

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Dissertations (2009 -)

Dissertations, Theses, and Professional Projects

---

# The Paradox of Nature: Merleau-Ponty's Semi-Naturalistic Critique of Husserlian Phenomenology

Shazad Akhtar  
*Marquette University*

---

## Recommended Citation

Akhtar, Shazad, "The Paradox of Nature: Merleau-Ponty's Semi-Naturalistic Critique of Husserlian Phenomenology" (2010).  
*Dissertations (2009 -)*. Paper 65.  
[http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations\\_mu/65](http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/65)

THE PARADOX OF NATURE: MERLEAU-PONTY'S SEMI-NATURALISTIC CRITIQUE  
OF HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

by

Shazad Akhtar, B. A., M. A.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School, Marquette University, in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

December 2010

## ABSTRACT

### THE PARADOX OF NATURE: MERLEAU-PONTY'S SEMