness of a life. In that context, ethical choice can only be understood in relation to a whole life, much like a Greek virtue ethics model. As for Aristotle, from childhood one acquires habits, experiencing a certain "sedimentation of life" that leads to certain tendencies and sets of choices. This sedimentation and set of habits does not simply limit our freedom: because we have the habit of being antagonistic, does not mean we are not free not to be antagonistic. Rather, "unless there are cycles of behavior, open situations... we never experience freedom" (PP 438). For choice – at the personal level of projects and action – to be possible, we must already have the basics of action down: "Higher-order behaviors give a new meaning to the life of the organism, but the mind here disposes of only a limited freedom; it needs simpler activities in order to stabilize itself in durable institutions and to realize itself truly as mind" (PP 4).

The Olympic-qualifying skier, as she twists and turns and flies, "disposes of only a limited freedom" – that available as one glides down a hills – but she realizes this

freedom into unthought forms, patterns, and routes. She capitalizes on a stability she has acquired at the basic level of skiing. She does not need to constantly reinstitute the basic form of skiing and this very instituted habit permits her more complex motion. Likewise, phenomenologists need not always be consciously aware of perception, but phenomenology can learn much about the possibility of higher orders of reflection, cognition, and creativity by revisiting the birth of higher levels of action.

In considering a life as a whole, we may wonder if we can see a pattern, an overall aim or goal; but again, the totality to which a natal ontology directs phenomenology exceeds it. A natal ontology does not describe us as passively following a pre-given causal telos that phenomenology – or any life science – might identify. Science cannot show “If I was destined to be me” based on my parts (PP 431). My existence, my “I,” unfolds in a situation. I unfold dynamically in time, carried forth by the momentum of my natality. A static (or dead) body is not a body for existential philosophy (PP 431) any more than for a medieval Thomist. I am more than the sum of the parts of my body: “I” happen in a situation. For example, “I” cannot be identified with a particular static set of molecules, even if those molecules are those in my genome. “I” have no identity that can be diagnosed by genetics prior to my unfolding in the world. Though we may wish to define an element of human nature by, for example, “finding the gene” for intelligence or athletic ability, such information cannot explain “nature” as it appears to us in our natal momentum. Just as a topographic map will not help the skier manage a difficult pass as she flies along, the information about my genome will not help me – in the moment – know the source of my anger, joy, or intention. As the discussion of actions in terms of sexuality show, we cannot distinguish this “natural process” or

identify a definite, pre-given aim of action. That said, we can still trace out general movements of the dialectic, styles of being (acting) in the world:

Although our body does not impose definite instincts upon us from birth, as it does upon animals, it does at least give to our life the form of generality, and develops our personal acts into stable dispositional tendencies. (PP 146)

Human nature, like nature in general, appears with a certain identifiable styles and momentum. As Merleau-Ponty puts it bittersweetly at the end of the chapter on sexuality, “no one is saved and no one is totally lost” (PP 171).

Any human action happens with the ambiguous unity of the art work. An action is individual; in relation to its situation “its meaning is not arbitrary and does not dwell in the firmament of ideas: it is locked in the world [like a poem] printed on some perishable page” (PP 150). Actions appear like paint flung at a canvas, a confluence of intention and chance, directed ambiguously at expression. Our nature appears in this totality, as does our freedom, but not distinctly. We cannot look at the canvas of our lives and see “freedom” there and “nature” there like two distinct colors. Freedom and nature are both aspects of the dialectical movement of the whole style of the work. Merleau-Ponty will return again and again throughout his later work, including the Nature Courses and “Eye and Mind, to the connection between the form of a human life – and indeed life in general – to the form of an art work. Already, as we saw in the *Structure of Behavior* (See Chapter 1), Merleau-Ponty compared behavior in general to a melodic movement. Now, in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty again turns to art to describe the dialectic of nature and freedom. Merleau-Ponty considers human bodies as exhibiting the same sort of stylistic unity of an art work: “the body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art” (PP 150).

In this, Merleau-Ponty departs from our “skiing” metaphor, leaving the realm of sheer activity for the realm of poetic and artistic activity. A human life follows a motivation and partakes in a momentum that generates, takes up, and reforms meaning. Whereas the skier moves down the hill for the sheer pleasure of movement, the painter moves her arm across the canvas for the sake of the art work as well as the pleasure. The skier, like the painter, has stylized movements, but the painter leaves a record of her stylized movement on the canvas.

At any given moment, we can witness this style if we turn toward our natality: “We are, as Proust declared, perched on a pyramid of past life, and if we do not see this, it is because we are obsessed by objective thought ... in old age a man is still in contact with his youth” (PP 393). The movement of our natality is still with us: the first momentum and our first motivation still show their force in every gesture. Is it a coincidence that Proust forms the central example for Merleau-Ponty’s chapter on temporality? That making art of life and life of art become almost confused in Merleau-Ponty’s work? So much form, so much beauty, such excess does he see in each natal life, that the very effort of living becomes the effort of writing poetry, of making art.

How far are we to take this analogy? How much does Merleau-Ponty expect of a person in the midst of living? Does he expect us to both live at the speed of the skier rushing down the hill, caught in momentum, but to execute our movements with the intention of a painter? Comparing the movement of life to that of art suggests the insertion of criteria of judgment, beauty, and intention into the very practice of action. If we compare action to an art work, then we might consider extending that analogy to judging the action as we judge an artwork. Just as there are good and bad, successful and

unsuccessful poems or paintings, there are successful and less successful actions. From there, we might consider how we understand *right* action as judged over the whole of a life and personal style. Again, we return to the model of Greek virtue ethics; an action would be *kalon*, beautiful when performed well.

In this sense, the analogy to artwork might be troubling on two counts if taken too far. First, the analogy suggests that someone might be able to *see* the total style of our life and judge it. In regard to this, we must remember that, for Merleau-Ponty, totality always exceeds perception and even phenomenological reflection; he would thus not hold the actor herself responsible for also being the spectator to her action, the painter responsible for criticism. But in regard to the analogy, one might also argue that an art work implies an artist; the painting itself is not free. We must wonder then, if in drawing this connection between art and life, Merleau-Ponty imagines us to be the effect of some hidden painter, again suggesting a teleological model of life. Or should natal understand themselves as both painters and painting? Even then, as painters, how much freedom do we exercise? In an extensive footnote at the end of the chapter on sexuality, Merleau-Ponty happily extends the dialectical description of personal affective life to a theory of history and politics (PP 171). Can he move so blithely from the affective life to the level of history? It seems he has leapt from the microscopic movement of an individual life toward the macroscopic movement of history without considering the more every-day size movement of life between one or two individuals. Between a description of action in personal affective life and action in history, we require a more explicit account of personal and ethical action. Merleau-Ponty has shown that at the level of personal action, each natal encounters a troubling and realistic ambiguity between freedom and nature.

Were this ambiguity to be amplified to the level of history and politics, it would grow even more troubling. Can one excuse Hitler because, as a natal like the rest of us, he was caught up in a momentum that exceeded him? He could not see what freedom and what nature motivated? However Merleau-Ponty might insist on a “good ambiguity,” some clarity seems necessary.

One might worry that only a very careful phenomenologist can navigate this good ambiguity, while the person in the midst of ethical choice cannot find a ground for discerning right action in her ambiguous situation. Has Merleau-Ponty simply skirted the problem and retreated into an unhelpful ambiguity? Certainly we hope this is not the case. We can be sure that he himself recognizes this problem insofar as he pursues these issues through the end of the Nature Courses. These questions preoccupy Merleau-Ponty as he refines his natal ontology, not only here in the *Phenomenology* but again in the later work, especially the discussion of evolution. Unfortunately, in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty does not provide enough details to illuminate his view on how to approach the ethics of action.

He does however devote many pages and much reflection to our natal connection to others. If our natal ontology is to acquire a ground for ethical relation from the *Phenomenology* – or find it lacking – then it may be from the discussion of relations with others which I present in the next chapter.

Conclusions: Natality means Nature and Others on the Inside

In the final pages of the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty says, in the words of Saint-Exupéry, “Your act is you” (PP 456). Action must be the final arbiter of our

responsibility, but each action appears over time, like a brush stroke across a canvas. Just as we cannot judge a painting from one brush stroke, so we cannot judge a life from one moment. And yet it seems that in the moment of action, we cannot see the canvas. This painter cannot see her strokes; like the famous video of Picasso “drawing” a bull with a light in mid-air but no canvas, the painter must feel the action from the inside. Like the skier, she guides her movement from within, without a view from above, navigating within the parameters of her natal momentum. Prereflective, theoretical knowledge of nature’s contribution to action is unavailable in the moment of action: we can only sense our general practice of taking up situations. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty does suggest that – like Saint-Exupéry reflecting on his war experience – we can assess, in retrospective reflection, whether nature or cultural dominated in the affective life.

Affective life reveals how the world is *for us* although most of the time the natural world appears to be in itself, without need of us. The affective life reveals the view of the skier on the slope rather than the view of the mountain from above. At first glance, it seems that our naturalness was the part of our existence that we were *not* responsible for: How could we be responsible for involuntary actions or hold others responsible for their actions? How can we hold the skier responsible for her speed on a steep slope? In reflection we might note the dominance of the physiological or the psychological, but “when reintegrated into existence, they are no longer distinguishable respectively as the order of the *in-itself*, and that of the *for-itself*” (PP 87). As we look at these moments in the affective life, it seems that we cannot so clearly distinguish between a nature “over-there” and the nature that we have generated. No more than the patient who experiences

the phantom limb can disentangle physical sensation from psychological past, can we completely distinguish natural from cultural in experience.

Although Merleau-Ponty retains a distinction between nature and culture, his dialectical vision of this pair differs from dualistic models: The difference lies in the ontological value given to the distinctions between nature and culture (this issue will continue to haunt Merleau-Ponty through the Nature Courses). Is this distinction – apparent in reflection – *more real* than the prereflective unity? In turning his philosophical attention to this problem, Merleau-Ponty turns from pure phenomenology toward ontology. He asks about the ontological status of the difference between nature and culture in experience. He argues that we cannot leave our natality, our original ambiguous lived experience, and finally emerge as adult Kantian subjects. We will never emerge into a world in which we can finally judge the a priori and a posteriori. That distinction is not *more real* than the prereflective unity in action. We cannot know this *in the moment*; as with nature and culture, we find that freedom and nature dialectically condition us. But the lack of this privileged knowledge in prereflective existence – the lack of a true Kantian critical standpoint – does not absolve us from action or even from understanding the situation. We *cannot* escape meaning in existence, but we are not lost in a sea of *any* meaning. We always commit ourselves to meaning -- to sexual meaning, linguistic meaning, economic meaning -- even though we do not know what motive in our choice originates in ourselves or outside us, from our nature or culture. Meaning is not given but taken up: when something has significance, “chance is transformed into reason; in so far as it is the act of taking up a *de facto* situation” (PP 171). Ontology

becomes a project of describing the taking up and expression of meaning: a project of attending to the poetic productivity of a natal life.

Nature lies at the heart of subjectivity as well as around it. Nature happens not only “over there” but within me: “I am thrown into a nature, and that nature appears not only as outside me, in objects devoid of history, but it is also discernable at the centre of subjectivity” (PP 346). Nature refers not to the “slope” only, to some pregiven, static structure beneath existence. Rather Nature refers to the entire unfolding drama of the metaphorical situation: to the many skiers, to the dynamic play in time of their movement, to their desire to move forward and to whatever movement set them on their way. The skier perceives all this; she perceives Nature not just beneath her, but within her, around her, before her. Like the skier, we do not have time to reflect completely on our next movement because we are *in* time, in natural time. The analogy of the skier amplifies the sense of speed in our dialectic, but the comparison is precise: we cannot reverse our direction in time nor willfully stop, even for philosophical reflection. In this sense, phenomenology is at once clarified as pure description; it is simply *the fact that*, as natal, we cannot know Nature per se, in the moment of action, but also shown to be a practice situated in natural time.

At the center of subjectivity for Merleau-Ponty is perception. Perception, rather than a private activity, directs us toward an excess, a context in which we find ourselves. If we attend to perception, to feeling – *sentir* – we find that it “does not belong to the order of the constituted”: “it represents for us what is ‘anterior to’ the mind, evokes the latter’s birth” (PP 45). The excess of perception points toward expression; the center of

subjectivity points toward intersubjectivity. This is why Merleau-Ponty says that “philosophy’s center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere” (SI 128).

The excess of perception points us toward the essential generality and plurality of existence: this is the momentum that the skier senses accompanying her down the hill. She senses herself caught up in a movement and drawn ahead of herself by a motivation: “each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not only my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world” (PP 216). The sensation of some specific color, for example, “arises from *sensibility* which has preceded it and which will outlive it, just as my birth and death belong to a natality and mortality which are anonymous” (PP 216).

Perception – bound to our natality – belongs to an anonymous existence, Merleau-Ponty states. What is this anonymous existence like? What is my experience of it like? Perhaps more importantly, what does it do for my experience of others and how do others condition my experience?

It is this problem Merleau-Ponty turns in the chapter on “other selves” in the *Phenomenology* and which I will address next.

**Ch 3 Of Being with Others:
Natality and the Atmosphere of Humanity in the *Phenomenology of Perception***

“Knowing who you are is good for one generation only.”
Flannery O’Conner, “Everything that Rises Must Converge”

Merleau-Ponty opens the chapter “Other Selves and the Human World” in *Phenomenology of Perception* with a discussion of two themes: nature and temporality. In the very first line of his chapter on being with others, he immediately situates that topic in relation to nature: “I am thrown into a nature, and that nature appears not only as outside me, in objects devoid of history, but it is also discernible at the centre of subjectivity” (PP 346). Why begin a discussion of relations with others by mentioning nature? What does it mean to approach the other through “nature”? And how does “nature” orient us toward temporality? Merleau-Ponty tells us here that nature appears at the center of subjectivity, but this subjectivity is not only *my* subjectivity, but subjectivity in general, a mode of being that I share with other subjects. This “atmosphere of humanity,” as he calls it, both motivates us and adds to our momentum through the world. It is this anonymous, shared subjectivity with its temporal orientation that Merleau-Ponty connects with nature, not only in this passage, but throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Without slipping into reductionism, Merleau-Ponty approaches personhood via nature, all the while asking us to rethink what “nature” itself might be.

We will begin by looking at what Merleau-Ponty has to say explicitly about relating to others. Following this close reading of the chapter “Other Selves and the Human World,” we will situate this discussion in relation to questions of nature, retracing Merleau-Ponty’s path in the *Phenomenology*. In following his style through this text, we

intend to acquire some sense, some orientation, that will guide us through his later courses.

Plurality: The Natural Atmosphere of Humanity

In “Other Selves and the Human World,” Merleau-Ponty performs a meditation on his own existence and its origins, embarking on reflection much like that of Descartes in his first Meditation. Yet Merleau-Ponty makes several un-Cartesian choices as he performs his meditation according to his natal ontology rather than Descartes’s dualistic and metaphysical ontology. Let us follow Merleau-Ponty on these meditations which lead him toward his expression of the existence of others.

In the opening lines of Meditation 1, Descartes famously doubts the opinions of his youth. When Descartes looks back on his childhood, he sees only a wealth of untruths, of things he can happily ignore now that, as a fully formed adult, he knows better:

Several years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and that consequently what I afterward based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew... (Descartes 13)

For Descartes, childhood has finished; indeed, “several years” separate him firmly from that youth and its strange opinions. Like Sartre, Descartes is one of the people whom childhood “casts out toward adult life; ...[who] believe that they have no past and are equally near to all possibilities” (SI 25, cited in Johnson “The Voice of Merleau-Ponty...” 88). Descartes explains that he feels he has finally reached a present that allows him to know completely his past: “I was waiting until I reached a point in my life

that was so timely that no more suitable time for undertaking these plans of action would come to pass” (13). From his fully formed, adult mind, Descartes can confidently assess both the past and the future, where he will “build a firm and lasting foundation for the sciences” (13). Descartes finds no reason to doubt the possibility of accomplishing this: no unpredictability shadows his future. His natality does not trouble his present; his present does not natally erupt into the future.

In the tradition of Descartes, Merleau-Ponty begins his chapter on other selves by also turning toward his youth. Like Descartes, Merleau-Ponty does not simply follow the Scholastics in taking for granted the training of his youth and experience: he does not assume that experience has already led him to definitive knowledge. But nor does he, like Descartes, reject his childhood. He considers his own existence by first looking back and then forward. He looks back on his childhood:

It is at the present time that I realize that the first twenty-five years of my life were a prolonged childhood, destined to be followed by a painful break leading eventually to independence. If I take myself back to those years as I actually lived them and as I carry them within me, my happiness at that time cannot be explained in terms of the sheltered atmosphere of the parental home; the world itself was more beautiful, things were more fascinating, and I can never be sure of reaching a fuller understanding of my past than it had of itself at the time I lived through it, nor of silencing its protest. (PP 346)

Merleau-Ponty marvels at both the distance and proximity of childhood. In retrospect, he finds that twenty-five years seem to have flown by, yet when he experienced those years, the time passed slowly: the time of childhood was “prolonged” and “sheltered” from the speed of adult life. Merleau-Ponty wonders both at the intimate sense he has of that past and also his estrangement from it; he cannot live those years again nor perceive them as

he perceived then, and yet his current perception emerged from that time. Merleau-Ponty marvels at the absence and presence of his own origins in his current life.

Merleau-Ponty finds that his current existence and opinions cannot be untwined from his past, enabling him, like Descartes, to dismiss entirely a set of past opinions. Rather, his present existence is indicative: Merleau-Ponty's existence is an indicative pronoun, a "this," which anonymously gestures towards antecedents that ironically both follow and precede him. His present life points backwards toward his birth and forward toward new possible experiences. This general, temporal indicativeness – this status of being a "one" whose existence distends and protends – appears to have something to do with Merleau-Ponty's nature. In fact, Merleau-Ponty here identifies nature with temporality itself.

Temporal dispersal defines Merleau-Ponty's nature: he finds that his "voluntary and rational life... merges into another power" and this power is "natural time" (PP 347). Due to his nature, he finds that he will "never manage to seize the present in which I live with apodictic certainty" because his existence disperses itself temporally, forward and backwards (PP 347). His natality institutes this temporal nature: "Such is the lot of a being who is born, that is, who once and for all has been given to himself as something to be understood" (PP 347). But identifying this fundamental structure of temporality does not isolate Merleau-Ponty in his projects as mortality isolates Dasein. Nor does the meditation on his nature isolate Merleau-Ponty as it does Descartes. Merleau-Ponty's *natal* – rather than mortal – temporality unites him with others. As born, Merleau-Ponty also finds that he is not alone in living this peculiar temporal, natal existence. In his meditations on being with others, Merleau-Ponty finds himself among other beings who

are similarly dispersed in the world. He finds that he lives in “an atmosphere of humanity” (PP 347).

What is this atmosphere of humanity? What is it like? What gives rise to it? What is it to live to alone, not even with one other, but among many others? Through these questions, we come to crux of the problem that occupies Merleau-Ponty through this chapter, the book, and (as I shall argue in succeeding sections) his later work on Nature:

[H]ow can the word ‘I’ be put into the plural, how can a general idea of the *I* be formed, how can I speak of an *I* other than my own, how can I know that there are other *I*’s, how can consciousness which, by its nature, and as self-knowledge, is in the mode of the *I*, be grasped in the mode Thou, and through this, in the world of the ‘One’? (PP 348)

That is, what is the meaning of belonging to a plurality? And how do we come to understand ourselves as part of a plurality? For Merleau-Ponty, the answer to this question cannot be that we construct the plural from the singular. We cannot integrate – in the sense used in calculus – from the “I” to the “one” nor the “we”: we lack the terms to extrapolate from the original function to any other. To use another mathematical example, we cannot derive depth from a point: we must first begin in a three-dimensional world and within that world, define plane, line, and point. Descartes suggested that depth was a derivative dimension, but for Merleau-Ponty it is the “*first* dimension” (EM 140, emphasis in the original). Likewise, the mode of the “One” and the “We” are not derivative but primary ways that existence is given to us. Already in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty unfolds subjectivity and finds at its natal heart not only nature but others.

Merleau-Ponty highlights the *plurality* of others – in contrast to the appearance of one other – as what must be investigated. The problem of understanding “others” cannot be approached by understanding a singular other; rather, as Merleau-Ponty’s chapter title suggests, we must study other *selves*, in the plural. I cannot understand the body of another as a singular object, but I also cannot look on the bodies of many other people as a collection of objects *or even a collection of subjects*. Merleau-Ponty writes: “The constitution of the other person does not fully elucidate that of society, which is not an existence involving two or even three people, co-existence involving an indefinite number of consciousnesses” (PP 349). If we first reduce the problem to the facing of a singular other – as for Hegel or even Levinas – we miss out on the phenomena of the one, the anonymous “someone” who uses the pipe, the spoon, or the body. The Hegelian struggle for dominance, Merleau-Ponty writes, depends on a prior natal co-existence:

With the *cogito* begins that struggle between consciousnesses, each one of which, as Hegel says, seeks the death of the other. For the struggle ever to begin, and for each consciousness to be capable of suspecting the alien presences which it negates, all must necessarily have some common ground and be mindful of their peaceful co-existence in the world of childhood. (PP 355)

Hegelian dialectical thought does not suffice to describe the embodied natal ground of that thinking. Idealism, even as disrupted by Hegel, cannot describe the phenomena of the plurality. But no more can objective thought. We cannot approach the problem of plurality through objective thought: there is “no place for other people and a plurality of consciousnesses in objective thought” (PP 350). We cannot integrate a plurality through the Cartesian definitively singular subject, nor can we derive plurality from a multiplicity of objects. Neither pure objectivism nor pure subjectivism, neither empiricism nor idealism, can give us plurality. Far from the fallenness of Heideggerian *das Man*,

plurality refers to a being-with akin to *Mitsein*, yet Merleau-Ponty describes the genetic and corporeal emergence of plural being-with in a way quite foreign to Heidegger.

How *can* we approach this elusive phenomenon of plurality? In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the answer is: via the body. In his later work, Merleau-Ponty gradually modifies this emphasis on the personal body for an emphasis on the flesh. Nonetheless, in the *Phenomenology*, by emphasizing the corporeal over the ideal as the ground of relations with others, Merleau-Ponty makes an important transition toward his account of plurality in his natal ontology.

The Natural Body, Anonymous Existence, and the Nature of Other Selves

All of the *Phenomenology of Perception*'s study of the body leads up to this study; as he puts it, in the chapter on "Other Selves" that appears near the end of the book, "What we have said about the body provides the beginning of a solution to this problem" (PP 349). The problem has arisen due to the reductive assumptions of objectivism and idealism. For objective thought, "the body of another, like my own, is not inhabited, but is an object" (PP 349). By contrast, in the phenomenological view of a natal ontology, one inhabits the body of another. Through the anonymous mode of the one – through my natal connection – I can inhabit the other's body. I cannot *know* the other completely: this would be the mistake of extreme objectivism or subjectivism. Both of these positions would assume that total knowledge of the other is available (albeit in a different manner). But, for Merleau-Ponty, while I cannot totally know the other, I can feel the "co-existence involving an indefinite number of consciousness" (PP 349) in which we both share. The personal body bears the marks of both culture and nature; the

body is lived from the inside and witnessed from the outside. The body participates in the world of objects as well as the life of subjects. My body, like the bodies of others, appears for me as an object, but the body also “withdraws from the objective world, and forms between the pure subject and the object a third genus of being, [and] the subject loses its purity and transparency” (PP 350).

When Merleau-Ponty turns toward his origins, he also turns toward his body. The body in general indicates a past and a future: the body is the site of the indicative temporality. Merleau-Ponty sees in his flesh the mark of a past and the mark of a future. We might imagine that were Merleau-Ponty a pregnant woman he could stare at his own omphalos – his origin – and he would see beneath it a gestating new omphalos, the site of being that will go from him into the world. Though we use the navel metaphorically here, the body carries this mark literally in the flesh of the navel; the navel marks the organ of our natality just as eyes literally give us vision. We do not have to be pregnant women to discover in our bodies the mark of our natal origin in others and our natal connection to others. In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty speaks quite directly of an “umbilical bond” (VI 107). In the *Phenomenology*, he grounds this apparently metaphorical description in the very flesh of the body.

But as Merleau-Ponty meditates, he does not idealize or romanticize his body. He does not pretend to be a pure corporeality, a raw fleshy animality alone among Western philosophers. To be embodied is not necessarily to be naked. Merleau-Ponty’s body is clothed, seated in a chair, using a pen. These cultural accoutrements mean that his body does not require the literal presence of other bodies beside it to be connected to others. Rather, his natural body accumulates a patina of culture; he matures according to the

cultural atmosphere around him. The atmosphere of humanity in which Merleau-Ponty finds himself emanates from the cultural objects around him: “Just as nature find its way to the core of my personal life and becomes inextricably linked with it, so behavior patterns settle into that nature, being deposited in the form of a cultural world” (PP 347). Were Merleau-Ponty to assume that the body ends at the line of one’s actual flesh, he would foreclose the very phenomenology of embodiment he attempts. But this is the very strength of Merleau-Ponty’s position: my body is hardly entirely only my own, but the bodies of others are also possessed and understood by me. The anonymous body that goes between us does not limit our relation to others but enables it. We can glimpse obliquely this anonymous body as it appears in cultural objects.

Where Descartes finds himself alienated by the cultural world exemplified in the objects surrounding him, Merleau-Ponty finds himself together with others even when he appears to be alone. Descartes, as he meditated on his existence, doubted all the objects around him: his dressing room and its contents (c.f. Descartes 14). For Descartes, his “dressing gown” and the “sheet of paper” in his hands *mean* nothing: he approaches the objects after bracketing all meaning, all cultural, historical, and personal contexts.⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, affirms that these objects indeed exist, but that these cultural objects point beyond themselves. This cultural world comprises a range of visible, partially visible, and as-yet invisible objects. Merleau-Ponty notices he understood

⁵⁹ For Michel Henry, this represents the very phenomenological strength of Descartes’s text. After performing the *epochē*, do you mean epoché Descartes indicates beyond his own empirical body, beyond *all* bodies, the fundamental phenomenological apperception that accompanies existence: “the obscure act of the infinite passion of a blind volition... or, if you like, ‘life.’” (“Videre Videor” 40). We can imagine that Merleau-Ponty would object to this position on several grounds – we will return to this in his critique of Descartes in the Nature Courses – but not the least because Henry, like the early Husserl, overlooks the thickness and occlusion of the body. We cannot complete the *epochē*, we cannot step out of our skins and encounter pure apperception.

himself as first and foremost not alone, but amidst a world of cultural objects that indicated, in absentia, others who were there before him. When he looks around himself, he notices that the object calls up its user: “*Someone* uses the pipe for smoking, the spoon for eating, the bell for summoning” (PP 348). The pipe does not point to one particular other individual, but a plural community of like others.

Perhaps most importantly for a natal ontology, Merleau-Ponty notes that such cultural indicators and the community they indicate have always been with him. “Culture” is not something that arrives with adulthood anymore than nature is something left behind in childhood. We are born into a world populated by such objects: “The child finds them around him at birth like meteorites from other planet. He appropriates them and learns to use them as others do, because the body image ensures the immediate correspondence of what he sees done and what he himself does” (PP 354). We, of course, hear echoes of the Heideggerian work-world with which Merleau-Ponty was well familiar. But where Heidegger emphasizes the use and meaning of these culturally foregrounded objects, Merleau-Ponty notes the role of the body and nature in their appearance. It is the child’s *body* – in all its natal fragility and receptivity – that permits this initial acquisition of a world (however he might later reflectively alienate himself from that world by taking a class in philosophy and performing Cartesian skepticism). These cultural objects appear against the background of nature, Merleau-Ponty notes; nature likewise appears as a background in contrast to the foreground of personal perception (PP 347). Like any background and foreground, these two appear together. The site of their appearance is the human body. He writes:

The very first of all cultural objects, and the one by which all the rest exist, is the body of the other person as the vehicle of a form of behavior.

Whether it be a question of vestiges or the body of another person, we need to know how an object in space can become the eloquent relic of an existence. (PP 348)

Prior even to language, our prereflective taking up of cultural objects is enabled by our natal, embodied relation to others.

Already in the examples I have used, the prevalence of childhood and infancy in this phenomenology of embodiment is apparent. But why is this? What is it about the moments of our lives closest to our birth that tell us so much about our nature? Is Merleau-Ponty suggesting that children enjoy some privileged proximity to Being?

I do not think this is the case for Merleau-Ponty, nor should it be the case for a careful natal ontology. We are interested in finding the meaning of being numerous *in general*, not in mourning some lost connection to others. We find in adults both a sense of connection to others and a sense of alienation (and we will return to the question of whether Merleau-Ponty fully addresses the latter). That said, we can also witness, both in adult life and in child life, a prereflective relation to others.

In *general* and not only in childhood, we do not have to determine by analogy what life shares our mode of being. Through a phenomenology that attends to embodiment, we understand vision in general “not a ‘thinking about seeing,’ to use Descartes’ expression, but as a gaze at grips with a visible world, and that is why for me there can be another’s gaze” (PP 351). But it can be useful to genetically attend to our entrance into the world, when we find that we consistently act prereflectively on the affirmation that others share our world. If we truly “grasp again on visible bodies those forms of behavior which are outlined there,” then we do not face the problem of “other consciousnesses” (PP 351). Turning back toward our natality can divert us from

problems possible only by beginning from an adult consciousness where Descartes himself began his meditations.

Our prereflective “grip” on the world is particularly evident in childhood. That the perception of others *as others* genetically precedes reflective understanding of these beings as “consciousnesses,” can be seen by considering childhood development: “A baby of fifteen months opens its mouth if I playfully take one of its fingers between my teeth and pretend to bite it. And yet it has scarcely looked at its face in a glass, and its teeth are not in any case like mine” (PP 352). The baby cannot yet perform reasoning “by analogy” nor would this reason be of very much help, given how her body differs from the adult philosopher who plays with her fingers. Instead, “ ‘Biting’ has immediately, for it, an intersubjective significance. It perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body” (PP 352). Not only do we not “reason by analogy” like Cartesians, we do not reduce others to objects like a Hegelian. Merleau-Ponty clearly pays tribute to Hegel’s account of the dialectical emergence of consciousness, but, as indicated above, he ultimately finds this account flawed. Hegel forgets our thickness, our opacity: he forgets knowledge I have of myself insofar as I am a body. I already know that I am not transparent to myself any more than others are. For the embodied being, “the others can be evident to me because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws my body in its wake” (PP 352).

The mechanism of the phenomena Merleau-Ponty here describes has recently been more clearly understood as the result of mirror neuron firing: such neurons allow

my body to literally move with the desires and actions of others.⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty's insights also confirm certain findings in child psychology, although as John O'Neill suggests, these studies affirm not Lacan's mirror phase per se, but the prereflective affirmative relation to others that precedes the phase (O'Neill 6). Whatever the genetic origin – physical or developmental – we find ourselves inhabiting a world made meaningful by their structure. In Merleau-Ponty's words, these structures mean that when I encounter another person "this world may remain undivided between my perception and his, [so that] the self which perceives is in no particularly privileged position" (PP 353). "My" very possessive relation to "my" perception dissolves; the other's movements guide mine before these gestures rise to the level of reflective and possessive consciousness.

In this natal situation, the body points backwards toward its natal origin in other like beings but also forward toward its expressive life with others. According to Merleau-Ponty, even Piaget, the famed child development psychology, failed to give enough credence to the natal origin of perception. I quote at-length his important critique of Piaget:

At about twelve years old, says Piaget, the child achieves the *cogito* and reaches the truths of rationalism... Piaget brings the child to a mature outlook as if the thoughts of the adult were self-sufficient and disposed of all contraction. But in reality, it must be the case that the child's outlook is in some way vindicated against the adult's and against Piaget, and that the unsophisticated thinking of our earliest years remains as an indispensable acquisition underlying that of maturity, if there is to be for the adult one single intersubjective world. (PP 355)

⁶⁰ These neurons help us both to make sense of the actions of another and to mimic it. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the neurons involve more than mimicking which on its own would be useless: "Why should an individual copy an action made by another individual? ... If an animal observing a conspecific eating some food imitates its movements, it will never get food ..." (Rizzolatti 55) The neurons reflect shared desire and intention, not pure movement per se. Such neurons are common around the mouth, for example, firing in response to movement of hands with objects.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Piaget's developmental studies can implicitly suggest a telos; he implies that the adult achieves some more authentic, complete world-relation. Certainly, we should not abandon the subtleties that only adult consciousness can achieve: few children do multi-variable calculus, write evolutionary theory, or compose truly profound poems. But if we forget the birth of such capacities, we also forget some aspect of their nature. If we forget the genesis of adult thought, we forget its generativity; if we assume that all thought was always mature, we forget that thought can mature.

Natals Are Not Skeptics

Merleau-Ponty says that the child's outlook is "vindicated against the adults." But in what way precisely is the child's outlook philosophically vindicated? One of the most striking things about the child's outlook is its commitment to the world; the adult, not the child, is a skeptic. Children do not doubt the ability of their caretakers to understand their needs; the child demands milk or attention, assuming that others can acknowledge and respond to this need. Before doubting whether communication can be fully understood, the child communicates. Before retreating into the willful privacy of adolescence, the child reaches out to everyone around her and assumes that these other beings share her world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it,

[T]he child lives in a world which he unhesitatingly believes accessible to all around him: He has no awareness of himself or others as private subjectivities, nor does he suspect that all of us, himself included, are limited to one certain point of view of the world. (PP 355)

Of course, we might say that this represents a childish egoism – perhaps every child is a megalomaniac, as Freud says – and indeed this can also be true; the child does not stop to reflect on the effect of her desires on others. But what is important to Merleau-Ponty is that the child assumes and affirms that others can understand her desires, and even before that, that these others *exist*. If the child were to act – ethically or unethically – she would first of all *already* have acknowledged the existence of others.

This prioritization of the prelinguistic, embodied connection to others marks one of the differences between Merleau-Ponty from Lacan and other psychoanalytic models of natality. As O’Neill has noted, “According to Lacan, the acquisition of intersubjectivity is achieved only at the level of language, or in the symbolic order”; for Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, “all individuality and every specific sociality presupposes an *anonymous intersubjectivity* that is the ground of our figural relations with things and persons in-and-as-our-world” (8).⁶¹

Merleau-Ponty, of course, does not fail to notice that language also connects us to others. He states clearly: “There is one particular cultural object which is destined to play a crucial role in the perception of other people: language” (PP 354). In dialogue, I find that my thoughts and those of an other are “woven into a single fabric” and “Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world” (PP 355). When children learn to babble, they will often watch not the mouth of the person speaking, but the eyes of the speaker (CA 14). In the lectures on child development, written just after the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty explains that in the “Cartesian

⁶¹ For another reading of the connection between Lacan and Merleau-Ponty, see Silverman “Cézanne’s Mirror Stage.” Silverman argues that in “Cézanne’s Doubt,” Merleau-Ponty presents the artists as reversing the process of disintegration begun in Lacan’s mirror state (273). Whether or not we agree with this particular claim, Silverman clearly demonstrates Merleau-Ponty’s familiarity and engagement with Lacan on these moments of child development.

tradition, there is no plane on which consciousness and language meet” (CA 3). The Cartesian split, of course, occurs between mind and body, but perhaps unexpectedly it was Descartes who put language on the side of the body, so that for Descartes “language arises from the order of things and not from the order of the subject” (CA 4).⁶² For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, “Language is neither thing nor mind, but it is immanent and transcendent at the same time” (CA 6). Language is a wholeness into which we are born. Though this might initially sound Heideggerian, as Merleau-Ponty will later clarify in the Nature Course, in Heidegger language is almost supernatural, exceeding and preceding us like the gods; this move by Heidegger only avoids the mystery and slips into reifying “gnosis” (NC 87). Heidegger’s or any philosophy that pays too much attention to language misses the dialectic of Nature at work in language. What is mysterious is not language in itself but that *we* – with our very fleshy beings – generate and regenerate language with each birth through our natal connection to others.

For an example of this wholeness in its concrete, contingent form, consider the phenomena of babbling. When children learn language, they learn by babbling. Babbling, “the ancestor of language,” is “spontaneous with respect to its environment” (CA 11). Babbling involves a codevelopment of neural and anatomical features.⁶³

German children babble “in German”; they play in the tone and rhythm of the language

⁶² Husserl and Sartre had re-posed the Cartesian problem; Merleau-Ponty struggles with the relation between Husserl’s possibly Cartesian position on language and de Saussure’s. For Husserl, the physical aspect of a sign can be separated from its meaning; for de Saussure (at least according to Merleau-Ponty), the physical sign, spoken or written or moved, is inseparable from its physical manifestation. Gesture – explicitly excluded by Husserl in the *Logical Investigations* – is a primary example of the unity of meaning and physicality (Merleau-Ponty does argue, perhaps rightly, that the Husserl later abandons his position on grammar).

⁶³ C.f. Guasti.

rather than with distinct signs.⁶⁴ For Heidegger, language is the path to the gods; perhaps this path follows a babbling Bavarian stream, but it does not seem to follow actual babbling, burping children.

Of course, Merleau-Ponty does owe much to and share much with Heidegger (a genealogy would be a project in itself) and in this case, his debt is apparent in his emphasis on the power of language to solicit us into being. The acquisition of language “is a development toward an end defined by the environment and not preestablished in the organism” (CA 14). Merleau-Ponty’s natal view presents language as a realm of new possibility with a power to invite new speech and action, where for Sartre and other Cartesians, “the word has no ‘power’; it universalizes and summarizes what already exists” (CA 4). Rather, a child learns language – learns *in* language – as we learn the meaning “of a new writer who, at first, is not understood, but who little by little becomes understandable” (CA 29). Merleau-Ponty critiques the linguist Jakobson for reducing language acquisition to an intellectual process (31); we learn not because of innate *intellectual* capacity but because of our whole vital motivation and relation to others. Neither in language nor in gesture nor in empathy do we represent the other in ourselves. As he will put it later, we understand the other as flesh through “an anonymous visibility that inhabits us both” (VI 142). Revitalizing a childlike vision – rediscovering our “natal pact” (See PrimP 6) – allows us to avoid an abstract philosophy of being and nothingness in favor of a natal philosophy, a philosophy of being born.

Merleau-Ponty never loses sight of language as fundamentally important evidence of our relation to others; he returns to this theme throughout his work in explicit

⁶⁴ The examples Merleau-Ponty chooses from early developments in linguistics are generally not contradicted by current research and in fact anticipate advancements in research on primate and human language acquisition. See, for example, the work by Bloom in *Language Acquisition*.

philosophical commentary and by allusion to writers and poets. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty also suggests that language is not the *only* evidence of our relation others or our capacity to merge our subjectivities with the wakes of others. Reflective linguistic articulation of our connection to others presupposes an orientation toward others, a receptivity that permits expressivity. Overemphasizing language as the moment in which I find myself in a plurality covers over the very multiplicity that constitutes a plurality.

Merleau-Ponty never suggests that turning toward prereflective life – toward our natality – admits us into unproblematic relations with others; the body does not offer a transcultural, transpersonal clear medium. Language does not cause the problem of other selves, nor does it resolve it. Instead, attending to our natural natal connection to others shows that the chasm between my self and other selves runs even deeper than I thought.

Merleau-Ponty writes:

The conflict between myself and the others does not begin only when we try to *think ourselves into* the other and does not vanish if we reintegrate thought into non-positing consciousness and unreflective living; it is already there if I try to live another's experiences, for example in the blindness of sacrifice. I enter a pact with the other, having resolved to live in an interworld in which I accord as much place to others as to myself. But this interworld is still a project of mine, and it would be hypocritical to pretend that I seek the welfare of another *as if it were mind*, since this very attachment to another's interest still has its source in me. (PP 357)

Even if I spontaneously decide to give up my self – my very life – for the other, *I*, in the privacy of my life project, I nonetheless make this choice. Even the most generous act of human love is not perfect love: it does not “cast out fear” as the biblical John says. We must still fear that this love is not reciprocal, that the other does not fully understand our love, that the other does not want our love. Merleau-Ponty imagines a tragic couple “in which there is more love felt on one side than on the other” (PP 357). Can this couple

simply draw on their prereflective connection to others and clarify this imbalance?

Unfortunately no, Merleau-Ponty responds. No phenomenology can study its way out of the facts of this situation or any situation.

To return to our natal emphasis, we can imagine this attempt at sacrifice and love as the love of a parent for a child (rather than that between lovers, as Merleau-Ponty mentions). As a mother or father, I might seek the welfare of my child “*as if it were mine,*” but I find only that I can never give this gift. Since the child’s very conception, the child appeared on the other side of a gap, *un écart*, in being.

But Merleau-Ponty cautions against too much skepticism: before we can even have these doubts, before we can even worry whether our child wants our sacrifice or our lover meets our desire, we can affirm that we do acknowledge these other selves. This affirmation depends on our natural natality. Merleau-Ponty explains that before we reflect on the authenticity of the other’s recognition of us (or vice versa), we first acknowledge the other:

But first we need to know how it has been possible for me to posit the other. In so far as I am born into the world, and have a body and a natural world, I can find in that world other patterns of behavior with which my own interweave, as we have explained above. But also in so far as I am born and my existence is already at work and is aware that it is given to itself, it always remains on the hither side of the acts in which it tries to become engaged and which are forever mere modalities of its own, and particular cases of its insurmountable generality. (PP 357-358)

Anonymous, general natal existence both enables and delimits our relation to other selves. The body does not offer a shortcut to others; generality does not mean unity. Merleau-Ponty states clearly: “The generality of the body will never make it clear how the indeclinable *I* can estrange itself” (PP 358). But it is through our very estranging *I*, our very difference from others in our plurality that we can come, for example, to love

others. If we could perfectly love others, we would only enjoy in ourselves “the love which God has for himself through me,” Merleau-Ponty says, paraphrasing Spinoza (PP 359). We do experience love for others insofar as we experience others as distinct, *as other*. Others are not just a concept indicated by cultural objects; others truly open up a gap in the world. As struggling phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty says, we must not abandon description of these experiences merely because they pose difficulty. Rather, “We must say of experience of others what we have said elsewhere about reflection: that its object cannot escape it entirely, since we have a notion of the object only through that experience” (PP 359).

However impossible to fully describe our experience of others, we nonetheless notice that we *do* experience others. As Merleau-Ponty puts it most concisely, “I can evolve a solipsist philosophy but, in doing so, I assume the existence of a community of men endowed with speech, and I address myself to it” (PP 360). As an adult, I can deny skeptically my relation to others, but I can only do so in a natural language: that is, a natal language, one inherited with by birth. Even were I to say nothing, my refusal to communicate speaks in a community of speakers: “the refusal to communicate ... is still a form of communication” (PP 361). Even to avoid physical contact with others, I must notice the difference between a human and a rock; I must set out to avoid *others*. I can only *leave* the company of others; I cannot begin without others. Only a rock, only the inimitably neutral stars can be alone; solipsism is only possible for someone who exists “without being or doing anything, which is impossible” (PP 361).

The Social, Plurality, and the First-Person Plural: History and the Real Battlefield for Nature

Having shown that phenomenology cannot leave off describing others, we are still left to wonder exactly what Merleau-Ponty has to say *about* our relations with others. He says that we cannot doubt others; solipsism is not an option. What, then, *are* our options? As phenomenologists looking for the meaning of being numerous, we have discovered a few things through our reading of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. We have found that the body indicates others, nature and culture, and that the intentional threads that tie us to these phenomena are loosest in childhood.

Merleau-Ponty makes the suggestion in this chapter of the *Phenomenology* that for more detail, we must turn to what he here calls “the social.” As phenomenologists, “we must return to the social with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing” (PP 362). We saw above that the social – at least in the terms of the *Phenomenology* – refers to what we here call a plurality. Merleau-Ponty calls it also a co-existence: “society... is not an existence involving two or even three people, but co-existence involving an indefinite number of consciousnesses” (PP 349). Phenomenology cannot restrict itself to the description of one consciousness – not even one temporally unfolding consciousness – because then phenomenology would miss the very phenomena that its language lets it explore. The social, however, he already notices does not present itself clearly as an object: “Prior to the process of becoming aware, the social exists obscurely and as a summoning” (PP 362). The social appears with the occlusion of subjectivity. In this chapter, we have also called this phenomena “plurality,” or the subject’s relation to multiple others. In Merleau-Ponty’s later work, he leaves off reference to “the social” in

favor of the term “flesh.” We can already see the motivation for doing so in this chapter in the *Phenomenology*. “The social” connotes the object of study of sociology. But the phenomena to which Merleau-Ponty directs phenomenology cannot be confused with that object. He makes clear: “Primarily the social does not exist as a third person object” (PP 362). Plurality cannot be studied by looking from the third person at other people’s relations to each other, as sociology attempts. Plurality does not refer to a “they” or a “them”; plurality is a stance that I take up with others, as a “we.”

Arendt’s objections – though distinct from those of Merleau-Ponty – to the terminology and techniques of “the social” and “sociology” are helpful here. For Arendt, the social, in contrast to the political, denotes a belonging to a group of others who are *like us*. Arendt traces how, over the past several centuries in Western cultures, “membership in a social class replaced the protection previously offered by membership in a family” (HC 256). Identifying a belonging-to a social group commits us to a group of others *like us*: like our family. But for Arendt “men cannot become citizens of the world as they are citizens of their countries... The rise of society brought about the simultaneous decline of the public as well as the private realm” (HC 257). Instead, we must be properly political citizens, participating in a sphere of difference.

Merleau-Ponty, in identifying the “atmosphere” of humanity, appears to have pointed toward intersubjective domain that makes such political projects possible. In this chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty shows that he foresees the connection to the political realm, although as in the *Structure of Behavior*, he does not fully explore its implications. He turns to concrete, political moments to exemplify “the social” which, following Arendt, we will continue to refer to as “plurality.” These examples come from

war and revolution: “the Russian peasants of 1917” and “the Battle of Waterloo.” What phenomenology – in contrast to sociology or history – must study is the view of the actors in this history, not the view of these actors from above:

The historian who is not engaged in the battle and who sees it from all angles ... thinks he has grasped it in its essential truth. But what he gives us is no more than a representation; he does not bring before us the battle itself since this issue was, at the time, contingent. (PP 362)

The battle of Waterloo was, at the time it was lived, contingent: it was open-ended. Action had not been performed; Fabrice, standing on the battlefield, had to make a choice. This choice depended on taking up an attitude toward the situation. The historian pretends to present us the definitive account of experience by virtue of being disengaged.

But what does that purportedly disengaged perspective tell us of experience? We are all engaged in the world, if not literally engaged in “battles.” What phenomenology ought to study is this mode of engagement in which we are with others. Looked on this way, plurality

is at one with all problems of transcendence. Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them; *how the presence to myself (Urpräsenz) which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time derepresentation (Entgenewärtigung) and throws me outside myself.* (PP 363-364)

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty alludes to Husserl’s *Crisis*, as marked in a footnote. We should consider the ramifications of this allusion at several levels. First, this allusion confirms that at this stage in his *oeuvre*, Merleau-Ponty had already read Husserl’s *Crisis* and noted its relevance not only for philosophy of science or history, but for the fundamental problems of phenomenology. This influence persists through Merleau-

Ponty's methodological innovations in generative phenomenology in the Nature Courses and "*La Philosophie Aujourd'hui*," as I will show. Second, Merleau-Ponty raises the issues of the *Crisis* in the context of very concrete reflections on history; for Merleau-Ponty, our natal connection to others conditions action, including concrete political events such as the battle of Waterloo. Whereas for Arendt we must emerge into the political arena as fully-formed adults, free from the constraints of the family, birth, and death, Merleau-Ponty suggests a more permeable boundary between the household and the political sphere. We never set aside our fleshy, natal connection to others; this connection may even be the ground of action with others, including political action.

Recovering our natal connection to others is no armchair philosophical project; rather, a natal ontology should reorient us on the very battlefield of history. At the same time, our natality arises from a particular natural and historical situation, with all its contingencies. As nats, the actors on the battlefield of Waterloo, no less than the Communists taking to the streets in post-war Paris or the worker priests, could not do *anything* – as natal, they were not “free” in Sartre’s sense⁶⁵ – but no more were they passive witnesses to their situation.

Merleau-Ponty has here taken up a theme, discussed in the last chapter, to which he will return again and again in more detail through his later work. That is, how we can take up our situation and act, without overlooking our very natal contingency? We can say at once, “I did not choose to be here” – I did not *choose* to be born, let alone here and now, with these people – and yet we still chose our actions. We say that we are natural – that we have bodies that determine us and which we did not determine – and yet we are responsible. In part, this responsibility rests on our natal affirmation and *connaissance*

⁶⁵ See Chapter 2,

of others like ourselves. We do have a natal affinity for beings like us; we do know which beings are other selves. This affinity does not tell us *how* we should act: but it does indicate that when we act, our *connaissance* of the comportement of other natsals implicates us in a life beyond the life of a single body.

The *Phenomenology of Perception* published just after World War II contains numerous references to political consequences and war-related examples. One mention in the preface gives us a sense of how broadly and politically Merleau-Ponty intends his new vision of nature to be applied. He argues that when we adopt his wider view of intentionality, we can take in not merely the objective facts or qualities of an object but its “unique mode of existing,” whether it is “a piece of wax” or “all the events of a revolution” (PP xviii). He moves from the classic Cartesian example of the object of reflective philosophy – a piece of wax – to an example that would have concerned his contemporaries worried about Marxist and revolution. The events of a revolution are as much, if not more importantly, the object of phenomenological thought than concrete objects around us.

Throughout the *Phenomenology*, not only in the chapter “Other Selves and the Human World,” he persistently returns to the theme of war. Many footnoted examples come from Saint-Exupéry’s account of living through bombing in the war (c.f. PP 84). Where did Schneider receive his pathological injuries? In the war: “After all Schneider’s trouble was not initially metaphysical, for it was a shell splinter which wounded him in the back of the head” (PP 126). War events also primarily mark out temporality for Merleau-Ponty at a personal level. He writes that he can know he had a “suit made before the armistice, since no more English cloth has been available since” (PP 418).

If the sequence of the subjects addressed in the *Phenomenology* are any indication of priority – and I think they are – then we can be sure that the events of revolution are possibly even *more* important for phenomenology to contemplate than the objects of everyday life, like Descartes’s wax. The concluding and climactic chapter of the *Phenomenology* applies the distinctions and theories developed throughout the book to the subject of revolution. Most of the chapter on freedom examines the situation of revolution as its primary example: he looks at possible Marxist revolution in Russia and also the French revolution and Napoleonic response. He presents the example of a prisoner who battles being tortured (PP 454). The fundamental examples of questions of freedom allude to war: “Shall I risk my life for so little?” (PP 456).

Sounding a bit like Wittgenstein’s infamous end to the *Tractatus*, Merleau-Ponty concludes the *Phenomenology* by indicating that he must be silent. Instead of offering more reflection, he turns to a citation from Saint-Exupéry’s *Pilote de Guerre* because he can *say* no more philosophically. He writes: “what is here required is silence, for only the hero lives out his relation to men and the world, and it is not fitting that another speak in his name.” After philosophy has called our attention to the nature of action, it remains to us to act in the world, as Saint-Exupéry acted. As Saint-Exupéry says, “Your abode is your act itself. Your act is you” (PP 456). “You” are who commits to an action, who takes up a situation and lives it. Even in inaction or silence, you commit yourself.

The implication is that phenomenology, from a descriptive project, leads to real action and a practical change. Yet we cannot say that a natal ontology offers a prescription for action in a plurality. Merleau-Ponty writes he has rediscovered “the natural world, the social world... as permanent field or dimension of existence: I may

well turn away from it, but not cease to be situated relatively to it” (PP 362). A natal ontology cannot tell us what to do in relation to others, but it can reveal that we do not act alone. For Merleau-Ponty all our action with others – from one on one, mother to child action, to action of a historical scale – arises from the very movement of human perception. As we are motivated to perceive light crossing a dark room, so we are motivated to act on a microscopic and macroscopic scale. Both “idealism and realism... falsify the motivational relations existing between the external and internal worlds, and make this relationship unintelligible” (PP 364).

We shall have to uncover a new relation between the external and the internal; we shall have to rethink our very interiority and exteriority as we rethink according to a natal ontology. What exactly it is to have nature inside us and to express externally our interior life will motivate Merleau-Ponty’s work throughout the Nature Courses. Yet already in the *Phenomenology*, he understands that our natal existence initiates us into a world of action and yet so conditions us that we are receptive – and thus passive as well as active – in this world of others.

Conclusions

The *Phenomenology of Perception* points us toward the phenomena of the One, the anonymous mode of being; the text also suggests that this modality is defined by a temporality shared by each individual being is capable sharing this mode with a plurality of others. But where does this mode of the one come from? What is the origin of this original and originating modality? These questions are not answered by the *Phenomenology of Perception*. These questions lie outside the domain of static

phenomenology – which might describe the experience of being or acting in the mode of the one – but also of genetic phenomenology which describes the acquisition of this modality in a single human existence. The one points beyond the history of an individual perception. In inquiring into the origin of the one in a self, we find that we trace the invisible umbilical cord toward other *selves*; moreover, these other selves include not just those specific individuals with us at any given moment, nor even any indefinite number of individuals living synchronously at this moment. Rather, we find ourselves umbilically connected toward a past and a future of other like beings, each tugging on our intentional cords. The womb of the world has given birth before; our siblings await us outside. We cannot meet them inside.

As we emerge – never fully – into exteriority, we find that we shelter a new interior hollow. This hollow surges forth; it bears our life, our projects and our children into being. It feels like us, but we can't see it. Like a gestating child inside a pregnant mother, being kicks: who gave it motion?

In pursuit of this question in the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty turns to Schelling, then Bergson, and finally the later Husserl.

CH 4 – Retrieving Nature’s Interiority: Toward Poetic Phenomenology

“I hide myself within a flower.”
– Emily Dickinson

To and From Cartesian Ontology: the Loss of Nature’s Interiority

In the “Philosopher and His Shadow,” Merleau-Ponty makes the following remark about the task of phenomenology as he sees it:

What resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the ‘barbarous’ source Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it. The philosopher must bear his shadow, which is not simply the factual absence of light. (Signs 178)⁶⁶

This essay appeared in *Signs*, published between the *Phenomenology* and the *Nature Courses*. As Barbaras points out, this period marks a transition in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking from a philosophy of consciousness, via a study of language, and toward a truly ontological position in the later work.⁶⁷ In this transitional essay, Merleau-Ponty describes a new sort of philosophy, a phenomenology that would avoid past dualisms. In this new sort of thinking, “we do not have to think about the world and ourselves in terms of the bifurcation of Nature and mind” (SI 162). This new thought would carry out the project envisioned in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: it would restore nature to the heart of subjectivity. This new thought would address Nature without being equivalent to “naturalism,” at least in any sense practiced by other philosophers so far, and certainly not in any reductive or simplistic sense. Instead, paraphrasing Husserl, Merleau-Ponty describes his new phenomenological thinking this way: “It is the science of Nature, or in a deeper sense, a certain philosophy which gives birth to the natural sciences and which

⁶⁶ Barbaras identifies this passage as marking a transition in Merleau-Ponty’s later position (77).

⁶⁷ c.f. Barbaras, Ch. 4. Dillon argues that there is not a leap but a development from Merleau-Ponty’s early thought to his later work (85).

comes back to the pure I and to the correlative, ‘things simply as things’ (*blosse Sachen*)” (SI 162-163). Beyond the classic formulation of phenomenology as a return to the things themselves, Merleau-Ponty here characterizes phenomenology as a science of Nature. But what is this new study of Nature like? What is the “Nature” that is studied? This is a Nature that correlates to the natural attitude, not naturalism per se. Just as “the natural attitude itself emerges unscathed from the complaints which can be made about naturalism” (SI 163), so Merleau-Ponty’s new study of Nature aims to recover Nature from a history of objectification by naturalism. Phenomenology cannot aim for a Romantic return to some pure Nature, but rather must attempt a productive generation of this sense of Nature.

In the above mentioned essay, Merleau-Ponty only postulates this as a project; in the Nature Courses, he embarks directly on a retrieval of this sense of Nature. As he mentions in the above quotation, this Nature – apparent in the natural attitude – is the same Nature that forms Schelling’s “barbarous source.” The Nature that Merleau-Ponty attempts to describe in the Nature Courses – and indeed in his later ontology – is “an object that is not an object at all; it is not really set out in front of us. It is our soil [*sol*] – not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us” (NC 3). In this view, Nature is not what we understand and objectify in reflective thought, but “what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduction of a meaning” (NC 3). This is the Nature *in us* – at the heart of subjectivity, as stated in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.⁶⁸ This is the Nature into which we are born as natals, and the Nature to which we give birth. In the view of Nature that Merleau-Ponty is in the

⁶⁸ See Chapter 2.

process of developing in the Nature Courses, subjectivity has an exteriority and Nature an interiority.

In Aristotelian finalism, Merleau-Ponty finds some of the first articulations of Nature as following its own interior motivation.⁶⁹ For Aristotle, natural bodies in *general* – not just persons – had intentions, orders, destinations; in Aristotle, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “a qualitative idea of destination is attached to Nature” (NC 7).⁷⁰ That is, natural bodies performed their teleological destinies, more or less successfully realizing these inherent aims. In short, for Aristotle, Nature had an interior life. It is as if in the history of Western thought, Nature was originally like a child with a rich, inner, imaginative life. As Merleau-Ponty continues to show throughout his history, with the “maturity” of Western thought, Nature lost this inner life. Nature was reduced to what we could say about it or what we could say about our own interventions in Nature.

Aristotle’s *De Anima* also offers a method for studying Nature, particularly through the affective life. In the *De Anima*, Aristotle describes two possible types of study: the study of the student of nature and the study of the dialectician. These two perspectives are assumed to be in contrast and in conflict. For example, when answering the questions “[w]hat anger is. The one would say it is a craving for revenge, or some such thing, while the other would say it is a boiling of the blood and heart around the heart. Of these, the one gives an account of the material, the other of the form and meaning” (403b10). The purported student of nature studies only the matter while the

⁶⁹ In the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty begins his study of Nature in the origins of Western philosophy with Aristotle and the Stoics. This beginning does not mark an absolute beginning: one might also trace, as Heidegger did, origins of *phusis* in the Pre-Socratics or Plato (See *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Chapter 1).

⁷⁰ In his recent translation of the *De Anima*, Joe Sachs calls this interior tendency toward a destination “being-at-work-staying-itself,” a rendering of Aristotle’s term *entelecheia*. Although he does not use the term in the cited section of the Nature Courses, the term *entelchy* reappears in Merleau-Ponty’s own work as well as in Husserl’s. See my chapter 6.

logician or dialectician, by contrast, ignores these physiological details and focuses instead on the intention of the angry person: Anger happens when a person desires retaliation. Aristotle determined that the true student of philosophy of nature must study both accounts, addressing both the physiological state and the psychological states that cause anger. Aristotle recognized that the account of the *so-called* “student of nature” alone would not suffice unless paired *with* the insights of the dialectician (403b 10a). That is, to understand the affective life, we must include both the account of *how* and of *why*. But Aristotle’s methodology applied not only to the study of human nature, of human souls, but to the study of en-souled, living beings in general. A proper study of Nature attends not only to the parts or processes of Nature, but to ends of these processes: to the totality that appears to the being who reflects on that totality.⁷¹

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, such a notion of Nature, and with it the proper method of the study of Nature, has been excised from Western philosophy. Merleau-Ponty – like many others – primarily holds Descartes responsible for this unfortunate situation.⁷²

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty argues that in the Aristotelian model, “nature still remains narrowly constructed in proportion to man” (NC 7). The philosopher himself had the privileged position of witnessing the orientation of Nature. Like a poor psychotherapist, the Aristotelian measured the intentions of her patient only on her own terms. Sachs disagrees, arguing that in his *Physics* and *De Anima*, Aristotle, unlike his predecessors, considers life to *be* purpose, and thus precisely not a purpose relative to human kind. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty does affirm that Aristotle at least noticed this interiority of life in a way that his predecessors did not.

⁷² Certainly, though common, Merleau-Ponty’s critical reading of Descartes is not the only possible reading. Michel Henry, for example, provides an alternative reading, drawing on the Replies and Objections as well as the *Passions of the Soul* that rehabilitates Descartes as a “material phenomenologist” who instituted consciousness as we now understand it (and, significantly for Henry, simultaneously the unconscious) (See “Videre Videor” in *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*). Henry draws on some of the same passages in Descartes which interest Merleau-Ponty – the claim, for example, that the soul, not the eye, sees – but finds in them evidence of phenomenological attentiveness that Merleau-Ponty does not. Henry’s account, however robustly presenting Descartes, still restricts itself to 1) a single consciousness, 2) an adult consciousness, and 3) a consciousness primarily occupied with *thinking*, not with acting. All of these restrictions would seem to Merleau-Ponty unhelpfully reductive rather than a necessary result of the phenomenological *epochē*. Henry approaches the objection Merleau-Ponty poses, writing that “Unless we suppose that the most essential being of man consists in mathematical activity and that the child occupies itself with preparing for the College Boards in the womb, we must recognize that the ‘thought’ here in question is not ‘understanding’ in the strict sense but revelation in its most original form, the mute

With the Cartesian turn, philosophy lost the rich Aristotelian tradition that attributed an interiority to Nature. This was a traumatic event in the history of Western thought; it is a trauma that Western thinkers since have, for the most part, either consciously or unconsciously failed to recognize. Merleau-Ponty proposes attempts to interrogate the Western tradition, locating this traumatic loss.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that phenomenology probe this question of Nature in manner akin to psychoanalytic inquiry.⁷³ In the first of the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty is engaged in the interrogation of Nature that he describes in the *Visible and the Invisible* as “an ontological psychoanalysis” in contrast to an “existential psychoanalysis” (VI 270)⁷⁴. This method of inquiring he refers to as “dialogue” and “interrogation.” And who is the subject or patient of this inquiry? In one sense, the patient is Nature itself: not the concept of Nature, but the complex of ideality and existence that is the totality of Nature. In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty explains that we can see “the whole of nature ... [as] our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue” (PP 320). In a working note in the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty instructs himself to do a “psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother” (VI 267). In the same note, he remarks: ““ Nature is at the first day’: it is there today ... It is a question of finding the present, the flesh of the

immanence of its first being-to-self, in the affectivity of pure self-sensing” (Henri “Videre Videor” 33). Nonetheless, Henry suggests that it is the *same* activity in the child and the adult: thinking refers to an immutable “mute immanence.”

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty’s attitude toward psychoanalysis changes over the course of his career. He had a negative view in the *Structure of Behavior*, but by the time of the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty was familiar with and respected the work of at least Freud. As Barbaras explains, Merleau-Ponty, who wrote an introduction to a book on Freud and consistently engages with the developing field of psychoanalysis throughout his career, envisions the reciprocal informing of psychoanalysis by phenomenology and vice versa (273).

⁷⁴ Barbaras identifies this passage (276) but only by way of contrast and comparison between Merleau-Ponty and Freud. He does not relate this practice to Merleau-Ponty’s ontological claims about Nature. However, in light of Merleau-Ponty’s working note dates only a month earlier that he will attempt a psychoanalysis of Nature, it seems important to draw together these two statements. Moreover, as we have seen and will see throughout this project, for Merleau-Ponty any concept of Nature implies an ontology: concept of Nature is “always the expression of an ontology – its privileged expression” (NC 204).

world (and not in the past) an ‘ever new’ and ‘always the same’” (VI 267). Each chapter takes up a different “interrogation,” a questioning partnership with various thinkers. Thus, in another sense, Western thought that conditions current human existence itself is the patient interrogated. He suggests that our current attitude and concept of Nature contain traces of the past of Nature. As a patient’s present attitudes and relationships toward people in her life bear out patterns established in childhood, so Western philosophy’s present relationship to Nature bears out patterns established early in its history. Merleau-Ponty does not clarify his partner in this dialogue; rather he lets the partner appear in the midst of the history he traces.

Although Merleau-Ponty imagines the loss of a certain sense of Nature, this does not leave him or us without hope as phenomenologists. In one sense, Cartesian metaphysics and post-Cartesian naturalism have occluded the Schelling-like un-thought ground of thought, and this marks a definitive loss. Phenomenology can never Romantically recover a past sense of Nature; nonetheless, this un-thought Nature is not completely foreign to us. It is true that we cannot see the Nature Merleau-Ponty intends phenomenology to seek. But we cannot see this Nature in exactly the same way that we cannot see our own faces; just as we might indirectly understand our own visage – in the face of an other, through touch, through expression – so we can indirectly discover this Nature. Merleau-Ponty sets in motion the process of accomplishing this by phenomenologically reflecting on the traumatic history of Nature, in hopes of regaining a new sense of Nature. No more than psychoanalysis promises a return to childhood does he expect phenomenology to provide us with an “authentic” or original access to Nature.

In conversation with Merleau-Ponty, I here recapitulate his history of Western thought. In retelling this history – like a patient retelling an early childhood or traumatic event – I attend to what stands out in Merleau-Ponty’s own account and in my own reiteration. What of the gaps in this account? He has drawn a strong line through the history of Western thought, substantiating his position with a rich genealogy. But that history has some marked lacks: Nietzsche appears not at all, Hegel is hardly mentioned, and Augustine and neo-Platonists do not precede Descartes. Certainly few authors beside Whitehead outside the continental European tradition make an appearance: no Emerson, Thoreau, or Wittgenstein. Are these sins of omission, insignificant gaps for the sake of concision, or significant of some more careful selection? On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty indeed had to choose a concise set of authors, manageable in his lecture course; his selections reflect his personal and historically conditioned selections (thus, the omission of, for example, Thoreau). On the other hand, his reading of these authors allows him to dialectically generate his own view; likewise, I have not covered all the authors discussed by Merleau-Ponty, but only the accounts most stressed by him or those significant in describing his natal ontology. Among these authors, I emphasized those concerned with science, particularly life science.⁷⁵ This type of engagement with the life sciences prefigures Merleau-Ponty’s own method and also the implications of his phenomenology.⁷⁶ Like Arendt, he attends to the co-emergence of life sciences in

⁷⁵ Certainly Augustine and the neo-Platonists before Descartes emphasized the inward man over the hypostatic body. But Descartes makes use of this view of the person as mind – *animus* – to enable the practice of natural science by eliminating problems of consciousness and interiority from the pure exteriority that nature science considers. Schelling wrote not only a nearly-phenomenological account of the appearance of Nature, but also a treatise on physical and life science issues. Nietzsche certainly offers a strong critique of dualist metaphysics, but not one that he presents in the context of emergent science.

⁷⁶ It is worth noting the many parallels between Merleau-Ponty’s history and that offered by Marjorie Grene and David Depew offer in *Philosophy of Biology*. These authors admit the selectivity of their

general: developments in biology and innovations in existential philosophy or in physics condition one another. This by no means justifies Merleau-Ponty's account as a *complete* history, but it does highlight significant genealogical precedents to the poetic phenomenological practice that Merleau-Ponty envisions.

Significantly for our project here, the lost Nature after which we seek corresponds to our natality. In the opening lines of the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty explains that what has been lost in the history of Western thought is the more fundamental meaning of "Nature" as "*nascor*, 'to be born'" (NC 3). That is, we have lost the meaning of Nature as birth: concomitantly, we have lost a view of ourselves as natural both from our births and from our generative activity of giving birth to speech, action, and reflection. As natals, we are born into Nature as we are born into our very bodies; interior and exterior intertwine. In Merleau-Ponty's new naturalism, phenomenology investigates this natal intertwining. After Aristotle, Schelling, Bergson, Husserl, and others saw this lost sense of Nature, and each made an effort at retrieval. Merleau-Ponty retraces the thought of each of these thinkers, but none has fully articulated the sort of phenomenology of Nature that would satisfy Merleau-Ponty.

But what exactly did Descartes do to Nature? What happened to Nature's interiority? What replaced Aristotelian finalism? We might think that it was entirely replaced by a mechanistic view of cause: Perhaps, with the scientific revolution and the shift to one unified sense of cause across disciplines, finalism was simply eliminated *toute courtoise*. But Merleau-Ponty argues that finalism did not disappear so neatly: it was not "rejected, but sublimated in God" (NC 8). As one might sublimate but not eliminate

account and yet argue that this very selection process expresses the methodological problems in philosophy of biology that they see as historically arising (xvi).

a powerful childhood memory of desire, Descartes simply transferred the impulse toward finalism into metaphysics, sublimating all those qualities into an inaccessible, other-worldly God.

As a perfect and complete being, the Cartesian God himself has no need to reflect on ends or aims of Nature. With the sublimation of finality into God, “the word ‘finality’ no longer retains any meaning except for man” (NC 9). Oddly, the omnipotent Cartesian God throws humanity back on itself, as Arendt puts it (HC 280). Merleau-Ponty describes the effect of the Cartesian God this way:

[God] sealed us in the union of body and soul. Thought is in humans, because it is in God, who made us what we are. God refers us to our situation of being created; He sends us toward the world. Philosophy is leaning against God. It does not see God, but it takes support from Him, and the philosopher finds in the authority of this the justification of his attitude of a man turned toward the world. (NC 130)

Ironically, it seems that in a certain sense, for the Cartesian “the point of view of God and the point of view of the human are indiscernible” (NC 130). God gifted humans with unerring – when used within its proper domain – intellect that could view the mechanism of Nature as clearly as a clock-maker could view the inner workings of a clock.

Where for the Aristotelian or the Scholastic the formality of Nature pointed back toward God’s intervention, for the Cartesian the appearance of the world does not provide evidence of anything but a process of parts on parts; Nature does not reveal its intentions. Assuming that one had insight into this totality of Nature rather than only its part would be to truly equate the human view to that of God. Thus, in another sense, the perspectives of the Cartesian God and the human definitively differ. The meaning of Nature for God is absolutely inaccessible. The appearance of any formality in Nature which would previously have been attributed to a finalism of Nature in itself is an

illusion. All Nature *for itself* is reduced to objectified nature *for us*. Nature “no longer has any orientation” (NC 10). Descartes purifies Nature into extension (NC 126). It is placeless, faceless, mindless, and directionless, an endless movement of part on parts with no meaning unless we witness it. Nature has no secrets anymore: Any intentionality attributed to Nature finds its way back to the Cartesian mind. Nature is only “the exterior realization of a rationality that is in God” (NC 10). We find a sort of “ontic inertia in essence” (NC 13). Rather than admitting the dynamic, evolving existence of Nature, Descartes limits Nature to a quiet, static, infinite thing, patiently neutral until we turn our attention toward it.

It is at the end of the *Meditations*, in a passage which Merleau-Ponty cites at length, that Descartes definitely restricts the reference of “nature.” In this passage, Descartes compares the human body to the mechanism of a clock. An Aristotelian might speak of the nature of the body or the clock in terms of what it is *for*: for example, it is the nature of the clock to tell time. The clock might perform better or worse in relation to this norm. But this use of the term “nature,” Descartes decides, is “simply a label which depends on my thought” (Descartes *Meditations*, cited in NC 14). Instead, he will use “nature” only to refer to “something which is really to be found in the things themselves” (NC 14). In Descartes’s view – and in many succeeding views – “nature” must refer to what is entirely independent of us.⁷⁷ If we made Nature relative to us or Nature relative to itself or to any norm, then we lose access to a neutral, objective natural world that we can study with physical or life science. Nature does have ends, but these are relevant only to God (who, in any case, does not need us to know them).

⁷⁷ With the simple change of a Latin letter, from *anima* to *animus*, as Joe Sachs puts it, Descartes restricts the category of “soul” to what we now call mind: to human mental activity (“Introduction” *On the Soul* 5).

In one sense, this is Descartes's great revolution. But, in another sense, it marks a trauma to which succeeding philosophies must respond. In order to bolster this peculiar view of Nature, Descartes requires a substantial God. When he revisits the Cartesian revolution in the second course on Nature, Merleau-Ponty enigmatically states that "God is the keystone" to understanding Nature (NC 134). But this statement offers no solution to the problem of Nature, nor postulates any theological or confessional position; instead, it identifies a site of investigation in the current structure of the concept of nature as it has resulted from the Cartesian history. Descartes served as a principle architect on the edifice of Nature that we inhabit; he placed God as a keystone, but this was a choice, not a necessity. "God is the keystone" for the edifice of Nature in the sense that "God" is the name written on the stone supporting the Cartesian concept of Nature *as it stands*. "God" marks the site on which the entire concept depends. If phenomenology is to inquire into the structure of this concept, into the history of the construction of Nature, then it will need to understand what role this concept plays. Just as in a building, the fact that the concept needs a keystone points back to the metaphorical "forces of gravity" that demand structures of a certain type. The presence of the keystone of God in all these philosophies of nature points to these absent forces. As a result, Merleau-Ponty argues that phenomenology should ask,

What is this weight of Being, this global contact that we try to transfer unto Nature and societies but without ever succeeding in it? We must perceive it, not as presence, but as absence, as always sustaining a taking of responsibility, an action. (NC 134)

For Merleau-Ponty this inevitable, omnipresent weight is what philosophy must reflect on. We take responsibility for the weight we give the keystone. The importance of God

in ontology only points outside of itself toward problems in understanding Nature in relation to a Judeo-Christian and Cartesian history.

In facing the dualistic structuring of Nature by the Christian tradition, Descartes chose a particular methodology contingent on a Judeo-Christian foundation. In Merleau-Ponty's view, this monotheistic tradition must avoid either mechanism or finalism in describing Nature (NC 130). Limiting Nature to mechanism would miss the hidden ends of Nature *for* God; permitting finalism in appearances would allow humans access to a God's eye view. Thus, the tradition oscillates between a positive theology and negative theology, between a situation in which God is clear and the world is nothing and one in which God is obscure and the world is nothing (NC 133). Cartesian thought likewise oscillates between two methods of solving this problem of nature: between an objective ontology in which everything is given and an ontology of existence in which God hides beyond essences (NC 128). God is either nowhere in the world or everywhere in the world:

If we allow two planes of reality, one interior to God, the other exterior, we are led to something like a polytheism, and if we allow only one plane, we are led to pantheism. Every effort of monotheism will be to seek an escape route from this dilemma. (NC 133)

Cartesian thought runs like a scaffold, zigzagging to hold up twin pillars of Judeo-Christian thought. Rather than splitting Nature into an inaccessible God and an illusory world, phenomenology should attend to Nature as it is given: "we must not veil the ontological mystery, nor mask the difference that separates the biblical, providential God from the Christian God, who in his last words protests 'Why have you abandoned me?'" (NC 134). In some sense the Christian tradition aided and abetted Descartes, complicit with Cartesian dualism. But in another sense Descartes unfairly beset a tradition whose

central tenets depend on the message of the incarnation. The Christian message of the incarnation emphasizes the miracle of birth into corporality in this world; as Arendt points out, the gospel message “a child is born unto us” encapsulates the condition of natality (HC 247). Nonetheless, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, whatever potential Christianity may or may not *have* had for properly expressing Nature, it has been irrevocably intertwined with the history of Cartesian thought, turning philosophy from the very mystery it ought to investigate.

Descartes’s dualism institutes a certain “strabismus” into philosophy: Cartesian ontology is a philosophy “necessarily worked over by doubt and a certain strabism. This strabism we see best in the dilemma of Being and Nothingness” (NC 127).⁷⁸ Barbaras calls this Merleau-Ponty’s charge of diplopia, leveled at Descartes but also the early Husserl, Sartre, and any thinker who does not attend to the natural intertwining of the transcendent and immanent in perception and corporeality. Merleau-Ponty perhaps cruelly alludes to both Sartre’s philosophy and his visual disability of strabismus in which Sartre’s two eyes do not work in coordination.⁷⁹ But the important suggestion is that it is Sartre’s his philosophy not merely his vision that suffers from strabismus; the philosophical lens that looks at Being cannot be coordinated with the lens that looks at Nothingness. The for-itself and in-itself are absolutely different from Sartre. But more importantly perhaps for the history here, Descartes’s work is the pathological cause of this Sartrean strabismus.

⁷⁸ See Introduction on this term. Merleau-Ponty revisits the charge of strabismus in the *Visible and the Invisible*, in a note that says his project will include “Reflection on Descartes’s ontologies – the ‘strabism’ of Western ontology” (VI 166).

⁷⁹ On Sartre’s visual impairment, see Annie Cohen-Solal, 38, 50. Sartre describes himself as suffering from “strabismus” like his friend Nizan (50).

Merleau-Ponty asks us to look at this unending effort of Cartesian thought, and indeed the entire preceding and proceeding tradition efforts, and consider to what forces this movement responds. The concept of Nature is “always the expression of an ontology – its privileged expression” (NC 204). Descartes’s concept of Nature reveals his dualistic ontological presuppositions. But Merleau-Ponty cannot simply knock the Cartesian and Judeo-Christian edifice of Nature to the ground and start again. Merleau-Ponty has to renovate the concept of Nature, as he renovates the entire Cartesian ontology. Or, to return to the psychoanalytic model that Merleau-Ponty also employs to describe his methodology, phenomenology must figuratively offer therapy to Nature. Given its structure and history, phenomenology must help Nature improve and develop. In this model, Nature is like a living person with history that both enables and disables its present relations.

If phenomenology can illuminate the Cartesian trauma in Nature’s history and its consequences, perhaps phenomenology can rehabilitate the concept of Nature, rather than abandon discussions of human nature, as Merleau-Ponty’s contemporaries – Sartre, de Beauvoir, Arendt, and Heidegger – suggest. Perhaps, in lieu of a strabismic vision, phenomenology can find a more coordinated, natural vision, a “binocular philosophy,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it (NC 134). Human beings exercise binocular vision in concert with certain actions: upright posture, grasping hands, general motility. Vision and action co-develop. Likewise, when philosophy metaphorically exercises a binocular vision, it must do so in concert with a type of action and responsibility for that action. When we look with this binocular philosophy, we perceive Nature “not as presence, but as absence, as always sustaining a taking of responsibility, an action” (NC 134). By turning toward

the natural vision with which humans are born, phenomenology discovers a prereflective, natural coordination both of action and perception, and action and responsibility. The advantage of rehabilitating rather than abandoning the concept of Nature lies here. With a binocular philosophy, Nature is naturally coordinated with ethical responsibility, just as perception coordinates with action. This aim distinguishes Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology from those of his contemporaries. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method turns to the prereflective unity of action and perception and also to the ontological co-emergence of Nature and ethics. Binocular philosophy reveals "the metamorphosis of brute being, the giving birth" of meaning (NC 134) that happens before nature and culture, freedom and nature, nature and responsibilities are divided in dualistic or strabismic philosophies.

Further Trauma: Kantian Division of Nature

But Cartesian dualism is not the only dualism that besets Western thought: The trauma effected by Descartes is hardly the last or most recent event in the history of philosophy's relationship with Nature. In Merleau-Ponty's view this tendency runs through many modern and later authors.⁸⁰ In Leibniz, for example, the same sublimation into God occurs. Leibniz's God is moderately more interventionist in that he selects the best possible world, but Leibniz, "no more than Descartes," succeeds in separating God and matter (NC11). In the same manner, Spinoza split nature into *naturans* and *naturata*: "Thus, all that could be interior to Nature takes refuge in God" (NC 9). Merleau-Ponty even argues that Cartesian positivism "fulfill[s] itself with Spinozism" (NC 13). The

⁸⁰ For the sake of simplicity, I shall continue to refer to the "Cartesian" attitude toward Nature, but it must be understood as the cumulative effect of a long history.

Cartesian model runs deep: All of these thinkers effect a similar sublimation of Nature. Later schools of thought – “naturalism, humanism, theism” – all respond to this Cartesian rift (NC 135). These apparently distinct schools of thought in fact overlap and intertwine so that “these three words have lost all clear meaning in our culture, and they ceaselessly pass into one another” (NC 135). Locating them in relation to these schools, Merleau-Ponty argues that Kant, Schelling, and Bergson each attempt various extreme responses to the Cartesian trauma.

After Descartes, perhaps the most influential figure on of the Western concept of Nature was Kant. For Merleau-Ponty, Kant’s philosophy falls into the rough category of humanism – more specifically, “philosophical anthropology” (NC 136) – and he finds that such humanist thought “tends to make the problem of Nature disappear” (NC 136). Rather than actually attending to Nature, humanism attributes everything in the situation of “human” and “Nature” to the human. In the transcendental aesthetic of the First Critique and in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant describes Nature as “the whole of the objects of sense,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it, thereby reducing Nature to the correlate of sensation, “a fortuitous factual assemblage” behind which hides “an unknowable being, an ontology of the in-itself” (NC 136). In Merleau-Ponty’s view, Kant’s first critique, rather than truly razing knowledge to its foundations, only perpetuates the Cartesian view with new terms. With Kant, the mind of a God who determines Nature is simply replaced by the human mind (NC 36). Nature, as Kant puts in the *Prolegomena*, is “the existence of things, so far as it is determined according to universal laws” (*Prolegomena* 42). The subject provides these laws, and thus “it is the human subject who carries Being” (NC 21).

Merleau-Ponty identifies in Kant the same pathologies affecting Descartes and Spinoza, manifested in new form. Descartes sublimated Nature into God, but Kant, like a patient who decides she must be responsible for all the troubles in her world, turns the problems of Nature back toward human existence. Like different patients, Kant and Descartes react to the pathological disassociation of Nature in two ways: One blames another for all her problems; the other blames herself. In the First Critique, the human subject splits into activity and passivity, understanding and sensibility. These two faculties remain absolutely distinct until Kant readdresses them in the *Critique of Judgment*. In that sense, the divisive move of the First Critique “appears as the return to a *naturans* that operates in us” (NC 22).

Yet Merleau-Ponty does not abandon Kant. Rather, he sees two possible interpretations of Kant’s view of Nature: first, as impoverishment of Nature by formulating it as a human construction, or second, as enrichment of Nature, insofar as we see Nature as a principle which precedes us and lives within us. As in the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty sees resources in the *Critique of Judgment* not available in the First Critique.⁸¹ The *Critique of Judgment*, Merleau-Ponty argues, “is an attempt to connect these two meanings” along with the two faculties split in the First Critique (NC 23). In this Third Critique, Kant acknowledges that aesthetic judgment is not well described by an absolute dualism between sensation and understanding. Being for-itself cannot be completely divided from being for-us. Of particular importance for the history traced here toward a natal ontology is Kant’s discussion of interiority and exteriority. In the second half of the Third Critique, Kant re-introduces a sort of finalism, noting that in living things, as in beautiful art, we have a tendency to “acknowledge a finality” (NC 25).

⁸¹ See my Chapter 1 and, again, Johnson, “Merleau-Ponty and Kant’s Third Critique.”

Living things appear to carry their own cause within them: “There is an interior in the exterior” (NC 25). Kant has glimpsed the post-Cartesian problematic loss of Nature’s interiority, and, stepping sideways rather than fully backpedaling through the First Critique, he approaches this problem. In judging the activity of living things, we find ourselves faced with the sort of interiority that Descartes excluded from Nature. Kant must attribute this apparent interiority to the human subject (as in the first critique) or else manage a different account of this interiority. Rather than only passively following laws of nature, living things appear to self-legislate. The apparent final causality of living things contradicts the causality attributed to the First Critique Kantian subject. We cannot have two types of cause at work: a self-legislating teleological cause and a categorically imposed cause. Thus, Merleau-Ponty argues that, for Kant, “There is an antinomy between causality and finality” (NC 25). Even the apparent finality of a blade of grass, Kant says, cannot be explained by mechanistic causality of an entirely exterior Nature:

It is absurd for men to hope that someday some Newton will come forth who could make it understood that it would be only the production of a blade of grass according to natural laws that no intention ordered. (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, section 75, cited in NC 288, nt. 10)

But perhaps such a Newton *has* stepped forth. One might argue that this Newton who does describe a blade of grass according to natural laws is Charles Darwin. Darwinian evolutionary theory claims to provide a naturalistic account of both mechanical and final cause (Thompson *Mind in Life* 131).⁸² Perhaps Kant merely failed to anticipate Darwin; or perhaps – and this would be a truly philosophical mistake – he failed by offering an inflexible dichotomy between two causalities. Perhaps Darwinian evolution is to

⁸² Grene and Depew also make this comparison between Newton and Darwin (1-3).

causality what non-Euclidean geometry and relativity are to Newtonian space and time. Alternatively, perhaps Darwinian evolution has not actually offered such a complete account of causality as it might seem. I return to this question and Merleau-Ponty's own assessment of Darwinism in Chapter 6, but it is important to note the direct relation Darwinian thinking has to the Kantian model with which Merleau-Ponty – like other post-Cartesian thinkers of Nature – wrestles.

For the moment, let us focus on how the question stood for Kant: in lieu of restoring the intentionality of final cause to God, can we attribute it to the human subject? This would still require explanation: how can our faculties judge two types of cause, mechanistic and final? For Merleau-Ponty, it is precisely this dualistic dilemma facing Kant that must be avoided. Instead of persisting in the terms of the dualistic antinomy, Merleau-Ponty says that we must “think another foundation of Nature” and “consider as thinkable an architectonic in which this kind of break between causality and finality would not exist” (NC 25). We cannot revise the terms of the First Critique but instead must abandon that dualistic architectonic entirely. The Cartesian model of Nature required a repeated effort to buttress a flawed dualism; the dualistic split between active and passive faculties in Kant's First Critique perpetuates efforts to hold up a flawed architectonic. Instead of persisting in dividing perception into activity and passivity, we must seek the pre-reflective ground of flesh that precedes dualistic divisions.

All of this is to say that Kant himself remains mired in the dualism of his own invention or re-invention. Though Kant “foresees the transformativist thought,” he backs away from the abyss. Where he might have embarked on a study of the “supersensible understanding,” Kant instead returned to the human sphere; his is a profoundly

humanistic philosophy in Merleau-Ponty's view (NC 26). Kant "reintroduces the concept of finalized Nature, despite the Cartesian reduction. But it is only the finality of human being" (NC 26). Human being, as freedom, opposes nature and completes it (NC 26). Not only does Kant remain a humanist, but he fails to appreciate even the historicity of the human being. For Kant, things are "immutably determined, as if it were possible to grasp the moment in history when there would no longer be history" (NC 29).

Merleau-Ponty hints, however, at a way that a Third Critique Kantian model of Nature might be improved: through Gestalt theory. In these same passages, Merleau-Ponty leaps historically from Kant to a mention of the Gestalt theorist Goldstein, noting that Goldstein brings up Kant's Third Critique sense of finalism. Here we see foreshadowed the move that Merleau-Ponty himself makes with regard to Nature later in the Nature Courses: Building on Kant's notion of judgment combined with Gestalt psychology, he develops a phenomenological version of totality to account for the apparent finality of Nature. This is a persistent theme of the Nature Courses in which Merleau-Ponty gradually refines his view of this prereflective ground of judgment.

In generating his own version of Nature that goes beyond Kant's, Merleau-Ponty will have to avoid not only dualism and humanism, but also an a-historicism. He has been sensitive to the problem at least since his encounter with Husserl's *Crisis* that helped him to a phenomenological method which takes account of historicity and generativity of existence in and with Nature. Merleau-Ponty's aim is "to discover a new meaning of the word 'Nature' as the residue that we cannot eliminate, as, e.g., the romantic idea of a savage Nature" (NC 35). The savage Nature, or brute Being, persists as a theme throughout his later work in the *Visible and the Invisible*, as the flesh and

vinculum of existence. The relation to history saves him from any easy Romanticism or mysticism, but he does recognize the efforts of the post-Kantian Romantics as moving toward the domain that he will articulate. In particular, he found strong genealogical roots to his own position in that of Friedrich Schelling, who also saw the need to push Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

Schelling, the Romantics, and the Poetic Retrieval of Nature

The Romantics felt the trauma of the Kantian distancing from Nature, but among them, perhaps only Schelling – who took “his point of departure from section 76 of the *Critique of Judgment*” – went in the direction that Merleau-Ponty advocates (NC 26). Rather than remaining within the terms of either Kantian, Spinozistic, or Cartesian dualism, Schelling dares to modify the underlying ontology in order to accommodate Nature.

Schelling moves to restore interiority to Nature that had been objectified by the transcendental subjectivity of the First Critique. Schelling sees the potential in the domain that Kant identified in the Third Critique but from which he shied away. In Schelling's vision of Nature, much like Merleau-Ponty's, “Nature is both passive and active, product and productivity” (NC 38). In Nature, he sees “there is a priority of the Whole over the parts. A causality is not added from the outside to this inside” (NC 39). Living things display a self-motivated totality visible only at the level of the whole, not of each of their parts. But this natural productivity, or generativity, is not just something added and from the outside, sculpted by a third party: “[T]here is a difference between artistic technique and natural production” (NC 39). At the least Schelling's natural productivity differs from pre-modern models of art: Where the modernist sculptor stands

outside her work, the post-modern artist might install herself within it, making her life and performance part of the work (a work that was, in turn, born from her thought.) The human being stands within Nature like this post-modern installation artist. Likewise, Nature reciprocally lives within human existence and is born from its productivity. Nature, rather than only the product of cognition, gives birth to cognition, a generative activity that we can feel. For Kant, any such natural productivity would have to be “only a dream,” but Schelling says “What Kant, at the end of his discourse, conceived of as a dream, I want *to live and feel*” (NC 39).

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, Schelling’s model is limited because he still turns to God, albeit a different sort of God, to account for the interiority of Nature. With Schelling, God is not infinite, perfect, and thus absolutely better and removed from this world. Rather, “the relation between the finite and the infinite is not such that we can put them in a linear order, and we cannot say that one has priority over the other” (NC 37). This is what Merleau-Ponty calls Schelling’s “circular thought.” Although at first blush this might sound like an insult, Merleau-Ponty approves of the honesty of the circularity. Schelling himself acknowledges the circularity: “Nature becomes a circle which returns into itself, a self-enclosed system” (*Ideas* 40). In Schelling’s circular thought, we find that “God is not known apart from experience, but we take hold of him in the finite” (NC 47). Where Descartes’s dualistic architectonic required God as a distinct keystone to unify a dualism, Schelling’s circular architectonic disperses God throughout the structure. The weight of being that we set out to explain and to support is transferred throughout Nature. In this architectural choice, Merleau-Ponty believes Schelling went farther even than Hegel: Schelling thought “at a higher level of rigor than did Hegel because of his

concept of the empirical; the identity of the finite and the infinite is thought by him in a more decisive way” (NC 47). The architectonic shift, removing the keystone of God, shifts the weight of being and the responsibility for it throughout Nature, and that Nature includes ourselves.

With this shift, we find ourselves with a new burden in philosophy and reflective thought in general. In Schelling, contrary to Spinoza’s absolute division, “the relation of *naturans* and *naturata* is no longer a *one-way* relation with a singular meaning” (NC 37). Instead, these two aspects dialectically co-constitute one another. Schelling affirms existence over essence, recalling post-Kantian idealism to a “barbaric principle” that precedes reflective thought (NC 38-39). Where Kant postulates a sort of teleology, for Schelling “Nature is not properly teleological” any more than it is completely mechanistic (NC 39). Merleau-Ponty points out that Schelling, like Bergson, expresses a “hostility to both mechanism and finalism equally” (NC 39). Schelling wants to describe a generalized sense (as in the French *sens*) that permeates existence, that would lead us back from exteriorization and essentialized concepts toward a living Nature flush with interiority.

Expanding slightly on Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with Schelling can clarify what is at stake in this discussion. Schelling agrees that there is a systematic, rule-following Nature outside us, but he does not find that acknowledging this would answer the most important philosophical questions: namely, what is existence lived within Nature like? Or, how should one act, living a natural life? Instead, he argues that philosophy must study our relationship to that systematic Nature, particularly how it appears within us:

We grant you in advance all our explanations of how such a purposive Nature has come to be actual *outside us*... By that you have explained to us virtually nothing; for we require to know, not how such a Nature arose outside us, but how even the very *idea* of such a Nature has got *into us*. (Schelling *Ideas* Trans. by Harris 41)

Descriptions of the lawfulness of Nature outside us and the origin of that Nature do not describe our relationship to that Nature. As Schelling puts it, “For the existence of such a Nature *outside me* is still far from explaining such a Nature *in me*... that is just the object of our question” (*Ideas* Trans. by Harris 41). The problem of understanding Nature interior to us reciprocally relates to understanding the interiority of Nature outside us. Once we reflectively distance ourselves from our prereflective union with Nature, then we cannot understand how Nature can have an interiority: “As soon... as I separate myself, and with me everything ideal, from Nature, nothing remains to me but a dead object, and I cease to comprehend how a *life outside me* can be possible” (Schelling *Ideas* Trans. by Harris 36).

Schelling notes that it is not as easy to escape Nature as Descartes might hope. In fact, “nature releases no one freely from her tutelage; there are no *native* sons of freedom,” as one translator puts it (*Ideas* Trans. by Harris 10). Perhaps better for our purposes here is the translation, “no one is a son of freedom *from birth*” (Schelling *Ideas* Trans. Hayden-Roy 168).⁸³ Freedom is acquired as we turn away from our birth, our naturalness. This move away from Nature is first step of philosophy; after initiating its existence in contrast to Nature, philosophy “assigns reflection only a *negative* value” (Schelling *Ideas* Trans. Hayden-Roy 169). With this negative philosophy, we are led into the Kantian dichotomy and Jacobi’s objections to Kant’s system: How can we understand the relation between the things themselves and our representations of them if not

⁸³ Both of these are translations of the text as collected in F.W. J Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*.

causally? The Kantian “things themselves” ought to be beyond the application of the category of causality (Schelling *Ideas* Trans. Hayden-Roy 171). In this model, freedom absolutely contrasts with Nature. Schelling argues that such negative philosophy misses the fact that “we wanted to know that *originally* there is no separation” between representations and things, freedom and nature (*Ideas* Trans. Hayden-Roy 171). Only Spinoza, Schelling believed, had seen that philosophy need not oppose mind and Nature. Instead, when it proceeded honestly from experience, philosophy “grasped the finite immediately in the idea of the infinite... and found the former only in the latter” (*Ideas* Trans. Hayden-Roy 174). For Schelling, negative philosophy interposes freedom between ourselves and Nature. We lack the capacity to step absolutely outside this world to reflect on freedom. We thereby alienate ourselves from Nature insofar as we are free.

But we might call the terms of alienation by different names than Schelling does. In more contemporary terms, we might say this is the opposition of culture and nature. This may seem like an inexact parallel; certainly we also have the term “freedom” today. But let us consider the parallel in terms of what is at stake in relation to Nature; in this translation appears the crucial shift of a natal ontology. For German idealists and Romantics, the concern was how to describe human existence as Natural while at the same time preserving freedom. To legitimately designate the purview of human responsibility, they felt it necessary to justify human freedom. Today, in legitimating human responsibility, we more often encounter this opposition between nature and culture. Culture is what people now commonly appeal to when they want to describe the acquisition of qualities that go “beyond” Nature or are opposed to Nature. Culture refers to whatever we create beyond what we come into the world with. We often ask whether

we can be responsible for natural qualities; how, for example, could I be responsible for tendencies that are genetically encoded? While we may approach the problem through different terminology than the nineteenth century Germans, we broach the same site of inquiry: insofar as we see ourselves as natals – as born and as natural – how can we be responsible for our actions? If we can trace the origin of some action or attribute to culture, then we perceive it as malleable in opposition to the fixed characteristic of Nature. We sense that we want to hold people responsible for their actions and thus require that people act according to non-natural, acquired motives and structures. But it is just this misconception about Nature as something fixed and opposed to variable culture (or unpredictable freedom) that a natal ontology revises.

For example, I might see my capacity to reflect in writing as differentiating me from an animal; I can set out my intentions for the day or for my classroom or for my political situation. Unlike an animal, I can see the origins of certain of my qualities in my genetic code; I can consider the responsibility of reproducing these patterns and passing them to my children. I thereby claim to have a special, reflective relation to the “nature” in me and that *I*, by reflecting on my genome, am not reducible to it. My genome arose through mechanistic causality, but I, from my special reflective point of view with my special *cultural* tools, am not bound by the same causality. Appeal to culture offers an alternative to natural causality. Through cultural tools for reflection, I am free to make choices about my genome, perhaps even to alter it or to alter that of my children.

Even in this most contemporary of scenarios, we retain the dualistic opposition of free subjective and objective nature, but rephrase it in terms of culture and nature. Nature may have found its way into our “selves,” into our very bodies and even into the

conditioning of the minds that arise in those bodies, but postulating a firm boundary between culture and nature apparently assures us that nature has not found its way into freedom. As Merleau-Ponty has argued since the *Phenomenology of Perception*, phenomenology should bear witness to the Nature at the very heart of subjectivity.

Schelling foresaw the obverse of the situation. When we ascribe to ourselves special non-Natural qualities, we lose sight not only of the Nature in us but of the same sort of qualities in Nature itself. Recalling the sense of Nature that has been lost is Nature as *nascere*, as being born: we have lost sight of Nature as natality. When we lose sight of our natality, we acquire only a falsely secure notion of responsibility. We have only defined culture, like freedom, *negatively* and cannot address the true philosophical problem: As Schelling asks, how they are originally unified? Or, as Merleau-Ponty wants to know, how do they prereflectively coincide? As soon as we interpose culture between ourselves and Nature, we cannot understand life outside ourselves as truly *life*. We can reflectively re-constitute it as life, analytically determining that we must understand it as life, but we do not see ourselves as truly arising from the same ground as this life. Significantly, “life outside” a self includes other selves. Thus, without a positive account of the interiority of Nature and exteriority of human existence, we cannot describe how we can experience others as natural beings and part of an ethical situation. According to Schelling’s view and the related view that Merleau-Ponty develops, insofar as we retain the restrictive dualistic relation to the Nature *in* us we also retain a limited relation to Nature outside us, including other natural selves.

It is in this revision that Schelling offers a corrective to the post-Cartesian history of Nature that denied interiority to Nature. As free, cultured beings, we reserve the right

to be the *only* interiority in Nature. Interiority only appears and can only be verified through cultural artifacts: speech, writing, and works. Were we to grant an interior, intentional moment to Nature, then we would lose our special status as absolutely free beings. Moreover, how could we verify any interiority, our own or Nature's, if not through cultural artifacts?

What are we to do about this détente? For Schelling, we must turn back, before dualistic division, to study the ground between ourselves and Nature. We should ask, "What then is that secret bond which couples our mind to Nature, or that hidden organ through which Nature speaks to our mind or our mind to Nature?" (Schelling *Ideas* Trans. by Harris 41). Schelling appeals to a metaphysical ground beyond personal mind. Merleau-Ponty, however, articulates this effort of Schelling's in his own phenomenological terms: "What Schelling means is that we rediscover Nature in our perceptual experience prior to reflection" (NC 39). Merleau-Ponty sees in Schelling's ontological shift one that he develops in his own ontology.⁸⁴ Performing a bit of ventriloquism on Schelling, Merleau-Ponty argues that we must avoid both a heavy-handed Kantian idealism and a reductive empiricism.⁸⁵ Merleau-Ponty even claims that Schelling seeks a "phenomenology of prereflexive Being," which would be a quite Merleau-Pontian project (NC 41). It does seem true that Schelling, in his own way, understood the primacy of perception and turned philosophy from the reflective life toward the world and the prereflective life. He argued that *pure* reflection should never

⁸⁴ See Patrick Burke "Creativity and the Unconscious in Merleau-Ponty and Schelling" on the relation between Merleau-Ponty's later aesthetics and Schelling's project.

⁸⁵ Not only does Merleau-Ponty share with Schelling a resistance to dualism, but he shares a reference to a wild, brute, or first Nature that precedes and exceeds objective accounts. Schelling points to an "*erst Natur*" that is "the fundamental stuff of all life and of every existing being, something terrifying, a barbaric principle" (NC 38, Merleau-Ponty citing K. Lowith's book on Nietzsche's relation to Schelling and other German Romanics). This *erst Natur* prefigures Merleau-Ponty's "brute being" associated with the flesh in the *Visible and the Invisible*.

be an ends but only a means (*Ideas* Trans. by Harris 11). Schelling saw that “perception teaches us an ontology that it alone can reveal to us” (NC 40). Through this hidden organ, we could find the prereflective coordination of freedom and action, of perception and action: the coordination of natural, binocular vision.

For Schelling, as for Merleau-Ponty, the philosophical community often makes two errors in regard to Nature: the alleged opposition of subjectivism and objectivism, or of idealism and reductive realism. Schelling’s move away from this false dichotomy depends on recognizing our natality: the fact that we are born (and thus natural) and the fact that we give birth (and thus create Nature). Such reciprocity is a key component in the relationship of natality and Nature in this account. As Merleau-Ponty observes, again rephrasing Schelling, “it is in my own nature that I find the originary state of the interiority of things” (NC 40). The Kantian subject transcended the world too completely, leaving fleshy objectivity behind; the dogmatic realist fails to see her own participation in the birth of Nature. I quote at length Merleau-Ponty’s description of natality in Schelling’s view of Nature:

Now for Schelling, everything is born starting from us; Nature is lent to our perception... We are the parents of a Nature of which we are also the children. It is in human being that things become conscious by themselves; but the relation is reciprocal: human being is also the becoming-conscious of things. (NC 43)

Rather than producing or owning or constructing Nature, Nature is *lent* to our perception. In a mixture of activity and passivity, we receive Nature, like a gift or a child. As in the psychoanalytic metaphor, Nature is better understood as a person or persona, rather than as either pure object or subject. One does not “own” or “construct” a child that one raises, but rather cares for her or him, and for some time. On the one hand, you are absolutely

responsible for the life of that child, but on the other hand, the child has a life of her own, and it would be *ir*responsible to completely lay a claim to it. The metaphor continues: each of us also began as children, brought into the world, lent to the world, before we could claim responsibility for life. And yet from these beginnings, we develop into beings responsible and conscious in and of our world: again, a reciprocity of freedom and action. Metaphorically, we find that we give birth to Nature and to consciousness of Nature, while we are also born from Nature and from a latent consciousness in Nature. Rather than actors or sufferers of Nature, we participate in its life with a strange mix of activity, passivity, and responsibility.

It would be a mistake to assume that our “naturalness” is equivalent to passivity or some fixed state. If we are to get beyond the dualism of freedom and nature or nature and culture, then we must describe that ambiguity of activity and passivity both in ourselves and in nature. Merleau-Ponty’s natal ontology also shares with Schelling’s philosophy this active-passive view of human existence. As Schelling puts it, the question becomes “And what is that within me which judges there to have been an impression made upon me? Again it is I myself who, insofar as I judge, am active, not passive” (*Ideas* Trans. Hayden-Roy 175). Merleau-Ponty adds to Schelling’s observations the insights of Gestalt theory. As Merleau-Ponty has shown since the *Structure of Behavior*, we do not take in mere data from the world, we perceive structured, meaningful wholes; we find that the world solicits our attention. We do not merely passively receive material, but are turned toward general ranges of meaning that interest us. A natal ontology argues that we ourselves are *both* Natural and free, active and passive.

We find ourselves again facing the problems addressed in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Are we prompted to judge Nature as formal because of objective or subjective structures? Do we attribute the formality of natural life only to structures in the object (as in traditional aesthetic and teleological theories), or do we attribute the meaning only to the play of faculties in the subject (as in the sublime)? How can we talk about our ambiguous passive/active *participation* in perception? How can we talk about the interiority of Nature? By what method, with what tools, can philosophy or any reflective individual proceed in understanding the interiority of Nature? Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "what will the organ of philosophy be?" (NC 44). What language will this new natal ontology speak?

Methodological Shift: The Risk of Romanticism

For Schelling, the answer is art. Art and poetry will be the language of philosophy of Nature. Merleau-Ponty describes Schelling's view thus: "The philosophy of Nature needs a language that can take up Nature in its least human aspect, and which thereby would be close to poetry" (NC 45). Art points toward the ground of human existence before it is reflectively divided into dualism. As Kant explains in the *Critique of Judgment*, by reflecting on art, philosophy can consider the site of activity where "the understanding is at the service of the imagination" (NC 46). In the moment at which one gives birth to art or when one judges art,⁸⁶ we find a "reconciliation of passivity and activity" (NC 46). These are just the two elements that were polarized as absolutely different in Kant's first critique. In artistic activity, the artist does not step back into

⁸⁶ Certainly Kant does not conflate aesthetic judgment with creative activity. Scholars of Kant have discussed how much his aesthetics can be considered an aesthetics of creation or reception (c.f. Bernstein). It would be an interesting project to consider whether Merleau-Ponty himself has conflated them.

reflective thought to worry about the difference between Nature and herself, inside and outside, subjectivity and objectivity. In the movement of artistic creation, “everything happens as if thinking were a natural thing” (NC 46). This is the same discovery we make when we turn toward our natality: we find ourselves to be natural things, naturally birthing Nature. Artistic production is another moment of this birth, this generative activity. In addressing this productivity, “Schelling’s philosophy seeks to restore a kind of non-division between us and Nature considered as an organism” (NC 46).

The risk in Schelling’s move toward poetry and artistic reconciliation is the risk in much of Romanticism in general: Philosophy gives up the rigor of critical reflection for thoughtless reunification with an imagined, ideal relation to Nature. Following Schelling, phenomenology might slip into a vitalism or mysticism, projecting a “magical” animism into what ought to be nature-in-itself. Philosophy might devolve into poetry. As Patrick Burke puts it, we might wonder, “Is there not some other, perhaps less poetic way – and thus, it would seem, more philosophically respectable – to describe this ancient current... this genesis that is genesis?” (Burke 197). Merleau-Ponty recognizes this critique and remains wary of it. He sees that Schelling “has a bad reputation,” partly due to Hegel and perhaps partly due to the “obstinate” character of Nature in Schelling (NC 49). The character of Nature is *so* mysterious, so occluded and opaque, that the philosopher might be reasonably put off by its resistance to inquiry. Nature might be so foreign to our rationality as to indeed become something irrational that can only be investigated irrationally.

Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty sees in Schelling if not a perfect solution, then a correct aim of inquiry and a correct method. The potential risks are “less the philosophy

of Schelling than the dangers to which it is exposed” (NC 49). Schelling does *not* simply assume that art will magically restore us to a blissful, childlike, primitive relation to Nature: Complete retrieval of some past state is not possible. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, Schelling admits that the proposed retrieval and non-division “is inevitably broken by reflection” so that the return “to a non-division can no longer be primitive non-division and must be conscious” (NC 47). The conscious retrieval applies to both the philosopher and the artist. The working artist today does not enjoy pure, Romantic, Dionysian possession by Nature; rather, with conscious effort, the artist lets creative movement happen. Likewise, the philosopher cannot hope to return to a prereflective mystical state from which she can view authentic Nature, but neither must Nature remain completely distant and unapproachable. The philosopher must consciously cultivate an attitude of openness to the excessive totality of Nature, as opposed to an attitude of viewing Nature as a collection of smallest parts. This attitude does not offer mystical access to Nature, nor does it reveal the complete content of Nature. To return to the analogy of Nature as a personality, we do not expect to know the complete contents of a person’s mind just by attending to a person as whole. But, in attending to a person as a whole, living, psychologically complex being, we do come to know things that would not be revealed in the attitude of objectifying science, however useful that study might be for other purposes. For Schelling, the attitude the philosopher ought to take in relation to Nature in order to know its “personality” is much like the attitude the artist takes: Neither provide fusion or union with Nature, but both offer something that a reductive science does not.

At the same time, phenomenology does not merge with artistic activity. Merleau-Ponty argues that the cultivation of poetic consciousness in Schelling “does not mean that

art is confused with philosophy and that the experience of the artist is confused with that of the philosopher” (NC 45). For Schelling, the projects of philosopher and the artist differ: The former “looks to express the world, the artist seeks to create it” (NC 46). But the two converse without hierarchy. It is just that philosophy cannot think of itself as absolutely independent of existence and experience, nor does it lose its autonomy as a discipline:

Schelling does not believe that philosophy has to expect everything from itself and not rely on any other experience, religious or artistic... There are experiences that teach something to philosophy, but that does not mean that philosophy has to lose its autonomy. (NC 46)

By attending to the attitude of artists, philosophy can learn new methods while still applying them in its own distinct project.

But what is that project? What could it mean for philosophy to “express” the world or Nature rather than create it (like an artist) or to objectify it (like reductive science)? In fact, Merleau-Ponty begins by asking at the opening of the course, why should we or *can* we speak about Nature? On the one hand, Nature seems all that is opposed to speech, all that is not discourse; on the other hand, how could we talk about Nature except through the slippery structures of discourse? (NC 3) Speaking to an audience steeped in post-structuralism, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that many might object to the possibility of even giving an account of nature. If Nature is so elusive and mysterious a character that it escapes all objectifying science, it seems philosophy as well will be in trouble when trying to express Nature’s character. The very project of expressing the Nature assumes that there is something like Nature and that it is possible to express it. Until the project is undertaken we do not even know who Nature is. It is a bit like assuming that there is someone in the forest when you are not there, and then

going out to find that person. Whenever you are in the forest, this person is not; whenever you do not seek this person, she is there to be found. Likewise, we assume that Nature is whoever or whatever we are not. As soon as philosophy objectifies Nature, it has lost Nature. Whenever we go out to seek Nature, Nature itself immediately escapes.

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that any philosophy that attempts what Schelling's does "is perpetually in tension and seems perpetually to be caught in a circle" (NC 47). This is the same circle that Descartes found himself in when trying to catch himself in the act of doubting: Descartes found that he was both subject and object. But for Merleau-Ponty this circular thinking is the only acceptable version of the cogito:

... this act grasps itself in its own operation [*a la oeuvre*] and thus cannot doubt itself...[is a thought] which *feels* itself rather than *sees* itself, which searches after clarity rather than possesses it, and which creates truth rather than finds it. (PrimP 22)

This admittedly circular thought humbly understands that it "began in time" (PP 22); acknowledging this beginning – without knowing it or encompassing it – brings thought from brash certainty toward subtle insight. Schelling circles around the site that Merleau-Ponty believes phenomenology must aim at: reflection on the prereflective life.⁸⁷

But the problem remains. How should philosophy proceed? By what method can phenomenology reflect on the elusive prereflective life? The phenomenologist who wishes phenomenology to be a *science* might recoil at the direction Merleau-Ponty's argument is leaning. Does this not lead to exactly the sort of problems that Merleau-Ponty worried might be the outcome of Schelling's work – a mysticism or degeneration into poetry? While taking both those disciplines seriously, we do not need to worry that

⁸⁷ Nonetheless, Schelling's circle still stands outside time: phenomenology will reveal life as unfolding temporally, as form that appears not only in space but also, inseparably, in time. As we will see in the next chapter, Merleau-Ponty will modify Schelling's circular philosophy into a spiral. For the moment, let us concentrate on Schelling's insights into prereflective life and the method needed to address this life.

phenomenology *becomes* poetry. But nor does it remain an abstract discipline. To clarify what the new phenomenological project might be, let us consider it less as a shift into poetry than a shift from a theoretical to a practical discipline. In that shift, we will have to include the shift included in Kant's "pure" reason to "practical" reason: the poetic, generative phenomenological attitude toward Nature that Merleau-Ponty suggests is also an *ethical* stand in relation to Nature. When we see ourselves as natals, we see ourselves as living in Nature but also Nature living within us.

Taking up a new understanding of Nature entails taking up a new way of living in and with Nature. For Schelling, "*Naturphilosophie* is in no way a theory, but rather a *life* within Nature" (NC 47). In recognizing Nature in this way, we find ourselves with a double injunction: "Not only must Nature become vision, but human being must also become Nature: 'Philosophers, in their visions, became Nature'" (NC 47, citing Schelling). Philosophy, quite concretely, lives in Nature – in natal beings – because philosophers themselves are born. This may seem so obvious as to be a banal observation. But Merleau-Ponty has shown us that this most obvious fact about philosophy has too often been overlooked; to admit this fact, indeed facticity in general, into phenomenology has profound philosophical implications, both methodological and epistemological. Phenomenology must entertain a total shift *in a way of life*. Taking on this new phenomenology is not a "theoretical" project. The evidence of phenomenology's success would appear in lives, not only in texts. In this, a natal ontology departs from hermeneutics in its restrictive sense.⁸⁸ To Schelling, reflection only in and of itself was a sort of sickness (*Ideas* 11) ; to remedy that sickness,

⁸⁸ Certainly Heidegger and Ricoeur have shown that hermeneutics might extend beyond textual interpretation to interpretation of the lived world: for example, from literal translation to linguistic hospitality in general, as Ricoeur describes in *On Translation*.

phenomenology must be open to a new life within Nature and to acknowledging the life of Nature in phenomenologists themselves. Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology would be taken up as an ethical practice, not a theory; new criteria for judging phenomenology would be required. One would study phenomenology not for theoretical knowledge, but as Aristotle might put it regarding ethics, in order to *become good*. Phenomenology would prescribe an *ethos*, a manner of living together with other natures and natural life.

These are bold claims. A phenomenology that emphasizes natality shows itself through a life lived attentively and expressively with others. The expression of a view of Nature is a life *in* Nature *with* natural others. A natal ontology would be a sort of ecological standpoint, a way of standing within and with Nature. Although I cannot take on the project here, one might envision ecological and biopolitical implications. With such sweeping questions in mind, in the following pages, I trace Merleau-Ponty's own methodological innovations toward a poetic phenomenology to accompany his natal ontology.

Chapter 5: Beginning Elsewhere: Generative Phenomenology and Poetic Phenomenology

“Epistemology

If there is nobody to share the world with,
There is no world.”

-Paul Durcan

With the turn to a natal ontology, the practice of phenomenology changes. Because nature and culture, naturalism and ethics, are no longer divided, phenomenology cannot perpetuate methodological practices based in such dualism. More precisely, I argue that the shift to a natal ontology entails a two-fold shift in the phenomenological method, evident in Merleau-Ponty’s later work. The first methodological shift is a turn toward poetry and art: in order to avoid the dualism of Descartes and Kant, Merleau-Ponty follows Schelling, turning to poetry, arguing that phenomenology must see itself as an expressive – and therefore productive – practice. I have sketched this history in the previous pages and pursue it further here. Merleau-Ponty’s later methodological innovation also entails a situation of the phenomenological practice in history. But why does a shift toward Nature have to do with a shift toward the historical? It would seem these are opposing movements: either we understand human being as natural *or* as historical. What does history have to do with natality?

In fact, natality and historicity co-emerge as human conditions. This is evident whether we follow Arendt’s definition of the terms in the *Human Condition* or if we simply phenomenologically attend to their appearance. As Paul Ricoeur so elegantly points out, some of the first histories are accounts of generation: accounts of birth and

lineage, the chains of “The son of, the son of...” recounted in Genesis and Numbers.⁸⁹ Natality reorients us not only to our natal – natural – origins, but to the situation of thought as emerging from others. Just as an individual is born from and into a world of others, so thought is born. Moreover, these “others” who condition existence are not all present with us at the moment, but spread throughout history: these others appear with us diachronically as well as synchronically.

In what follows, I show how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological method shifts with his ontology to take into account historicity and poetic productivity. Drawing on the method of the later Husserl and the practices of artists and writers, Merleau-Ponty develops what I call his “poetic” phenomenology that takes a stance in relation to its world, holding itself and life science in general responsible for its productive relation to Nature.

What is a poetic phenomenology? How does it differ from other styles of phenomenology or from Schelling’s poetic consciousness and indeed from poetry itself? In one sense, a poetic phenomenology shares much with Husserl’s “generative phenomenology,” as Anthony Steinbock has described the method of the later Husserl; I argue that Merleau-Ponty was aware of and intended to practice the method that Husserl advocated in the *Crisis*. However, Merleau-Ponty was influenced not only by Husserl, but by art and poetry, and it is by drawing on these practices that Merleau-Ponty provides a positive model for the practice of life science where Husserl might have remained at the level of critique. My aim is not to show the limitations of Husserl, but only what

⁸⁹ On such first histories based on accounts of generation, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 3, 109-111.

Merleau-Ponty could accomplish by developing these innovations which in any case came at the end of Husserl's career and life.

Husserl's *Crisis* and the Birth of Generative Phenomenology

Before we can appreciate what Merleau-Ponty draws from artistic practices, let us consider his innovations in the phenomenological method, particularly in relation to Husserl. "Generative" phenomenology concerns problems of "genesis." As Merleau-Ponty puts it in the last of the Nature Courses, "problems of genesis... put the very fabric of being into question" (NC 243). One question for this project is, of course, how are genesis and generativity related to natality? In other words, how is poetic phenomenology related to generative and to genetic phenomenology?

Let us briefly consider these terms – "static," "genetic," and "generative" – in relation to phenomenology and then begin to encounter Merleau-Ponty's efforts at each. These three types of phenomenology correspond roughly to stages of development in Husserl's thought – as Steinbock details – and also to domains of investigation.⁹⁰ In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty claims explicitly that after Husserl, phenomenology must take up the project of a "*phénoménologie génétique*" (PP 7), that is, a phenomenology that inquires into origins. As Steinbock shows, the most progressive phenomenology happening when Merleau-Ponty wrote was thought to be such "genetic phenomenology." Yet, as Steinbock painstakingly points out, "genetic" phenomenology does not extend to all the topics that Husserl himself eventually tackled; genetic

⁹⁰ C.f. *Home and Beyond*, 34. Others have found that Steinbock does not do justice to Husserl's early work, essentially arguing that static phenomenology can consider a range of phenomena that Steinbock admits. See Burt Hopkins, Review of Steinbock. However, as we will see, Merleau-Ponty himself identifies these three periods of development in Husserl and models his own method on what he values in the later period.

phenomenology cannot investigate constitution beyond a constitution within a single monad or ego. Genetic phenomenology cannot extend to the intersubjective and historical phenomena of birth and generation; for that, as Steinbock puts it, we would need a “generative phenomenology” to revise and double back on “genetic” and “static” phenomenologies .

In a sense, one cannot truly study genesis through genetic phenomenology; a perspective on genesis itself is required. This phenomenology would be a “method of questioning back [*Rückfrage*] into the founding layers of validity ‘and therefore a question back into genesis’” (Steinbock *Home and Beyond* 41). This “questioning-back” of Husserl’s prefigures Merleau-Ponty’s own terminology of “interrogation” in “Eye and Mind,” as well as the emphasis on dialogue and dialectic that we have seen. A generative phenomenology cannot proceed along a straight line toward a definitive end of life science, but must interrogate its own progress. This phenomenology understands the circle which Schelling identified: when we recognize ourselves as natals and natural, we find that we have given birth to Nature as well as being born from it. Yet for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, this interrogative questioning-back does not inscribe a vicious circle; rather, phenomenology, like other sciences, spirals in time, turning back toward its past but never actually finding itself in the same place. Let me initially put it this way, posing a hypothesis I continue to investigate in this and the following studies: the fact of natality raises the problem of genesis, but specifically orients these problems to a historical being for whom they are meaningful.⁹¹ A natal ontology aims toward not an account of life or the generation of natural life per se, but an account of belonging to natural life and the

⁹¹ In the following chapter, I take up the problem of genesis in regard to animal and human development in particular, as Merleau-Ponty examined it in the Nature Courses. For the moment, I focus on the methodological problems for phenomenology in relation to historicity.

meaning of this belonging for the practice of life sciences (in which I include phenomenology). This ontology requires a phenomenological method that attends to the historical, generative, and expressive unfolding of such a life.

While Husserl did not use the word “generative” to characterize his work, what he is doing in the *Crisis of the European Sciences* sets the ground for a generative phenomenology and begins to move beyond a strictly genetic model (Steinbock *Home and Beyond* 46).⁹² As Thompson summarizes, genetic phenomenology “focuses on individual development without explicit analysis of its generational and historical embeddedness” (33). By contrast, generative phenomenology self-consciously considers the life-world and “the historical, social, and cultural becoming of human experience” (Thompson 33). Turning toward natality fundamentally alters the aims and methods of phenomenology. If we take birth and death as “constitutive occurrences,” then “the scope of phenomenological analysis must extend even beyond genesis” of a single subject (Steinbock “From Phenomenological Immortality to Natality” 34, hereafter cited as “Nativity”). Birth points us beyond even a synchronic intersubjectivity and towards a diachronic intersubjective community. As Steinbock puts it, generative phenomenology points toward “geo-historical, social, normatively significant lifeworlds” (“Nativity” 34).

⁹² Steinbock acknowledges that other interpreters of Husserl, namely Klaus Held, have remarked on the shift toward intersubjectivity and the “plural and social sphere,” but in Steinbock’s view Held’s account does not see how radical the shift toward “homeworld” is (*Home and Beyond* 221). Rather than an intersubjectivity plurality composed of many individuals – as described in Husserl’s Fifth Cartesian Meditation – a homeworld comprises a community, a phenomenon first and foremost existing in the collective. Steinbock offers the examples of collectives such as “a demonstration, a ball game, a wedding” (*Home and Beyond* 221). In this sense, I find that Steinbock aims at a similar sense of plurality in relation to natality as Arendt. The plurality to which we belong cannot be derived from or composed from multiple individuals; rather, a plurality always precedes and solicits these natal beings into existence.

The smallest unit of this intergenerational homeworld, for Husserl and Steinbock, is the home “of mother or parent and child” (“Nativity” 35).⁹³

The question then arises: did Merleau-Ponty himself make such progress? Did he transition from genetic to what Steinbock calls generative phenomenology? If he did, did he explicitly name or identify this new method? I believe the answer is yes, he did make this move past genetic phenomenology, though the transition was not made explicit until his work in the 1950s into the early 1960s; furthermore, I believe he had established his own terminology for the type of broadened phenomenology that Steinbock identifies. He calls this type of phenomenology variously “ φ ” phenomenology in the course on Husserl’s *Origins of Geometry* or “binocular” and “poetic” in “Eye and Mind” and the *Visible and the Invisible*. Using the terminology of “poetry” and “poetics” to define his phenomenological method is not merely a pleasant way to loosely associate Merleau-Ponty with Schelling; were it only this there would be no reason to depart from Steinbock’s already established “generative phenomenology.” Identifying and maintaining a relationship between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and artistic or poetic practice becomes increasingly important for Merleau-Ponty, who predominantly draws on artistic and literary models for a non-objectifying relation to Nature in a way not present in Husserl.

In “*La Philosophie Aujourd’hui*” (1958-1959), a course given just prior to the last Nature Course, Merleau-Ponty recapitulates some of the work on Nature and sets those

⁹³ With generative phenomenology, we uncover an asymmetrical relation between past and future. As Steinbock has pointed out, when we understand existence only in terms of this monodic self-constitution – that is, if we restrict phenomenological study to a static or even *genetic* study of the emergence of the subject – we find a symmetry of past and future. However, when we include birth in the range of topics under phenomenological study, we find that an asymmetry appears. For Steinbock, natality points to the mystery of the past birth and mystery of the future (“From Phenomenological Immortality to Natality” 39).

claims within his broader goals, providing an indication of how the study of Nature fits into a phenomenological project as a whole, particularly in relation to Husserl's development. In this course, Merleau-Ponty himself divides Husserl's work into three periods correspondent to the divisions Steinbock makes: the periods of the *Logical Investigations*, of *Ideas I and II*, and the *Cartesian Meditations* (PA 66-73).⁹⁴ In the first period, he notes Husserl's turn from positivism and psychologism toward a phenomenology of "things themselves" and essences. In the second period, Husserl deepened these studies, moving from philosophy of subjectivity toward a philosophy of experience (PA 68). Instead of admitting the possibility of immediately accessing essences, as in the first period, Husserl next notes the appearance of essence *in time* and the ambiguous complexity of passive synthesis (PA 68). The impossibility of completely grasping either the self or essences is problematized by temporality: "The subject escapes itself in trying to seize hold of itself or seizes hold of itself only in escaping" (PA 69).⁹⁵ Through the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl circles more intently around the problem of the possibility of the reduction, especially (PA 70). With the *Cartesian Meditations*, he notes a profound shift in Husserl's method vis à vis the constitution of ideality. The reduction appears increasingly progressive, involving "more steps" (PA 70).

For Merleau-Ponty, a tension in Husserl's published material to this point indicates an unresolved, problematic status of Nature in phenomenology and relates to

⁹⁴ The reading given in this chapter does not purport to be an entirely just or charitable reading of Husserl per se; my aim is to present the significance of Husserl's work for Merleau-Ponty. As I described in the introduction, Merleau-Ponty presents his own view in dialogue with his predecessor, allowing his method to emerge dialectically rather than directly, as he himself describes in "The Philosopher and his Shadow" (SI). Contrasting Merleau-Ponty's later methods to these earlier efforts of Husserl provides clarification of Merleau-Ponty's intentions, not a "correction" of Husserl. In order to fully appreciate why Merleau-Ponty turns to visual artists and poets for methods in the phenomenology of Nature, we must see what he felt was lacking in the available methods; another more robust reading of unpublished Husserl, for example, might suggest innovation in his work.

⁹⁵ All citations from *La Philosophie Aujourd'hui* are my translations from French.

the necessary methodological shift. As always for Merleau-Ponty, the status of Nature is indicative of an ontology; insofar as Husserl's view of Nature shifts, so shifts his ontology. In particular, Merleau-Ponty notices an unresolved tension in Husserl's definition of Nature in *Ideas II*. He even claims that by the end of *Ideas II*, Husserl is "visibly embarrassed" by the contradiction (NC 79). According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl does try in the *Crisis* and other later works to correct this but this in fact yields two contradictory definitions of Nature, one ideal and one contingent. First, Husserl describes Nature as "'the sphere of pure things,' the ensemble of things that are only things" (NC 72, citing Husserl *Ideas II*). This is an ideal Nature at which all science aims: "There is in every scientist, or even in a perceiving individual, a step toward a conception of this sort" (NC 72). But later in the same text, Husserl redescribes Nature as

... that with which I have a relation of an original and primordial character... the sphere of all the 'objects which can be primally present not just to one subject, but, if they are primally present to one, can be given identically as primally present idealiter to all other subjects...' (NC 78, citing Husserl *Ideas II*).

In this second definition, Nature appears in relation to an intersubjective community. Merleau-Ponty finds that this second definition accords with Husserl's later text, "The Earth Does Not Move," on the special status of the earth for human knowledge.⁹⁶ In this later text, as well as in the *Crisis*, Husserl attends to the community or plurality in which the idea of Nature arises. Specifically, the idea of Nature arises on this earth, through this historically emergent community. This conclusion disrupts the system of transcendental idealism at which Husserl originally aimed; it is as if within his own work, Husserl had to

⁹⁶ See *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. Lawlor. On Husserl's work in this text, see also John Sallis, *The Force of Imagination*, 178-180.

once again make the transition from Kantian transcendental idealism to Schelling's productive and poetic version of consciousness. Husserl, like Schelling, responded to the specter of transcendental idealism; Merleau-Ponty identifies this project in his two predecessors and considers his own project to be a continuation of these attempts (NC 71). If Nature emerged specifically on earth and in relation to humans specifically, then humanity constituted a Nature contingent on that community and that location in the universe: the earth. Nature is not equivalent to the earth, nor to the universe; as Arendt points out, it is the "universal" standpoint that attempts to ignore the specificity of the earth. Rather Nature is a dynamic principle that has emerged on earth from natal beings.

In the opening pages of the *Human Condition*, Arendt also comments on the special status of the earth for the natal. Although I have no evidence that she read the Husserlian text to which Merleau-Ponty refers,⁹⁷ the similarity of the discussion is quite striking. She claims that humans have attempted a "two fold flight from earth" – epitomized by our attempt at space travel – attempting to leave the earth for the universe and the world for the self (HC 6). In the modern and post-modern era, humans imagine themselves as first and foremost *selves* with access to a universal standpoint, forgetting their natality on this earth and among this plurality. Natality points us to the problems of genesis that generative phenomenology must take up. For both Arendt and Husserl, humanity has forgotten both the specificity of the earth and the emergence of thought in a *plurality*. Thought is born into a world of others and must orient itself toward this birth.

⁹⁷ Her definitive biography makes no mention of Arendt reading Husserl's later texts or even much of his work after her dissertation (See Cohen-Solal). However, Arendt was in contact with Heidegger by the 1950s when she wrote the *Human Condition*. Thus, it seems most plausible that Arendt understood Husserl's ideas through Heidegger or even had access to the texts through him. Arendt, in any case, has quite a tendency to allude to authors and ideas without footnotes or citation.

In Merleau-Ponty's view, Husserl recognizes this in his later work. In the final period of Husserl's thought, phenomenological thought, finding itself "born in a preceding life," is "obliged to supply its act of birth (*naissance*)" (PA 70). All phenomenological reflection arises from a preexisting, preceding life already in flow: this flow of life extends beyond the individual and into the preceding generation that gave birth to that individual and to the language and science that she practices. In other words, upon admitting its natality, phenomenology becomes generative phenomenology, conscientious of the birth of existence not only within the individual but across generations.

In his course notes on Husserl's "The Origin of Geometry" – a course which complements both "*La philosophie aujourd'hui*" and the Nature Courses, as Lawlor points out (ix) – Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the project of a phenomenology of Nature

...is not intemporal... It is the interrogation of a *tradition*, i.e., of what is given as constructed by man, as 'spiritual,' not natural, being, as engendered and therefore *as born*. (NO 19)

Let us parse these complex claims. First, the project of studying human being is *itself* temporal. A tradition emerges over time, over generations, but also investigating a tradition occurs over time. Not only does human existence define itself temporally in relation to the beginning and ending of the life of an individual, but in relation to the life of a tradition.

Generative phenomenology reveals that individuals take up a Nature begun before their birth. As Bernard Waldenfels has put it, one finds that "one begins, but coming from elsewhere"(34). In the poetic phenomenology that Merleau-Ponty develops, natality also points toward this plurality, this "beginning elsewhere." As Waldenfels points out,

this is the great insight of Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on creative expression. We find our freedom not through absolute Kantian autonomy but in our capacity to respond to the world. Rather than agents, we are responsive patients. In Waldenfels's words, "In this respect the human being is not only an 'animal which has a *logos*,' but also an 'animal which endures a specific *pathos*' (34).

In this fact of "beginning elsewhere" inheres both a passivity and an activity. This ambiguity of passivity and activity happens on several levels of existence: perceptual, reflective, prereflective, linguistic, temporal. For example, "beginning elsewhere" at a perceptual level entails an active-passive receptivity to the world, as Husserl famously elaborated on in his *Active and Passive Synthesis Lectures*. We "begin elsewhere" in that we begin when we are prompted by the world to begin. Consider when the event of "watching something" begins: our eyes actively follow a light moving across a dark room, and yet that light draws the attention of our gaze.⁹⁸ The event of gazing begins before we consciously or reflectively notice that we are gazing. The event begins even before our eyes *prereflectively* turn toward the light; yet we also could not turn toward the light at all were we not so constructed as to be sensitive to light. At all these various levels, the gaze "begins elsewhere" and includes both a passivity and an activity.

Yet condition of "beginning elsewhere" is not limited to the active passivity in individual perception. We are prereflectively prompted by the environment (*Umwelt*)—and thus begin elsewhere — but we are also prompted by a world (*Welt*) of others. In Merleau-Ponty's words, "The universal is not the concept but this perception in flesh and blood, foundation of my relation with others" (NC 78). Phenomenology must recognize

⁹⁸ c.f. SB Ch 1, and my chapter 1.

that perception encompasses the influence of history and language that shapes this world of others. We begin elsewhere in language and history; we begin before “we” are conscious of ourselves. Individuals take up ideas and innovate; thus, they are somewhat active, but they are not “the initiators.” New thought in life science begins with receptivity to what has already begun elsewhere in science. Unlike Kantian transcendental idealism which considers a-historical subject who actively impose categories on the universe, generative – and poetic – phenomenology describes a living being who emerges in history and language, solicited into relationship with Nature.⁹⁹

Plurality and Generativity

Yet such insights of the *Crisis* regarding historicity lead Husserl to turn to the problem of intersubjectivity and the possible paradoxes it raises: when the phenomenologist notices the undeniable participation of the “I” in the transcendental, she also notices the the participation of a plurality of subjects in constituting the transcendental (PA 84-85). The transcendental I leads beyond itself. Rather than attaining access to absolute ideal thought, phenomenology realizes an “*généralité spirituelle*” (PA 84, citing Husserl’s *Crisis*). Upon broaching the problem of intersubjectivity – or, to use my terms here, “plurality” – phenomenology understands itself as generative and as participating in an already ongoing generation of the ideal. Philosophy circles around the site of our generative activity, unable to transcend it for an ideal realm. With this understanding, “philosophy is already in a recognition/rebirth [*une*

⁹⁹ In the first Nature Course, Merleau-Ponty argues that when phenomenology discovered passive synthesis, it could no longer pretend to a transcendental idealism like Kant’s: “Kant ignores ‘inferior degrees of constitution’” whereas Husserl “wants to understand what is nonphilosophical, what is preliminary to science and philosophy” (NC 71).

reconnaissance]” (PA 85). Philosophy returns to the birth [*à la naissance*] of philosophical life (PA 87).

By emphasizing the role of the plurality and indeed natality (as *naissance*) in constituting Nature, Husserl undermines his own original definition of Nature, but also improves upon that definition. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “Husserl rehabilitated the idea of Nature by this idea of jointure¹⁰⁰ to a common truth that subjects would continue but of which they would not be the initiators” (NC 78).

This new philosophy occurs “at the jointure of men”: “*à la jointure des hommes*” (PA 88). This jointure, the suture, is not a thing, but the site where an “event” takes place he remarks (NC 251). Alluding to his own new terminology of the flesh and also to a history of describing the union of the body and soul, Merleau-Ponty situates post-*Crisis* phenomenology in the flesh and musculature of world and its intersubjective structures. Elaborating on this metaphor, he refers to this site of jointure as the “vinculum.” In anatomy, “vinculum” refers to connective tissue; this living substance connects “parts” of the body. In mathematics, a vinculum is a “straight line drawn over two or more terms, denoting that these are to be considered as subject to the same operations of multiplication, division, etc., by another term” (OED). Merleau-Ponty exploits both meanings. As he puts it in the third Nature Course, “There is a unique theme of

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty here uses “joint” and elsewhere “jointure” (NC 70, 251, and *à la jointure* in *La Nature 2*, 11) to describe the intersection of the horizontal and vertical orders. In French, the term can be used both anatomically and or structurally/technically, as in carpentry (See *Le Robert Collins*). In English, the word can also refer concretely to the joining of two materials, or the metaphorical joining of, for example, the body and the soul, as Chaucer uses in one of the first cited instances (See *Oxford English Dictionary*). Interestingly, Greeks hypothesized that the soul might be some sort of “harmony” or *harmonia* which, as Joe Sachs points out, “originally means the sort of joining, such as mortising, that is done in carpentry”; Aristotle considers such hypotheses in the *De Anima (On the Soul 65*, note 11).

philosophy: the *nexus*, the *vinculum* ‘Nature’-‘Man’-‘God’” (NC 203).¹⁰¹ The *vinculum* is the site at which all his later work aims: he notes that in the second Nature Course he studied the juncture of “physis-logos” and that in the third course, he finally considers the entire triad of “physis-logos-history” (PA 37). These two sets of three terms, “Nature-Man-God” and “physis-logos-history,” that make up the *vinculum* are subject to the same operations. Phenomenology investigates these operations. This juncture, this *vinculum*, is the site of ontology and includes “categories of substance, of subject-object, of cause” (PA 37).

With the *Crisis*, Husserl identified this living flesh of the world, with its ideal bones and empirical tissue, its intersubjective ossature. This flesh is not only structures but animates. Its whole living body is already in motion. Husserl’s “*Lebenswelt*,” life-world, becomes here literally a world that is alive. Human existence both gives birth and is born from this flesh; phenomenology studies this life world from the inside. If Husserl’s insights in the *Crisis* are taken seriously, then phenomenology cannot continue to speak of “subjects” or “minds” as the topics of study. Nor can phenomenology speak of cognition in abstraction from historical, political, and ethical situation. In other words, when we take seriously our natality – our location in an intergenerational as well as intersubjective world – we cannot speak about human existence in abstraction from its location in the life-world and Nature. In all of this, Merleau-Ponty leads phenomenology toward a new ontology – “not as a determination of essences or significance but of our

¹⁰¹ If Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is to be taken up in a contemporary context, the *vinculum* must be understood as occurring at the intersection of “Nature – *Human* – God” not with “man.” I return to this remark in Chapter 7 in the context of feminist critiques of Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the visible. For the moment, note that gender exemplifies the intertwining of physis and logos; thus, a gendered term cannot restrict one of the terms of the intertwining. I hope that I offer an elucidation of Merleau-Ponty’s view on the matter; if not, I offer a suitable correction.

kinship, our coexistence”: “*Ontologie universelle, non plus comme déterminations d’essences ou signification que nous constituons, mais comme notre parenté, notre coexistence*” (PA 89). Phenomenology witnesses human kinship to life in general, to life as “coexistence,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it. To see this kinship with other life is “not a return to finalism,” emphasizing what animals are for us, but an affirmation of what links us with other forms of life (PA 89-90). To turn toward this phenomena is not to admit a “residue of pre-science in science, as the Cartesian ontology would have thought” (PA 90). Instead, a truly living science that studies life must acknowledge that it arose from the same life world, both participating in its generation and born from it. Biology arose because we are living things, living among other living things. We generate the ideals that we apply to the life world, but we are also born, literally, in the manner of that life world. Science is enveloped in this life world: “The universe of physics is *enveloped* in that of life and not the inverse. And as that of life is enveloped in that of man, conscientious biology tends toward philosophy” (PA 91).

Husserl revitalizes Nature by conceiving it as generated in the life-world and generative of the life-world; attending to this envelopment in plurality is the hallmark of a generative phenomenology. Generative phenomenology thus also leads to a different sense of Nature than does objectifying science.¹⁰² In the life-world, Nature appears not as a set of abstract laws (as for Kant) but as a dynamic principle co-emergent with human existence. On this new definition, Nature must be understood in relation to the plurality of the life-world: or as Thompson puts it, the “interconnectedness of generations” (33).

¹⁰² As Thompson puts it, “the life-world is subject-relative in the sense that it is bound to human subjectivity. This is in contrast to ‘objective nature’ as conceived by science, which is arrived at through logical and theoretical abstraction. *Nature* so construed is an abstraction” (34).

In Merleau-Ponty's view, the insights of the *Crisis* ramify through all disciplines that attend to Nature, to all life sciences. Today, we might include among the "life sciences" the disciplines of cognitive science and evolutionary biology. The problem that Husserl noticed is particularly evident in the efforts of evolutionary biology and of cognitive science (disciplines that themselves increasingly overlap, even as they are ever more specialized) that make claims about what human "nature" *is* while at the same time increasingly emphasizing the malleability and temporality of the human species. Husserl saw the crisis of rationality already in 1939, and Merleau-Ponty foresaw its special consequences in the life sciences.

Merleau-Ponty cites the build-up to the Second World War as a profound influence on the movement of Husserl's thought from the second period into the final period:

Husserl resented fascism [and] ... He wanted to show that this crisis [of rationality] was motivated... that the existential crisis should not be judged on high by philosophy, as if philosophy bore no responsibility. (PA 72)

Merleau-Ponty held philosophy – as he believed Husserl did – profoundly responsible for the crisis of modern rationality. Merleau-Ponty describes how Husserl, much like Arendt in the *Human Condition*, attempted to trace the origins of modern world alienation through a failure of philosophy. After noticing this historical deformation of rationality, Husserl postulates that philosophy must rise again like the phoenix (PA 72). In its new life, philosophy would be conscious of itself as non-philosophy, as open onto the life-world. For Husserl, Arendt, and Merleau-Ponty alike, the Second World War pressurized the atmosphere in which philosophy was practiced; no longer could

phenomenology pretend to practice a purely descriptive discipline. In this situation, silence as much as speech counted as action.

Thus, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, in this third period of Husserl's work, phenomenological practice becomes not only generative but also ethically and politically responsible. As Schelling suggested, a turn toward natality entails a shift in both theory and practice, toward a life lived with Nature. The life scientist deploys her views of Nature into a politically and ethically charged life-world. If life science claims a special position from which to view a "mind" in itself or "nature" in itself, it fails to take responsibility for those categories in so far as they appear *for us*, for life science in life scientists. Indeed if, for example, a working cognitive scientist asserts that she has gotten behind appearances to *the* thing in-itself, "mind," she discredits her own creative activity.

Productivity and the Confusion of Making and Knowing

It seems a noble goal to recognize the creative, expressive activity of life science. But does this not reduce life science to making a second Nature, like art, rather than reflecting Nature itself? If phenomenology attempts to be conscious of rationality as a sedimentation, as a "historical institution" (*Stiftung historique*), can it continue to speak "rationally" of a shared human rationality? But would science not then be confusing making with knowing, artifice with evidence? Merleau-Ponty and Arendt's similar yet distinct responses to this problem clarify the approach I advocate here.

In the *Human Condition*, Arendt worries that science has long confused making with knowing: *homo faber* confused making with knowing until the only knowledge humans could rely on was knowledge they produced themselves. Arendt argues that

certain post-Cartesian trends in science and philosophy brought thinking and making increasingly close together. In this she agrees with Merleau-Ponty, declaring that “what Merleau-Ponty has to say against Descartes is brilliantly right” (LM 1 49). Yet where Merleau-Ponty follows Schelling in asking us to acknowledge our productive generation of Nature, Arendt worries about the prevalence of productivity. Where “productivity” is a figure of poesis for Merleau-Ponty, for Arendt “productivity” is a figure of instrumentality and fabrication. She thinks not that we have overlooked productivity, but that we are enraptured with it and with the structure of our own minds. With Descartes, philosophy is reduced to “theory of cognition and psychology” (HC 293), no longer capable of speculating on a shared world that has been thought out of existence.

Cognitive structures now occupy the center of philosophy, a place that the public sphere ought to have occupied in Arendt’s view. After the Cartesian withdrawal into the self, “What men now have in common is not the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking” (HC 283). Modern humans share “common sense” but not a *sensus communis*. What was lost was

... the *sensus communis*... a kind of sixth sense needed to keep my five senses together ... [This sense] fits the sensations of my strictly private five senses – so private that sensations in their mere sensational quality and intensity are incommunicable – into a common world shared by others. (LM 1 50)

For Arendt, Descartes turned us from the public world in which our knowledge takes its orientation from the others who are always already there from our birth. Cartesian science left us navel-gazing, entranced by ourselves but forgetting the origin of ourselves in others. Where the omphalos studied by our self-centered reflection ought to have reminded us of our natality, we instead remained entranced with our own minds and our

own activity. For Arendt, the telescope exemplifies this post-Cartesian shift: humanity apparently extended the reach of its vision to the before unseen universe, and what resulted was not increased security founded on a wider range of knowledge, but increased *insecurity* in the form of Cartesian doubt. The modern emphasis on instruments confused *thinking* with *making*. With Galileo's invention of the telescope, we are sure *only* of what we put into the world and can doubt the rest. Citing Alfred Whitehead to whom Merleau-Ponty also pays careful attention, Arendt writes: "Cartesian reason is entirely based on the implicit assumption that the mind can only know that which it has itself produced and retains in some sense within itself" (HC 283). As thought was confused with action "in order to be certain one has to *make sure*, and in order to know one had to do" (Arendt HC 290). Kant himself began this shift toward knowledge as creation when he wrote, "Give me matter and I will build a world from it, that is, give me matter and I will show you how a world developed from it" (Kant cited in HC 296). "Productivity" and "creativity" were the highest values of what Arendt calls the *homo faber* who so unfortunately emerged following the Cartesian doubt and the invention of the telescope.

For Arendt, Bergson represents the development of productivity in *homo faber* par excellence, but problematically so. While declining to embark on a full reflection of his work, Arendt makes the following broad claim

[Bergson's] insistence on the priority of *homo faber* over *homo sapiens* and on fabrication as the source of human intelligence... could easily be read like a case study of how the modern age's earlier conviction of the relative superiority of making over thinking was then superseded and annihilated by its more recent conviction of an absolute superiority of life over everything else. (HC 305, note 68)

Nature is not just a fabric from which we can cut whatever we want, Arendt argued.

Bergson's philosophy represents the valuation of creativity and making over collective action for Arendt.

Perhaps even more troubling to Arendt than the telescope or Bergson's thought, is the rise in experimental science. While the telescope left us seeking certainty in instruments we made, experimental science left us as passive witnesses to nature as a collection of processes. Arendt writes: "The shift from the 'why' and 'what' to the 'how' implies that the actual objects of knowledge can no longer be things or eternal motions but must be processes" (HC 296). As instrumentation became experimentation, *homo faber* became *homo laborans*: when natural science had revealed all of nature as a process, humanity could see itself as following a natural process. Where post-Cartesian humans at least saw themselves as a source of knowledge, experimental process-oriented science finally, "deprived man as maker and builder of those fixed and permanent standards and measurements which, prior to the modern ages, have always served him as guides for his doing and criteria for his judgment" (HC 307). When people could no longer trust the products of their own making, there was no need to value those products in and of themselves. Thus, the only sort of activity left to humans was laboring; the life of action and even the life of work fell away.

Arendt's solution – if she offers one – to the alienated post-modern condition, to the crisis in rationality that Husserl described, is to bring thought into action. Not only ought we to *act* but we ought to *think* what we are doing; in particular, we ought to think through meaning in the human sphere. By contrast,

the action of the scientists, since it acts into nature from the standpoint of the universe and not into the web of human relationships, lacks the

revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence. (HC 324)

For both Arendt and Merleau-Ponty, reflecting on our natality helps us avoid viewing ourselves as passive byproducts of natural science. Science might be lead to objectification is through the move to ideality; Merleau-Ponty notes the particular problem of the creation of a “second nature” in the history that Husserl traces in the *Crisis* (PA 75). This second nature is the aforementioned realm of ideality and abstractions; Western thought generated this second nature and placed it between the reflecting subject and her objectivity. The post-Cartesian thoughtless obsession with this “second nature” concerns Arendt. Abstraction insulated the subject from seeing actual Nature in herself. Rather than turning toward that Nature, the subject could reflect only on the nature that she herself had generated. Neither Arendt nor Merleau-Ponty are satisfied with the Kant of the First Critique who would see Nature as “made” by an active understanding distinctly separate from passive sensibility.

That said, Merleau-Ponty differs from Arendt on the relation between natality and human nature and also on the relation between productivity and knowledge. Although both Arendt and Merleau-Ponty agree on the failings of Kant of the First Critique, Merleau-Ponty follows Schelling rather than even the Kant of the Third Critique. Arendt suggests that we might attempt a sort of thinking that is not tied to the cycle of production; the spectator, like the indifferent Kantian judge, might be the best qualified to think.¹⁰³ By contrast, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we might better succeed by attending to our productivity as part of an expressive act, one that is inherently passive as

¹⁰³ See *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* which contains notes toward what would have been the third section on “Judgment” to complete *Life of the Mind*.

well as active. Where Arendt sees productivity as an absolute activity, an effort to *impose* meaning on the world, Merleau-Ponty articulates a more subtle sense of productivity that understands human actions as fundamentally encompassing passivity.

Rather than slipping into a speechless state of wonder in the face of Nature, Merleau-Ponty suggests, following Husserl, that phenomenology take positive action and outline a plan for life science. For Merleau-Ponty –in contrast to Husserl – life science might follow artists and interrogate Nature without objectifying it. What Arendt calls the confusing of making and knowing Merleau-Ponty calls “operational thought,” a category he discusses in detail by way of contrast with painting in “Eye and Mind.” Operational thought is productive thought that equates Nature with the ideal objects of science (EM 122). Operational thought runs the risk that Arendt predicts in the *Human Condition* for all “making” as knowing. By reducing all of Nature to its own artificial products, operational thought cannot be certain of anything beyond its own production. Or, as Merleau-Ponty state the problem, “to say that the world is, by nominal definition, the object *x* of our operations is to treat scientist’s knowledge as if it were absolute, as if everything that is and has been was meant only to enter the laboratory” (EM 122). As he puts in the Nature Course, “operationalism knows ahead of time what it will find. It will only ever find physico-mathematical relations; it restricts Being to what for it is manipulable” (NC 203). But for Merleau-Ponty the existence of operational thought does not foreclose the potential of productivity and creativity in science as it seems to for Arendt. For Merleau-Ponty as for Husserl, phenomenology, having recognized the crisis in the sciences, can attempt to assess the relation of the first Nature to the second nature of reflection and abstraction, and our participation in generating this second nature.

In Husserl's view – and I think Merleau-Ponty's – phenomenology must rise to the occasion, acknowledging this crisis of alienated rationality and yet not abandoning its creative and expressive project. In the first lines of "*La Philosophie Aujourd'hui*," Merleau-Ponty makes reference to the penultimate lines of Husserl's *Crisis* (PA 39): Husserl calls for "a heroism of reason that will definitively overcome naturalism" so that "the phoenix of a new inner life of spirit will arise" (Husserl *Crisis* 192). Husserl bemoans the state of the sciences, particularly psychology, whose practitioners "do not see that from the very beginning they necessarily presuppose themselves as a group of men belonging to their own environing world and historical period" (*Crisis* 187). How can we –or *can* we? – have a science that is conscious and conscientious of the normative, historical development of truth? The trouble is not with rationality per se; understanding rationality as historically constituted does not mean that we abandon rationality (as many caricatures of phenomenology suggest).¹⁰⁴ Rather, as Husserl puts it, "the reason for the downfall of a rational culture does not lie in the essence of rationalism itself but only in its exteriorization, its absorption in 'naturalism' and 'objectivism'" (*Crisis* 191). Or, in Merleau-Ponty's view, the trouble is with "naturalism" insofar as it becomes operational. Science hopes to make progress by stepping outside of nature, by making all study focused on an objective world, "over-there," peering out into nature but never mingling with it. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in the open line of "Eye and Mind": "Science manipulates things and gives up living in them" (EM 121). Science gives up living *in* things: that is, letting the natural world have an inner life. If we make

¹⁰⁴ C.f. Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*.

an object of nature, we fail in the same way as we fail when we make an object of a person: we foreclose a whole range of meaning.¹⁰⁵

To better describe the positive program of action suggested by himself and Husserl for the life sciences, Merleau-Ponty looks beyond the phenomenological and ontological traditions and toward philosophy of science. In the work of Alfred North Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty finds an echo of his own critique of the practice of science. Merleau-Ponty focuses on a crucial insight of Whitehead's: we must relinquish a certain assumption that Nature is hidden behind ordinary perception. Nature does not hide behind the veil of ordinary perception; Nature is not a Hegelian totality that life science can aim to apprehend.¹⁰⁶ For Whitehead, Nature appears not only in the microscopic – at the molecular or sub-molecular level – nor only in the macroscopic – at the astrophysical level – nor only in proportion to standard human perception. Nature crisscrosses all these domains. Neither the physicist nor the biologist nor the humanist has exclusive access to Nature. Rather, to understand Nature, phenomenology must consider how it is that Nature can appear at all of these levels. Whitehead draws attention to the perceiving person without reducing Nature to an effect of the subject. Let me offer some examples

¹⁰⁵ One *can* study another person as an object: one can notice a hair color, a genotype, or the functioning of neural pathways. All of these investigations have their place in the study of other humans. A neurologist may “objectify” human nature in order to locate patterns and structures visible from the outside. But were a neurologist to so objectify her patient that she forgot the neural pathways belonged to another person, she would fail at the ultimate aim of the practice of her science: she practices neurology in order to improve the lives of human beings. She looks for neural structures *of perception*: she must have experience of perception and of perceiving beings in order to set out on her research. This macroscopic goal motivates and guides her practice, and to forget the living situation in which neurology arises could possibly lead to poor scientific practice and ethical choices. She would not, for example, want to so objectify her patients that she forgets that her patients could feel pain or that she was looking at vision in order to heal blindness.

¹⁰⁶ Or, as Merleau-Ponty himself puts it in *Signs*, “we seek not to restrict or discredit the initiatives of science but to situate science as an intentional system in the total field of our relationships to Being” (*Signs* 152).

of how a natal ontology, applying Merleau-Ponty's insights into Whitehead, would redirect the attention of a life scientist.¹⁰⁷

First, consider a barge passing in front of the Louvre.¹⁰⁸ If we were to study this phenomenon scientifically, we would divide the form into events. But then, we might give "reality" to these events rather than the ongoing duration that we first perceived. That would be a mistake, putting "the cart before the horse" (NC 120).¹⁰⁹ We are mistaken when we assume that Nature hides behind everyday perception: Nature includes both everyday, macroscopic perception and scientific, microscopic perception. Next, consider the event of a sunset¹¹⁰ :

The red glow of the sunset should be as much a part of nature as are the molecules and electric waves ... What we ask from the philosophy of science is some account of the coherence of things perceptively known.
(Whitehead 37)

Life science looks at the "coherence" for the incarnate being. In Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology, a concept of Nature is neither only a set of physical principles nor only a description of perceptual qualities. Nature refers to the jointure across these orders of perception or, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, at the "vinculum," at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal.

Finally, consider the example of perceiving a distant star, another example offered by Merleau-Ponty and similar to those addressed by Whitehead. We know that the star

¹⁰⁷ Whitehead's work (and Merleau-Ponty's commentary) focuses primarily on the status of space and time in science; rather than digress into that history, I offer examples, drawing on allusions that more easily illuminate a view of Nature in general.

¹⁰⁸ This is Merleau-Ponty's own example in his lecture (NC 114).

¹⁰⁹ A similar mistake might be made in evolutionary theory where there has been a tendency to describe organism as artifacts; while this view provides a useful "explanatory heuristic," we cannot give undue ontological status to this view, inherited from finalist theologies (Thompson 210). At the same time, we should not assume that the macroscopically evident relations between well-adapted organism and environment are mere illusion, behind which hides a more authentic mechanistic Nature.

¹¹⁰ This is Whitehead's own example that I believe illuminates Merleau-Ponty's position although he himself does not remark on this particular passage.

we are seeing in the night sky may well have died out or radically change many millennia earlier. Acknowledging this difference between the star as it appears and the star as it was leads us to attribute more reality to one or the other. We might say that the event that appears to us only echoes some “real” event that occurred in the past. In that case, “Real Nature” hides in itself. But we should not “bifurcate” Nature into “the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness” (Whitehead 38). We cannot disentangle the folding of time itself from the folding of time for us:

If we perceive in the present a star that no longer exists, then we perceive in the present that which in fact is past. But we must not figure that the critique of unique emplacements consists in saying that our present and the existence of the perceived star are two flashes of one same event... Whitehead invites us to conceive of nonserial relations between space and time. (NC 115)

There is no linear sequence to be unraveled; there is no place outside of time from which one could perceive this sequence. Instead, there is “a certain thickness to time” (NC 115). Assuming a hidden, real “event” bifurcated into a past and a present, “to think Nature as a process from the event to the object is to take our ‘abstractions for reality’” (NC 116). To avoid these mistakes, we must refer “to perception in the state of its coming-to-be or birth” (NC 116, reference to Whitehead *Concept of Nature*).

Again, attending to our own natality reinvigorates our sense of Nature. We do not merely access Nature but participate in Nature’s birth *at all levels of perception*. At the same time, rather than attributing ourselves a special status outside of Nature as its maker, we see also that “perception is made starting from the interior of Nature” (NC 117). In other words, “There is nothing between me and the Nature that I perceive” (NC 116). There is no empty space, no between self and Nature. Unlike Descartes in his bedroom chamber, we cannot seal ourselves away from the natural world: there is no

place outside of space and time to which we can retreat. We are enveloped in the life world. Without returning to Aristotelian finalism, Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology suggests that a philosophy of Nature would do well to apprehend the link between, to use Aristotle's terms, the views of "student of nature" and "the dialectician," or in more contemporary terms, the views of the cognitive scientist and those of the existential phenomenologist. Nature appears to both: this is the "ontological mystery" that we cannot veil. Drawing on Whitehead's work, Merleau-Ponty directs a phenomenology of Nature toward this fabric of the real whose grain and pattern can be studied by quantum mechanics, biology, or phenomenology. Phenomenology entertains a generalized shift in attention toward the vinculum and acknowledges that we have participated in the birth of Nature at all these levels.

In this sense, phenomenology works poetically, conscientious of its creative and expressive activity. In so doing, phenomenology becomes poetic. In making connection to *poiesis*, Merleau-Ponty offers not only a critique of science, but a specific alternative model for relating to Nature. Husserl's call to arms alone will not suffice; to be more than a protest cry, phenomenology must also show how science can next proceed. If objectifying, exteriorizing rationality leads to the crisis, what sort of rationality would be better? What are non-objectifying rational judgments that allow for interiority like? Other disciplines can retain a freedom that science does not, and these disciplines may shed light on how working science can better attend to brute existence.

Merleau-Ponty hardly intends to reduce life science to expression identical to art-making. But he does require that life science attend to the artifice inherent in the project of science. Life science must learn from art and poetry not a new method per se – not

how to stand in the laboratory as Cézanne stood on the hill before Mt. Arles – but a responsibility for its productivity. As a creative discipline, science exercises *poesis*, making meaning as well as taking up the meaning of the world in which it finds itself.

Painting, Poetry, and Poetic Phenomenology

Fully cognizant of the generative phenomenological project Husserl called for, Merleau-Ponty sets out to practice the sort of phenomenology that might “definitively overcome naturalism” but perhaps without the bravado of “heroism” that Husserl called for. Science had already performed too many bold, heroic gestures in the face of Nature; a more subtle method would be called for. Both Heidegger and the later Husserl circle an “un-thought” or “a silence” (NO 13-14). Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty advocates a circling around Nature’s silence, rather than a filling up of this silence. As he puts it – albeit roughly – in the notes on the *Origins of Geometry*: “The unthought can appear only through contact. History of ϕ <‘philosophy’> and ‘the poeticizing of the history of <‘philosophy’>’ (Husserl)” (NO 15). Such phenomenology is “constructed by *Erzeugung* < ‘production’>” and it thereby can “unveil the *Ursprung* < ‘origin’> of passivity” (NO 16). By admitting the productivity of life science, we find passivity at the core of this activity; we find that even our life science began elsewhere. As Leonard Lawlor puts it, this practice is “always preparatory even though we speak of it as something done, is always concentrated in the person of the philosopher” (Introduction to *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* 14).

A poetic phenomenology acts poetically insofar as it does not take meaning as “ready-made” in prose but changes language poetically. Through an ultimately discursive discipline – phenomenology – poetic phenomenology aims at that domain which

precedes and exceeds language, that which “precedes its objectifying power” (Barbaras 196). Representing this prediscursive realm requires innovative discourse. The very *person* of the philosopher is implicated in what is best described as a *practice* – not a theory – insofar as the expression of prereflective, corporeal, and historically conditioned being only appears to such a being *also* at the level of ordinary perception.

The term “poetic” must be understood in its broadest sense, inherited from the Greek; *poesis* refers not to a specialized practice limited to high “art” contexts, but fundamental human productivity.¹¹¹ This expanded definition of “poetry” can be understood best by contrast with prose, although only by way of convention. “Prosaic” writing is any writing that only reuses already established meaning structures, in Merleau-Ponty’s view. In fact, both great prose and poetry per se can display this generative meaning-making. For Merleau-Ponty, the important thing is to acknowledge productivity:

Communication in literature is not the simple appeal on the part of the writer to meanings which would be part of an *a priori* of the mind; rather, communication arouses the meanings in the mind through enticement and a kind of oblique action... Perhaps poetry is only that part of literature where this autonomy is ostentatiously displayed... Prosaic writing, on the other hand, limits itself to using, through accepted signs, the meanings already accepted in a given culture... When a writer is no longer capable of thus founding a new universality and of taking the risk of communicating, he has outlived his time. It seems to me that we can also say of other institutions that they have ceased to live when they show themselves incapable of carrying on a poetry of human relations – that is, the call of each individual freedom to all others. (PrimP 9)

For Merleau-Ponty, “poetry, as the work of metaphor, has an ontological meaning comparable to that of painting; it leads back to the originary experience” prior to

¹¹¹ In this sense, Merleau-Ponty shows his debt to Heidegger, especially his work on the German Romantics. As evinced by his many essays on and allusions to poetry, Merleau-Ponty takes this discipline quite seriously. Poetry describes not a specialized art form whose products are found only in small bookstores, but rather a generalized type of generative human activity.

reflective objectification (Barbaras 196). The appearance of many metaphors in Merleau-Ponty's own writing shows itself to be no mere coincidence. These metaphors, far from mere felicities of language, are gestures toward the excess that goes before and pushes forth language.¹¹² Merleau-Ponty continues to make this contrast in his unfinished *Prose of the World*, but in the Nature Courses he also specifically clarifies it in relation to Schelling's work. Schelling, in contrast to Fichte, aims at a "nonprosaic conception of consciousness," or a "poetic consciousness" (NC 50). This poetic consciousness notices not only its own activity but its passivity; poetic consciousness feels itself rather than only knowing or positing itself. But perhaps more importantly for our discussion of natality, poetic consciousness takes note of its own origins and its own productivity: "poetic consciousness recognizes that it does not possess its object totally, that it can understand it only as a creation, and that it creates clarity by an operation that is not deductive but creative" (NC 50). In Schelling, Merleau-Ponty sees a subtler sense of consciousness itself, a sense that Merleau-Ponty develops phenomenologically. As evident in the above passage in his *précise*, poetic consciousness reminds us of the call of the freedom of "all the others" in the plurality on each individual consciousness (PrimP 9). Poetic phenomenology thus suggests a study of conscious existence situated in history and with others.

Poetic practice is not limited to poetry per se. Rather, as suggested by the Greek *poeisis*, this a general type of human action. Another discipline that maintains a loose, non-objectifying relation to Nature is painting. In his 1961 essay "Eye and Mind," as in the courses leading up to it, Merleau-Ponty again takes up the project of Husserl's *Crisis*. Science, he sees, has been and is "an admirably active, ingenious and bold way of

¹¹² I return to several key metaphors – pregnancy and vision – in Chapter 7.

thinking” (EM 121). But that boldness comes at a cost: in boldly assuming it could discover things, science also assumed that all the world could be treated as an object “predestined for our ingenious schemes” (EM 121). In haste to learn something about nature, science had to assume that it *could* learn something, that nature spoke its language of objectivity and mechanistic causality: that is, that nature had no inner life. Like a charismatic conversationalist who takes a room by storm, science began its interrogation of Nature by speaking first. Caught up in its own bold discourse, science loudly and forgot that Nature had an inner life, a complex psychology, failing to note that Nature was not speaking back. Nature was a shy subject, too easily objectified. Merleau-Ponty argues that – as Husserl and then Arendt predicted – by the mid-twentieth century science, had reached a crisis. The only things science knew about Nature were things that science itself had said of the object it created.

For Merleau-Ponty, the painter, by contrast, retains a special talent for not objectifying her world. The painter interrogates Nature through the circuit of eye and mind, hand and vision. Merleau-Ponty there discusses painting not only to illuminate painting for painting’s sake, but because he finds this practice to be perhaps fundamental to “all culture” (EM 123). While this essay provides some insight to the practice of painting and to the study of aesthetics, it also offers a generalizable model of interrogating Nature that Merleau-Ponty hopes science as well might adopt. Cezanne’s paintings remind us not just that Mt. St. Arles is beautiful, but that “Nature is on the inside” (EM 125). Given the historical shift toward Nature as entirely exterior that Merleau-Ponty recounts in the first Nature Course (see Chapter 4), this statement must be taken quite seriously. The painter is able to admit an interiority to Nature that life science

can no longer admit. How is this? It is because the painter equally admits that Nature is interior to subjectivity, to corporeality. Painters make explicit and accept that they began elsewhere and that they produce work; there is no shame in inspiration nor in production. Forgetting productivity leads to “all sorts of vagabond endeavors” in science.

Experimental sciences “represent themselves to be autonomous, ... [but] their thinking deliberately reduces itself to a set of data-collecting techniques” (EM 121). Purportedly achieving neutrality, science has only covered up its own production of these techniques; these *techne* are designed to collect information *for* someone: this someone is not any being, but a living scientist herself, implicated in the results of her study.

Rather than objectifying the world, the painter interrogates that world. Paintings offer “the gaze traces of vision, from the inside, in order that it may espouse them” (EM 126). The painter presents not mere images of objects but a trace of her natural vision as a painter. He “takes his body with him” and “it is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings” (EM 123).¹¹³ The painter “is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees” (EM 123). Painters manage to practice a “secret science” and to approach “the world without determining that world ahead of time as absolutely in-itself or for-itself (EM 124-125). Nature inhabits the painter as she inhabits nature. Her vision includes the movements of her eyes and her hands and her reflective consideration about the painting. The world prompts her to paint, and a certain passivity inheres in her very eyes that cannot help but be drawn along by the world: “The eye is an instrument that moves itself, a means which invents its own ends; it is *that which* has been moved by some impact of the world, which it then restores to the visible through the traces of a hand” (EM127). Painters can admit that

¹¹³ On how Cézanne lends his body to the landscape, see Silverman, *Texualities*, 162-174.

their work is motivated; painting can admit that each of its techniques “is a technique of the body” (EM 129).

A painter shows this history of motivation, of motive vision. She shows, in pain that others condition her very vision. Painters “have so often chosen to draw themselves in the act of painting” because this moment reveals the mystery of vision (EM 130). In self-portraiture, the painter feels that her body “can include elements drawn from the body of another,” that other bodies see her body that sees itself (EM130). It is thus that “painting scrambles all our categories” (EM 130). Through self-portraiture, painters engage in a sort of healthy navel-gazing. In reflecting on their own visibility, they notice the mark of nature and others in their own body. They see the omphalos prominent in their flesh that presents itself to be seen by their own eyes and others. Merleau-Ponty suggests that in fact all painting is “autofigurative” insofar as it practices this presentation of visibility and productivity (EM 141). In contrast to the painter, when the Cartesian looks at himself,

The Cartesian does not see *himself* in the mirror; he see a puppet, an ‘outside,’ which, he has every reason to believe, other people see in the very same way, but which is no more for himself than for others a body in the flesh. (EM 131)

It might be reasonably objected that painting, as much as life science, has a history that includes technical innovation, from Renaissance perspective techniques to the twentieth century’s acrylic paint. But in Merleau-Ponty’s generous view,¹¹⁴ such technical innovations never defined the project of painting itself: “The truth is that no means of

¹¹⁴ For many reasons Merleau-Ponty may be said to describe not painting itself but an ideal painting. Merleau-Ponty hardly considers the economic and historical conditions that motivate particular painters; he is no art historian. As Magritte protested, Merleau-Ponty’s thesis “hardly makes one think of painting” in the sense of the discipline that succeeds or fails in New York’s Chelsea galleries (Johnson *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* 336). For my purposes here, however, the idea is in fact not to describe painting per se but a type of practice possibly available to all those engages in creative disciplines whether painting, poetry, or science.

expression, once mastered, resolves the problems of painting or transforms it into a technique” (EM 135). For Merleau-Ponty, technical skill is not confused with ideality in painting as it is in science. I think Merleau-Ponty is too generous in this idealistic vision of painting, which certainly takes place within an economically and politically fraught life-world as well. I think one can only charitably interpret his work as descriptive of an *aim* or ideal for life science or for any creative, expressive practice. He rightly points out that post-Cartesian science may have become too entranced with its own techniques, forgetting that creative activity is at work in the development of these techniques.

For Merleau-Ponty, the ideal painter is aware of technical creativity. The painter acquires technical skills in order to better let herself be moved by the world. The painter keeps open the circuit between eye and mind which is “a crossroads of all the aspects of Being. [Where] ‘A certain fire wills to live... a leaping spark, it arcs the gap in the circle it was to trace: the return to the eye, and beyond’” (EM 147, citing Paul Klee). This circuit of eye and mind criss-crosses the flesh. This permeability to the world allows painting to occur, but it is also what allows all cultural activity to occur. Most significantly, “there is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that here nature ends and the human being or expression begins” (NC 147). Painting scrambles all our categories, including the categories of Nature and culture, animal and human, expression and perception.

Merleau-Ponty implies that science would like to step out of this messy domain; it would like to be an ideal art practiced by ideal beings. Indeed “how crystal clear everything would be in our philosophy if only we would exorcize these specters ... brush them to one side of an unequivocal world!” (EM 130). But these specters, these rent

beings include scientists themselves, and in fact, “even science learns to recognize a zone of the ‘fundamental,’ peopled with dense, open beings of which an exhaustive treatment is out of the question” (EM 149). If science can accept this domain, then it will find that like painting, it has an open-ended, infinite project ahead of itself. Thus recognizing the interrogation undertaken by painting and in healthy science does not reduce either science to painting, nor does it take away the unique project of science. Merleau-Ponty recognizes that this might seem to be the case. He anticipates the possible reaction of a disappointed reductionist and responds:

What, says the understanding, like [Stendhal’s] Lamiel, is that all there is to it? Is this the highest point of reason, to realize that the soil beneath our feet is shifting, to pompously call ‘interrogation’ what is only a persistent state of stupor... But this disappointment issues from that spurious fantasy which claims for itself a positivity capable of making up for its own emptiness. It is the regret of not being everything, and a rather groundless regret at that. (EM 149)

This is a groundless regret because it forecloses the very project of science itself. If science could be everything, could know everything, then science would come to a close. It would truly be the end of history that Hegel predicted. But instead of persistently being disappointed, Merleau-Ponty suggests that science rejoice that no such finality has come or will come. Our natality secures for us an endless science, as unfinished and unfinishable as the domain of art. Heidegger turned toward a description of truth as “a-lethia,” as clearing rather than an assertion, but this turning does not mark a failure of phenomenology to account for truth. Rather, his phenomenology attended to the limitations and conditions of attending to truth. Likewise, when Merleau-Ponty asks us to recognize the contingencies in which science emerges and suggests interrogation as a

model of inquiry, he offers not critique but affirmation of a creative beginning in life science.

Evolutionary Theory, Productivity, and Bergson's *Creative Evolution*

The comparisons and contrasts between painting and science in general set the stage for Merleau-Ponty's critique of evolutionary life science in particular.¹¹⁵ This comparison can be seen in a key analogy between painting and evolutionary theory in Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, a text to which Merleau-Ponty devotes much attention.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Bergson attempts to show that neither mechanism nor finalism sufficiently describes the movement of life in evolution. In the face of the failure of these two methods, Bergson proposes a refining of consciousness that would see past the illusions of stasis and absence to see the positive flow of life and mind in life. According to Bergson himself, Darwinian evolutionary theory purports to account for the generative movement of life, but its methods can sometimes preemptively limit the definition of life to morphology. Darwinians like Herbert Spencer attempt to understand evolving life through a reconstructive, paleontological perspective (Bergson 364).¹¹⁶ But this method does not attend to the actual genesis of life: it cannot see the flux of life itself. For Bergson, Spencerian Darwinism is like a child piecing together a picture that has been cut into pieces; she may recombine the pieces into an image, but the generative

¹¹⁵ I focus on this problem in the following chapter.

¹¹⁶ Spencer was a follower of Darwin who actually coined the phrase "survival of the fittest." This phrase and indeed Spencerian Darwinism in general represent a caricature, albeit a classic one, of Darwin's work. Bergson's criticism may not be as valid if applied to more subtle, recent Darwinian theories. In a sense, molecular biological studies of genome mutation could be seen as looking the generative activity of life itself, rather than only piecing life together a retrospective, macroscopic view as Spencer did. But, as we will see in the next chapter, this microscopic view fails to consider movement of life at higher orders of beings. Merleau-Ponty, if not Bergson, certainly critiques this model as well.

“act of drawing and painting has nothing to do with that of putting together the fragments of a picture already drawn and already painted” (Bergson 364). Instead of studying generation, Spencerian Darwinism accounts only for difference in forms rather than the process of becoming those forms.¹¹⁷ For Bergson, a *true* evolutionary philosophy understands a “radical becoming” (273) in the on-going flux and duration of life.¹¹⁸ In the metaphor of a painting, this type of philosophy would be a “learning to paint” rather than piecing the painting back together retrospectively. The philosopher attunes herself to the movement of life, as a learning painter attunes herself to the brushstrokes and gestures in the movement of painting. For Bergson, as for Merleau-Ponty, when we understand human life itself as evolved, we can no longer attempt only to view evolution from the outside. This is not only a theoretical aim but a practical constraint. A life scientist cannot work like the child who pieces together the painting after the fact because the “painting” of human nature is still being painted. Rather, the life scientist who intends to describe human nature from the inside must attune herself to the generative activity of “painting” itself, that is, to the movement of evolving life itself, as lived from the inside. As one must learn to paint in order to understand the genesis of painting, in Bergson’s view so must life science “establish contact with the creative effort” of mind in order to understand the evolution of mind in life (Bergson 370).

Bergson attempts this without returning to teleology; he builds on the aspect of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* which concerned both Merleau-Ponty and Schelling.

Bergson himself puts it this way: “It is within the evolutionary movement that we place

¹¹⁷ This transition from biology as morphology to biology as a study of temporal and dynamic life will reappear in my later discussion of Arnold Gesell. See Chapter 6.

¹¹⁸ It would be an interesting project to consider whether Thompson’s “enactive evolution” accomplishes what Bergson envisions, and if not, what else Thompsons accounts for. See Thompson 201, 217.

ourselves, in order to follow it to its present results, instead of recomposing these results artificially with fragments of themselves” (364). Such a philosophy of life is inseparable from a philosophy of knowledge (Bergson xiii). The isomorphic fit of mind to life is no coincidence but due to the “generative cause” of intellect (Bergson xv). Mind and life – knowing and living – emerge from the same source for Bergson.

Let us translate Bergson’s terms to Merleau-Ponty’s natal ontology. Merleau-Ponty shares Bergson’s commitment to a theory of life that approaches theory from within life itself, affirming Bergson’s crucial insight that Nature must be seen as involved in a “reciprocal envelopment” with human nature. This reciprocity can be seen, for example, The mode of “*l’on*” – the “atmosphere of humanity” – that humans share with their species. Bergson attempts to think of perception in the mode of “an impersonal third-person *On*,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it (NC 56). As evolving beings, we emerge into a life conditioned not only by an immediate, present world of embodied others, and we sense the echo of the general movement of life in our perception. We are not “projecting” when we see this movement of life. Projection is only a problem for the Cartesian, as Joe Sachs points out (7). For the Cartesian, it is clear what the “I” is, and thus there is the risk that characteristics of the “I” be projected onto other life; for Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, the ontological mystery of life persists, not resolved by the assertion of an “I” or “mind” that might project a world around it. The Cartesian ontologically assumes a real, substantial distinction between the movement of mind and of life; Bergson teaches us, and Merleau-Ponty follows him, that we need make no such assumption. As Thompson puts it, a natal ontology locates the “hard problem” at the level of life, not at the level of

consciousness (236). Bergson and Merleau-Ponty likewise suggest that the hard problem is to understand the affinity of our life with other life, the fact that mind arises in life.

Not only does Bergson guide phenomenology beyond a Cartesian dualism of mind and life, but in *Creative Evolution* he reminds life science that life must be as defined according to its appearance in *time*.¹¹⁹ Natural life institutes time and temporal structures. Because life structures itself *for* some future, futurity is instituted as a structure of life. Natural life works over and establishes the institutions in which life evolves. Or, as Arendt might put it, in terms of human life, existence happens according to certain changeable conditions, not pre-given, fixed natures. In other more Merleau-Pontian terms, natural life inscribes institutions, “*Stiftung*, as Husserl would say” (NC 59). These institutions are as broad as time and Nature themselves.

In addition, Bergson reminds us of one of the important tenets of evolution theory. Merleau-Ponty rephrases the insight thus: “there is not a foreman who directs evolution, because there is not a worker, or rather, there is not a distinction between them. In the natural operation, the end is immanent to the means” (NC 59). In Merleau-Ponty’s view, a certain vein of evolutionary biology – “*pensée américaine*” as he puts it¹²⁰ – has forgotten this. Such evolutionists [mis]understand life only in terms of techniques oriented toward specific aims; a flower, for example, “has developed (sic) its nectar.... For the specific intention of attracting insects” (PA 42). Evolutionary biology implicitly – though never explicitly – treats the flower as if it were an artisan, crafting its

¹¹⁹ Husserl, of course, also transformed phenomenology with his work on time. But Bergson’s *L’evolution Creatrice* published in 1909 preceded Husserl’s *Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness* given between 1905 and 1917, undergoing various revisions and editing by his students Edith Stein and Heidegger (See edition edited by John Brough, 3-4). In the French-speaking world, Bergson’s work made some of the first forays into temporality and – of particular important to Merleau-Ponty’s work and my own – specifically discussed life, not only consciousness, as a temporal phenomena.

¹²⁰ Merleau-Ponty quotes several phrases in English in this passage from an article in a biology journal.

own structure with intention. In this way, evolutionary biology “without finalism, speaks the language of finality” (PA 42). Oddly, biology manages to speak of finality while still within a science that also speaks the language of mechanistic causality, a mix of “blind necessity and artificialism” (PA 43).

Let us try to better understand this. In order to apprehend the tendencies of life at this macroscopic scale, biologists import metaphors that echo finalism. At the same time, the only form of cause consciously postulated by these scientists is mechanistic cause. This finalism and the tendency to sublimate it has been inherited due to the history I recounted in the previous chapter; to maintain an orderly, Cartesian part-on-part causality, science must sublimate all other types of causality to God or the realm of metaphysics, which is subsequently dismissed. On the one hand, Nature cannot have any interiority because Nature has been defined as pure exteriority, and life science cannot postulate any macroscopic, structural types of causality. All of those structures are mere appearance for us, and behind them lies the “true” objective, mechanistic nature with only parts and no structures. On the other hand, life scientists cannot truly see themselves as natural. Were their concepts of Nature to have emerged naturally, they would have no special status for revealing what is behind the veil of appearances. This contributes to the crisis in the human sciences which persists even decades after Husserl’s *Crisis* announced it. Merleau-Ponty worries that life science may already have reached a point at which knowing and making, *poesis* and *noesis* have been irrecoverably intertwined, covering over the inherited techniques for addressing Nature.

Merleau-Ponty sees this covering-over of artifice especially in the evolutionary biology of his day. In “*La Philosophie Aujourd’hui*,” he identifies what he sees as two

major aspects of the crisis: a crisis of rationality in terms of inter-human relations that corresponds to a crisis of rationality in relation to Nature. He notices this most obviously in two then-recent developments: neo-Darwinian evolution theory and the atomic bomb. Each of these developments involves a peculiar combination of “naturalism” and “artificialism” (PA 42). In both cases, technology is no longer “only the application of science, but the condition of science” (PA 42). A similar mix of artificial technique and naturalism appears in neo-Darwinian thought. Through the methodological lens of evolutionary biology, an organism has certain “devices” that permit its “success” within essentially competitive environments (PA 42).

Supposedly, with our human artifice, we have uncovered “natural” things. But in fact, such artificialist thinking entails an “extreme re-covering of nature”; or, Merleau-Ponty also puts it, a re-veiling of Nature: “*extrême refoulement de la Nature par artificialisme et << retour du refoulé>>*” (PA 43).¹²¹ Rather than “uncovering” Nature by discovering its supposed “intentions” in evolution, we have only re-veiled Nature with this artificial finalism. We have trapped ourselves in a sort of dream world, or “horror museum,” and attribute all the creations therein to Nature when in fact we have manufactured them (PA 43). Paradoxically, we affirm and negate nature: we purport to acknowledge its creativity, but in fact, we only affirm what we have put into nature. In order to get out of this crisis, Husserl asks science to acknowledge that the generation of ideality in time does not discredit it as ideality. The fact that a certain view of life has emerged over time and might have emerged otherwise does not discredit it as a science.

¹²¹ This phrasing continues the psychoanalytic metaphor – “*refoulement*” is the standard French translation of Freud’s *Verdrängung* or “repression” – and reinforces Merleau-Ponty’s connections to the psychoanalytic movement, particularly through Lacan. I am grateful to Jeffery Bloechl for pointing out this connection. For a standard use of the term see Laplace and Pontalis, 392-396, and for Lacan’s use of the term see *Écrits*, 386-387.

Where evolutionary biology fails, in Merleau-Ponty's view, is in such reflection on its own methodology.

Though inspired by Bergson, Merleau-Ponty critiques his work, albeit not as harshly as Arendt. Merleau-Ponty would save the spirit if not the letter of Bergson's position. He argues that Bergson "oscillate[s] between a spiritualism... and a materialism," always tending toward a positivism (NC 55).¹²² In a sense, Merleau-Ponty suggests that Bergson fails to see the complexity of his own insight. Although he introduces a rich sense of temporality into a phenomenology of Nature, Bergson oddly omits history, so intent is he on describing a positive life force (NC 67).¹²³ For Bergson, productivity merges with product and he makes "of life an undivided principle pursuing a goal" (NC 60). His *élan vital* is so powerful and transcendental that actual bodies and contingent details are mere obstacles to its forceful project: even "the nervous system is compared by Bergson to a 'vise' that would impede consciousness from completely realizing itself" (NC 62). In Merleau-Ponty's view, Bergson postulates a continuity between human life and animal life that would have worried Arendt: he "admits a unity of species at the origin, the unity of the vegetative and the animal" (NC 53). In the end,

¹²² For Merleau-Ponty, Bergson goes too far in a sort of positivism of life that forgets the nothingness, the non-being that accompanies all intuitions. Merleau-Ponty is not alone in seeing this failure of Bergson; Bachelard expresses a similar critique in the *Dialectic of Duration*, confirming Merleau-Ponty's suspicions (Bachelard 24). For Merleau-Ponty, human existence is a fold, a hollow; certainly, it is a hollow in material, in positive stuff, but it nonetheless essentially folds over on itself. Sartre, of course, went too far in the opposite direction: he saw existence as *only* nothingness without location in materiality (NC 66). While Merleau-Ponty does not go the way of Sartre, neither does he content himself with the positivism of Bergson. Both Sartre and Bergson retain terminology that ties them to dualisms, to the unending reversals of materialism and idealism, positivism, and negativism.

¹²³ In Thompson's words, this is the mistake of a "structuralist" version of evolution. He cautions that a structuralist view—Bergsonian or otherwise—does not go far enough if it overemphasizes "ahistorical laws of form over historical pathways in evolution" (211).

Merleau-Ponty rather damningly concludes that “Bergson does not hesitate to confuse God and evolution” (NC 63).¹²⁴

Merleau-Ponty draws on Bergson’s thought, emphasizing temporality and evolution, and yet he tempers Bergson’s vision. Influenced by structuralism and the masters of hermeneutic suspicion – Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – Merleau-Ponty sees a complexity emerging in the human order. He suggests a “jointure” of the reflective life and the prereflective life, an affinity of animal and human life without reducing the former to the latter. He does not suggest a unitary life “force” moving through all of them. Frustrating and complex as this may be, it is the project of a phenomenology of Nature to attend to human existence as the life in Nature that institutes Nature. Our evolution into the world includes the history of reflective as well as prereflective existence. For Merleau-Ponty, we must remember that as natural beings we participate in a historically unfolding situation, not in an ahistorical natural process, as for Bergson.¹²⁵ Nature is not the “stuff” that we are given to work on nor the sheer capacity to produce. Again the connection between Nature and natality clarifies the status of Nature. Human natality does not happen once: it is an ongoing condition. Likewise, Nature is not a fixed state nor a pre-given, complete principle:

¹²⁴ The trouble with Bergson’s work, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, is methodological: what method does Bergson propose to investigate life? What exactly would be the criterion for establishing “contact with the creative effort”? In his discussion of Bergson, Merleau-Ponty addresses an objection that might be leveled at Schelling or Bergson or perhaps even Merleau-Ponty himself: is this a sort of animism or mysticism? Bergson himself explicitly rejects this. For Bergson, actual animism would entail attributing a metaphysical status to the movement of life which he does not. To suggest that the world contains forms that offer themselves to our perception does not mean that these forms substantially sustain themselves when not perceived. Merleau-Ponty charitably interprets Bergson’s efforts thus: Bergson only wants to “think perception according to perception, and no longer according to a realist perspective” (NC 54). I charitably interpret Merleau-Ponty as advocating a shift in the phenomenological method that would, unlike Bergson’s work, offer a rigorous phenomenology of perception that takes into account our situation in a temporally evolving species. What is essential to take from Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Bergson is this methodological shift.

¹²⁵ Merleau-Ponty devotes an entire course to “institution,” though I will not digress into that discussion here.

Living nature is thus a principle of finite unity that comes to terms with a contingency, which does not dominate it but is charged with realizing itself in this contingency and thus with undoing itself. Between the producer and the product, there is a necessary discordance that we cannot regret, because it constitutes the very realization of life. (NC 61)

Life is initiated into a world structured for it: “life is like a bouquet that opens itself” (NC 59). The flowers of the bouquet, like fruit, temporally “dehisce” into the world, neither entirely “active” nor entirely passive. The world solicits the flower to unfold: chemicals in the air affect the structure of the flower that is in turn structured to be opened by the world. In dehiscence, an action occurs but its initiation lies as much with the world as with the flowers themselves. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in the *Visible and the Invisible*, like Bergson he is “not a finalist” because he envisions Being as active-passively involved in such “dehiscence” (VI 263, 265). The same active/passive dehiscence occurs in human existence as in floral existence. Phenomenology should attend to “the fabric of our life, attend from within to the dehiscence (analogy to that of my own body) which opens it to itself and opens us upon it” (VI 117). Human being institutes and is instituted into more complex structures than the flower, but this does not mean that we differ from the flower radically, as for-itself from in-itself. Like a fruit, a human emerges with a permeable skin, affected by its world, structured from the molecular to the macroscopic level to ripen into that world.

Phenomenology cannot fail to address the new order of total transformation caused by history, language, and the ethical, political community. This is the problem that generative and then poetic phenomenology faces: how can we, through natural science, study Nature when Nature is co-emerging with? into? ourselves? To return to the problem raised at the beginning of the chapter, how could phenomenology speak of

the existential condition of plurality in connection with natural speciation without disregarding the fact that we are the natural species who generated the very terms “species” and “Nature”?

Here a point of difference between Merleau-Ponty and Arendt’s views on natality will further clarify the overall methodological shifts that Merleau-Ponty’s poetic phenomenology suggests. To distinguish “natality” as an existential condition from physical birth, Arendt distinguishes between two instances of natality: first natality and second natality. First natality refers to the event of being born and to natural tendencies and gifts which are part of the private human sphere (HC 62); second natality, linguistic natality, refers to the capacity to give birth to projects in speech and action, particularly political projects, after the necessities of life were mastered (HC 30-31).¹²⁶ Without digressing into a discussion of Arendt, it seems safe to say that Arendt herself focused almost entirely on second natality while avoiding discussions of first natality which happened in the private sphere and depended on human naturalness.¹²⁷

Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, engages in a detailed study of both Arendtian first natality and second natality.¹²⁸ Phenomenology cannot separate first natality from second natality; to do this would entail returning to a dualistic version of human nature, as if speech emerged only in fully-formed, non-natural adults. To separate the events of

¹²⁶ See Birmingham 28-30.

¹²⁷ For a detailed account of this tendency in Arendt – and indeed a resuscitation of her views on nature – see Peg Birmingham’s *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights*.

¹²⁸ Insofar as we associate second natality with speech and political action, Merleau-Ponty’s work progresses from a discussion of first natality in *Structure of Behavior* and the first part of *Phenomenology of Perception* toward a discussion of second natality in the latter part of the *Phenomenology* through his later work such as *Adventures of the Dialectic*, “Eye and Mind,” and the *Visible and the Invisible*.

first and second natality, would again separate “Nature” from “nurture.”¹²⁹ While Arendt assumes that we can differentiate between the birth of action in public and in private, Merleau-Ponty finds action in all spheres to arise from a prereflectively historically and linguistically conditioned existence. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* and the lecture on the acquisition of language, Merleau-Ponty witnesses the emergence of speech with the development of individual bodies.¹³⁰ In this Merleau-Ponty follows Heidegger and Husserl in always understanding human being as conditioned by historicity.¹³¹ Arendt’s firm distinction between first and second natality suggests that humans emerge completely formed from their first natality and that second natality in the political sphere does not reciprocally affect that original birth. If we retained Arendt’s terms, then the best we could say is that “first natality” and “second natality” dialectically condition human existence. But even the dialectical model of nature-culture or first-second natality fails to fully describe the richness and the complexity of the phenomena of natality. While we must study both first and second natality, we should also not conflate these two moments without considering how the complexities of second natality reciprocally affect first natality. To attend to this properly requires poetic phenomenology.

For Merleau-Ponty, if we saw perfect continuity from first natality through second natality, we would make the same mistake as Gestalt psychologists with regard to the different orders of existence from physical to psychological (SB 136).¹³² In the *Structure*

¹²⁹ Birmingham suggests that one might translate this problem into Heideggerian terms as the *Augenblick* of *Da-sein* that at once appears historically and understands itself temporally. Arendt refers to the *Augenblick* but does not seem to bring to bear the full sense of historicity intended by Heidegger (Birmingham 31).

¹³⁰ See Chapter 2 on the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*

¹³¹ As Birmingham points out, this correction of Arendt’s thinking by Heideggerian thinking might have been welcomed by Arendt herself (33).

¹³² Gestalt psychology, though making profound progress in introducing the notion of form, restricted itself to a materialism by seeing no difference between structures at the physical level and structures at the psychological level. For Merleau-Ponty, theorists like Kofka Kafka? intended this as progress that would

of Behavior, when comparing human existence to all living existence, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “human order,” not of a “mental or rational order,” in addition to a physical and vital order because a person is not an “animal” plus “rationality” (SB 180-181). To extend this into an analogy, we might think of vitality and humanness as different functions rather than as constants or variables. A living being is not “physicality plus vitality” but the function vitality performed on the function physicality. Likewise, a person is not “vitality plus rationality” but the function rationality performed on vitality. We cannot simply subtract rationality from personhood to find some base animality. Consciousness, rationality and language – all aspects of the function “human” – have fundamentally transformed the whole. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “Either mind is nothing, or it constitutes a real and not an ideal transformation of man” (SB 181). As in an algebraic expression, the order of operations encapsulates simple transformations into secondary, tertiary, and quaternary mutations that cannot easily be retraced from the final product. At each level of application, we cannot miss the complexity that the new whole reciprocally introduces onto its parts and vice versa. Poetic phenomenology must attend to this reciprocity; what remains to be seen is how it can accomplish this without being caught a uselessly vicious circle.

Conclusions: Ramifying Natality and Motivated Life Science

Given this confusion and fusion of Nature and artifice – nature and culture, nurture and nature – in evolving human nature should we not give up on the term

make psychology a science contiguous with the rest of science (SB 136); what they missed is what they themselves emphasized: the higher orders of life, such as consciousness, refigured the other orders. Today, we might say the same of adaptionist evolutionary theories like those of Dennett and Dawkins: they miss the unique structural permutations of biological and conscious life on physical structures.

“Nature” altogether, as Arendt suggests? Merleau-Ponty does not. Instead, as often the case, he instead admits a certain ambiguity into the term, or as Whitehead puts it, he lets Nature have “ragged edges.” As Whitehead himself put it, “Nature-philosophy must not construct Nature but let it construct itself” (NC 120, citing Whitehead). For Merleau-Ponty as for Whitehead, Nature is both “an obscure principle” and “a creative principle” (NC 120). Nature eludes clarity but definitely includes creativity and productivity; it is a “for-itself,” not like a Hegelian consciousness, but an on-going process “that subtends all creation” (NC 121).

The concept of Nature has “ragged edges” because it is incomplete. But rather than viewing this incompleteness as a failure of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty suggests life science see it as an ongoing possibility, an event that life science participate in and take responsibility for. His phenomenology strives not for “a metascience or secret science, but rather a reading of science itself as a certain (reduced) ontology” (NC 206). This does not make science “wrong,” but like Nature itself, only incomplete. Life science must not leap to conclusions about Nature, putting an end to this history as Hegel precipitously put an end to art: “The natural must not be a lazy postulate” (NC). Certain scientific theories – such as the phlogiston model of oxygen or Coghill’s theory of development¹³³ – fade and are replaced by newer, more precise models. But this process of transition reflects the poetic activity of science, not its mistakes. As he puts it in “The Algorithm and the Mystery of Language” in relation to mathematics, “We are trying to show not that mathematical thought rests upon the sensible but that it is creative” (*Prose of the World* 126). The result of an algorithm, this “synthesis is the result of the development of my knowledge and not its precondition” (*Prose of the World* 127).

¹³³ See Chapter 6.

Where for Kant such synthesis occurred a priori, for Merleau-Ponty, taking Kant's insights even further through Husserl shows that particular synthetic conclusions of science could only occur in history, after the accumulation of centuries of creative, expressive efforts. Merleau-Ponty summarizes it this way: "If creations are not permanent acquisitions, it is not just that, like all things, they pass away: it is also that they have almost their entire lives before them" (EM 158).

I would argue that the crisis Merleau-Ponty saw in the evolutionary biology of his day has only become more acute in a contemporary context. The crisis persists whenever life science draws conclusions that preemptively assume Nature is an object fixed in space and time rather than open-ended and incomplete. For example, upon discovering the genome, certain life scientists claimed to have found the "language gene," without waiting to see that the genome does not rest, a fixed object, to be attached to lifeworld structures like language.¹³⁴ In a contemporary context, we can modify not just the philosophical concept of Nature, but what we previously thought of as 'Nature itself': we can modify both our genome and our definition of genome. We find ourselves responsible for both our definition and the distinction that it institutes between a purportedly "natural" element and the "cultural" context in which it appears. We nurture our nature as we practice life science. But, just as Husserl does not advocate abandoning rationality, neither Merleau-Ponty's criticisms nor my own mean that phenomenology needs to abandon relations with the study of evolution. Instead, life scientists, like poets, must see themselves as responsible for the view of Nature produced. Life science does not casually explore a possible Nature outside of the actual Nature deployed into the politically and ethically fraught life-world.

¹³⁴ In later pages, I discuss epigenesis and recent investigations into the malleability of the genome.

The life scientists must recognize themselves as motivated to work. We participate in the same confluence of motivation and motion that Merleau-Ponty described in the *Structure of Behavior* studies of eye movement, through the *Phenomenology of Perception* reflections on the affective life. The life scientist is seized upon by her world, much like the artist. The artist and the scientist alike respond to the life-world according to the active-passive synthesis that enables perception and expression. As Patrick Burke has put it, for Merleau-Ponty as for Schelling, the artist is seized upon by the world, and possibly “driven to production ... even against an inner resistance” (Burke 191). This seizure is analogous to the “operation of grace” on the mystic.¹³⁵ The world seizes the artist: possessed by the divine gift, he paints and “everything he paints is an answer to this excitement and his hand is nothing but the instrument of a distant will” (VI, cited in Burke 191).

This is a powerful analogy between art and religious possession, given that Merleau-Ponty also compares artistic practice to scientific practice. It seems one thing to describe a painter as possessed by the world and another to so describe the practicing scientist this way. But in making this analogy Merleau-Ponty does not make metaphysical claims about a supernatural deity or force in art: rather, he seeks to better describe human existence as it corporeally comports itself with its life-world. He finds these possibly metaphysically weighted terms – possession, gift of tongues, divinity – the best approximation to describe the artist’s receptivity to the world. In making this comparison, Merleau-Ponty does not abandon philosophy but rather takes up its tradition. These tropes have long been associated with not only artistic and poetic production, but

¹³⁵ Burke cites this passage from the *Visible and the Invisible*: “our fleshy eyes have the gift of the visible as it was once said that inspired men had the gift of tongues” (VI, cited in Burke 191).

with philosophy itself, since Plato's *Phaedrus* described the manic state of the lover of wisdom. Merleau-Ponty makes a similar comparison but in a post-metaphysical context. He asks us to witness the productivity of artists and consider whether it does not, phenomenologically, echo that of those possessed by religious fervor. Likewise, he asks us to witness the inspired scientist and ask if she does not share a certain comportment with the inspired artist. Each is *motivated* to work. Motive lives not only in the world nor only in the artist, but in their relation. Motive does not equate to cause, as one might say it does for a materialist like Hume. As Merleau-Ponty remarks in the *Phenomenology*, motivation does not cancel out freedom but is its condition, and freedom likewise is the condition for responsibility.¹³⁶ Motivation unfolds in the relationship between artist or scientist and her particular situation. Each stands in a relation of wonder, as Arendt or even Descartes himself might put it: wonder is the first passion.¹³⁷ Philosophical reflection becomes a thaumatology of this initial and ever-renewed motivation to work by the world. But this does not mean that science gives up ideality, any more than noticing Beethoven's motivation to write the "Ode to Joy" effaces the unique act of its creation.

In his notes on Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, Merleau-Ponty poses just the question the critical reader might now want to ask of him: "Is that still 'philosophy?'" Or instead, "Is drawing near to speech, speaking, seeing, thinking presently ... a 'mysticism' without God"? (NO 49). These are the same questions we might have asked Schelling or Bergson. But he replies quite clearly, "No: it is not extraphilosophical ... All of speculation is necessary in order to discover a sense for this prespeculative Being" (NO

¹³⁶ See Chapter 2.

¹³⁷ See HC, Chapter 6, and Descartes's *The Passions* in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, I: 358.

49). The project of turning toward the prereflective life, toward natality in plurality, lies not outside philosophy but within it. The question then, for philosophy, is what it can say about this. If we can never step out of the circle – if we are always the artist, never the critic – how can we reflect on our definition of Nature? Or, as Merleau-Ponty asks: “But what we will say about it? [i.e. Nature] Everything that we will say *about it* will be in principle false. Silence?” (NO 49) It seems that because the revelation of poetry appears not in discourse *about it* but in the act of its making, reflective philosophy can say nothing. We would be in the trap of Derrida’s “White Mythologies”: speculative philosophy would seek the place outside of metaphor, of poetry, and if we failed to find one, we could only speak metaphorically, poetically. Merleau-Ponty’s response, however, differs subtly from Derrida’s;¹³⁸ in his lecture, he responds, “But the ϕ < ‘philosophy’> *replaced* by art, poetry, life? No, because they speak only silent. ϕ < ‘Philosophy’> as the thematization of this speaking silence” (NO 49). The disciplines exchange and interweave, but we can differentiate them and their tasks. They interweave dialectically and productively (NO 45). Husserl’s reflections on the practice of geometry do not replace the practice of doing geometry, although the reflections might renovate and renew it. Just as the artist must ultimately take responsibility for the art work – while at the same time admitting that she was “inspired”— so the scientist does not give up responsibility by admitting to inspiration by her particular natural, cultural, and historical situation.

At present some of the most transformative and perhaps controversial developments in life science’s conception of Nature and particularly human nature are

¹³⁸ Or perhaps echoes *certain* interpretations of Derrida, though not the simpler or dominant interpretation that I will accept here. In doing so, I follow Paul Ricoeur’s response in *Rule of Metaphor*, Ch 8.

occurring in evolutionary biology. Biology – indeed life science in general – has become a study of temporally and dynamically emerging relationships, rather than a study of fixed forms; I discuss the early stages of the shift as Merleau-Ponty witnessed it in the following pages. It is to his investigations into this area that I turn next.

Chapter 6 **Totality: Animality, Genesis and Development**

“There is a history in all men's lives
Figuring the natures of the times deceas'd;
The which observ'd, a man may prophesy
With a near aim, of the main chance of things
As yet not come to life, who in their seeds
And weak beginning lie intreasur'd.
Such things become the hatch and brood of time...”
- Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, Part II ¹³⁹

In a sense, the climax of the Nature Courses is the concluding discussion on development and evolution. Evolution! the thoughtful phenomenologist might say with alarm. Phenomenology can't broach that subject. What does that have to do with poetic phenomenology? How can phenomenology speak of human being in terms of speciation and *not* fall into reductive, objectifying terms? “Species” traditionally denotes a fixed type, a category, objectively perceivable. Speaking of the human species would seem to lead us to the very situation Arendt envisioned the study of human nature would always lead to: Seeking to catch sight of human “species” would be a futile and even harmful attempt akin to jumping over our own shadow.

However difficult or impossible speaking of the human species might seem to the phenomenologist, other life scientists do speak of the human species in a contemporary context.¹⁴⁰ Biology, cognitive science, and philosophy might work on models of human life that depend on a view of the human being as an evolving species like any other biological life form. However critically it might respond, phenomenology *must* consider

¹³⁹ Arnold Gesell cites part of this passage. See Gesell 481.

¹⁴⁰ For example, the subtitle to Steven Pinker's popular *The Blank Slate* is “The Modern Denial of Human Nature.” Such a denial indeed seems to be a *modern*, arising in the early part of the twentieth century through the very group of thinkers under consideration here. Pinker's work – however correct or incorrect as philosophy or science – now has a hold on the contemporary mind, as evinced by its popular reviews in journals from *Nature* to the *New York Times*. In the light of this contemporary problem, I offer the accounts of these modern thinkers.

these issues if it is to respond to contemporary life sciences that are indeed occupied with studying human beings as part of an evolving species. Let us take “evolving species” to mean roughly our participation in a group of organisms with shared tendencies and to the changing of these shared tendencies over time, including changes at a phenotypical and genetic level.¹⁴¹ Let us see if, following Merleau-Ponty, we can find a way to speak phenomenologically of belong to a life that emerges in this way, without falling into a dualism of nature and nurture, or nature and culture.

Merleau-Ponty engages with the then-contemporary discussions of evolution and culls a description of “species” that has an “ontological value,” as he puts it, but avoids objectivism (NC 189). This rehabilitation of speciation is essential to his “new ontology” of visibility or *voyance* (Carbone 31). As Carbone puts it, playing with Merleau-Ponty’s own terms, the change in the concept “species” “helps to characterize that ‘ontological mutation’ ... in relation to the concept of Nature” (33).¹⁴² I will show that this view of “species” is in fact similar to Arendt’s sense of “plurality”; both Merleau-Ponty’s non-reductive sense of species and Arendt’s plurality are discovered through our natality and our visible orientation toward others and implicate us into ethical relations with others. (I return to each of these characteristic in turn in this and the following study.) In these lectures, Merleau-Ponty brings a phenomenological eye to then-current developmental and evolutionary biological studies and connects them to phenomenological work on intersubjectivity, further substantiating the relationship between natality and plurality.

¹⁴¹ To track the changing definition of the term “species” would be a task in itself. Grene and Depew, for example, argue persuasively that Aristotle used the term to refer not to fixed classifications but to revisable –and oft-revised – categories (18). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “species” took on a more robust and fixed sense, unambiguously denoting groups branching out from the tree of life (19). In a sense, Grene and Depew suggest that Aristotle’s more malleable sense of “species” is more suited to contemporary, epigenetically-informed accounts of speciation.

¹⁴² Carbone here cites Merleau-Ponty, who claims in the Nature Courses that phenomenology must see “the necessity of the ontological mutation” (NC 204).

These are not mere passing references but sustained discussions of evolution which carry over into the *Visible and the Invisible*.¹⁴³ Merleau-Ponty dares to speak of the human “species” and other natural species without falling into a reductive view of life or existence Arendt fears, in the *Human Condition*, that any discussion of human nature might slip into. In the second and third of the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty suggests a jointure across the human and animal orders of existence. This jointure is particularly apparent in the genesis of animals, in their development. Rather than highlighting animality in contrast to human existence, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the continuity of human and animal experience as he does not in the *Structure of Behavior*, where he identified only the physical, vital, and human orders.¹⁴⁴ Studying animality per se allows Merleau-Ponty to focus on the emergence of interiority in Nature. By the end of the courses, he even considers the possibility of an “animal culture” (NC 198). By implication, he suggests the animality of culture, taking another pass at erasing the definitive line between “nature” and “culture” as he has since the *Phenomenology of Perception*; as he puts it in the *Visible and the Invisible*, in his later work he finds “The distinction between the two planes (natural and cultural) is abstract: everything is cultural in us ... and everything is natural in us” (VI 253). I will return to the perhaps frustrating ambiguity that this statement might suggest. For now, let us note that it implies that though the study in this Nature Course at first appears to be a discussion of totality in relation to animal development per-se, it has definite implications in the sphere of human

¹⁴³ For just a selection of the many references to evolution, evolutionary theory, and speciation in the *Visible and the Invisible*, see VI 172, 226, 223, 256, 265.

¹⁴⁴ See Thompson 449, note 2.

action.¹⁴⁵ No easy delineation between human life and life in general, natural life and cultural life, can be assumed.

The continuity between animal and human life implies also that human freedom (as a part of human life) arises from the organic form, in the very structure of animal behavior. In Hans Jonas's words, life's independence of form from matter constitutes no less than the very freedom of the organism. Jonas admits that this may seem like a broad and counter-intuitive claim: "One expects to encounter the term ['freedom'] in the areas of mind and will, and not before: but if mind is prefigured in the organic form from the beginning, then freedom is" (Jonas, *Phenomenology of Biology*, cited in Thompson 151). Merleau-Ponty makes clear that the descriptions of animal life that I will discuss below are intended to also describe human life:

... the human universe is not the product of freedom in the Kantian sense, that is, event-based freedom which is attested to in a decision; it is, rather a structural freedom. In brief, it is the theme of the melody, much more than the idea of a nature-subject or of a suprasensible thing, that best expresses the intuition of the animal. (NC 178)

Like Thompson, Merleau-Ponty here locates the "hard" problem, not at the level of consciousness or mind, but at the level of life (223-224). In understanding actions in the animal or human sphere, we exercise the same sort of judgment that the biologist exercises in understanding the behavior of an animal. These actions emerge within a total style of being, not according to some pre-given telos nor – as is more tempting to propose in the case of animals – according to an instinctive reaction to an environment.

¹⁴⁵ Bryan Smyth cautions that Merleau-Ponty nonetheless prioritizes the human sphere. He finds that Merleau-Ponty does not consider human relations to animals, for example, in an ethical way; that is, Merleau-Ponty does not define, in his words, an "ethical interspecific coexistence" (172). Indeed, I would agree that Merleau-Ponty makes no claims in this regard. I think, however, this represents less a failing on Merleau-Ponty's part than a differentiation of his project. In the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty does not offer a prescription for human ethical coexistence either. He is concerned with establishing the ontological condition for such coexistence, not with making prescriptions about it.

Merleau-Ponty's insights depend on the fact that his natal ontology non-reductively views existence as generative and oriented toward a plurality. Merleau-Ponty's approach is "non-reductive" because he always situates life within an excessive totality. Since his pre-*Structure of Behavior* work on Gestalt theory, Merleau-Ponty has emphasized the need to phenomenologically attend to the whole, to the total situation in which a natal being lives. Merleau-Ponty shows that we must attend to the totality of life at various orders of existence, from the genetic to the individual to the plural. He reminds us in the Nature Courses, for example, that the totality of an organism,

... is not a sum of instantaneous and punctual microscopic events; it is an enveloping phenomenon In between the microscopic facts, global reality is delineated like a watermark, never graspable for objective-particular thinking, never eliminable from or reducible to the microscope. (NC 207)

The totality of the organism is an "enveloping phenomenon"; it is therefore *not* a totality that the organism can witness completely. Merleau-Ponty speaks not of the standard Western metaphysical sense of totality so critiqued by Levinas; the totality of natal animals precisely includes a "relations with *a surplus*," as Levinas puts it (*Totality and Infinity* 22). The natal being finds itself situated in a totality; Merleau-Ponty would affirm, as Levinas describes, that there is no place in this enveloping totality from which one might "promote the claims of a subjectivity free as the wind" (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 22). Totality, in Merleau-Ponty's description, is also not a macroscopic phenomena: totality does not elude perception simply because it is too large in space. Notice in the citation above that Merleau-Ponty claims the totality of the organism *also* appears in the microscope: it is "never eliminable from" even microscopic study. At the same time, this totality cannot be reduced to evidence apparent from the microscopic

perspective. Totality haunts visions with a surplus whether viewed from a microscopic or macroscopic angle.

The totality of the organism's situation must be understood as temporally unfolding. In the last hundred to two hundred years, as biology emerged as a rigorous science, the recognition of the temporal situation of biological life has taken on increased importance.¹⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty remarked on several key innovations in developmental biology that had been made in the decades preceding his second Nature Course – from the 1930s and through the 1950s.

Temporality and the New Biology

In this second course, Merleau-Ponty reassesses the state of the life sciences in comparison to when he began his work in the *Structure of Behavior*, particularly emphasizing the shifts in developmental and evolutionary biology. In the late 1950s, Merleau-Ponty claimed that though the debate between vitalism and materialism has not vanished, biology has come to take seriously some notions that would be, in his words, “unclassifiable” according to the traditional dichotomy (NC 139). In the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty rejected simple stimulus-response theory for a more subtle, gestalt view of behavior.¹⁴⁷ Twenty-five years later, he re-articulates this view that intentional behavior is inexplicable in terms of either only the organism's actions by itself or only the action of the environment on the organism:

¹⁴⁶ Grene and Depew argue that in fact Aristotle himself already saw the need to understand life as temporally unfolding. This is evident in his division of his studies into the *Parts of Animals*, a morphology of spatial forms, and the *Generation of Animals*, a study of “the diachronic development of individual organism in and through the process of generation” (26-27). Sachs, as well, in his translation of *On the Soul*, stresses that one must understand the “form” of living being to refer to an on-going activity of “being-at-work-staying itself” rather than a spatial structure immanent in matter (See Introduction to Book 1).

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter 1.

We discover between the situation and the response an internal articulation that we understand, but that we cannot reduce to its elements: this is the school of intentional behavior... by reincorporating meaning, the notion of behavior remains something anchored in a body, but the body is no longer a machine. (NC 140)

New attention to the temporal comportment of organisms changed the very basic practices of biology. Biology once focused almost entirely on morphology: the form of individual animals as fixed adult species or forms. Biologists turned their attention to the emergences of these forms. As child developmental theorist Arnold Gesell, whom Merleau-Ponty studied, puts it: “When Goethe coined the word Morphologie he was thinking particularly of the shapes of skulls and flowers” (471). But G.E. Coghill, Gesell and his contemporaries who interested Merleau-Ponty recognized that one must study the co-emergence of behavior and form over time. Their discoveries in morphology emerged in parallel with innovations in evolutionary theories, eventually converging with these discoveries. According to the new developments in biology, animal life could not be properly understood only by examining spatial forms fixed in time.

Merleau-Ponty refers to a series of experiments – now more easily repeated digitally and confirmed by more detailed research¹⁴⁸ – by A. Michotte, an experimental psychologist working in Louvain, influenced by both Gestalt theory and phenomenology.¹⁴⁹ Michotte’s projected images suggest various causal relationships occurring in time to the viewer; Michotte was convinced that causality, rather than inferred from experience (as Hume suggested) or intuitively apprehended from nature in

¹⁴⁸ See for example, Wolff “Dynamics and the perception of causal events,” 555 – 587, and Young, Beckmann, and Wasserman, “The pigeon's perception of Michotte's launching effect,” 223 - 237.

¹⁴⁹ See *Perception of Causality*, iv-v.

itself, is understood because of particular spatio-temporal formal configurations.¹⁵⁰ In the experiment that most interested Merleau-Ponty, the figures either hook toward one another or dilate, and these faint movements give the impression of life. The subjects who watch the experiment “do not say that this schema makes them think of something, but that they perceive a living thing” (NC 154). They see something living and animallike no matter what their experience with actual animals: that is, the tendency to perceive animal life is inherent to perception, not acquired by inference from experience. Playing on the Kantian term, “schema” here describes a temporally unfolding structure *felt* by subjects rather than a fixed structure that intervenes between cognitive categories. The subjects “wince, like we have when we find a caterpillar where we weren’t expecting it” (NC 154). They sense that this is a living being because its movement suggests a future: not just any future, but a future limited by a certain style and tendency of movement. The living organism balances precariously in the present; we perceive this teetering instability that the organism tends to correct. When we “consider the organism in a given minute, we observe that there is the future in every present, because its present is in a state of imbalance” (NC 155).¹⁵¹

This imbalance appears in the very spatio-temporal formal structure of the organism. The capacity for perceiving this dynamic structure of life inheres in perception but is not reducible to perception. Michotte’s work reinforces the emerging consensus

¹⁵⁰ “We do not, according to Michotte, see one billiard ball cause another to move *either* because we intuitively apprehend a fact of nature *or* because past experience leads us to see the event in this fashion, but because the spatio-temporal organization is such that it directly unleashes this impression in us” (Translator’s Introduction to *Perception of Causality* vi).

¹⁵¹ References to Michotte reappear in the *Visible and the Invisible*, marking his work as of more than passing interest to Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty even remarks that “‘life’ in Michotte’s experiments exemplifies the flesh” (VI 250). See also VI 178.

that one cannot understand life by studying phylogenetic trees and the fixed morphology of various dead species.

Particularly exemplary of this new view of biology are studies of *developing* organisms, both human and animal. Merleau-Ponty points out that the irreducibility of the totality – so important for a non-reductive view of life – is “particularly striking in genesis” (NC 207). That is, in the generation and growth – in the natality of – an organism from birth, we can see more obviously the need to attend to the totality. In the Nature Courses considered here, Merleau-Ponty develops his natal ontology through studies of genesis, both of an individual organism and of a plurality of organisms. Studies of the generation of life are relevant to his ontological project because, as he puts it, “problems of genesis... put the very fabric of being into question” (NC 243). Nonetheless, he reminds the phenomenologist that such reflection is undertaken in order to elucidate the *meaning* of these studies for a life lived in relation to them:

... philosophy is not concerned with genesis [per se], with empirical circumstance; it is not from them that comes that which is engendered – Scheler – but this would suppose essence descending into existence, the transcendental order perpendicular to the horizontal order of facts: Where is the joint¹⁵² of this welding? It is this suture or seam that interests us in genesis, not the ‘conditions of existence’ for themselves. (NC 229)

Events of genesis show the “suture” of the horizontal order of life with the vertical order of reflective on that life. Genesis stretches the flesh of the world and shows these seams and fibers: Nature, living and emerging temporally, and our ideal concept “Nature,” vertically ex-static in relation to this temporality. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology aims not to offer insights into the *process* of genesis, but into the meaning of belonging to such being in which genesis appears. As we reflect on the relation between genetics and

¹⁵² Again, Merleau-Ponty alludes to the jointure, the vinculum, the event that is the intersection of vertical and horizontal, and to the tradition of so-describing the participation of body and soul.

development, we might want to keep in mind these priorities. Nature emerges in a totality that includes a plurality, and, as natals ourselves, we study Nature in order to understand the existential meaning and responsibility of belonging to this totality that generates Nature.

Genesis and Animal Development

To exemplify the complex, irreducible relationship between organism and world, Merleau-Ponty recounts a famous 1929 experiment on the axolotl lizard by a pioneering neuroembryologist G.E. Coghill.¹⁵³ Merleau-Ponty describes the axolotl lizard as “a very long lizard, about seven inches, which as a tadpole lives in the water, then, once it has its four legs, develops on land” (NC 141). The axolotyl, now often studied for its regenerative abilities, exhibits neoteny, meaning that although it is an amphibian, it reaches sexual maturity without metamorphosing; this makes the amphibian an interesting test case for developmental studies.¹⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty describes how at first, the tadpole has no motility, but it *does* have a sensory system. When it moves on land, its rear legs develop first, prompting a movement to which the developing front legs adapt: “In brief, the local reactions are enveloped in a narrow way in the total behavior” (NC 141). As the axolotl develops from an embryo, its nervous and motor systems grow together.¹⁵⁵ We might think that the lizard has a sensory system before it acquires motor skills and so the development of the lizard depends ultimately and entirely on its nervous

¹⁵³ See Coghill’s major work, *Anatomy and the Problem of Behaviour*.

¹⁵⁴ C.f. www.axolotyl.org, and Armstrong and Malacinski.

¹⁵⁵ Originally, the “cells are of the same kind, and what distinguishes them is the direction of conduction: toward the head or toward the tail, following from which they are motor or sensory” (NC 143). Merleau-Ponty sees this as a result of “gradients.” Though “gradients” as Merleau-Ponty imagined them are in fact an out-dated concept in biology, the co-development of sensory and motor systems still holds.

system. Rather, the neural and motor systems dynamically co-develop, so that “for the axolotl, to exist from head to tail and to swim are the same thing” (NC 144).

Reinforcing the themes of *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty explains, expanding on Coghill, that axolotl’s development shows that “there is no difference between the organization of the body and behavior, since the body is defined as the place of behavior” (NC 146). As a result, Merleau-Ponty identifies the comportment of the axolotl with its very existence: for the axolotl to exist *as axolotl* and to swim “are the same thing” (NC 144). The structures of the behavior, integrated into their environment, are inseparable from the body of the organism itself. Comportment, far from an ideal projection, inheres in the very existence of the animals: it “appears as a principle immanent to the organism itself” (NC 145). The totality of comportment is not an illusion any more than the body of the organism is an illusion.

Coghill’s embryological studies reveal that a reductive view – one that understands the organism in terms of simplest parts, independent of the situation – fails to describe the self-organizing *momentum* of the organism. This is the same sort of momentum that Merleau-Ponty described in the *Phenomenology* in relation to human affective life¹⁵⁶: the motion of the organism is motivated and caught up in a momentum. The comportment of a living organism points to an excess, a momentum beyond itself which contributes to the movement of the individual organism. As we saw in the *Structure of Behavior*, analysis cannot reduce the development of the organism to a set of smallest parts at the chemical level which simply cause a developmental reaction in the organism; in so doing, analysis would miss the momentum of the situation, the environment of the organism. Instead, particular reactions only emerge in relationship to total comportment: these “local

¹⁵⁶ See Chapter 2.

reactions are implicated within local behavior” (NC 142). A bottom-up view of the organism explains the total situation no better than a top-down, teleological view of the organism. No prescient neural system organizes the development of the organism from the top down. Following Coghill, Merleau-Ponty explains these particular developmental phenomena in terms of an outdated model of gradients, but the basic conclusions still hold for more current version of embryological development.¹⁵⁷

Without access to the details of the underlying mechanisms, Merleau-Ponty saw the need to study development as a cycle between organism and environment. Today, his insights have been confirmed by the theories of epigenesis, which means roughly “outside genetics” (Jaenish 245).¹⁵⁸ While some early geneticists mistook the genome for a fixed, pre-given set of traits, epigenetics shows that the environment and other factors influence the expression of certain elements of the genome. Contrary to the common assumption that genetic encoding indicates inevitable expression of a “hard-wired” trait, epigenetics shows a more subtle interaction between organism and environment.¹⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty himself notes a connection to epigenesis (NC 152), but at the time he wrote, “epigenesis” referred roughly to the theory that animal forms emerge and develop rather than simply unfolding into a pre-given form.¹⁶⁰ Today, biologists have clarified the genetic mechanism of this process through morphogens,¹⁶¹ describing how epigenetic suppression and expression allow for cellular differentiation from stem cells (Jaenish

¹⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty describes the development thus: “The first behavior of the animals is thus organized under preneural gradients: the nervous system emerges from a preneural dynamic” (NC 143).

¹⁵⁸ For further, in-depth discussion of epigenesis and development in particular, see Robert.

¹⁵⁹ For an excellent summary of the relevant features of epigenetics to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, see Meecham and Papageorgiou.

¹⁶⁰ On this history, see Jablonka and Lamb.

¹⁶¹ Morphogens – literally “formgiving” – are “a particular type of signaling molecule that sets the positional value of a cell by forming a concentration gradient across the developmental field in which the cell resides” (Tabata 620).

245).¹⁶² In this process, a morphogen does not directly equate to a certain morphology; rather morphogens create an environment that tends to cause certain gene expression, according to a sort of feedback loop, a cycling of molecules that gradually condition the emerging form of the organism. Epigenesis can also condition gene expression in adults (Jaenish 245) and differentiate gene expression in genetically similar organisms such as twins.

As Merleau-Ponty so clairvoyantly puts it, “What is ‘genetically’ first is not necessarily transcendently first... Genesis truly understood must show a relation to the whole” (NC 229). He uses the word “genetically” here most likely to refer to the general sense of the temporal history of a living being, but we can also understand this sentence if we twist his meaning a bit and use “genetically” in the sense of “what is given in the genome.” As Darian Meacham and Anna-Pia Papageorgiou point out, Merleau-Ponty himself had already determined that “the distinction between the two plans (natural and cultural) is abstract,” and thus, Merleau-Ponty would no doubt affirm that “neither the corporeal event of the epigenetic marker, nor the field of latent sense that is opened by it can be thought independently of it” (Meacham 71). Genetics *informs* an account of natural life, but even genetics cannot be thought independently of the situation in which genes are expressed. Genes express themselves in relation to a totality that encompasses not only the organism, but the plurality of like organisms, and also the environment broadly construed. Genetics alone does not suffice as an account of Nature; human

¹⁶² Coghill and his contemporaries – and therefore Merleau-Ponty – did not yet understand which molecules caused which sorts of developments nor how they caused gene expression, but they did recognize that the chemical makeup of a cell is polarized and that certain features emerged in relation to these variations. Currently, biologists postulate that gradients of morphogens allow cells to speed up development. The concentration of a particular morphogen molecule in an area of a cell prefigures the future development of the cell by affecting gene expression in certain cells: “A morphogen signal is transduced through an intracellular signaling cascade to the nucleus, where it regulates the transcription of target genes in the receiving cells” (Tabata 628).

existence cannot be understood through an appeal to a “genetic” account that forgets the total being in which genetics emerges.

While I do not claim that Merleau-Ponty had prescient insights into genetics per se, he does express a precocious understanding of the implications of this new, more dynamic view of biology. He saw the shift in biology from a static study of forms to a dialectical study of life in an environment. Perhaps because his work preceded the explosion of genetic theory, he could grasp the basic tenets and link them to phenomenology; this process of interdisciplinary work becomes increasingly difficult with the specialization of each field. In any case, Merleau-Ponty situates current developments in relation to a phenomenology of Nature that can shed light on what these new theoretical developments into Nature mean for the humans investigating them. In short, Merleau-Ponty argues that “the nervous system is not the last explanation” for life (NC 142). Today, we might say the same of the genome. “Nature” cannot be neatly identified with genome as if either were fixed or raw material. Rather, the dynamic nature of this developmental system leads us to understand the living organism as system that unfolds in time, not a pre-given, final form that must simply be unpacked. The organism’s Nature is not just some *final* outcome of genes, but the dynamic system of *momentum* across time. An organism moves forward from its natal momentum. Coghill saw that before there is a neural system to call for certain behaviors, there must already be a momentum toward the development of the neural system. Neither pure mechanism nor pre-given teleology describes the embryonic development of the organism.¹⁶³ A “

¹⁶³ As Dewitte points out, while classical teleology is certainly rejected, it may be reasonable to retain the contemporary biological use of the term “teleology” (95). Husserl distinguishes between a “telos” resulting from a historically contingent accident and an “entelechy” that inheres in a being. See *Crisis* 16. Merleau-

‘reference to the future’ thus already exists in the embryo” (NC 144). This reference to the future is like the pattern established in a melody that protends into the improvisational cadenza that follows; as Meacham puts it, it is the institution that comportment reinstitutes again and again (68-69). Merleau-Ponty describes this as the “unfurling of behavior” (NC 144), alluding again to the metaphor of the bouquet that opens itself. The axolotl dehisces into the world, its behavior unfolding like the petals of a flower. External conditions might stunt or prevent this unfurling or alternatively hasten and enhance it.

To return to our theme of natality, we can now see how a living – natal – organism differs from non-living matter in its emergence into its environment. An “embryo is not simple matter, but matter which refers to the future” (NC 144). The animal begins elsewhere (has momentum) and aims elsewhere (is motivated). The contingencies in an organism’s environment are both the condition of possibility and the conditions limiting the organism’s existence and freedom. This co-emergence constitutes the natality of the axolotl. The axolotl experiment exemplifies the “coupling of a co-defined self-pole and environment-pole” that emerges at the vital level of the natural world in Thompson’s paraphrase of Merleau-Ponty (Thompson 75). Rather than passively submitting to an exterior world, an organism organizes its environment and at the same time, the organization of the organism depends on solicitation by the environment. Life distinguishes itself from other aspects of the natural world – such as a

Ponty makes similar use of the term “entelechy” and “endogenous” structure of cause; add semi-colon or delete “see”? see in Michotte’s experiments, for example (NC 154).

candle flame or a waterfall – because organisms shape the “physiochemical environment” according to a certain “quiet force,” an “inertia” in their comportment (NC 177).¹⁶⁴

The organism, as natal, defines itself as a momentum through that environment. This momentum carries the organism not just toward some particular final end, but a range of new, unforeseen possibilities. The axolotl is natural insofar as it is born and tends toward *not only death* but its project of life.

Totality and Human Development - Gesell and Embryology

This discussion of lizard development may seem too far removed from the human existence to link the animal to the human, but in the same Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty expands the discussion to describe human development. After relating Coghill’s experiment, Merleau-Ponty links this work to another famous early study of human embryological development by Gesell. Where Coghill considered particular cellular differentiation in animals, Gesell studied nascent behavior in embryos, neonate, and premature infants. Gesell innovatively studied this infant behavior through freeze-frames of a film of infant movement.¹⁶⁵ He argued that, while the gestures of infants might seem to be made at random, in fact they nascently express behavioral tendencies (471). In this way, Gesell led biology, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “back to this side of the frozen

¹⁶⁴ We can see self-organization not only between an organism and an environment, but within an organism. Life maintains itself internally as well as externally. Thompson offers many examples of cellular organization, but Merleau-Ponty himself also cites a study that shows the similarity between “the physiological activity of tissue repair and the behavior activity of the animal that repairs its dwelling” (NC 179). The process of repairing a scar entails a migration of cells within the organism in an orderly fashion that has “the character of finality and of nonfinality: finality, since it is under the dependence of the wound; nonfinality, since it suffices that the wound does not have a manifest existence so that it is not produced” (NC 179). This “intraorganic activity” merges with behavior itself (NC 180). This spiraling principle of Nature unfurls within and without an organism.

¹⁶⁵ Gesell called his method “cinemanalysis” and considered this method to be “a kind of dissection which anatomizes the patterns of behavior” (Gesell 473). Although Gesell considered his method a “morphology” in that he studied certain gestural forms, he found that these forms must be understood as unfolding in time.

structure that anatomy reveals” (NC 151). Gesell’s experiments show, as Merleau-Ponty summarizes, that “all movement exercised by the embryo is the anticipation of a behavior which will be taken up by the child at a higher level” (NC 148). At the same time, these nascent behaviors do not explicitly prescribe to future behaviors. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty notes that Gesell “uses the metaphor of weaving in connection with this” (NC 149). As the behavior of the embryo emerges, it emerges as surprisingly as a design appears on a loom: the movement of the weaver seems to have nothing to do with the final image. As Merleau-Ponty remarks: “The design must appear with a certain surprise, to the extent that it is born of the meeting of threads which have the air of having nothing to do with it” (NC 149).

For Merleau-Ponty, Gesell’s work shows the same reciprocity between developing human and environment as the other experiments show between other organisms and environments. The body of the infant suggests certain behavior forms, as if to assert certain forms and anticipate its future; at the same time, the body opens on to the environment, malleable and changeable. Gesell even inferred that morphogenesis, like that in Coghill’s lizard, accounted for the preneural conditioning of cellular behavior (NC 148); as epigenetic studies now demonstrate, this is indeed the case. Current research in embryology and neonatal studies bears out many of the conclusions of Gesell’s work.

Genesis Points toward Ontology and Diachronous Totality

Yet for Merleau-Ponty, developmental studies are not conclusions in themselves. Instead, they only point toward further philosophical – specifically *ontological* – problems. As he puts it, these developmental studies are “the index of a problem, not

responses” (NC 151). This problem is the status of totality: what is the ontological status of this motivating momentum that appears in natality? Noticing the tendencies of developing organisms, we might be tempted to speak of “hidden powers” and return to a sort of vitalism (NC 152). These studies suggest *not* that “the future is thought in the present” (NC 153). Instead, the coupling of organism and environment reminds us that we also cannot comprehend what an organism is by assessing it as a fixed form at any given time: “There are adherences between the spatial parts of the embryo and the temporal parts of its life” (NC 152). Noticing the dynamic unfolding of life, we ask: “What status must we give totality? Such is the philosophical question that Coghill’s experiments pose, a question which is at the center of this course on the idea of nature and maybe the whole of philosophy” (NC 145).

The possible appearance of a totality in Nature may be “the whole of philosophy”: This is quite a claim and requires some unpacking. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of nature – carried out in the *Structure of Behavior* and in these *Nature Courses* – along with his phenomenology of human action and perception – in the *Phenomenology of Perception* – suggest collectively that life science can only understand its topic if it attends to totality. In ignoring or affirming this excessive totality, life science – phenomenology or biology – implicitly makes an ontological claim. In reflection, phenomenology may distinguish nature from culture, but it cannot forget that prior to reflection, such a distinction does not appear.

The more careful the phenomenology of Nature, the more elusive seems the totality in which life appears. Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on Coghill’s and Gesells’s works show that phenomenology must attend to the totality of animality as emerging in

time, and likewise to human development as emerging in time. But each of these examples considers totality only in relation to a single organism and its world. In the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty also shows that phenomenology must attend to totality between organisms and other organisms, both synchronously and across generations. It is addressing this totality that brings phenomenology toward reflections on evolutionary theory. Merleau-Ponty, drawing on the work of the above theorists and some neo-Darwinians, calls into question the classical Darwinian view of organism.

Totality in Plurality - Trouble with Darwin

In current biology, theories of animality are now inseparable from theories of evolution. Merleau-Ponty saw this interdependence and its significance for a phenomenology of Nature. Depending on the view of the organism, different views of evolution will be possible and vice versa. As Merleau-Ponty describes, “Darwinism [was]... reborn around 1930 with Fisher and Wright” (NC 245). These thinkers calculated the rate of speciation and change through studies of population mutation rate. But they assumed a constant rate of “fitness” of an organism for its environment, as if the only thing that mattered were the pre-given genetic material, failing to account for behavior in an environment. This work, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, is “thought without rigor [that] is a shrinking back from the architectonic, to the pluri-dimensionality of Being” (NC 246). In Merleau-Ponty’s view, these neo-Darwinians could not accept the complexity of the situational totality.¹⁶⁶ They wished for the sort of life they could study

¹⁶⁶ In what follows, when I refer to “Darwinism,” I mean the state of Darwinian evolutionary theory as of 1960 when Merleau-Ponty studied it. More current evolutionary theories may not deserve all of Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms. I do, however, consider his summaries of evolutionary theory at the time to be sufficiently accurate accounts that accord with my own understanding of Morgan, Simpson, Portmann and other neo and post-Darwinians.

statistically, outside of a situation. In a sense, they invented this life and studied it, and imagined that their results could be reapplied to actual life in-situ. But in their oversimplification, they missed the phenomena of life itself. This ideal is “science” but these theories also “drain the facts” (NC 246).

The best model of neo-Darwinism that Merleau-Ponty finds is what we now call “the Modern Synthesis,” or, as he puts it, “the ‘synthetic theory of evolution’” (NC 244). This theory improves upon classical Darwinism by merging the macroscopic theory of selection with microscope work on genetics and on embryology. Originally these theories were thought to contradict one another; embryology and epigenetics were seen as a slippery slope back toward a Lamarckian view of a malleable organism.¹⁶⁷ In fact, as we have seen above, this view of the organism as malleable in relation to its environment advanced evolutionary theory.

More importantly for Merleau-Ponty, Darwinian evolution redefined life in terms of its context in an environment with other life (NC 244). With Darwinian evolution, biologists understand life as “not only of the individual, but of the biosphere or of the world life” (NC 244).¹⁶⁸

For a classical Darwinian, the intentional unfolding of the organism in the environment has definite meaning: *This* behavior of all possible behaviors succeeds in

¹⁶⁷ On this connection to Lamarck see Meacham 67, or Pray 14.

¹⁶⁸ In fact, as Thompson shows, evolutionary biology still splits around this issue of the priority of individual and ecology in defining life; some theorists – most extremely, the proponents of the Gaia hypothesis – argue that we can only define life in relation to other life, and indeed to the complex of life in an ecosystem, particularly the overall ecosystem that makes up the entire earth (119-121). The definition of life includes integration into the biosphere. Other thinkers – such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett – argue that science can define life in relation to one organism or a chain of organisms: Something is alive if it organizes itself, perpetuates itself, and generates similar self-perpetuating, robust systems (Thompson 120). Merleau-Ponty appears to have conflated the neo-Darwinian definition of life with an ecological view of life. This ecological view corresponds to his own view of life in general as participating in the flesh of the world. Rather than separable and distinct from its environment, life appears as a fold in the flesh of world.

this environment. Behavior and its particular relation to an environment are not an illusion. But the classical Darwinian approach transfers all intentionality to the environment while at the same time retaining only a mechanistic account of cause.

Darwinism thus

suppresses the problem... Darwinian thinking gives the actual world the power to determine the only possible. Yet the exterior world exists only *partes extra partes*; it would engender the whole of behavior by the summation of elements. (NC 175)

If biology appeals to speciation to account for behavior, it only skirts the problem.

Traditionally, biologists determined species by comparing the *forms* – the *eidos*, essences or ideas – of living things. Darwinian evolution shows the mutability of species, and thus that biologists must now attend to species not only as a certain form, but as successful compartments, succeeding or failing as enacted in time in a particular environment. The real question is, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "How will such an individual participate in the idea of its species?" (NC 176). Thus, Darwinian evolution improves understanding of natural life by admitting its mutability, temporality, and relation to a diachronous totality.

But classical Darwinism falls short of fully appreciating the reciprocal influence of the organism on its environment. While appreciating Darwinism as an improvement over biology as a study of fixed morphology, Merleau-Ponty nonetheless has critiques of even this most then-forward thinking version of evolution in the Modern Synthesis.

Animals develop not only morphological traits, but behaviors in relation to environments. These behaviors are not selected "by" the environment. (This would transfer a mysterious *élan vital* to the environment.) Animals intentionally emplace themselves in an environment, rather than passively submitting. In classical Darwinism, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, the environment simply selects the fit animal from fixed morphologies. The

environment issues an ultimatum and organisms must either submit or die: “The axolotl swims because if it didn’t, it wouldn’t exist. The ultimatum of the milieu to the organism explains the adjustment of the organism to the milieu” (NC 151). The new dynamic studies show that instead, “Behavior is neither a simple architectural effect nor a sheath of functions . . . it sketches out its milieu (*Umwelt*); it contains a project in reference to the whole of its life” (NC 151).

For example, Merleau-Ponty describes how a crab can use a sea anemone to either camouflage itself or, alternatively, consume the anemone as food.¹⁶⁹ The crab determines alternative meanings of its surroundings (NC 176). The environment, which includes sea anemones, does not simply act unilaterally on the crab: the crab chooses either to eat the anemone or to employ it for other intentions. The crab adopts a certain orientation toward the environment and opens new meanings and possible behaviors for itself: “the animal defines its territory as a privileged emplacement” (NC 176).¹⁷⁰ There is an inertia in the animal,” a tendency to stay in motion along a trajectory (NC 177); unlike other physical objects, living things gently reorganize their environment to accommodate this trajectory. But organisms cannot guarantee themselves this trajectory; always, they open onto the environment in which they act and they “began elsewhere” in that environment. Uexküll’s crab may make a poor choice, eating an anemone that it ought to have saved to camouflage itself from an incoming predator. Or, born in an

¹⁶⁹ The studies of this crab by Uexküll is also mentioned in Heidegger’s *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 261-264, although the editors of the Nature Course claim that Merleau-Ponty would not have known of this work. Carbone also remarks on this connection (c.f. 29, 36). It would be fascinating to further research and compare Merleau-Ponty’s account with Heidegger’s account, both for philosophical and historical reasons.

¹⁷⁰ Thompson describes the environment-organizing activity as “sense-making.” Sense-making capacity combined with adaptability distinguishes living things from other “robust systems. Robust systems also conserve “identity through material change, but life can also “assimilate and accommodate to the environment” (Thompson 148).

unlucky time and place, the crab's habits may not benefit it against new, unforeseeable predators or changing ocean temperatures. But the surging-forth of an environment for the crab is not an illusion: the crab has taken actions whose meaning only appear across time and space.

Animals do not just organize themselves and maintain that organization over time.¹⁷¹ Instead, they enjoy a certain "independence of form from matter," as Hans Jonas puts it (cited in Thompson 152). Although the actual molecules of water, carbon, and nitrogen vary over time, a plant nonetheless maintains its form, independent of this change. This defines self-identity of the life form in relation to its environment. Identifying sense-making capacity and adaptability as criterion for life in general means that we can see a "deep continuity" between "mind and life," to use Thompson's terms. In short, "there is not a break between the planned animal, the animal that plans, and the animal without a plan" (NC 176). Again, rather than a radical break between animal and human life, we find a permutation and a difference in *degree* of innovation, not of type. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, in the behavior of the crab "there is a beginning of culture. The architecture of symbols that the animal brings from its side thus defines within Nature a species of preculture" (NC 176). In ignoring the effect of the organism on its environment, Darwinism forecloses the possibility of understanding this animal "preculture" and, by implication, human culture in its more complex forms.

Another way that we can express Merleau-Ponty's critique of Darwinism is that the trouble with standard evolutionary theory is that it prioritizes mortality over natality.

¹⁷¹ In that sense, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of life distinguishes itself from even the most generous account of Aristotelian philosophy of life where life is a being-at-work-staying itself (see Sachs). Living things do not simply work at maintaining a pre-given state of being, but determine their mode of being in conjunction with their environment and can maintain a range of modes of being through a variety of strategies.

Darwinian thought means “a factor of life replaced by a factor of death” (NC 244). To the question, “What is life?,” the Darwinian can only respond, “It is what did not die,” according to Merleau-Ponty.¹⁷² Darwinian thought resolves “the problem of knowing where a certain resolute being comes from by showing how other beings are not” (NC 244). For Darwin, the environment, the milieu, simply decides whether or not certain structures survive. If a certain structure exists in an environment, then the environment has chosen it to be existence. By implication, there is some “idea according to which the milieu discriminates that which allows or does not allow the survival of the organism” (NC 151). Classical Darwinism transfers agency from the organism to the environment, forgetting the reciprocal influence of organism on environment.

This prioritization of mortality as the factor of selection is not supported by current epigenetic research; Merleau-Ponty again identifies a key problem with simplistic Darwinism through his natal ontology. As genetics advances to more subtle understanding of genotype and phenotype, heredity and epigenetics, biology accommodates an increasingly flexible view of the organism. Even by 1960, geneticists saw there were “several genes for one single character, several characters for one single gene... there are ‘potentialities of development’ which are inherited” rather than a simple one-to-one correspondence of trait and genome (NC 248). But even these advances, this “making-supple of genetics allows [science] to seal off a gap between the theoretical schema... and the facts” (NC 248). No matter how “supple” genetic theory becomes, it cannot become a theory of Nature if it restricts itself to a single scale of study that

¹⁷² Merleau-Ponty appears to have correctly assessed evolutionary theory insofar as I am capable of assessing it myself. Were evolutionary theory shown to be capable of orientation toward natality, then I would welcome correction of Merleau-Ponty’s view and my own on this point.

assumes an objective and objectifying standpoint. Ontological value must be restored – or given for the first time – to the excessive totality of Nature.

Valorizing mortality over natality, neo-Darwinism could only see life retrospectively and negatively: it misses the unpredictability of natality. Life is a capacity for initiation, for beginning and freedom in a certain stylistic range, not a mere avoidance of or lack of death. The Darwinian animal is selected based on how useful its adaptations are for not-dying in its environment. When animals develop certain behaviors – for example, making a nest – these behaviors are originally activities that, in Merleau-Ponty's description

... do not have an object; they come to hook onto an object without being oriented toward this object... The heron one day perceives leaves, falls in front of them in a sort of ecstasy, then executes the behavioral stratagem of accumulation of leaves for the nest and then falls back to calm. It is not that the instinct is yet there, but that it is announced by partial relations. (NC 191)

The appearance of nascent future behaviors in present behaviors refers to something *in* the organism, not just *for* us. He puts it like this:

[T]he outlines of the organism in the embryo constitute a factor of imbalance. It is not because we humans consider them as outlines that they are such, but because they break the current balance and fix the conditions for a future balance. (NC 156)

In Merleau-Ponty's view, Bergson, for example, missed this imbalance: he failed to note the lack in the present that indicates the future of the organism. Natality would have different meaning were it not so fragile and inseparably linked to mortality and temporality. Bergson sees absence "only in the mind" not in the natural world, but Merleau-Ponty points out that "in biology, absence has a signification: the death of an organism" (NC 66). This death coincides with a lack of productivity: a lack of the ordering and instituting of life. Sometimes when we perceive a lack of ordering and

beginning in the natural world, this is not just a lack in our perception: Nature itself lacks that order. Nature includes not just the activity of life, of the *élan vital* expressing itself in matter, but the cessation of life. If we do not acknowledge this difference, then we fail to see the true miracle of natality.¹⁷³ In this oversight, Bergson misses the phenomena of Nature itself: natural life is limited. Instead of viewing life as an all-powerful *élan vital*, “the reality of life that we would have to recognize would be limited” (NC 157).

Structures inhere in organisms, not just our perception. We cannot aim behind or below the unreality of perception toward some more true reality at a molecular or submolecular level: “The notion of the real is not necessarily linked to that of molecular being” (NC 157). Instead, for us the problem of the real appears at the level of the living thing.

When an animal comports itself, a tension arises between activity and meaning-in-the-world. This a productive tension: “This tension meets the object not so much because it is directed toward it as because it is a means capable of resolving the tension, as if the object intervened ... as if it brought to the animal the fragment of a melody that the animal carried within itself” (NC 192). Merleau-Ponty compares the tug of instinct on animal life to dream life: “There is an oneiric, sacred, and absolute character of instinct... both an inertia and a hallucination, oneiric behavior, capable of making a world and of picking up any object of the world” (NC 193). This tug tightens into a “tension that wants to find relief without knowing why” (NC 193). A norm tugs on behavior but does not prescribe behavior; the tension might resolve itself through some unforeseen permutation. The organism has the capacity to generate *new* possibilities: its natality does not stipulate a life, but orients it and sets it in productive tension with its world. As Sean Kelly and Thompson have stressed, this tension around a norm is

¹⁷³ On Merleau-Ponty’s view of Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, see Chapter 5.

constitutive of behavior in general for Merleau-Ponty.¹⁷⁴ In the case described by Merleau-Ponty, however, the tension across the norm is analogous not just to the relationship we might have in judging an artistic object, but to the productive tension in generating this artistic object.

Merleau-Ponty again turns toward the domain of art for a model of the dynamic totality he intends as occurring between an organism and its environment. He compares the totality of behavior that Gesell's developmental studies reveal to the totality of a final painting in contrast to the production of the painting. A painter, like the organism, works within a certain field of freedom and according to a certain style. Her body tends toward certain gestures but no one gesture determines the form of the painting. To illustrate this clearly, Merleau-Ponty describes a film of Picasso drawing. In this clip – now displayed at the Picasso museum in Paris and on-line – Picasso draws the famous bull/minotaur figure in his later work. But he draws it without a canvas or a brush in his hand; instead, only a light moving in the air is captured. So practiced is Picasso's gesture, that he can generate the gestures that portray "bull" without any visual record. His body knows the pattern; his eyes would only supply redundant information. But to the viewer, the appearance of the bull is almost miraculous: Picasso squats and jumps and reaches, seemingly at random, and yet the record of that gesture is the image of a bull. Likewise,

Matisse threw his brush in as many diverse places as possible, and after a certain time, logic appeared. It's the same thing for the body of behavior in Gesell. Threads are tied up, which come from everywhere, and which constitute independent forms, and at the same time, he finds that these threads realize something which has a unity. (NC 154)

The painting analogy reveals some subtleties that the musical analogy used previously does not: we see that the relation between the generation and the formal result may be

¹⁷⁴ See Kelly "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty" and Thompson 147.

oblique. The final form that appears emerges gradually, in a spiral between the artist and the environment. When we see a painting, we attend to this final form. If we were to study painting, like we study an organism, we would need to attend both to the final, meaningful form and to the strange interweaving of gestural threads that lead to it. But we could not *just* watch the painter's arm movement because such study would be meaningless without reference back to the generated painting. The working biologist, whether or not she admits it, attends to the unity that emerges as well as to the individual threads of behavior or threads of molecular interaction. She implicitly admits the *being* of these totalities as well as the being of the individual organism or the individual parts of the organism. Without attention to the totality that these forms generate, these individual threads would have as little meaning as longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates of Picasso's hand, without reference to the final picture. The biologist, aware of the temporal unfolding of behavior in time, secretly performs the same sort of judgment as a person regarding a painting.

Talking about "adaptation" in the classical Darwinian sense gives the impression that at distinct moment in time, an organism altered itself in relation to the world, rather than temporally unfolding in a reciprocal relationship with its environment. Neither a God of finalist teleology nor an omnipotent genome predetermines particular adaptive behaviors. An organism's adaptive behaviors emerge through the confluence of style and environment. This range of contingencies constitutes the animal's freedom to initiate in its world.

Understanding adaptation according to simple utility would be to posit either "a somewhat vague proof of finality, or rather as a mysterious relation between the animal

and the milieu... a unity of the 'world of will' that would hide behind 'the world of representations,' as Schopenhauer would say" (NC 185). We cannot simply exclude the un-useful from understanding of natural life: Nature encompasses the productive activity itself, not merely an action for certain ends.

All in all, these issues are "the occasion to question Darwinian ideology" (NC 186). If we suggest that animals organize their environment and consciously adapt according to usefulness, then we implicitly return to a finalistic model of cause in Nature: Nature in-itself contains a causality that we can never know. Alternatively, if we assume that the crab merely reacts mechanistically to external stimuli, then there is only mechanistic Nature in-itself that appears, falsely, to be organized for-us. Instead, acknowledging the participation of organisms in organizing an environment helps us to avoid the "old dilemma" of a split between Nature in-itself and Nature for-us. For example, the biologist Uexküll, according to Merleau-Ponty, was troubled by the ontological implications of his claims about behavior. He thus makes some postulations about a secret "*Naturfaktor*" that prompts the motivated actions of living things. Uexküll is, at first, in Merleau-Ponty's words "agnostic" about this motivation for the unfolding in Nature, but then he himself makes the connection between judgment of totality in the domain of art and science (NC 173). To describe the motivated, temporal development of the organism in its environment, Uexküll says that we can think of "the unfurling of an *Umwelt* as a melody that is singing itself" (NC 173). I will quote at length Merleau-Ponty's reflections on this analogy. He writes:

This is a comparison full of meaning. When we invent melody, the melody sings in us much more than we sing it; it goes down the throat of the singer, as Proust says. Just as the painter is struck by a painting which is not there, the body is suspended in what it sings: the melody is

incarnated and finds in the body a type of servant. The melody gives us a particular consciousness of time. We think naturally that the past secretes the future ahead of it. But this notion of time is refuted by the melody. At the moment when the melody begins, the last note is there, in its own manner. In a melody, a reciprocal influence between the first and the last note takes place, and we have to say that the first note is possible only because of the last, and vice versa. It is the way things happen in the construction of a living being. (NC 174)

Several claims are made in this passage with regard to productivity, temporality, and ontological status. Let us consider each in turn. First, notice that Merleau-Ponty imagines a setting in which we *invent* the melody; this is not the melody of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" as hummed by someone today in the shower, but the melody for the original piece as it overtook Beethoven himself. When Beethoven sang this tune to himself, the tune overtook him: the song "went down his throat." Beethoven did not actively swallow the tune; it invaded him and gestated within him. The tune took over his body and this body was "suspended" in the song, the very song that he gave birth to. Thus, the living thing gives birth to a comportment that overtakes its life and carries the living thing to a future that it both began and to which it submits. This futurity leads us to think that the past already contained this future in it; in a living thing, this would mean that an organism came into the world with a tiny germ of its future that would merely inevitably unfold. The organism would be like medieval images of the fetus: a tiny person compressed into a seed pod. This would be the assumption of finalism.

In more contemporary terms, we might assume that an organism's genetic code contains a script for all its future possibilities. The organism merely plays out this pre-given script. But the melody analogy corrects this model. In composition, an unforeseen totality guides the emerging piece. Some historical and personal contingencies give rise to a style, but this style does not lead directly to any particular piece. In my example,

Beethoven scored a tune for the poem, *An die Freude* by Friedrich Schiller, the Romantic poet. This tune appears in Beethoven's *Nine Symphony*. When Beethoven wrote "Ode to Joy," Schiller's words haunted him, but they did not dictate a melody. He lived with the composition until it prompted him toward a melody. This melody carried itself forward into the tune and then into the symphony.¹⁷⁵

Neither a tune nor a symphony can be understood by considering its form at any given moment in time. Likewise, "Behavior cannot be understood if we understand it moment by moment" (NC 175). The reciprocity between organism and environment cannot be seen just as a circle – visible at a glance in space – but like a spiral, rotating and unfurling. Phenomenology adds temporality to morphologically-oriented biology and Schelling's circular philosophy of Nature. Nature appears in time, not only in space. We cannot simply tack one moment of time onto another, as if a series of distinct moments were discernable. As Husserl shows in his lectures on internal time consciousness, time appears with a protention into the future and a retention of the past; no "pure" present is available to the subject. Moreover, this is not an illusory model time distorted by its appearance *for* the subject; as we saw through Whitehead in the last chapter, contemporary physics shows us that we cannot appeal to some "pure" and therefore linear time. Instead, the time of appearance of a dying star for us and the time of death of that star for itself, interleave and overlap in time and space.

The same might be said of the dynamic principle at play between animal comportment and the environment. Nature unfurls in time for the organism itself and for ourselves. We cannot unravel a linear chain of events to show either that some first cause

¹⁷⁵ This is my "just-so" story of Beethoven's compositional process. It is true that he took the libretto from Schiller, but I make no specific historical or musicological claims about the origin of the piece. I only clarify Merleau-Ponty's account of how such composition might have happened.

entailed all the following events or that there is a “priority of effect over cause. Just as we cannot say that the last note the end of the melody and that the first is the effect of it, neither can we distinguish the meaning apart from the meaning where it is expressed” (NC 174). Nature corresponds not to a state of affairs but to the *meaning* unfolding between life and environment.

Let us return to the question raised by Gesell’s experiments on development—how do we think about totality? – by considering how Merleau-Ponty conveys what the biologist witnesses. In order to capture the sense of totality in behavior that he intends, Merleau-Ponty again employs the metaphor of a melody:

We can place the embryonic development which first becomes symmetrical, then asymmetrical, parallel with the natal phases... Behavior develops ‘in a spiral.’ If this is the case, then every motor theme of embryonic life can be considered as a theme that will be elaborated at a higher level in postnatal life. (NC 148)

Again, the metaphor from the sphere of art is no mere arbitrary coincidence. Witnessing the totality of behavior requires a sort of judgment akin to that of a person listening to a piece of music. The working biologist attends to the prefigurations of the eventual behavioral melody in the embryo; she has a sense of where the melody will go in adulthood and looks for hints of it in these nascent stages. As in the *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty depends on this metaphor to escape reposing the problem of behavior in the standard terminology: The biologist does not witness a stimulus and a response, nor a linear chain of cause and effect. She attunes herself to an emergent pattern, an improvisation on a theme rather than the filling in of pre-given categories. As we saw in the *Structure of Behavior*, this type of judgment shares much with Kantian aesthetic judgment. To return to the issues posed at the beginning of this chapter, we see

the first piece in poetic phenomenology. Where Schelling's poetic consciousness caught itself in a circle, Merleau-Ponty gently refines that movement into a spiral. Though a spiral might indefinitely coil in on itself, a site on an inner coil differs from a site on an outer coil. The temporal unfolding of the movement reveals itself in the form. A poetic phenomenology attends to such temporal unfolding of totalities like behavior.

We do not need to postulate a new type of force or causality at play in life to reorient phenomenology toward totality. This might be the worry of adaptionist-evolutionists who critique Steven J. Gould¹⁷⁶: are we unnecessarily inserting a macro "life force" with macro-phenomena? But moving past Uexküll's agnosticism does not require adopting a faith-like stance on a mysterious life force; it does, however, require shifting a paradigm that claims Nature can be defined a-temporally or microscopically. When a living thing participates in organizing its environment,

[There is a] surging-forth of a privileged milieu... not the manifestation of a new force. The living being works only with physicochemical elements, but these subordinated forces join the unseen relations between them. We can at this moment speak of an animal. This moment is not entirely under the dependence of physicochemical conditions. The animal is like a quiet force. (NC 177)

The appearance of animal life does not indicate the spontaneous appearance of a super-physical force. Like the weak ties between hydrogen and oxygen, the animal is a "quiet force," but also an effective and natural one. The animal engenders this weak force with its birth, a birth that in turn depends on similar weak forces at play between environment and ancestral life forms. Unlike the strong messianic promise of a finalist teleology, this weak force – like Benjamin's "weak messianism" – draws an animal towards a future,

¹⁷⁶ See below, on Gould and Simpson.

but an open future fraught with contingency and the detritus of the real world and the real environment.¹⁷⁷

Exceptions to Critique: Simpson, Gould, and Macroevolution

Of the neo-Darwinian theorists, Merleau-Ponty highlights as exceptional to this general failure of evolutionary theory the work of George Simpson, a paleontologist (NC 247). One problem that evolutionary theorists were facing at the time of the neo-Darwinian revolution was understanding the differences in rates of evolution between parts of an organism and of organism as a whole. Certain theorists postulated in advance that there was some general “uniform rate of evolution” for both parts and whole organisms (NC 248). But no such consistent rate can be confirmed. Instead of making this assumption, Simpson started from paleontological evidence of rapid changes in morphology at a macroscopic scale; on a macroscopic scale “discontinuity is the rule” (NC 248). Simpson’s work “brings the paleo-ontological fact back to a ‘causal background’” (NC 248). Much of neo-Darwinism assumed a linear, horizontal “progress” in evolution. But for Merleau-Ponty, this assumption obstinately clings to a Cartesian model of causality; we can “compare [it to] Descartes: there is not more in creation than in conservation = philosophy of the horizontal” (NC 250).

Simpson’s work prefigures the now controversial yet popular work by Steven Jay Gould. In a recent festschrift on Simpson’s work, Gould reaffirms Simpson’s work in more contemporary terms. For Simpson, evolution as viewed through paleontology could study not only an established “phylogeny” but the “processes and mechanisms”

¹⁷⁷ I return to “weak-messianism” as Arendt describes it in Chapter 8, Conclusion. See Benjamin *Illuminations* 57.

that generated these life forms (Gould 130). Paleontologists examine morphology and long-term change. That is, they study life at a different scale and over a longer time period; both in space and time, paleontology points toward a larger totality. This view accommodates “a plurality of factors in evolution, [and a] plurality of evolutions (micro-macro-mega evolution)” (NC 247). To return to Bergson’s analogy of life as the painting of a canvas, Simpson’s and Gould’s work each suggests that paleontology can show the history of the process that generated the picture, not just the state of the current picture itself. Simpson identified the “tempo” and “mode” of evolution as the objects of paleontological study. These terms describe the method and rate of change at a macroscopic level. In Gould’s view “micro and macro evolution are not opposed, but neither does one follow by extrapolation from (and therefore become intellectually subservient to) the other” (Gould 135). Evolution must be studied not only through the examination of living organisms – as done by molecular biologists working in genetics – but through paleontology precisely in order to reveal the transformations at a macroscopic level. In Gould’s view “if important new causes arise at higher phenomenological levels of long time or great magnitude,” then the paradigm for understanding evolution must change (136).¹⁷⁸ In particular, Gould advocates a tough-

¹⁷⁸ In the controversial *Punctuated Equilibrium*, Gould expands on this theory, originally propounded in a 1977 paper. Many current adaptationist evolutionary theorists – such as Daniel Dennett – have excoriated Gould for positing unnecessary macro phenomena to what can be explained solely through other means. Interestingly, Gould attributes what he calls a “phenomenological” position to the molecular biology view (127). According to Gould, a phenomenological account of evolution offers “a descriptive accounting dedicated to documenting that life followed this particular pathway, rather than another route equally plausible in theory” (127). So defined, phenomenology would be interested only in actual Nature, not possible Natures, in description of a neutral state of affairs with an irrelevant history rather than a still-emerging state of affairs whose history has implications for its future. By contrast, I would suggest that a phenomenological account – properly described via Merleau-Ponty – would be quite close to Gould’s own. Gould assumes that phenomenology equates to static phenomenology. We have seen that generative phenomenology, far from studying only static forms, attends to the generation of forms over time in a macroscopic totality that includes both organisms and the environment. (Ironically, Gould does wryly

minded pluralism that would attend to the complexity of this situation and allow for possible “punctuated equilibrium” rather than steady, slow change over time.

Goold does self-critically point to the problem with such macro-oriented, tough-minded pluralism: there is a problem with identifying criteria for evolutionary selection at all these various levels (139). That is, how can we transfer the rigorous criterion of molecular biology to macroscopic study, whether paleontological or phenomenological?

This is a deep criticism, and I do not think Merleau-Ponty addresses it. (I return to this issue in my Conclusion.) As we will see again, his own methodology for macroscopic attention to totality comes from the arts, not from the sciences. Merleau-Ponty’s work – like perhaps other phenomenological reflections on the practice of science – remains to a degree a negative critique rather than a clear positive prescription for new practice in biology. The suggestions Merleau-Ponty implicitly makes are that science can learn much by attending to the practice of art. These suggestions happen in the guise of metaphors and comparisons between these two domains, as we have seen in the Nature Courses and also in “Eye and Mind.”

Conclusions – Ontology and Appearance

In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty returns to Coghill’s experiment and the issue of totality. In this article, he more explicitly connects the experiment to his critique of reductive science. He remarks that in his “present time...our embryology and biology are full of ‘gradients,’” suggesting that gradients are descriptive trends that will fade – as they have – in favor of more precise terminology. But his critique cuts much deeper than

admit that if the solution is to be found anywhere, it might be in postmodern thought, whatever “silliness in architecture and incomprehensibility in literature” it may also have engendered (135).)

the suggestion that biology has not reached its final conclusions on development. I quote at length a passage that requires much explication:

Just how these differ from what classical tradition called ‘order’ or ‘totality’ is not at all clear. This question, however, is not raised; it is not even allowed. The gradient is a net we throw out to sea, without knowing what we will haul back in it. It is the slender twig upon which unforeseeable crystallizations will form. No doubt this freedom of operation will serve well to overcome many a pointless dilemma – provided only that from time to time we take stock, and ask ourselves why the apparatus works in one place and fails in others. For all its flexibility, science must understand itself; it must see itself as a construction based on a brute, existent world and not claim for its blind operations the constitutive value that ‘concepts of nature’ were granted in a certain idealist philosophy. (NC 122)

In an oft-cited passage in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes a similar allusion to trawling in the sea. In that case, he speaks of the practice of phenomenology: “Husserl’s essences are destined to bring back all the living relationships of experience, as a the fisherman’s net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed” (PP xvii). The key difference between this sort of phenomenological “trawling” for living beings and the reductive objectivism of certain practices in science appears in the second part of Merleau-Ponty’s example above. The working concept of the gradient is like a twig on which scientific ideas crystallize.

Merleau-Ponty alludes to a famous passage from Stendhal’s *Love*:

At the mines of Salzburg, they throw a leafless wintry bough into one of the abandoned workings. Two or three months later they pull it out covered with a shining deposit of crystals.... What I have called crystallization is a mental process which draws from everything that happens new proofs of the perfection of the loved one. (Stendhal 19)

For Stendhal, this mental process of crystallization means that after falling in love, “a man in love sees every perfection in the object of his love” (Stendhal 45). In love, we are not blind, but we are misguided; like some sort of cognitively disabled Oliver Sacks

patient, we have the strange habit of mis-attributing all virtue to one person. The scientist makes a similar mistake in attributing too much ontological value to concepts on which knowledge crystallizes.

The biologist must ask herself, what appearance suggested the concept of gradients in the first place? It is to that “thing itself” that biology must return: the vinculum at which the vertical and horizontal orders intersect, where Nature and our concept “Nature” meet. To make progress as science, biology cannot attribute more reality to its constructs than to the thing itself. Recall from the previous discussion of Whitehead that a philosophy of science ought to explain (or at least attend to) the continuity between the macroscopic, microscopic, and personal levels of appearance. Phenomenology should reveal our ontological commitment to “middle-sized” everyday objects which are our “conceptual firsts” as Quine puts it (*Word and Object* 5). The ontological value of these personal-sized objects should not be subsumed or forgotten in relation to macroscopic and microscopic objects of scientific study. None of these viewpoints offers more valid insight into Nature itself because Nature itself crosses all these domains, the vinculum of the flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty requires the metaphor of the vinculum to make precise this jointure; to my mind, no term in either philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, or existential philosophy quite captures this aspect of Nature.

To explain the “thing itself,” the appearance “cell-developing,” the biologist casts out a net of theory: in this case, the theory of gradients. But instead of releasing the living thing, the biologist allows ideas about life to crystallize. She claims for these crystallizations a reality not attributed to the life itself. In this, she implicitly expresses

an ontological position; as de Waehlens pointed out in the forward, unveiling this implicit ontology has been Merleau-Ponty's concern since the *Structure of Behavior*.

At the time Merleau-Ponty gave his Nature Courses, the notion of gradients had great popularity and claimed a strong objective value. It seemed that biology had discovered something "more objective," with more reality than was available in previous theories of cell development. Indeed, biologists had hit upon an important aspect of cell development. But the question is, are gradients *real*? How real? More real than the apparent behavioral structures of the developing organism? But less real than the molecular and even sub-molecular structures beneath them? What of the ontological status of the melody of behavior? And, by analogy, what of the ontological status of the comportment of the organism? How real is this appearance? These are the ontological questions of a natal ontology in contrast to a phenomenology of life. In posing such questions, ontology does not become nominalism or conventionalism. Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology does not deny the reality of the ideal constructs of biology, but it suggests that these constructs imply an ontological position.

Biology now has a standard working account, however incomplete, of some of the molecular structures that cause cell differentiation. Yet perhaps even current models of gradients are merely temporary theoretical constructs that biology will toss out, with the theory of phlogiston, when it uncovers a better molecular or sub-molecular explanation. This is the great "flexibility" of science that Merleau-Ponty notices. But he replies that *despite* that flexibility, science ought to recognize the prereflective perceptual life (to use his early career terminology) or, in other words, the flesh of the brute world (to use his later career terms) in which the living scientist performs her operations.

A natal ontology can not only retain a non-objectifying stance toward Nature, it *ought* to retain a non-objectifying stance. To objectify Nature would reduce to an object independent of a situation and into the sort of totality that Levinas rightly critiques. In suggesting that a ontology *ought* to avoid objectifying, Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology again incorporates an ethical stance into its ontological position. It becomes an ethical error to objectify Nature and to deploy into an ethically and politically fraught human world, an objectified view of human nature.

If life science can resist the impulse to reduce Nature to an object, then it can truly investigate the vinculum. Properly understood, Nature is a "leaf" of Being (NC 305). s Merleau-Ponty's translators point out, the French *feuille* connotes both the fold of an uncut page and a leaf itself (NC 305, note 7). In the former sense, human life as *un feuille* forms not a hole in being but a fold: we are this leaf of Being and we are folded in it, a chiasmatic doubling. Thus, the "Nature outside of us must be unveiled to us by the Nature that we are" (NC 206). This reciprocity has meaning not just for the "I" but for *us*: for the others among which we find ourselves and for ourselves, insofar as we find our *self* inseparable from the others also pleating Being. From this ontological perspective, the "deepening of Nature must clarify to us the other Beings and their engagement in Being" (NC 206).

In these remarks, Merleau-Ponty reinforces the ontological emphasis of his work in these courses. Merleau-Ponty suggests that life science – including phenomenology – must next move beyond the dialectical model of natural life toward a vision of world as flesh: an appearing, visible world.¹⁷⁹ Again, Merleau-Ponty's ontological shift

¹⁷⁹ Thompson identifies this development: "the reciprocal determination of whole and part... is recognizable only to 'dialectical thinking,' but not mechanical thinking" (68). Yet in distinction from

incorporates an ethical shift: in this case, a taking into account the others who appear with us in this life. A natal ontology emphasizes that Being appears, and in particular, appears in a plurality.

For Merleau-Ponty this points toward another flawed assumption underlying simplistic Darwinism. A simplistic evolutionary theory might assume that this activity of adaptation and sense-making occurs according to a principle of utility and one relative to an individual. This caricatured, simplistic view of adaptation¹⁸⁰ imagines that animals only acquire traits according to a minimal criterion of usefulness. For example, if a butterfly imitates other butterflies or displays markings resembling eyes, it has not acquired these behaviors *in order* to fool predators. Instead, the butterfly also appears for other butterflies. Again, the criterion of usefulness would posit that the butterfly appears in order to secure sexual reproduction. But its appearance is in excess of what is “useful.” Its need to appear, rather than a criterion of usefulness, motivates the butterfly. To ignore this and to focus only on utility, would be to make an implicit ontological claim: that a certain behavior must be “useful” to be “real.” But in the view of Merleau-Ponty (and Thompson), this inverts, or at the least distorts, the actual process of evolution. This assumption implicitly retains a finalist model of evolution and misses the unpredictable play that leads to novelty at the genetic and behavioral level: the

Thompson, the dialectical model for Merleau-Ponty is not the final state of life science nor of a phenomenology of Nature. As mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty does claim that by the time he gave his courses on Nature, “biology has become dialectical” (NC 139). But this statement only marks the beginning of his investigation into a new description of what life science can and ought to be because the innovation of dialectical theories in biology only raises new ontological questions for a phenomenology of Nature. Positing a static definition of life according to vitalism or materialism would miss the on-going, generative activity of science itself. Here we see the influence of Husserl’s *Crisis*, noted in the last chapter, on Merleau-Ponty’s view of the practice of biology in particular.

¹⁸⁰ Again, we must keep in mind that Merleau-Ponty critiques the versions of Darwinism and neo-Darwinism popular in his day. Subtler contemporary theories of evolution that take into account such factors as sexual display and epigenesis do not make such mistakes. In either case, the potential problem for Merleau-Ponty would be the covering over of ontological claims.

unpredictability inherent to natality. Adaptation “is not the canon of life, but a particular realization of the tide of natural production,” and utility is “not a criterion for life” (NC 184).

It is to this next implicit ontological claim that, follow Merleau-Ponty – and, as I will show, also Arendt – that I turn my attention. The claim is that natal being is conditioned by appearance. Like all living beings, human beings display for one another. Birth marks the moment of our appearance into a plurality; natality describes the ongoing condition of appearing in a plurality.

Ch 7 Plurality and Visibility

Does God ever judge us by appearances?
I suspect that he does.
- W.H. Auden

Appearance and Display: Arendt, Portmann, and Merleau-Ponty

In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt surprisingly – given her earlier anti-naturalism stance – devotes pages to assessing and affirming the work of the biologist Adolf Portmann. In the midst of a tour-de-force through the history of Western metaphysics, Arendt reflects on the work of Portmann as well as of Merleau-Ponty and the significance of animal display for indicating the human condition of visibility and plurality.¹⁸¹ For Arendt, both Merleau-Ponty and Portmann demonstrate the necessary turn of philosophy from metaphysics and interiority toward ontology, phenomenology, and exteriority. In her early natal philosophy – in *The Human Condition* – Arendt reminds us that we must appear in public in order to participate in the political sphere. In the *Life of the Mind*, Arendt returns to appearance to reflect on it in an ontological and metaphysical sense. In his own later work – the *Visible and the Invisible* – though he makes no reference to *Life of the Mind*, Merleau-Ponty independently confirms and develops Arendt's insight into the turn toward appearances and visibility; Merleau-Ponty shows that as natals we are ontologically defined by the play of visibility and invisibility, display and interiority, that orients us toward others. Merleau-Ponty grounds Arendt's claims about appearance in the human sphere to the ontic details of display in animality.

¹⁸¹ Dewitte points out this reference by Arendt in his essay on Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Portmann (93).

Phenomenology has shown that “we live in an *appearing* world,” Arendt argues, and thus it is “plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in this world of ours should be located precisely on the surface” (LM 27). For Arendt, this phenomenological turn toward appearances is confirmed by Portmann’s work.

Until Portmann’s studies, functionalism was the dominant working hypothesis of biology: it was generally assumed that it was reasonable “to interpret all [animal] appearances as function of the [internal] life process” (LM 27). By contrast, Arendt believes, “Portmann has shown that the facts themselves speak a very different language from the simplistic functional hypothesis” (LM 27). Instead of emphasizing the utility of animals’ forms, Portmann emphasizes “the urge to self-display” by animals. The plumage of birds, for example, cannot be entirely justified by a functionalist appeal to warmth or camouflage from enemies. Rather, birds display for one another. This is an instinct that seems to both Portmann and Arendt to be “entirely gratuitous in terms of life-preservation; it far transcends what may be deemed necessary for sexual attraction” (LM 29). Humans do not merely echo animals tendency toward self-display, but in fact, Arendt believes the phenomena of self-display “reaches its climax in the human species” (LM 30). Self-display, unlike conscious self-presentation, is prereflective and depends on “the consistency and duration of the image thereby presented to the world” (LM 36). She concludes:

These findings suggest that the predominance of outside appearance implies, in addition to the sheer receptivity of our senses, a spontaneous activity: *whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched*. It is indeed as though everything that is alive ... has an *urge to appear*. (LM 29, emphasizes in the original)

For Arendt, the significance of Portmann's work is that it presents evidence that confirms the reversal of certain biological theories but also certain ontological presuppositions. Like Merleau-Ponty, Arendt finds that since Descartes, philosophy has prioritized interiority, the working of the mind for itself, forgetting its appearance in this world for others.¹⁸² Arendt finds frustrating this historical hierarchy of inner over outer person, with its suggestion that "our 'inner life,' is more relevant to what we 'are' than what appears on the outside" (LM 30). For Arendt, we must appear on the outside, in the public sphere, or we do not appear at all. We are visible because we are plural and plural because we are visible. Arendt declares: "Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth" (LM 19). All true human action takes place in a plurality, between people, not in the privacy of an overly hallowed mental life. Arendt certainly advocates thinking: without thought, we risk slipping into banality of evil. But in order to avoid evil, thought *must appear*.

In the *Life of the Mind*, Arendt returns to this theme that she raised in the *Human Condition*, but here cites support from Merleau-Ponty to describe this forgetfulness of our orientation¹⁸³ toward plurality. This orientation, this *sens*, appears in and with our very corporeality. For Arendt, there has been an important "reversal of the metaphysical hierarchy: [toward] the value of the surface" (LM 26). She quotes Merleau-Ponty's *Visible and the Invisible* – which in turn invokes Husserl with a series of German terms –

¹⁸² See the HC Chapter 6.

¹⁸³ Here as elsewhere, I use the term "orientation" to describe the relation to plurality to preserve the connotation of Merleau-Ponty's *sens* as a corporeal and perceptual sense of situation. Husserl or Heidegger might have describe plurality as a "horizon" of being, but for Merleau-Ponty, our relation to others arises corporeally. Plurality intertwines with our very corporeal structure; it is not a horizon toward which we reaching but our *sens* of reaching-toward.

and summarizes the similarity between her critique and his. In the following passage, I reproduce both Arendt's citation of Merleau-Ponty and her commentary:

'For when an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its own account the ontological function of the first ... The dis-illusion is the loss of one evidence only because it is the acquisition of *another evidence* ... there is no *Schein* without an *Erscheinung*, every *Schein* is the counterpart of an *Erscheinung*.' That modern science, in its relentless search for *the* truth behind *mere* appearances, will ever be able to resolve this predicament is, to say the least, highly doubtful, if only because the scientist himself belongs to the world of appearances although his perspective on this world may differ from the common-sense perspective. (26)

For Arendt and Merleau-Ponty, when we truly reverse the Platonic metaphysical hierarchy, we find a new emphasis not only on existence rather than essence, but on appearance and visibility. As visible beings, we find ourselves oriented toward a world of appearances and also toward other, visible beings. For Arendt, recognizing orientation toward a plurality always entails both the possibility and responsibility for political action. Thus, insofar as the natal – for example, the life scientist – realizes that she is “of the world and not merely in it” (LM 22), she can no longer consider herself a passive observer but an ethically and politically implicated participant in conditioning the existence of others.

Phenomenology – the study of appearance – had finally emerged to reorient philosophy to visibility. With this turn comes a turn toward natality. In a phenomenological context, as Michel Henry puts it, “coming into be” can only be understood as “coming into appearance” which in turn must be understood as “coming into the world” (“*Phénoménologie de la naissance*” 127, my translations).

Phenomenological appearance occurs in a world of beings who witness appearance; such

beings, unlike rocks and air, do not only appear themselves but share a world of appearances. Phenomenology can perform a “transcription of ontological themes,” illuminating the type of appearance attributed to beings who are born (Henry “*Phénoménologie de la naissance*” 125).

For Arendt, this new ontology appeared in the wake of the end of metaphysics with the nineteenth century “death of God.” The end of metaphysics meant not the literal death of God – “about which we can *know* as little as about God’s existence” – but rather “the traditional *thought* of God” (LM). For Arendt, the death of the traditional thought of God accompanied the end of the entire domain of the suprasensory, the transcendent, or “whatever is not given to the senses” (LM 10). With the end of metaphysics, Arendt remarks “what has come to an end is the basic distinction between the sensory and the suprasensory” (LM 10). But the end of this distinction does mean a descent into materialism per se. When Nietzsche set in motion this end of metaphysical thought and the hierarchy associated with God, he did not thereby advocate a materialism in which the sensory is *merely* sensory. Rather, quoting Heidegger, Arendt remarks that Nietzsche’s insight was that “the elimination of the suprasensory also eliminates the merely sensory and thereby the difference between them’ (Heidegger)” (LM 11). The end of metaphysics does not mean the inevitable rise of materialism; rather “The whole framework of reference in which our thinking was accustomed to orient itself breaks down” (LM 11).

She believes that perhaps Merleau-Ponty alone fully saw this breakdown: “Merleau-Ponty, to my knowledge [was] the only philosopher who not only tried to give an account of the organic structure of human existence but also tried in all earnest to

embark upon a ‘philosophy of the flesh’” (LM 33). Nonetheless, Arendt argues that even Merleau-Ponty still failed to fully shift his paradigm accordingly. He

was still misled by the old identification of mind and soul when he defined ‘the mind as the *other side* of the body’ since ‘there is a body of the mind, a mind of the body and a chiasm between them.’ Precisely the lack of such chiasmata or crossings over is the crux of mental phenomena, and Merleau-Ponty himself, in a different context, recognized the lack with great clarity. (LM 33)

Arendt here cites from Merleau-Ponty’s *Visible and the Invisible* and *Signs*. She does indeed point to a weakness in Merleau-Ponty’s work as he transitions from classical dualistic terminology – “mind” and “body” – toward his terminology of “flesh,” which encompasses mind in life with others, irreducible to terms of dualism. Certainly, he may have retained some problematically weighted terms. But in his ontology of the flesh, especially as we see in the Nature Courses, it seems he does indeed make the shift that Arendt requires. He, however, would dispute Arendt’s suggestions that in the flesh there are not “crossings over.” What crosses-over is not the “mind” and the “body,” but existence and existence: my existence and that of the other.

This is the very structure of the chiasm that marks his ontology: the visible is the invisible and invisible is the visible. These two statements are irreducible to one another and in that irreducibility of the multivalent copula, ontology appears and hides.¹⁸⁴ Where for example, a metaphor marks an ontological tension with its double claim of “it is” and “it is not” for Ricoeur,¹⁸⁵ for Merleau-Ponty, the chiasm makes the double claim of “it is”

¹⁸⁴ Note that “chiasm” refers specifically to this rhetorical structure, a crisscrossing or “chi” – an x – shape that appears between these two invert pairs of terms. Another example would be “The Rational is Real and the Real is Rational.” This double distinction never folds in on itself. See Barbaras 84 and my footnote 19 for more on this non-dualistic distinction.

¹⁸⁵ See *The Rule of Metaphor*, Chapter 8, on this “ontological” tension.

and “it is” in which identity requires the subtle, twice-deployed copula for expression.¹⁸⁶ Each term of the chiasm lays claim and is claimed by the other term, active and passive: “the idea of *chiasm*, that is: every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and being taken, the hold is held” (VI 266, cited in Carbone xiv). This simultaneous active-passivity unfolds in time, for the incarnate someone who *is* time, as Carbone points out (7). As Hegel might say, “even the transition to a mere proposition, contains a *becoming-other*” (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 11); the rhetorical structure of the chiasm allows some of this becoming-other to appear in the in-between of discourse itself.

I find my own body visible and invisible, haunted by the visibility and invisibility of others. Not only that but I can *notice* this crisscrossing. That discernment itself merits phenomenological attention. I can not only self-display, but notice this orientation for others and reflect on the meaning of participating in the world. Discerning the chiasmatic crossing allows me to take up responsibility in the public sphere where I appear. Were I to imagine – like Descartes – that I were first and foremost identifiable with my mental life, my corporeal presentation for others would have little or no relation to the life for which I am responsible. Likewise, the corporeal presentation of others would tell me nothing of others. In fact, corporeality is expressive: it is expressive not only of a personal, private interior, but of the situation in which that corporeal life comports itself. It is for that total comportment that I – that any one – is responsible.

Arendt thinks that Portmann’s only error – like Merleau-Ponty’s – is in not taking his own insights far enough:

¹⁸⁶ Husserl makes such a distinction in the Sixth of the *Logical Investigations*. Gilbert Ryle points to a similar ontological tension in the rhetorical deployment of the copula in his famous description of the category mistake in *Concept of Mind* (18). One might say it would be a sort of category mistake to assume that two statements joined by copula in a chiasm are reducible to one another.

When Portmann defines life as ‘the appearance of an inside in an outside,’ he seems to fall victim to the very views he criticizes for the point of his own findings is that what appears outside is so hopelessly *different* from the inside that one can hardly say that the inside ever appears at all. (LM 29)

It is not certain, however, that this is a fair critique of Portmann’s final position. As Dewitte shows in a detailed resume of Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Portmann, in a sense both Merleau-Ponty and Portmann describe an interanimality that goes beyond intervisibility per se. In his second edition revision of the *Die Tiergestalt*, Portmann describes a phenomena of visual presentation in animals that seems to be “for nothing”; visual qualities not actually seen by other animals but which implicate animals in a sort of general visibility (Dewitte108). Dewitte believes there was *un rendez-vous manqué* between Merleau-Ponty and Portman (109).¹⁸⁷ From our reading of Arendt, it seems she might also have enjoyed this meeting: in this appearance for the sake of appearing, Portmann and Merleau-Ponty would finally have gone beyond any hint of metaphysical finalism. Finally, we would truly be thinking in an ontology of the flesh.

Merleau-Ponty on Sexual Display and Orientation toward Others

Although Arendt makes no mention of having read Merleau-Ponty’s work on Portmann, Merleau-Ponty himself devotes extensive commentary to Portmann’s work in

¹⁸⁷ In a footnote referring to Dewitte’s essay, the English translators of the *Nature Courses* suggest that Dewitte argues that Merleau-Ponty and/or his auditors misread Portmann. However, while Dewitte does point out some discrepancies between Merleau-Ponty’s citations and Portmann’s text, Dewitte’s thesis is essentially that there are complementary themes between the two authors. He makes it clear that Portmann’s work, like Merleau-Ponty’s and even Arendt’s (though he only mentions hers in passing), was aimed at showing the importance of corporeality, interanimality, and appearance: “*tout le travail de Portmann tendant à montrer que c’est au contraire l’apparence extérieure qui pourrait bien être le plus réel et le plus intéressant.... Merleau-Ponty et Arendt, ces deux philosophes d’inspiration phénoménologique, ont compris d’emblée de la même façon la portée ontologique de la pensée portmannienne*” (93).

the Nature Courses and to related then-contemporary theories of animal evolution.¹⁸⁸ In these courses on animality and the human body, armed with new research into evolutionary biology, Merleau-Ponty returns to the basic theses of the *Structure of Behavior*. His lectures here depend on the recognition that natural – natal –living beings, whether animal or human, comport themselves with their world and with others.¹⁸⁹ In these lectures, Merleau-Ponty is particularly concerned with demonstrating that an individual animal does not comport itself only for itself; comportment does not develop in a closed circuit between single animal and world. Instead, comportment emerges between an animal, the environment, and other animals. Animals display certain traits *for each other*: colorful feathers, certain gestures or even faces. We cannot see the organism as simply a result of activity only in relation to itself or even between itself and the non-living world. In order to understand these particular behaviors, we must see the organism as oriented toward other similar organisms.

Where in the *Structure of Behavior* Merleau-Ponty attempted to dispel myths of Pavlovian behaviorism, in these courses, he attempts to dispel the myths of utilitarianism and simplistic Darwinism (in contrast to the robust theories of evolution developed by later theorists in the modern synthesis¹⁹⁰). Even in animals, sexual display does not emerge according to a simple principle utility. Merleau-Ponty points out that “sexuality, if it aims only at utility, could manifest itself by more economic plan” (NC 188). He postulates that there is “a specular relation between animals: each is the mirror of the

¹⁸⁸ See Chapter 6 on his discussion of evolution.

¹⁸⁹ See Chapter 1 for my explication of Merleau-Ponty’s justification of this assumption in the *Structure of Behavior*.

¹⁹⁰ Darwin and his contemporary and rival Alfred Russel Wallace disputed just this point of sexual display and utility. Wallace argued that bird plumage could not be explained according to the principle of utility alone but must take into account sexual display. C.f. Slotten 290.

other” (NC 189). Many animals depend on their visibility: this allows the “specular relation” to occur. Without this natural, mimetic relation to one another, sexual display would not have meaning. The meaning of display and copulation are not separable for the animal, any more than for a human. Sexual display is a “monstration, a ceremony in which the animals give themselves to each other” (NC 196).

Interanimality and the Ontological Value of Species

Because animals’ very bodies and comportment co-emerge with their world and with others, we cannot understand animality in terms of individual animals. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “what exists are not separated animals, but an inter-animality” (NC 189). This inter-animality arises not between “subjects” or between “minds,” but between visible, displaying bodies, prereflectively oriented toward one another. Interanimality is not an illusion but a perceptual relation. Identifying “this perceptual relation gives an ontological value back to the notions of species” (NC 189). Merleau-Ponty’s vision of “species” here is not equivalent to the fixed species described by pre-nineteenth century scientists nor the genetically and reproductively defined “species” of modern and contemporary biology.

Merleau-Ponty refutes the theory of “species nominalism” which argues that the very category “species” is an arbitrary and artifactual notion with no real bearing on animal life (Dewitte102). By contrast, he argues that we must acknowledge speciation, not by way of reductive genetic or morphological classifications, but as description of a group in which an individual organism orients itself. Merleau-Ponty refers to an experiential fact of animal life: animal existence is conditioned by not only an

environment but by the need to display for other animals. Jacques Dewitte puts it this way:

To mutually recognize each other *as* congeners; it is this recognition (that includes at once a 'showing oneself as' and a 'being recognized as') that gives ontological status to the species" [*"se reconnaissent mutuellement comme congénères; c'est cette reconnaissance (qui comporte à la fois un <<se montrer comme>> et un <<se reconnaître comme>>) qui donne un statut ontologique à la espèce.*] (Dewitte103)

I reproduce de Witte's comments in French because his word choices of "*reconnaissance*" and "*reconnaître*" re-enforce the tight relationship between natality, plurality, and visibility. Animals mutually recognize each other as part of a plurality in which they are rooted by natality and into which they may give birth.

For Merleau-Ponty, this is as true of animals in general as it is true of humans. As with comportment in general, it is clear to him that "human desire emerges from animal desire. Already in the animal, in the ceremony of love, desire is not a mechanical functioning, but an opening to an *Umwelt* of fellow creatures" (NC 225). While animals do not have a *Welt*, a world of others per se, their environment, their *Umwelt*, includes others whose existence co-emerges with their own. Sexuality fundamentally conditions human existence which orients itself toward other bodies, themselves drawn toward display.¹⁹¹ This by no means *reduces* existence to sexual drive; that would be to miss the excess of display that Portmann points to. In the *Second Sex*, de Beauvoir points out just this possible worry regarding existential views of sexuality, citing Merleau-Ponty's in particular. She writes: "'Sexuality' is coextensive with existence' can be understood in two very different ways; it can mean that every experience of the existent has a sexual

¹⁹¹ Reversing his earlier negative views on Freud in *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty praises Freud for having seen the essential structuring of life by desire, especially sexual desire for others; Freud "truly saw" the "problem of the flesh" (NC 226).

significance, or that every sexual phenomenon has an existential import” (39). For de Beauvoir, it would be a mistake to conclude, as she thought Freud did, that “biology is destiny” (46) and that “all human behavior” is “the outcome of desire” (42).¹⁹²

Likewise, to reduce display to sexual display, visibility to the visual sense would be akin to reducing comportment to reductive behaviorism, a mistake against which Merleau-Ponty has cautioned since the *Structure of Behavior*. In all cases, human life includes a general involvement in the excessive totality of a world.

Nor does Merleau-Ponty’s claim reduce human desire to animal desire any more than animal bodies can be reduced to a collection of organic molecules identical to those in rocks and trees. Drawing a line in the sand between animal and human activity does not necessarily help us understand our sort of being. Merleau-Ponty even goes so far as to say that since “there is not an objective criterion for consciousness,” he finds it to be reasonable to ask, “Is there animal consciousness, and if so, to what extent?” (NC 199). He does not pursue this question, but he finds it reasonable, not hesitating to connect human and animal sexual display. Rather, he attempts to “bring these facts of the phenomena [of animal sexual display] close to human language” and to various other symbolic activities (NC 198).

¹⁹² Existential philosophy must recognize that, especially for the woman, the body is her, but her body is also “something other than herself” (29). She worries that Merleau-Ponty may have overemphasized the generality of the body, and yet for the most part she agrees with his view which situates life within both factual bodies and history; she concludes: “As Merleau-Ponty very justly puts it, man is not a natural species. He is a historical idea. Woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming” (34). The relationship between Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir on the issue of sexuality bears further investigation, but for an excellent study that shows the comparison rather than contrast between these two thinkers’ views, see Sonia Kruks’ “Simone de Beauvoir: Teaching Sartre about Freedom.” For my purposes here, it is most important to recognize that for Merleau-Ponty, sexuality does not exhaust biological motivation or visible animal display. Humans and animals alike have, as de Beauvoir put it, “ways of being concerned with the world which cannot be reduced to any others” (46).

As described in the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty's theory of the flesh shows that there is no need to posit some radical distinction between human and animal life: "There are no substantial differences between physical Nature, life and mind" (NC 212). Rather than radically or substantially different from the "stuff" of the natural world, we are "the arrangement of a hollow" that "surges forth at birth" (NC 210). Animal life appears inseparably with desire as "a sort of seething, an 'always future hollow'" (NC 210). We do not reduce human existence to animal or natural existence in general: we merely attend to how it arises from the same ground. Merleau-Ponty admits that "it is true that it remains for us to understand how this vision... becomes mind" (NC 210), but he does not shy from this problem. Whatever mind is provoked in human life, it arises from this fold in the flesh that appears with all life. This flesh is the body as an open "circuit" (NC 22) between visible and invisible, or, as he puts in the other essay, between eye and mind. As the title of Arendt's last book puts it, Arendt, like many others in the phenomenological tradition of the twentieth century, reflects primarily on "the life of the mind"; Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, as Thompson puts it in his title, suggests that we may encounter an even more complex problem if we admit there is "mind in life." In Merleau-Ponty's view, although the problem of language happens "at the human level. The difficulty is to be situated at the level of axolotl" (NC 157). Or, as Thompson puts it, rather than situating the problem of mind only at the level of conscious reflection, we might find an even more complicated problem if we associate the appearance of mind with the appearance of life (128). Language emerges with life through the very same types of structural totalities that condition the existence of the axolotl. Ideality itself arises naturally. We cannot find the "reality" of language by searching at a sub-

molecular level: this would miss the phenomenon of language that appears for humans. At the same time, we cannot postulate a radical difference between the structures at a molecular level and a linguistic level. This would miss the excess of totality in which these orders of life are situated.

Umbilical Bond and the Orientation toward Others

The urge to self-display – in humans as well as animals – depends on a prereflective orientation toward others. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty recognizes, the case of the human animal does include very complex – irreducibly complex – expressions of the urge to display. This orientation of existence toward display makes possible all of culture, including language, for Merleau-Ponty. As Arendt does, Merleau-Ponty imagines that visibility conditions all appearing being. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, the self-display forms a “tacit language” of gesture and perhaps even “a moral physiognomy [in] (signature, gait, face)” (NC 211). We might argue that sexual display is part of some “ready-made or natural symbolism of the body” and that as humans, we have a conventionalized language of symbols *plus* this bodily symbolism (NC 211). But the excavation of such a gestural language is not what interests Merleau-Ponty as develops his ontological position. What is of relevance ontologically is that philosophy “would have to take as its theme the umbilical bond that binds it always to Being” (VI 107). In this metaphor, the phenomenology of animality and visibility meets ontology. The metaphor of pregnancy presents not only our relation to others but our very relation to being. In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty refers more than once to our inter-

animality and inter-corporeality as “*notre lien natal avec le monde*” (VI 32 / 54) and to “*le cordon ombilical de notre savoir*” (VI 157 / 209).

Even the tacit language of gesture and body presupposes this umbilical bond, this natal link to others. Prior to developing any particular gestural language, we presuppose that we are seen and can be seen, hear and are heard. However far we trace back language we find that “There is always a language before language, which is perception” (NC 219). If we assume that conventional language can merely be derived from bodily language or alternatively, that it superseded it, we erase the very problem we need to study: we cannot step outside of incarnation for a view onto it (NC 226). We would be returning to a fruitless dualism: not a dualism of body and soul, but of body and language.¹⁹³ To avoid dualism, we cannot cut language off from Nature. A phenomenology of Nature is an account, a *logos*, of Nature, yet that *logos* arises from Nature. When *logos* does arise from Nature – *logos* broadly construed to encompass art, history, language, science – it gives rise to an “ideal intersubjectivity held together by noncorporeity” (NC 228). But this intersubjectivity still arose from incarnate Nature. This orientation is toward not one particular other, but to the “atmosphere” of animality, or as Merleau-Ponty put it in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the “atmosphere of humanity.”¹⁹⁴ In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology revealed the appearance of the atmosphere of humanity in perception; he now makes an ontological claim about the ground of this appearance. What is of interest for a natal ontology is not a genetic account of the origin of language as such, but the meaning of being prereflectively oriented toward others with such structures as language.

¹⁹³ Or, as Thompson has put it, a dualism of “information” and matter (185).

¹⁹⁴ See Chapter 3.

What interests Merleau-Ponty is how conventional language presupposes communicability in general, presupposes this inter-animality, this prereflective relation to the other. As we saw in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and the lectures, “Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language,” Merleau-Ponty does attend to the acquisition of language by developing individuals. But in the Nature Courses, he situates this acquisition in a general prereflective orientation toward others.

For Merleau-Ponty, not surprisingly, our *umbilical* bond can be seen not only in sexual display but in infant development. Interestingly, despite her emphasis on natality and even appearance in her later work, Arendt pays little attention to the actual event of physical birth in her discussion of visibility and appearance. Merleau-Ponty, however, in the Nature Courses, returns again and again to the event of birth as exemplary of the human condition.

One concrete manifestation of our umbilical bond – though not the only one – is in the gaze between caretaker and infant. With birth, a child literally becomes “visible,” emerging from the womb into the public world and beginning to see with its own eyes. At the moment a child emerges from the womb, “the eye, with its nervous apparatus, takes to seeing” (NC 210). This literal visibility serves as a metaphor to demonstrate the fleshy physicality of human life itself. Merleau-Ponty has been rigorously critiqued, most famously by Luce Irigaray, for this bias toward vision.¹⁹⁵ Yet this critique and related critiques seem to rest on a dual misunderstanding: first, that he prioritizes the

¹⁹⁵In *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray even remarks that Merleau-Ponty’s description of the prereflective relations aim at a certain “shared knowledge [*connaissance*]” (128). For Irigaray, however, such *connaissance* is problematic insofar as it presumes total access to the invisible and interior of the other. For Merleau-Ponty and certainly for the ontology I advocate here, *connaissance* does not presume such Cartesian clarity. Elizabeth Grosz offers an excellent summary and reflection on these projects in *Volatile Bodies*.

visual apparatus per se, and a reduction of visibility to visual display alone, and second, that visibility comes with unimpeded access to the visible. But such reduction would in fact be a Cartesian position: for the Cartesian, the eye, unimpeded by the thickness of the flesh, without the blind spot inherent to actual incarnation, can totally access visibility. The Cartesian eye – like the I – encompasses the visible, rather than is encompassed by it, enveloped by it. Merleau-Ponty stresses not the visual apparatus itself, but the fact of being oriented toward other perceiving and perceived bodies. More importantly perhaps, in no case does perception – visual or otherwise – allow for pure access to the object of perception, certainly not to the interior of the feminine or to the “invisible” of the feminine, as Irigaray imagines (128). These critiques come primarily from a feminist perspective, and I do not dismiss the necessity of such feminist improvement upon Merleau-Ponty’s decidedly historically situated – and therefore limited - account of the body. Merleau-Ponty would be the first to admit such historical limitation. In a contemporary context, it would be problematic if it were true that, as Lawlor puts it, “[f]or Merleau-Ponty the *Verflechtung* exists between man, world, and writing” (NO x). I find Lawlor’s repetition of “man” as a term of the chiasm to be a troubling choice. His choice points toward a possible problematic interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s account where gender determines the “natural” body which intertwines with the world and discourse. Instead, I think we should see gender as appearing within the intertwining between the human, world, and writing rather than as defining one of the terms of the chiasm. That said, certain feminist critiques of visibility – Irigaray’s forming the model – risk foreclosing phenomenology and existential philosophy in general by too hastily setting aside comparisons across difference for emphasis on difference itself. It is

essential to my position here that our *connaissance* of the other – as other - be affirmed, or we risk the pitfalls of Cartesian skepticism. Even as I admit the difference of the other from myself, I must first of all affirm my knowledge of the other’s existence and the mark of the other in knowing in general. Visibility – or *voyance* – in a world of others does not, however, thereby equate to total possession or knowledge (as *savoir*) of the other.¹⁹⁶ Visibility entails invisibility, just as activity entails passivity. As Carbone puts, *voyance* is a “complying with the showing of the sensible universe itself,” akin to Heideggerian disclosure (33).¹⁹⁷

This fragile visibility complies with and engages a world of others. The vision and visibility of the child appear together and in relation to a plurality. With birth, “I see that other humans see” (NC 210). Likewise, “just as I perceive my hand touching, I perceive others as perceiving. The articulation of their body on the world is lived by me in the articulation of my body on the world where I see them” (NC 218). This living-with the other does not possess the other or demand total access to the other but implicitly affirms the other.

The role of the gaze and the vision in this coming to be of the child is not that of the possessive, objectifying gaze described by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, nor that of the formative gaze that accompanies subjectivity described by Lacan in his lectures.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ In that sense, we have *connaissance* of the other a bit like Descartes has knowledge of God. He knows indubitably that God exists, but he does not thereby have total comprehension of God.

¹⁹⁷ Carbone shows that Merleau-Ponty finds this *voyance* not only in painting (a literally “visual” art) but equally in literature and in music. He cites Merleau-Ponty’s allusions to Proust and to the ‘little phrase’ as example of *voyance* where “in light just as in the musical idea, we have an idea which is not *what* we see, but is behind it” (Carbone 35, citing the Course “Cartesian Ontology and the Ontology of Today”).

¹⁹⁸ Merleau-Ponty would no doubt have been familiar with these accounts, each of which would embroil us here in an interesting but divergent trajectory in the history of European philosophy. Briefly, on Sartre’s view, see *Being and Nothingness* (340-343). On Lacan’s view, c.f. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (84) or *Le Séminaire, livre XI*, 245). Lacan comments on Merleau-Ponty’s *Visible and the Invisible*, identifying a kinship between their two projects, yet Lacan describes a general gaze that

Merleau-Ponty here emphasizes not the gazing of the child on itself, nor the gaze of the other on the child, nor even of a subject on another subject, but the mutual gazing of the child and the adult that prefigures the mutual gazing that continues into adult life. This is the prereflective, activity of, as Beata Stawarska has put it, “a process of social attunement” (20).¹⁹⁹ Prior to “reading the minds of others” as some views on child development put it,²⁰⁰ the child attunes herself to their being. In a sense, a child’s acquisition of a world quite literally depends on this co-visibility apparent in the gaze between infant and mother that constituting subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Evolutionary biologists now argue over the origins of the skill for attunement in humans and other primates.²⁰¹

It would be a mistake to assume that in human beings or in Merleau-Ponty’s view of human beings that such mutual attunement depends on the visual apparatus per se. In the *Nature Courses*, Merleau-Ponty argues that this coarticulation of the world begins even before birth, during pregnancy.²⁰² A mother gives birth to a body already in motion, a motion provoked by her own motions: “there is no pregnancy of souls. It is a

constitutes us as subjects, located at the order of the imaginary and symbolic, not the actual mutual gazing of infant and mother. He argues that one must separate “the eye and the gaze” (74). Dewitte points out the connection between Merleau-Ponty, Portmann, and Lacan on this issue regarding turn from a “god’s-eye” view of life toward the view of life as constituted by human events of gazing (110).

¹⁹⁹ Stawarska summarizes some of this research thus: “For the infant, joint visual attention with the adult initially takes the form of direct eye contact or mutual gaze before giving rise to a more complex formation which alternates between attending to each other’s eyes and jointly intending an object present in their visual field (a toy, food). Sustained focus on the caretaker’s eyes has been found in infants as young as 1 month of age (Wolff 1963), and it has been documented as a basic trait of a normally developing mother-infant relation. The focus on the eyes is made possible by the relative functional maturity of the infant’s visual-motor system, attained already by the third month, while other motor behaviors are less mature” (“Mutual Gaze and Social Cognition” 19).

²⁰⁰ For a view that does seem to make such an assumption, see Baron-Cohen *Mindblindness*.

²⁰¹ For a recent overview of such research see Sarah Hardy *Mothers and Others*.

²⁰² Francine Wynn has critiqued Merleau-Ponty for overemphasizing the moment of birth as initiation into the world; she claims he has forgotten the significance of pre-natal in-utero development. Wynn focuses primarily on Merleau-Ponty’s earlier published work, whereas I show below and in the preceding chapter that Merleau-Ponty in fact devotes extended discussions to embryogenesis.

body that produces pregnancy and that moves to perceive... There is no descent of a soul into a body, but rather the emergence of a life in its cradle, a provoked vision” (NC 218).²⁰³ Some “provocation” stirs up the life that is the child: the child has begun elsewhere, yet consists of flesh open to provocation. Sexuality, also codependent with visibility and plurality, provoked life and so on and so forth. The individual pleats this flesh that precedes and exceeds it: as flesh, the body participates in “an open totality” (NC 218). Again, visibility indicates not the primacy of the visual organism per se, but the flesh in general: the co-perceptual (perceived and perceiving) emergence of an organism oriented toward a totality.

These connections between child development, evolutionary biology, and social cognition mark a domain for no-doubt fruitful further investigation. In pursuit of an *ontological* project, I do not take on those investigations here, but I mark them as the site of further conversation between Merleau-Ponty’s natal ontology and these burgeoning fields of research in life science. A natal ontology does not resolve these issues, but points toward the ontological assumptions made in, for example, the Cartesian theory of mind models that overlook prepersonal and premental orientation toward others. Prior to interpreting the minds of others, prior to objectifying others, the child is oriented toward others who visibly appear.

A natal ontology directs phenomenology toward both sexual display and development; these in turn each indicate the condition of plurality in human existence.

²⁰³ Admittedly, in neither the *Nature Courses* nor in the *Visible and the Invisible*, does Merleau-Ponty offer an actual, in-depth phenomenology of pregnancy per se. Pregnancy remains a loosely used metaphor. (See the following chapter on my conclusions). He borrows pregnancy as a metaphor for being, as if he borrowed sonar as a metaphor for perceiving being. Merleau-Ponty could never check the terms of his metaphor against the experience of bats; nor can he ever check the metaphor of pregnancy by experiencing it himself. Nonetheless, my hope is that even if Merleau-Ponty’s work does not fully reciprocate accounts of female embodiment in pregnancy— such as those of Iris Marion Young — it can serve to enrich that metaphor of pregnancy and his ontology in general.

Even Arendt, with her non-natural view of natality, saw the inseparability of natality and plurality. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes our *natural* natality and plurality. Arendt calls “natality” and “plurality” aspects of the human condition; for Merleau-Ponty these are aspects of the “fabric of brute meaning” (NC 123). To be born into Nature includes being a visible, actual physical structure, oriented toward others. Where Arendt separates “first natality” and actual birth from what she calls “second natality” in speech and action, for Merleau-Ponty we can make no such absolute distinction.²⁰⁴ One might phenomenologically distinguish these moments in existence, as one might distinguish the feeling of being a subject and the feeling of being an object, but phenomenologists should not make the ontological claim that these orders of physical birth and second natality depend on radically different orders of being. We cannot institute this distinction because it entails a return to a dualism of speech and action, action and perception, and indeed ethics and ontology: prior to these dualistic divisions, we appear in the world, oriented toward a visible exterior, oriented toward expression as much as perception. Such is being that belongs to a plurality.

While phenomenology avoids speaking reductively of a human “species” as either fixed morphologies or as the passive result of genetics, phenomenology does affirm an orientation of life toward like-structured life. Merleau-Ponty puts it this way: “associated bodies must be revived along with my object – ‘others,’ not merely as my congeners, as the zoologist says, but others who haunt me and whom I haunt” (EM 122). In this passage, Merleau-Ponty reinforces the continuity between human and animal life and yet also the difference that phenomenological reflection can make, or perhaps, as

²⁰⁴ See Chapter 5 for a discussion of this distinction in relation to generative and poetic phenomenology and Birmingham 31-33 for a discussion of first and second natality in Arendt.

Derrida might put it, the *différance* that phenomenology can mark.²⁰⁵ The zoologist, in Merleau-Ponty's words – perhaps a better word choice would be “biologist” – studies a species as an objective group: a group that shares certain traits, can reproduce together or not. The phenomenologist, by contrast, studies the meaning of belonging to such a group – notably the human group, with its complex comportment – from the inside. While a great deal of phenomenological attention has been deservedly directed at describing others as *different*, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that phenomenology must also describe our very basic orientation toward others as like us; this orientation means that others are as identifiable as others who merit empathy and response.

A natal ontology depends on admitting the ontological status of “species,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it, or the condition of “plurality,” as Arendt puts it. In natality as in sexuality, human existence involves this prepredicative orientation and reciprocity. In fact, in general we can see “The body as organ of the for-other” (NC 218). Sexual display and child development show that “there is a *natural* rooting of the for-other” (NC 210). Our corporeality not only gives us access to an *Umwelt* but to others with similar schemas, “a relation to other corporal schemas” so that we find “among the things, there are living ‘similar’” (NC 224).

This “other” refers to other beings *like* ourselves, with whom we share the condition of both perceiving and being perceived. Yet this other is no less *unlike* our self: as Arendt points out, were a plurality to contain only identical beings, “endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model,” there would be no need for speech at all (HC

²⁰⁵ On such confluences of thought between the later Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, see Leonard Lawlor's “Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl.”

8). The very fact that we are oriented to display for others affirms the otherness of others.

Phenomenology has had good reason to resist giving ontological value to the notion of species; the term suggests that human existence can be studied as an object from the outside. Phenomenology may have assumed that delineating between the human order and the natural order would save it from the possible problem of viewing the history of humanity as the mere progress of a natural species. But instead, Merleau-Ponty shows that this natural history of a species is a problem *if* phenomenology postulates a radical difference between the order of life and the order of the human. Such postulation resumes dualism: the human for-itself differs absolutely from nature-itself. Instead, we ought to see the human as a permutation of complexity; language is one – albeit significant – function of transformation that occurs. The human order then gains an irreducible sort of complexity *as* Nature, not in opposition to Nature.

Conclusions: Of Being Alone

Let us return to the quotation from George Oppen: “Shipwrecked by the singular / We have chosen / the meaning / of being numerous.” We have seen in the preceding pages, that Merleau-Ponty, like Arendt, redirects phenomenology’s attention from the meaning of a singular life toward the meaning of a life in a plurality. Like other twentieth century post-Cartesian thinkers, Merleau-Ponty restores our proximity to others. He manages this redirection by pointing us toward our natality, toward our life as natural nats, toward the omphalous in our flesh that connects us with others. He uniquely accomplishes this by restoring an ontological value to the very term “species.”

His natal ontology shows that we belong to a plurality, that existence is conditioned by the fact that we are numerous, natal, and natural. Merleau-Ponty has shown that we are enveloped by the flesh of the world through our “umbilical bond that always binds us to Being.

In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty returns to this theme of seeing according to others – to the inhabiting and co-habiting of vision – in some particularly forceful examples. When I am talking with someone else, “should the voice alter, should the unwonted appear in the score of the dialogue, or, on the contrary, should a response respond too well to what I thought without having really said it” – in short, should the person with whom I am speaking do anything that shows her to be a *person* and not a robot – then, “suddenly there breaks forth the evidence that yonder also, minute by minute, life is being lived” (VI 11). When this happens, I cease to be confined by the apparent limits of my physical skin; when I face this speaking other, “another private world shows through... and for a moment I live in it” (VI 11).

If I were not born, if I were not a natal being, inhering in a plurality, I could not accomplish this. I could worry skeptically like Descartes that the other does not exist. But this is not a problem for the natal: I feel the umbilical tug of the other on my vision, and in fact, for Merleau-Ponty, I can even sense through the other as if she were a distant organ. There is, in fact, a “propagation of my ownmost secret ...” (VI 11).

And in this last phrase lies possible trouble. The propagation of my inner life in another might be a beautiful thing; the propagation of an other’s inner life in mine *might* be a miraculous cohabitation. But it might be a terrifying, traumatizing appropriation of

my interiority. If perception can propagate, if it can instill itself sexually in another being, then it can rape, invade.

The question is, then, whether the emphasis on exteriority related to natality by Arendt and amplified by Merleau-Ponty has gone too far. Has a phenomenology of natality become a phenomenology of existence that overprescribes exteriority, that connects us to others so entirely that we cannot acquire an interiority? Have we restored an ontological value to “species” only to take ontological possibility from the individual? Has Merleau-Ponty given us a perceptual world, a world of interanimality so fertile that that we risk unwanted perceptual pregnancy?

At risk of taking this metaphor too far – and yet Merleau-Ponty himself has already done it: the number of references to fertility, pregnancy, and invagination in the *Visible and the Invisible* is startling²⁰⁶ – what prophylactic can one use in this atmosphere of fertility? Merleau-Ponty himself does not hesitate to connect the theme of pregnancy to invasion and promiscuous behavior; he writes that things themselves generate their temporal and spatial existence “by encroachment, by promiscuity – a perpetual pregnancy, perpetual parturition, generativity, and generality, brute essence and brute existence...” (VI 115).

What can Merleau-Ponty’s natal ontology tell us of being singular? We have found that we enjoy a *sensus communis* of the flesh, through our natal nature, our embodiment. But does our nature not also give us a *sensus individus*? A sense of being singular? A sense that, even as I understand the meaning of others, I might fail to understand it or to be understood. In the sense that, at the moment the umbilical cord is

²⁰⁶ See VI for “birth” 33, 126, 142, 144, 145, 155, 221 and “born” 246, 47 and “pregnancy” on 115, 148-9, 206, 207, 208, 209, 212, 213, 259, “pregnant” 123, 124, 136, 216. In all these instances, the French original contains the same allusion.

severed, bitten off or torn, I find myself alone in the world. Has Merleau-Ponty forgotten that the natal, once free from the womb, *is* so often alone?

What can natal say of being alone? Of interiority as well as exteriority? What of the moment of being “shipwrecked by the singular”? What of the moment when I find that I *can* sail away from this plurality, this community that has given birth to me? This turning away from the plurality might be a moment of despair, akin to Heideggerian *Angst*, or it might be a simple withdrawal into private meditation. This might happen while we are physical with others as easily as when we are physically isolated.

At first glances, it seems possible that Merleau-Ponty has either failed to describe this experience or even – more philosophically troubling – excluded it ontologically. It seems that in a natal ontology, our umbilical tie to others, always apparent as we exercise our *connaissance*, does not allow us to ever withdraw. Perhaps the proximity of the flesh, the always being with others that it permits, so totally enfolds us that we cannot extract ourselves from it. Perhaps we must simply awaken to this fact, as the Buddhist awakes to the fact that there is no difference between her being and others’ being. And yet this metaphysical suggestion ignores the phenomenological fact, so well described by Heidegger, that we experience ourselves and others as distinct.

If properly formulated, a natal ontology must leave room for sense of individuation: of the capacity not only to be-with others but to be *other* to the plurality. But has Merleau-Ponty ever described, in phenomenological detail, this withdrawing from the other? Or, in more Levinasian terms, the other’s withdrawal from me? Merleau-Ponty painstakingly reassures us that we can affirm a prereflective relation to the other, but we may wonder if the same philosophy can also affirm our distance. It is

true that Merleau-Ponty does not expressly devote chapters or essays to this experience of division per se. We can easily imagine that he perhaps felt this unnecessary when faced with a Cartesian tradition that so emphasized the individual mind and a more recent Heideggerian, and even Sartrean, emphasis on the taking up of one's own authentic projects. Like Arendt, Merleau-Ponty stresses natality over mortality for good historical reasons, but he nonetheless may have done better to readdress these phenomena after reorienting phenomenology.

That said, it is not the case that there is no room in his natal ontology to describe this phenomena. This event does not contradict any of the conditions Merleau-Ponty has laid forth. Though it is true that he has failed to devote as much time to explicitly describing the experience of individuation and privacy, he certainly identifies it. However, rather than a lack of division between self and other, we find a lack of hierarchy between self and other. He puts it this way in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “the self which perceives is in no particularly privileged position” (PP 353). Also in the *Phenomenology*, he explains that “[t]he generality of the body will never make it clear how the indeclinable *I* can estrange itself” (PP 358). The body indicates generality but also the withdrawal of individuality. In the *Visible and the Invisible*, we find hints – both metaphorically and prosaically offered – of such moments of division and their effects. The metaphors of vision and pregnancy both illuminate and obscure the *écart* in being between my self and the other that Merleau-Ponty describes.

For Merleau-Ponty, between being singular and being numerous is a gap, *un écart*. This difference is as vast and as narrow as that between 5:09 and “5:10 is for the

one who dies / At 5:09,” in the words of poet Alan Shapiro.²⁰⁷ Or, it is the divide between two tectonic plates pressed up against each other; between them, we can see a definitive, fundamental cleavage in the earth, yet for all intents and purposes, they form a mass: I cannot put my hand between the two.

Merleau-Ponty describes the *écart* in the flesh through the metaphor of vision. He first explains how we might notice the *écart* within our binocular vision. Between my two monocular eyes, there is a “certain divergence [*écart*] from the imminent true vision” (VI 7). Likewise, Merleau-Ponty continues, one could also “describe the private worlds [of perceiving subjects] as divergence with respect to the *world itself*” (VI 10, note). In this analogy, the left eye does not merge with the right eye: it is their very difference that permits binocular vision. Likewise, my being does not merge with the being of another: it is our difference that permits a world to arise. We must coordinate in order to see; one eye can close or the other open. A natal ontology requires the chiasmatic *écart* for a world to appear between human beings.

Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of vision in the Nature Courses in a slightly different way to clarify that the natal being, though appearing exteriorly, nonetheless preserves interiority. As a metaphor, Merleau-Ponty explains that he prefers vision to other senses, such as touch, because of vision’s disproportionate nature: “the eye is much more seeing than seen, a more subtle flesh, more nervous” (NC 223). When we study the appearance of the eye, we could never forget the interiority of the organism who lives through the eye. The eye preserves the interiority of the organism while the organism at once takes on its environment. The eye reminds us that though life appears for other life, it does so through its invisible interiority. Life is a fold in being: what is a fold without

²⁰⁷ From “Country Western Singer” in *Old War*.

an interior? Yet unless we unfold a fold, all we can see is its exterior. The same with life: until we dissect a body, we cannot see its interiority and yet this very action destroys the lively interiority of life itself.

Thus, though a natal ontology does turn toward appearance, it does not take away singularity, interiority, or the invisible that animates the visible. The invisible is always already with the visible: “visible being is not the whole of Being, because it [Being] already has its other invisible side” (NC 271). This is the very mystery of animal comportment: the exteriority, the appearance of life, indicates the interiority, the motivation and momentum of life. Phenomenology cannot study “purely” physical or pure appearance, any more than Pavlov could. The phenomenological turn toward appearance and visibility emphasized by both Arendt and Merleau-Ponty in their work on Portmann is equally a turn toward invisibility. In animal life, this invisibility is indicated by the peculiar prospective momentum of comportment; in human life, invisibility is indicated by the even more peculiar movement of reflective activity and collective activity. Even as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes appearance, he puts equal emphasis on what does not appear per se.

The condition of plurality does not mean that we find ourselves at one with all human beings. As Babaras points out, in the *Visible and Invisible* Merleau-Ponty does not seek to prove our pure coincidence with Being (84). Rather, Merleau-Ponty attempts to show that experience has given rise to our sense of duality and our dualistic split in philosophy between idealism and realism, to our sense of both the vertical and horizontal orders. Merleau-Ponty does not seek to efface our experience of a mind and a body nor the historical, philosophical fact that two opposed schools of thought have emerged.

Instead, he wishes to describe the ground of experience from which dualism springs.

Barbaras puts it this way:

... [T]he soil where the to-and-from [of dualism] is grounded must be the soil *for* this duality; that is it must be able to give an account of the fact that the philosophies developed in our history are confronted, despite everything, with the choice between fact and essence. (Barbaras 84)

A robust natal ontology must show how our natality leads us to experience ourselves as both singular and numerous. We can at once attend to our connection to others and yet never achieve coincidence with others. Phenomenology might affirm the sense of a distinction between first natality – original birth and coming to be with others – and second natality – giving birth to speech and actions – but it does postulate a radical difference between this first ontic fact and the ontology that might appear in reflection. Instead phenomenology attends to this differing.

The metaphor of pregnancy again helps to clarify the situation. The appeal to metaphor marks not a turn from philosophy or from phenomenological rigor, but a radical attempt at such rigor. Metaphor marks an investment of language with that which precedes and calls forth language.²⁰⁸ The umbilical bond encapsulates this drawing together across a definitive divide. The umbilical cord connects the mother to her child; through this organ, essential molecules are transferred. Yet even as actual fleshy material unites them, never does the body of the mother merge with the body of the child. At birth, the literally fleshy bond is cut, but the metaphorical bond – and the mark of the

²⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty makes the point regarding vision that a metaphor is “too much and too little for what he intends” (VI 221, cited in Barbaras 194). Merleau-Ponty does not fall into “ontological vehemence,” taking metaphor too seriously, but rather requires metaphorical language to “attention within language, that which exceeds and precedes its objectifying power” (Barbaras 196-197, note 9). Again we see Merleau-Ponty’s debt to Heidegger. Barbaras refers to Merleau-Ponty’s use of the metaphor of vision, and I suggest the same could be said of pregnancy in the later work. So dominant is the reference to impregnation that we cannot let it rest at the level of “mere” allusion, mere metaphor.

literal bond – remains. We can identify the concrete, factual site of our natal union with another, but even this site marks an equiprimordial distinction between my body and the body of my mother.

In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty makes the connection to pregnancy through both the metaphorical pregnancy of language – as in Gestalt psychology – and references to literal pregnancy. Merleau-Ponty frequently uses the term “*prégnance*”; this is a technical term taken from Gestalt psychology and not the word for saying a woman “is pregnant” in French, which would be “*enceinte*.” But he also uses *enceinte* several times, suggesting that he encouraged the double reading of *prégnance* (c.f. *Le Visible et L’invisible* 181, 316, 346). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty takes quite seriously the allusions called up by the metaphor of pregnancy. When he says that perception is born, he notes also that it a *labor* accompanies it (c.f. VI 147, 156). The pregnancy of human being shows itself corporeally, linguistically, and intersubjectively – all through our presentations for the other.

That said, to identify our natal connection to others, our exteriority and our appearance for others does not deny our interiority. In fact, if properly understood, this affirmation of visibility is equally an affirmation of invisibility. Both singularity and numerousness co-emerge; in more Arendtian terms, the public sphere of plurality and action depends on the private life of the mind. In this public space, we do risk ourselves; we risk the propagation of our “own most secret life” by another, but such fertility is the condition of action. Far from impregnable Cartesian minds, natals enter the world in vulnerable yet fertile bodies, whose interior lives are always already oriented to appear to others.

Conclusions - Practical Implications of a Natal Ontology

“ Of time ...
... is it not
In fear the roots grip

Downward
And beget

The baffling hierarchies
Of father and child

As of leaves on their high
Thin twigs to shield us

From time, from open
Time”

- George Oppen, “Of Being Numerous”

Practical Shifts in a Natal Ontology

Western thought still suffers from strabismus. This strabismus is a pathologically disturbed vision – *theoria*— that does not coordinate theories of perception with theories of ethics in action. It is not the Cartesian strabismus between body and soul, nor the Sartrean strabismus between being and nothingness. It is rather a strabismus between body and brain, between cognitive science and politics, between nature and nurture, the first person and the third person perspectives. If philosophy becomes philosophy of mind – as Arendt worries in the conclusion of the *Human Condition* – there is no discipline to attend to the coordination of these two lenses, two visions. In the early twentieth century when Merleau-Ponty began the *Structure of Behavior*, he was concerned with overcoming dualism: an inherited Cartesian dualism and the dualism of neo-Kantians like Brunschvicg. Today phenomenology faces a situation with these other dualistic divisions; a natal ontology offers an alternative to these détentes.

Let us review some of the characteristics revealed by phenomenological attention to natality and their ontological implications. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty uncovers the phenomenological fact that the action of natals occurs in a plurality. He asks us to consider what this atmosphere of humanity is like. What is it to live not alone, not even with one other, but among many others? He asks, “[H]ow can the word ‘I’ be put into the plural ... be grasped in the mode Thou, and through this, in the world of the ‘One’?” (PP 348) In the *Phenomenology* and in the *Structure of Behavior*, he focuses on the genetic origin of this phenomenological fact. That is, he asks how – in animal development, or in human childhood and infancy, for example– do we come to acquire our orientation to the plurality? And what is a life lived according to such acquisition? For Merleau-Ponty, we do not construct the plural from the singular; we do not integrate from the “I” to the “one” or the “we.” Instead, we co-emerge with our world and with others, born into a prereflective *connaissance* of others.

In the *Nature Courses* and the *Visible and the Invisible*, he makes the ontological claim that this atmosphere of humanity is rooted in the umbilical bond we share with being. He asks us to consider what gives rise to the atmosphere of humanity identified in the *Phenomenology* and to address the meaning of belonging to such being. What is the meaning of being a natal in a plurality? What is the meaning of being natural? How historically – through the legacy of Descartes, Schelling, and others – did we acquire our working definition of “natural” and “nature”? He prompts us to reflect on the emergence of our understanding of “nature” and natality through the practices of life science, across generations, in time.

Recall that throughout all these investigations we have been looking for the *meaning* of being numerous, for the meaning of belonging to a plurality and a life in Nature. We have been seeking not an account of life as such, but the meaning of belonging to the sort of life we have. For example, the ontological questions Merleau-Ponty asks in the final Nature Course are not the question of the biologist – “Are there species?” – but the questions of the phenomenologist – “What would it mean to belong to a species?” and “How shall I – or better, how shall *we* – comport ourselves as a result?” Jonas, Thompson, Varella, and others have embarked on the project of a phenomenology of life and gone much farther than Merleau-Ponty could have, given the biology of his day. But in offering a natal ontology, Merleau-Ponty may have gone farther because his work locates a phenomenology of life in relation to the long tradition of philosophy of Nature and provides a reflection on the existential significance of natality. Merleau-Ponty summarizes this distinction through this example:

There are two ways to consider the animals, as there are two ways to consider an inscription on an old stone: we can wonder how this inscription was traced, but we can also seek to know what it means. Likewise, we can either analyze the processes of the animal under a microscope, or see a totality in the animal. (NC 187)

We can merely remark on the trace of plurality in our lives, or we can ask about the meaning of that trace. Life sciences – phenomenology and biology – share a concern with life, but the nature of the concern differs profoundly. Whereas the biologist attends to the definition of natural life – to the quality of its appearance— the phenomenologist attends to the meaning of being natal. The phenomenologist considers how natality practically re-orient the meaning of our life.

The phenomenological discovery of natality that Merleau-Ponty guides us toward is like the discovering of the anemone as a useful camouflage by the crab. Upon discovering this new meaning in the anemone, the world is changed for the crab. The crab's environment has a new *sens*. With the crab's new perception of this meaning – despite no change in the anemone itself – new actions are possible for the crab. The discovery has immediate significance. It entails a practical shift in relation to the world. The phenomenologist, upon discovering the meaning of natality in her world, similarly has new possibilities open to her. Of course, “natality” is not an external object like the anemone. The phenomenologist's natality intimately interweaves with her life. Nonetheless, as the discovery of the anemone's possible meaning creates new conditions for the life of the crab, so the discovery of natality alters the condition of the life of the phenomenologist. Specifically, highlighting natality reveals life as a tendency toward not some particular final end – or death – but a range of new, unforeseen possibilities, both restricted and made possible by contingencies.

I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology entails a practical shift that results from the ontological shift away from dualism: for example, from the dualism of nature and nurture. In a natal ontology, “nature” is not opposed to “nurture.” Rather, to be natural is by definition to be nurtured. One is nurtured by an environment and a world of others both synchronously and diachronously. This “nurturing” conditions and solicits our nature at the perceptual, reflective, and historical levels. The practical shifts can be seen in three domains of philosophical and phenomenological study: philosophy of science, phenomenology, and ethics. In each of these shifts, Merleau-Ponty draws on phenomenological descriptions of natal existence but also makes ontological claims – or

points out ontological claims implicitly made – about this existence. In the first two domains, Merleau-Ponty offers explicit critiques which I have clarified in his texts and readdress here; his critiques, following in the Kantian tradition, are not merely negative but positive, if incomplete, and prescriptive. In the third domain, ethics, Merleau-Ponty suggests but does not explicitly state his position or offer a prescription. In drawing out the ethical implications of the practical shifts he suggests, I amplify the meaning of his texts in the service of developing full-fledged natal ontology with an ethical orientation – an ethical *sens*, appearing with our very corporeality. In the first domain, Merleau-Ponty’s natal ontology critiques life science for dualism and reductionism and advocates instead an attention to totality that, for example, would admit the “ontological value” of belonging to a species. In the second domain, Merleau-Ponty critiques life science – both phenomenological and biological – for forgetting to situate itself in history, in a plurality stretched across generations. Finally, a natal ontology – grounded in nature by Merleau-Ponty’s work and situated politically by Arendt’s – entails a practical ethical shift toward affirming *connaissance* in the domain of human action in general. In addressing this final domain, I again offer a clarification of this natal ontology by way of a contrast with the Heideggerian ontology.

As mentioned in my introduction, while Merleau-Ponty offers a phenomenology, a critique of science, a political philosophy, and even an ontology, he does not explicitly present a text on ethics. Nonetheless, as we have seen throughout the preceding pages, Merleau-Ponty never waives in his concern for others; the turn toward natality is inseparable from a turn toward plurality. In these conclusions, I will try to draw out some

of the practical and ethical implications of this turn, indicating a proto-ethics that I see as latent in his thought.

Practical Shift: Affirming *Connaissance*

First, let us reflect on the practical shift that Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology suggests regarding our *connaissance* – our natal knowing – rooted in others. I have already gestured in the direction of this shift in the preceding chapters; I will now reiterate those claims, amplified by the new information in this chapter.

As we saw (primarily in Chapters 1, 3 and 6) from the *Structure of Behavior* to the Nature Courses, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the co-emergence of organism and environment, person and world: comportment and *connaissance* condition all natural/*natus* being. To be born is to be born *with* a world and with others. Again and again, Merleau-Ponty has shown that human existence, far from occurring in isolation like the Cartesian mind, appears in a world, motivated by *others* and caught in the momentum of a plurality that precedes and exceeds it. As he puts it concisely in a working note from 1959:

Everything comes down to this: form a theory of perception and of comprehension that shows that to comprehend is not to constitute in intellectual immanence, that to comprehend is to apprehend by coexistence, laterally, *by the style* [... *saisir par coexistence, latéralement, en style*]" (VI 188 / 242).

Comprehension – thinking itself – occurs through coexistence. Comprehension itself implicates us with others; knowing implicates us with an ethical world. In light of such a claim, the theory of perception and reflection and ethical practice could never truly part ways.

Since his first gesture toward ethics, or “moral theory” as he then put it in the *Structure of Behavior*,²⁰⁹ Merleau-Ponty has suggested that there are ethical implications to his phenomenological studies, and later to his natal ontology. His texts are rife with examples drawn from the political world; his work in *Les Temps Moderne* and the essays in *Signs, Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic* remind us of his political commitment. But between this politics and the phenomenological and ontological work described above, there is a gap. Never does Merleau-Ponty explicitly express an ethics. But we cannot forget his claims in his 1945 talk: that if we adopt his ontology, “there is a type of doubt concerning man, and a type of spite, which become impossible” (PP 27). I would like to return to few points in his work that I have identified as implicitly expressive of an ethical outlook and try to draw these together to articulate this ethical stance.

The *Phenomenology of Perception* offers a phenomenology of action that describes action and perception as co-emergent, natively conditioned by a plurality. The text suggests that we put aside problems of skepticism and take up the problems of plurality. If, Merleau-Ponty asks, I truly let go of the illusion of my self as most authentically interior and private, what new identity do I – or better, *we* – take on? It would seem that we would have to take responsibility for our very appearance. We would be as responsible for what we suggest with our visible bodies and with our words. Let me offer of a few perhaps trivial examples of what this shift *might* be like and then hint at the concomitant complications. Imagine that a child – too young for language – faces me and expresses a need for a cup of juice; I have a *connaissance* of her comportment. In the very moment of perceiving the child, I understand the action that

²⁰⁹ See Chapter 1 and SB 223.

she desires. I may not respond to this desire – perhaps the child has had too much sugar – but I would be remiss not to admit that I *recognize* the desire. By virtue of the umbilical bond that ties us both to being, I feel the pull of her existence on the world around me. Or, in a dispute with my husband, I cannot say “Well, you didn’t *say* not to do such and such” when his body language suggests that he would be hurt by my action. Perhaps (I will reconsider this below), according to a natal ontology I am responsible for prereflective *understanding* of his attitude. Being a natal, I first of all understand his comportment; in reflection, I deny my *connaissance* for my convenience or private, conflicting wants.

This sort of practical shift is suggested by Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, and in many cases, this seems to be an excellent antidote to Cartesian ontology. When I perceive my natal connection to others, new actions are possible, and I can better take up an attitude toward others when conscientious of the condition of my perception by plurality. Knowing arises from *connaissance*, from our motivated entrance in the world, caught in the momentum of plural existence. At the heart of subjectivity we find Nature, and it is a Nature – quite unlike Cartesian Nature – that bears with it the mark of others. In the very structure of being-for-us, we find the other. As Barbaras puts it, “the passage to intersubjectivity truly constitutes at the heart of the sensible, a first step toward the invisible” (240). The twining of the visible with the invisible describes my intertwining with the mode of the anonymous one, the atmosphere of humanity. My appearance – my existence – is always equiprimordially existence with-others. Barbaras describe it thus: “The other is constituted at the very level of mute experience, as an extension of the carnal relationship, that is, just as much as a dimension of sensible Being itself” (240).

As a result, “The relation to the other cannot, strictly speaking be situated on one side or the other,” (240) with the visible or the invisible, the material or the mental, with mind or life: Being-with and being-for-the-other describes being itself.

But, though profound, this new attitude toward natal connection is far from a cure-all for phenomenology or ontology. *Connaissance* of the other’s appearance does not give me pure access to the other; as we saw in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, we can never mistake the body as a short-cut to knowledge. To do so would be to make another Cartesian mistake: the mistaking of overlooking the thickness of the body. The Cartesian envisions the body as a nearly transparent, unimportant medium rather than a thick and opaque mode of being-in-the-world.²¹⁰ *Connaissance* does not see *through* the comportment of others toward intentions. The example that I offer above suggests such transparent access to intention along with affirmation of *connaissance*. What of an autistic person in my place who does not enjoy such easy access to this prereflective mode of being? What of standard confusion and misinterpretation of gestural language? A natal ontology does not solve these problems, though it does identify them as a site of further research.²¹¹ All the natal ontology that I have here established can say is that I would be denying a more fundamental bond to others when I claim not to notice the other as an other, bearing meaning and interiority with her or himself. Perhaps the trouble with a natal ontology is the same one that Merleau-Ponty foresaw in naturalism: “Naturalism

²¹⁰ This is the mistake Merleau-Ponty claims Husserl made in regard to temporality: “Husserl’s error is to have described the [temporal] interlocking starting from a *Prasensfeld* considered without thickness, as immanent consciousness” (VI 173). Husserl forgot the “thickness” of the temporal being.

²¹¹ I can envision many further studies of the relation between first person and third person experiences of such situations of prereflective response to – if not *understanding of* – the comportment of others. Consider, for example, the phenomenology of dance: dancers prereflectively coordinate movement with others, moving in a situation. The experience of dancing offers phenomenological evidence of what participating in collective action is like. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone has embarked on such research in dance from a phenomenological perspective; I can imagine fascinating encounters between her work and cognitive scientific studies, akin to the joint work accomplished by Stawarska, Kelly, and others.

is a philosophy vague enough to support the most varied moral superstructures” (AD 75). In that case, Merleau-Ponty’s naturalism only correlates with an ethics, but has no causal or structural relationship.

In this regard, it may seem Merleau-Ponty has gained minimal ground to establish ethics. Of course, ethics per se was never his expressed project: all that he promised was to show a *lack* of doubt and spite concerning the other. Indeed this lack of doubt may be all that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology offers in the way of an ethics, but it is no less significant. A natal ontology assures us of the use of the first-person plural. It does not, however, prescribe its empirical contents. In that sense, it remains a proto-ethics: prescribing a stance that acknowledges the other but without indicating any particular conduct toward the other. While we may not know *what* to do in relation to others, we will find that we are not isolated from them, and thus we find that we are not at risk of the ethical pitfalls of solipsism or of skepticism. Our *connaissance* implicitly indicates our natality with others. Knowledge as *connaissance* bears the mark of the other in its very appearance. As a natal, I can be assured that *we* both witness a landscape. I cannot know your experience of it – perhaps, you are blind, perhaps you have never see this countryside, perhaps you are afraid of a threat that does not threaten me – but I cannot mistake that between us, *we* act in and perceive the same situation. I know this naturally; genetically before I knew any empirical fact, before I knew my *self*, I knew in the mode of the *we*. This points to the other strength of a natal ontology: it offers this proto-ethics in coordination with an account of nature. In another sense, in a natal ontology we must recognize that whatever epistemological or ontological claims we deploy inherently take

an ethical stance. This is especially apparent, as I discuss below, in the special case of the life scientist.

The affirmation of the first-person plural in a natal ontology disclose us as beings who are oriented in a world in which ethical action is *possible*. Perhaps one might say Merleau-Ponty offers a minimalist ethics as Levinas has been said to include a minimalist religion. Without this orientation, without our *connaissance* of others, we could not know them as others, let alone choose to act responsibly toward them. To return to the themes of the previous section, we find that we have an orientation to the plurality stretched across generations in which we find ourselves. But we also find that, though alienation and skepticism are possible, comprehension and collective action are also possible. Twentieth century hermeneutics and then deconstructionists pointed toward a historical situation of human existence, but these movements have been often been seen as fracturing the collective, emphasizing difference over communication, the untranslatable over translation.²¹² Merleau-Ponty suggests another approach to our historical situation in a plurality, one that affirms our natal possibility to act with others.

I opened this project by contrasting Merleau-Ponty and Arendt's natal ontology with Heidegger's ontology of mortality. Let me return to that contrast as I conclude and focus on the difference between the natal ontology and the mortal ontology on this issue of nature. As I described earlier, for Heidegger, *physis* referred to an original ordering, growing, coming to be, whereas *ethos/mores* denoted an agreed upon, conventional ordering (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 13).²¹³ *Ethos* is determined by reflective, human

²¹² Dillon describes this tendency to view language as a sort of glass ceiling "which we cannot break through" as "post-hermeneutic pessimism" (89).

²¹³ Again, I focus on *Introduction to Metaphysics* as representative of mid-career Heidegger and because this text was among the earliest translated into French and likely influenced Merleau-Ponty.

putting-into order. Heidegger thus situates the problem of life at the difference between human life and all other being. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty has stressed throughout the *Nature Courses* that we must see the “lateral union of animality and humanity” (NC 271). Where Heidegger imagines that emphasizing the Latin *natus* could only entail the opposition of life and non-life, Merleau-Ponty shows it entails rather a positive alliance of human life with life in general. He also differs from this early Heideggerian stance on the need to follow the Greek model opposing *ethos* and *physis*: it is our nature in the sense of *natus* that initiates us into a world of others, tying us to Being through the same umbilical bond. Whatever *ethos* human beings form draws upon rather than opposes this natural connection. An *ethos* appears in our prereflective *connaissance* of our plurality and is brought into being by that plurality. This *connaissance* appears phenomenologically as the “atmosphere of humanity” that conditions human action, as he puts it in the *Phenomenology* (PP 347).²¹⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, just as action and perception co-emerge, so must a philosophy of Nature and ethical action.

To oppose *physis* and *ethos* is to divide human being from living being, and indeed all being, a move which would disrupt Merleau-Ponty’s entire natal ontology. In this, we again see Merleau-Ponty’s similarity to Arendt for whom natality and action are connected in the political sphere. Though as we have seen, she does not emphasize natural facticity per se, her natal philosophy, like Merleau-Ponty’s, views the human condition as first and foremost conditioned by a natal plurality. Human being distinguishes itself not by questioning being but by initiating action with others.

Thus, though a natal ontology may seem to have established a minimal ground for ethics – offered “weak” ethical force akin to Benjamin’s “weak” messianism – it is not

²¹⁴ See Chapter 3 on the atmosphere of humanity and being-with-others in this text.

therefore negligible. Weak messianism proposes that, while history does not prescribe our path in “strong” sense as perhaps for Hegel, it nonetheless draws us into a momentum. Where a totalizing view of history might focus on great individuals and great wars, weak messianism looks to the little bits of history, the detritus floating with us into the future. Like the weak bonds between the hydrogen and oxygen molecules, natality weakly yet fundamentally bonds human being. Its molecular totality exceeds the property of any individual part. To separate out a single reflective human being would be as disruptive as molecular fission; nothing representative of the original situation would remain. In *Illuminations*, introduced by Arendt, Benjamin writes:

There is a secret agreement [*Verabredung*: also appointment, conspiracy] between the generations of the past and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. (254, my additions to translations)

In Benjamin’s view, the angel of history looks back on this past, witnessing the storm “blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned” (Benjamin 257). In the *Human Condition*, Arendt expresses this turning of history as a turn toward *archē*, beginnings which rule and guide future action (Young-ah Gottlieb 135). As Arendt pointed out, natality calls attention to these *archai*, to beginnings: such beginnings lie behind us and before us.²¹⁵ These natal ruling *archai* are “weak” guides like Benjamin’s “weak” messianism, but this hardly makes their effect unimportant. Natality, like Benjamin’s weak force, entails a fragility and openness, not

²¹⁵ *Archē* restores a doubleness to beginnings comparable to that in endings. We still have a double sense of endings in teleology in *telos* but “[i]n most modern European languages ... the doubleness of beginning... has been effectively eliminated; but ... the duplicity of the term for beginning (*archein*) has profound and disturbing consequences” (Young-Ah Gottlieb 148).

an absolute agency. The natal is caught up in this momentum of history just as she is motivated to act within history.

Reflection on the meaning of belonging to a plural life in history need not involve arbitrarily drawing a line between human life and life in general. In fact, witnessing the similarity of our natal lives to all natal lives can point us toward the atmosphere of humanity, the momentum of generations and the motivation of the affective life that conditions us as natals. Perhaps due to the current American and European cultural dominance of the third person scientific perspective, phenomenology has hastened to preserve the first person perspective, thus implicitly and unnecessarily pitting the first person phenomenological perspective against the third person scientific perspective. Yet between the two – or perhaps with both – we find the first person plural. The first person plural reminds us of the natural atmosphere of humanity in which we are born.²¹⁶

Phenomenology would miss out on an important opportunity if it failed to admit this phenomenological fact: that we are part of a plurality of others. I do not suggest that phenomenology has not addressed plurality at all: we have many examples in Husserl and Heidegger and the tradition which follows of being-with others. But outside of Merleau-Ponty's work, rarely are these others discussed as bodies that comport themselves, evolve even their so-called "physical" structures to display for each other (as we have seen, display and comportment are never purely physical) and certainly not in terms of evolving bodies participating in a species. It seems that with the exception of Merleau-Ponty, phenomenologists have been content to say at most "Yes, evolutionary theory

²¹⁶ Stawarska and others, perhaps following in the tradition of Levinas though he is not mentioned, have argued the second person might provide an alternative to this first person/third person debate ("Introduction" to Special Edition of *Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*). I add the first person plural as another alternative.

exists,” but not to admit any sense of such natural continuity with others into the phenomenological conversation.

The risk seems too great: this would be to reduce human history to natural history. But in the preceding pages we have seen the benefits of admitting developmental and evolutionary studies into the phenomenology of human existence. For example, admitting the details of epigenetic conditioning into a discussion of nature and nurture changes the terms of the conversation: we are saved useless repetitions of the nature vs. nurture or nature vs. culture debates. Cultural and personal history cannot be disentangled from nature even at the molecular level. This intertwining of Nature with culture appears at the microscopic and macroscopic levels and can be witnessed from the third person and the first person plural.

Given the entanglement of nature and culture, I argue that a natal ontology rather than a Cartesian ontology should be adopted. Should this revelation not profoundly alter all future phenomenological reflections on Nature, especially human Nature?

Phenomenology can then bring to the table relevant reflections on this intertwining, from Schelling to Merleau-Ponty, and phenomenology can show which ontology is implied by these revelations. Once we admit that natal life must be understood in the context of a plurality of generations, we can admit into phenomenological reflection the “weak force” in the momentum of our plurality, that atmosphere of humanity in which we are born. The meaning and valuation of this life must be understood in relation to other, like-lives, not just in relation to a single, own-most finitude and project.

Phenomenology can then pursue a study of human life across generations not merely within a single consciousness or synchronous group of others; this is the turn

toward poetic phenomenology described here in Chapters 5-6. The turn toward the historical is unsurprisingly marked by the turn of generative and then poetic phenomenology. Generational structures are the basis of some of the first histories,²¹⁷ such as the chains of “The son of, the son of...” recounted in Genesis and Numbers. It is, in the words of Oppen, to “[t]he baffling hierarchies / Of father and child” that phenomenology may turn its attention. As poetic phenomenology, phenomenology can reflect on life as begun elsewhere, not as a project initiated or comprised by an individual life or static consciousness. We feel the tug of a living, natural *Mit-sein* from the past and the future. Phenomenology could ask: what is it *like* to belong to such historical movement? What is experience like when it feels the tug of the past and the present on the future? These are the same questions that Husserl and Heidegger asked; Merleau-Ponty only adds that they need not exclude considerations of human naturalness. To belong to a plurality stretched across generations does not mean to merely belong to a lineage, or chain of “filiation,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it (NC 213). Rather, it means to live an existence conditioned by the momentum of life and a group of like – yet always distinct – lives.

Example of the Practical Shift in Life Sciences, Both Biology and Phenomenology

I have argued in this conclusion as well as in the body of this text that natals should take responsibility for action and productivity. One such natal is the life scientist, both phenomenological and biological. I would like to here consider the results of applying the practical shift of natality to each of these life sciences: I will first recall and then assess Merleau-Ponty’s critique of these life sciences.

²¹⁷ On such first histories based on accounts of generation, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 3, 109-111.

Connaissance and comportement – knowing with and being-born-with – indicate a totality too often overlooked by life science. Both phenomenology and biology must be cautious not to forget the excess of totality or risk becoming an ontology of identity, positivity, and Bergsonian plenum. The elusiveness and excess of totality appears, for example, in the hidden motivation for the movement of comportment. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “To grasp life in the things is to grasp a lack in the things as such” (NC 158). Identifying life means identifying a general tendency toward some as yet indeterminate, unfixed end. In his discussion of evolution, he reminds the life scientist that the key to avoiding reductive errors is to notice that “there is not a spirit of the species, but a dialogue” (NC 198). Evolution may be the phenomenon that currently calls life science to attend most to totality. When totality is taken into account, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, speciation is a dialogical concept, put into play by interrogative beings; in other words, “[i]t is not a positive being but an interrogative being which defines life” (NC 156). If we can consider “species” as a notion that emerges dialogically and dialectically rather than as an object completely available to the scientific gaze, then we can restore an ontological value to “species.”

The phenomenologist enjoys no more privileged view than the biologist on this total situation of life; she only enjoys a different view. The difference, the convergence of these views, is the site of interest. In biology, Darwinism “gives a fecundity of life starting from what there is” (NC 251). But idealism “is right to say that the actual is not like a unique plane and without thickness” (NC 251). In phenomenology, idealism points out the thickness of the world: human existence encompasses not only actuality but possibility, the visible and the invisible. But the idealist strange of phenomenology must

be cautious not to turn fully into idealism (as perhaps the early Husserl did), privileging the ecstatic and transcendental over the actual and material. Idealism and Darwinian materialism intersect at the vinculum, at the “suturing of organism-milieu, organism-organism” and “in this suture, something happens which is not an actual fact – a jointure which is the articulation of the vertical order on the horizontal order” (NC 251). A natal ontology attends to this suture. As Merleau-Ponty puts it succinctly in the *Visible and the Invisible*, “The macrophenomena of evolution are not less real, the microphenomena are *not more* real. There is no hierarchy between them” (VI 226). The working biologist cannot always make an ecstatic leap to reflect on her practice, but as Merleau-Ponty has shown, life science does make progress – à la Gesell, Coghill, Simpson, Gould, and others – when conscientious of totality.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that life science can learn this interrogative method from art and poetry. Like the painter at work in “Eye and Mind,” the life scientist must interrogate Nature as if Nature itself were a person with an interior life. If life science can maintain a similar attitude in relation to Nature as it appears humanly, then life science will keep open rather than foreclose its study of Nature. As we saw from the *Structure of Behavior* through the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the Nature Courses, and “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty draws many analogies between formal appearance in life science and in art – for example, the similarity between the forms of a melody and animal comportment. He also suggests explicitly in the Nature Courses and “Eye and Mind” that the life scientist can learn to interrogate these forms like the artist or poet. In the *Visible and the Invisible*, he summarizes the integration of creativity, productivity, and ontology thus: “Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it” (VI

197). What being is for us, we have participated in creating, even if – indeed, especially if – that being is Nature itself. We must note and take responsibility for our ontologically productive creativity.

This may be Merleau-Ponty's greatest positive contribution to the philosophy of life science: the reuniting of perception with action, theoretical (*theoria*) vision with a practical, ethical stance. Life science expresses – implicitly or explicitly, actively and passively – a philosophy of Nature and should take up responsibility for that expression. Recall that for Merleau-Ponty, a Nature-philosophy, far from a mere theory, is “as always sustaining a taking of responsibility, an action” (NC 134). The practice of visual artists exemplifies the codependence of action and perception in general in Merleau-Ponty's work. It is this inseparability of responsibility, action, and vision that natural science can learn from painting and poetry. The artist, while she may require a certain privacy for artistic creation, rarely fails to take responsibility for her creativity, her productivity, and her creations. If only for the sake of pride, the artist says, “*I made this.*” While the productivity and creativity involved in life science differs from that at work in art, they are no less the responsibility of the scientist. In the case of evolutionary theory, the biologist must take responsibility for the attribution of ontological value to the category “species” with regard to the human being. When this term is deployed into an ethically and politically charged world – and all human worlds *are* so charged – the life scientist must consider the effect of that deployment. She cannot leave the responsibility for ethical assessment to the critical philosopher. Insofar as new innovations – such as those in epigenesis – demonstrate the permeability and flexibility of this category, biology revises it. This malleability reminds life science that it cannot appeal to its own ideal

objects as having a world-independent reality and thus a freedom from the responsibilities of this world. To claim that the genome constitutes some purely natural, a-cultural, a-political construct is to fail in this responsibility.

By contrast, to succeed in taking up this responsibility – to succeed in addressing Nature dialogically – can allow science to advance by affirming its already so-useful malleability. As epigenetic studies have shown, the so-called “natural” component of human existence co-emerges with a world that is, like any *human* world, culturally and historically conditioned. The life scientist, no less than any other natal, must admit her natal connection to this ethical and political world. To think of the life scientist as a natal, puts the life scientist back into history. Rather than attempting an a-historical perspective on life, the life scientist views life from inside life. To do natural science is still to work in a political and ethical world, however thick the walls of the laboratory. To reiterate a claim made in the first chapter, we cannot leave ethics for the philosopher and the study of life or perception to the biologists.

This positive yet cautious interrogation of life science distinguishes Merleau-Ponty’s natal ontology from that of other phenomenologists and even from Arendt’s own natal political philosophy. Again, a contrast with Heidegger brings to light Merleau-Ponty’s unique position. While Heidegger indubitably and incalculably influenced Merleau-Ponty, his ontology nonetheless differs profoundly from that of the latter, not only on the emphasis of mortality, but regarding the very definition of nature, ethics, and perhaps being. It seems that whether we choose the “fallenness” of the everyday world of Da-sein in *Being and Time*, the hierarchical positioning of poetry over science in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, or the denigration of technology from combines to gas

chambers in “The Question Concerning Technology,” we find an anti-scientism in Heidegger not present in Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger, even before his more explicit turn to the poetic, praises philosophy and poetry over and above science, stating baldly that “the spirit of poetry ... is essentially superior to the spirit that prevails in all mere science” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 21). For Merleau-Ponty such hierarchical prioritization of poetry over science is unnecessary and even misguided. His natal ontology focuses on the jointure of the vertical and the horizontal orders. Ontology happens at the intersection of the vertical, ecstatic, poetic or phenomenological attitude with the horizontal, natural attitude. For Heidegger, the horizontal order of the everyday, while inevitable, is “fallen,” a fallenness that conditions the unfortunate, objectifying habit of working science. Merleau-Ponty compresses many claims in a short but ramifying passage that critiques science as well as phenomenology, particularly the Heideggerian model:

[S]cience still lives in part on a Cartesian myth: a myth, and not a philosophy, because if the consequences remain, the principles are abandoned ... But modern science often criticizes itself and its own ontology. Also, the radical opposition, traced by Heidegger, between ontic science and ontological philosophy is valid only in the case of Cartesian science, which posits nature as an object spread out in front of us, and not in the case of a modern science, which places its own object and its relation to this object in question. (NC 85)

Like Levinas, Merleau-Ponty rejects the Heideggerian prioritization of ontological over ontic. Phenomenology cannot claim a privileged place for itself outside of the ontic world nor outside of Nature. Instead, phenomenology must attend to the jointure between the ontic and ontological. As Arendt persistently points out in her history of modernity, science, philosophy, theology, and economics all participate in the conditioning of human existence; the innovations of each discipline co-emerge.

Ontology, like any philosophical notion emerges, from the historical confluence of theories, actions and bodies. Ontology is not “decided” by convention, but is secreted through this ongoing complex of activities.

But who could ever then make ontological assessments? Who will ever be in a position to arbitrate between natural science and a phenomenology of Nature? It seems the only person qualified for this project would be someone dually trained in science yet freed from the constraints of actually practicing that discipline and able to purely reflect on its systems. But here Merleau-Ponty’s positive ontological contribution to the philosophy of science reminds us of the trouble with such an ideal – rather than practical – vision of life science. He suggests that life science should heed Schelling’s warning: pure reflection would not necessarily be a healthy practice or a possible one. It might rather unhealthily perpetuate the strabismus, dividing theories and thus making them un-useful in actual practice. Neither biology nor phenomenology should withdraw into “pure” research as if disassociated from the ethical political world. Attributing a special reflective role to phenomenology has its own risks. Philosophy irresponsibly continues to instantiate a dualism when it definitively delineates science in-itself from philosophy for-itself, or in Heideggerian terms, ontology from the ontic life. This dualism of reflection and action perpetuates the Cartesian dualism of mind and body because it implicitly assumes that in some real, substantial way, reflection can be performed while withdrawn from the world of action.

Merleau-Ponty finds that Heidegger turns so forcefully from this world and its technology toward the un-worldliness of ontology that he forgets the ontological mystery:

the prereflective life that Nature joins between ontic science and ontological study.²¹⁸

Poetic phenomenology, as Merleau-Ponty practices it, does not mean a retreat into language or art, but a recognition of the very ontic origin of even the activities of language, art, or life science.

This anti-technological and anti-scientific tendency of Heidegger's has shown itself more than once in the history of twentieth century philosophy and remains a risk for the phenomenologist trying carve out a role for her study in relation to the elephantine presence of science in contemporary life. As we have seen, Arendt, like Heidegger, noted with dismay a conflation of making with knowing in the rise of the *homo faber* after the seventeenth century. She implies that we might find a way back around this historical shift toward something like the Greek attitude of speechless wonder at Nature. Where Arendt would eliminate making from knowing in favor of speechless wonder and Heidegger would follow the Greeks to a more authentic view of language, Merleau-Ponty turns to contemporary life science, suggesting that phenomenology attend to the birth of this human activity. In the birth of life science, we can see the birth of Nature. Nature was born with artifice, with *techne*, not before it. For Merleau-Ponty, "we cannot think Nature without taking account to ourselves that our idea of Nature is impregnated with artifice" (NC 86). Artifice couples with Nature: Nature is impregnated with artifice. This generative event ends forever the possibility of disentangling them.

²¹⁸ While Merleau-Ponty frequently exhibits and expresses debt to Heidegger, he also definitively critiques him for the special status he gives to the philosopher and to language. He levels this critique not only at the early Heidegger but the later Heidegger. Heidegger reifies language so that his brand of humanism threatens to merge with theism: "there is not only the human outside of beings, but also the relation to Being which cannot be part of the human equipment" (NC 137). Language possesses the human. When Heidegger suggests this, he of course does not explicitly give language the power of the other-worldly dualistic Cartesian God; nonetheless, he does turn from the ontic details of language as actually expressed by human bodies in Merleau-Ponty's view.

For Merleau-Ponty, science is not fallen because it is not poetry or philosophy; no more do poetry and philosophy fail by not doing science. Each domain must be cautious, cautious not to objectify a totality that exceeds all of these domains. To withdraw from the ontic, horizontal order would be to claim the right to withdraw from the ethical and political world in which human action appears. Such withdrawal is neither possible nor desirable. In this, phenomenology should follow modern science which in fact “often criticizes itself” (NC 85). Although phenomenology can teach life science of the situation in history to which it belongs, life science may likewise teach phenomenology to question its taking up of that history.

In his engagement with science, Merleau-Ponty rarely slips into romanticization or idealization of the scientific practice; he cautions the life scientist to be always conscientious of the ethical political world in which she works. When, for example, the scientist works in her lab or writes up a report of her studies, her effect on the ethical and political community is muted, muffled by the thickness of the institution in which she practices. She does not need to reflect on the ontological or ethical implications of her work as she moves the microscope. When she speaks on the radio, online or in a public journal, however, she does need to exercise the caution that Merleau-Ponty demands. To describe an aspect of the human genome is to do biology; to claim that this physical structure equates to human being in itself is to make an ontological claim about a totality that exceeds science itself. It is in the making of such claims that Merleau-Ponty cautions life science, both phenomenologically and biologically.

Some Limitations of Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Life Science

This is the critique of life science that Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology offers. We must now consider whether it suffices as a prescription for improving the practice of life science. The trouble with this dialogical, poetic model of life science is its imprecision. The natal understands that she co-emerges with her world and that life must be understood in the context of a totality not in a vacuum. But what are the precise criteria that the biologist should use to account for totality? What is the model for coordinated actions that involve shifts from public to private, discipline to discipline? Western thought seems to require the philosophical equivalent of physical therapy to repair this disorder of vision that has caused a crisis in the sciences.

In evolutionary theory, for example, we saw in Gould's self-critique and critique of Simpson (see Chapter 6) the problem of identifying criteria for evolutionary selection at all these various levels, macroscopic to microscopic (Gould 139). More generally, life science – both phenomenological and biological – must ask itself how to translate the rigorous criteria of molecular biology to macroscopic study, whether paleontological or phenomenological. As Ricoeur might point out, such translation will not occur without a remainder, but this does not mean one should not attempt it. The phenomenologist or the biologist may need to perform the work of mourning the loss in this translation, but she should not give up the work.²¹⁹

Merleau-Ponty offers no Rosetta stone for this translation, this practical shift that he asks life science to take. In this sense, his natal ontology remains just that: an *ontological* project, not a practical manual for the practice of life science, either biological or phenomenological. Here, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and ontology deserve criticism; perhaps were his project completed, he might have offered a more

²¹⁹ *On Translation* 4-5.

precise prescription for life science. We return to the possible criticism that de Waelhens pointed to regarding the *Structure of Behavior*: is Merleau-Ponty's work only negative, only critique, with no positive techniques offered to the practicing biologist, let alone the practicing phenomenologist? (See Chapter 1 and SB xxv) What can phenomenology say today when faced with the complexity of contemporary evolutionary biology or indeed any field of science today? This field, like many others, has exploded in the sixty succeeding years since Merleau-Ponty studied it.

I think Merleau-Ponty offers more than a negative critique but it is nonetheless an incomplete (or, biographical details aside, simply insufficient) expression of a positive project. Phenomenology needs to study more closely the criteria of judgment exercised in describing perceptual wholes at a personal scale – “middle-sized” everyday objects which are our “conceptual firsts” and mark our basic ontological commitments, as Quine puts it (5) – to the macroscopic and microscopic fields of scientific study.²²⁰ Much work remains for the phenomenological translator within the life sciences. Given the insufficiency of his project, we can either flesh out his account or abandon it. I believe I have shown in these pages that Merleau-Ponty's ontology has much to offer, even with the aforementioned failing. He has pointed to some serious limitations imposed by life science when it takes an unnecessarily objective and reductive standpoint (a negative critique). But his work also points toward a vast and unfulfilled project of rigorously moving between these two life sciences.

²²⁰ I can envision fascinating further study comparing and contrasting W.V. Quine's and Merleau-Ponty's critiques of science. Though these two figures might at first glance appear to belong to radically divergent traditions, in fact there are many felicitous overlaps between their critiques, each of which was developed in the same historical time period.

The possibility of ethical action in the life sciences, or indeed in life in general, points us back toward an as yet unresolved issue in our natal ontology drawn from Merleau-Ponty that may require supplementation by Arendt: responsibility for action.

Unresolved Problems: Ambiguity, Nature, Culture, Responsibility

In this practical shift to affirming *connaissance*, a natal ontology assumes that nature and culture intertwine. Nature and culture are the warp and woof of the fabric of the world; at the macroscopic to the microscopic level, they tightly and inseparably constitute human existence. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty showed that in the moments of the affective life in which we make choices, we cannot discern a level of culture and a level of nature; we cannot separate our active consciousness from the passive-active body through which we receive the world. In the *Nature Courses*, through studies of development and epigenesis, Merleau-Ponty showed that nature and culture intertwine in the very formulation of our genome. So closely tied are freedom and Nature, action and passivity, that “we no longer see where behavior begins and where mind ends” (NC 178). This ambiguity might seem like a loss of clarity. Instead, we might see it as a rich opening onto a view of mind in life and life in mind, in Thompson’s words, or “flesh,” in Merleau-Ponty’s words.

Yet this intertwining of nature and culture returns us to a question that has already raised itself: what then can we say of responsibility for a life so lived, where mind and life, freedom and nature intertwine? For what of this complex of nature and culture, freedom and nature can I, or any natal, possibly be held responsible? I have argued that life science ought to take responsibility for its productivity, but how can any natal be

responsible? Thompson, Alva Nöe, Kelly, and others have amplified phenomenology's understanding of the mechanisms underlying perception and even of action in a certain restricted sense, but what of action in its richest Arendtian sense? Are *natural* natal humans capable of the very unpredictable initiation that Arendt saw as constitutive of natality?

Merleau-Ponty's answer to this question is ambiguous. Merleau-Ponty has been called the philosopher of ambiguity for good reason; from the *Structure of Behavior* to the *Visible and the Invisible*, his work describes an ambiguous, chiasmatic intertwining as fundamentally constitutive of human existence.²²¹ In Sartre's view of freedom and subjectivity, one is unambiguously responsible for one's actions: Nature offers no excuse from responsibility. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, shows us that action ambiguously depends on a passivity for which we cannot be held *consciously* responsible. As natals, we are precisely more than "consciousnesses": we are bodies among generations of others' bodies. We ambiguously comprise a temporally unfolding dynamic of nature and culture, freedom and nature. But I nonetheless find myself in a political world that unambiguously holds me responsible for personal acts. Even if I were caught in the momentum and motivation of natal existence – if, for example, my passive receptivity to a sexual atmosphere led me not only to an erotic enchantment with another person, but to a rape or violation of that person – I am unambiguously responsible for that behavior. If I fall asleep at the wheel of a car after days of driving, I am responsible for the lives in the vehicle I hit. These are just the moments in which the slope of the affective life grows steep: the momentum of nature overwhelms the natal speeding through time. The only

²²¹ For an early articulation of this characterization, see de Waelhens, "Philosophy of Ambiguity" in *Structure of Behavior*.

clear statement about such situations that Merleau-Ponty has offered on the relation between a person's identity and her acts is a quotation from Saint-Éxupéry: "Your act is you."

My act is me, but am I responsible for this act? For my "self"? What am I, are we to do? In what follows, I clarify what Merleau-Ponty has only hinted at in his texts; I push the claims of his text beyond what they explicitly offer.

First, let us readdress whether in these and other situations we are free, and then consider what responsibility could be entailed by such freedom were it to exist. As natal, we are free, but in a natal ontology, freedom is acquired. We are not "naturally" free; the equation of freedom with nature reduces all actions of nature to acts of freedom. In practice, we can and we *should* distinguish some actions as less free than others (See Chapter 2, SB 203, PP 437). This is the case because we are free in relation to a contingent situation. Like El Greco, we are free as bodies in this world. Freedom, moreover, cannot be understood if it is equal in all moments in time, across a life. When we exercise our freedom, we commit ourselves to acts that may lessen or increase our freedom. Not only does freedom require commitment, it requires ongoing commitment. Instances of coming to awareness and free acts "are real only if they are sustained by a new commitment" (PP 455).

Freedom and Nature co-emerge for Merleau-Ponty as for Arendt²²² in the natal beginning "of somebody," to use Arendt's words. But what is "Nature" as I use it here? Let us recall some of the claims about Nature that have been made. As we saw through the *Nature Courses*, Nature appears as a temporally and spatially unfurling principle; it is

²²² Arendt argues that the principle of beginning "is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created and not before" (HC 177).

not just a principle “for us,” a veil hiding a materialist universe behind it. Nor can Nature be understood outside of this contingent, spatio-temporal world. Freedom, too, appears in this same spatio-temporal pattern. As a result, for Merleau-Ponty, human freedom is not “freedom in the Kantian sense, that is, event-based freedom which is attested to in a decision; it is, rather, a structural freedom. In brief, it is the theme of the melody much more than the idea of a nature-subject” (NC 178). Like the movement of the animals itself, the movement of human freedom traces a melodic line for Merleau-Ponty. This melody has no sense – *sens* – if we look at only one moment of it. As we saw in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty identifies freedom over the course of a time, not in relation to any single event or choice. To see freedom we must look at a whole life – animal or human – as it unfolds in time, in an environment. We attest to freedom, as to Nature, “as a theme that haunts consciousness” (NC 178).

To answer the question, “am I free”? I cannot look at just one moment of choice. I can only bear witness to the pattern of choosing that appears across my life. A style will appear in that pattern, just as a style will appear in the pattern of an axolotl’s walking or a crab’s scuttling. The pattern will be mine. It will only have sense in relation to the world and the others in which it appears.

Responsibility for that freedom is something that I will have to make for myself. Responsibility is a meaning that I bring to a situation. In this regard, we must depend on Arendt’s politically oriented philosophy to clarify Merleau-Ponty’s ambiguous philosophy. Given contingency – indeed all that is “mysteriously given,” to use Arendt’s words (OT 301) – I can nonetheless make sense of this contingency. I can witness in my

life and others' lives stories and indeed histories. For that meaning-making, and the responsibility it points toward, I can be responsible.

Again, we turn to the metaphor of the melody. If I were a violinist, preparing an improvisation – for which I would literally and metaphorically be *responsible*— I would have to begin by hearing the melody, or the symphony, that preceded my cadenza. The action for which I would assume responsibility would depend on initial responsiveness. My action would depend on perception, an ongoing attunement to the others playing with me. If I wanted to play *well* – or metaphorically, act well – I could not play just any musical phrase: I would have to attend to the meaningful pattern – the musical “story” – that came before. The “story” includes both immediate actions and historical actions. That attunement, that attention, would reveal to me the principle that coemerged with the beginning of the melody.

On this issue of meaning-making, it is useful to return to Arendt's account of the human condition.²²³ Natality refers not to the beginning of an event, but rather to the beginning “of somebody, who is a beginner himself” (HC 177). This *somebody* who begins sets things in motion and also into order, rather than merely passively following the processes of nature. Recall that for Arendt when natals begin in this rich Greek sense, they “set something in motion” (Arendt, HC 177), but this motion is unpredictable. For Arendt we should see human action as miraculous precisely because it is unpredictable; unlike mere “natural processes,” humans can release themselves from cycles.²²⁴ It is thus

²²³ One might also turn to Paul Ricoeur for an in-depth discussion of the relation of story-telling, emplotment, and action in either *Oneself as Another* or *Time and Narrative*, especially Volumes 1 and 3. Ricoeur may offer a more rigorous phenomenology of this relationship than either Merleau-Ponty or Arendt, who both point toward poetry and history as meaning-making events but do not offer the detailed research that Ricoeur does.

²²⁴ Rather than attempting to maintain rule over the unpredictable sphere of political action, political thought must readmit the unpredictability inherent to beginning (See Young-ah Gottlieb 150). Arendt

that, in Peg Birmingham's words, "humanity's guarantee lies not in the end of humanity but in its beginning" (8). Human beginnings, though unpredictable, are not therefore arbitrary. As Arendt puts it, "What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself" (OT 212). Humans can take up contingencies and "produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence" (HC 324). For Arendt, the condition of natality can be understood in the Gospel message "a child has been born unto us," which synecdochally shows "the miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruins is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted" (HC 247).²²⁵ That is, natal beings can make meaningful stories from their lives. Natsals can take an event – the event of life – and make it meaningful.

Merleau-Ponty, we might say, takes the message – a child has been born unto us – quite literally as representative of natality. Merleau-Ponty would agree with Arendt that natality refers to the beginning "of somebody" and that "[b]eginning and principle are not only related to each other, but are coeval" (Arendt OT 212). But for Merleau-Ponty, this principle is coeval with natural life, not only with a story viewed in reflection on a life. For Merleau-Ponty as for Arendt, history – with its meaningful *stories* – is rooted in

critiques Plato as one of the first political thinkers to make the mistake of forgetting the unpredictability of natality. Plato, Arendt believed, thought that beginning in politics could guide and rule all that followed. This mistake of Plato's conditioned much of Western political thinking: "In the tradition of Platonic thought, this original linguistically predetermined identity of ruling and beginning had the consequence that all beginning was understood as the legitimation for rulership, until finally, the element of beginning disappeared altogether from the concept of rulership" (HC 224). Arendt turns political thought from this utopian tendency in Western history. Rather than slipping into either Platonic absolute control or into the passivity of behaviorism, and ending up with the "most sterile passivity history has ever known," human beings should take up their capacity for unpredictable action (HC 322).

²²⁵ Ironically, of course, Arendt pays little attention to actual birth (and is often troubled by the influence of certain elements of the Christian tradition) and sees human action as a way *out of* the problem of human nature. Yet, as we have seen in considering her work in the *Life of the Mind*, this anti-naturalist prejudice is just that: it is a prejudice, not inherent to a philosophy of natality.

natality but it is rooted even more deeply in the very dynamic principle of life. Meaning arises with life: it is not applied to it after the fact. In the *Structure of Behavior*, we saw for Merleau-Ponty history itself is not of a movement of world spirit but “intelligibility in the nascent state” (SB 207). History arises from the birth of intelligibility in living organisms, the coming-to-life of mind – the enlivening action of mind – over and over. As Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on totality remind us, identifying the principle of history as rooted in the movement of life does not mean that we can then see the total action of history. Turning toward beginnings, we advance toward historical understanding by backing into a future we cannot see. Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in *Prose of the World*, “The awareness of truth advances like a crab, turned toward its point of departure, toward that structure *whose* signification it expresses” (128). Our natalivity points backwards toward our natal origins – to the fact that we began elsewhere – but also blindly forward toward our expressive life and projects.

Like weak-messianism, this nascent momentum of mind in life is something that we can only witness retrospectively: it is not a predictive tool. As living things, we are drawn backwards toward a future we cannot see. For Merleau-Ponty, history is not behind us – something the philosopher can see in total, as for Hegel – but hidden before us (SB 206). We cannot, like Hegel, watch this principle from the outside. We are caught up in its movement; its excessive momentum carries us on, even through our reflection on it. As he puts it in the *Phenomenology*, “[i]t is true Marx says, that history does not walk on its head, but it is also true that it does not think with its feet. Or one should say rather that it is neither its ‘head’ nor its ‘feet’ that we have to worry about, but

its body” (PP xix).²²⁶ Through his natal ontology, Merleau-Ponty has put bodies into natural history by showing the fragile bodily initiation of the actions that set history into motion and follow from the momentum of history.

Like other natural life, humans do not merely passively respond to the contingencies of their situations, but organize these contingent situations into meaningful stories. Here Arendt and even Ricoeur’s work usefully supplement Merleau-Ponty’s own; where Merleau-Ponty points out a continuity between the movement of life and the movement of history, Ricoeur and Arendt fill in a phenomenological gap between prereflective experience and phenomenological work on history, describing the activity of story-making and narrative structure.²²⁷ Human beings are thus historical beings. And here perhaps we reach the point at which – even for Merleau-Ponty – human life distinguishes itself from other life: not at the level of meaning-making but historically transmitted meaning. Human action, in distinction from the activity of life in general, involves not just sustaining of life itself – self-making, auto-poeisis – but generative action, *poeisis*, that can be transmitted through history. Humans do not just reproduce themselves as lives, but make meaning of their lives, individually and collectively. It is

²²⁶ This strange comment appears in the context of explaining that we cannot simply invert (or stand on its head) Marxism which has in turn inverted Hegelianism. This analogy of the body as history recurs in both the *Phenomenology* and in the *Adventures of the Dialectic*. For example, he explains that the movement of Communism is like that of an organism, “endowed with differentiated means of perception and action.” This movement of history analogously has a body and brain: “In an organism there is no action without a nervous system, but the nervous system endows an organism with a life which it is not adequate to explain” (AD 119). But the life of an organism, the structure of its behavior, does not predetermine its action; instead there is a “mobilization of all these resources in the face of a perceived situation to which one must respond” (AD 119).

²²⁷ See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, and also Richard Kearney’s *On Stories*. Ricoeur uses the term “emplots” and “emplotment” to connote roughly the fundamental act of putting into meaningful narrative order, into a dramatic structure; this is the activity of “mimesis” in its richest Greek sense (*mimesis*₁ in Ricoeur’s terms). Rather than a mere copying of the world, mimesis in this sense is an original putting-into-order, a putting-into-meaning. This putting-into-meaning occurs at the levels of sentence syntax, story, and text. See *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1, Part 1, Section 3 and Volume 3, Part 1, Section 1.

in the domain of history and *poesis* that we find the *meaning* of being numerous and natural, not merely the *fact* of being numerous and natural.

By Way of Conclusion

Again and again Merleau-Ponty has drawn connections between the poetic and aesthetic sphere and the sphere of action, between the appearance of life and the appearance of art. Let us elaborate on this connection: The theory of art offers no art to be judged. Likewise, a theory of action, offers no actions to judge. To determine the ethical effect of the practical shifts suggested by Merleau-Ponty's ontology, we would have to witness it at work precisely *in practice*. Perhaps all we can say is what Merleau-Ponty says at the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

There is no theoretical reply to these questions. But there are these *things* which stand, irrefutable, there is before you this person whom you love, there are these men whose existence around you is that of slaves, and *your* freedom cannot be willed without leaving behind its singular relevance, and without willing freedom *for all*. (PP 456)

We cannot resolve this discussion in theory; we must adopt a natal ontology and witness its effect in action. Concretely, that would mean we would have to see if the life scientist, for example, who attends to the plurality in which she deploys her views on Nature – formulated in the laboratory but expressed in a politically charged environment – has a better ethical and political effect. Can life science, for example, study race or gender through an evolutionary biological method and yet safely deploy these conclusions into an ethically and politically fraught sphere? This question points toward

future research specifically applying a natal ontology to current détentes over human nature in, for example, feminism and gender studies.²²⁸

This question cannot be resolved theoretically within the investigations here, but perhaps not in any theoretical studies. Merleau-Ponty's natal ontology has guided life science toward a non-dualistic outlook on human naturalness; from these new outlooks, a new range of actions are possible.

Rather than avoiding the problem of natural life – as phenomenology may do for reason that Arendt expresses – Merleau-Ponty challenges phenomenology to take up that problem. Life science can now take action, understanding itself as a discipline of action, not only description. Life science must take such coordinated action – between phenomenology and other life science – even when the issue of human natural life raises problems like “natural history” and the human “species.” In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty began to ask about the ontological status of the difference between nature and culture in experience. He argues that we cannot leave our natality – our original, ambiguous, lived experience – and finally emerge as adult Kantian subjects. We will never emerge into a world in which we can finally judge the a priori and a posteriori. That distinction is not *more real* than the prereflective unity in action. We cannot know this *in the moment*; as with nature and culture, we find that freedom and nature dialectically condition us. Nature is not over there but in me. This is not an illusion from which I can escape.

Merleau-Ponty describes his work in the Nature Courses as a “meditation of our ‘strange kinship’ with the animals (and thus the theory of evolution)” (NC 271). The lesson of this meditation is to reveal the “ontological part of the new science of life” so

²²⁸ For just one such recent study see Mann, “What Should Feminists Do About Nature?”

that phenomenology can correct itself, drawing on scientists' "own intuitions" and instead of regarding human being as having ascended from animal, envisioning the "lateral union of animality and humanity" (NC 271). Merleau-Ponty concludes that he has "given such a large place to theory of evolution" in his course because he needed to restore the depth of the "lateral relation, or *Ineinander*" to "give this depth to the human body, this archaeology, this natal past" (NC 273). The project which we conclude here follows Merleau-Ponty in this restoration of our natal past. Through an archaeological method, we turn toward our beginnings and find our natal and horizontal connection to animal life in general. Because of this relation and this natal past, we find that we can give ontological value to the term "species"; we find that being is disclosed through our natal connection to a plurality. Just as Merleau-Ponty describes language as not behind us in a universal grammar but before us, in expression,²²⁹ so the life of the species or plurality to which we belong is something before us, not behind us.

Descartes had hoped for an impermeable Nature, pure exteriority with no interiority capable of such impregnation. But once we realize our participation in the generation of Nature, we find not only that Nature is pregnable, but that we, as natural, are permeable as well. Nature cannot be sought without artifice, nor vice versa; Nature corresponds not to a state of affairs but the *meaning* unfolding between life and environment. Nature conditions culture which conditions Nature in a spiraling, temporally unfolding event in which, by our birthright, we are actors, not spectators.

²²⁹ *Prose of the World* 41, cited in Dewitte 105.

List of Abbreviations

Note: Where French and English translations appear together in my text, I have marked the page numbers with a slash. For example “umbilical cord [*le cordon umbilical*]”(VI 107 /).

Works by Merleau-Ponty

- CA *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language.*
- CZ “Cezanne’s Doubt.” *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader.*
- EM “Eye and Mind.” *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader.*
- NC *Nature: Course Notes.*
- NO “Course Notes: Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology” in *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology.*
- PA “*La Philosophie Aujourd’hui.*”
- PP *Phenomenology of Perception.*
- PrimP *Primacy of Perception.*
- SB *Structure of Behavior*
- SI *Signs.*
- VI *Visible and the Invisible.*

Works by Hannah Arendt

- OT *Origins of Totalitarianism.*
- HC *Human Condition .*
- LI *Life of the Mind.* Two Volumes, designed 1, 2.

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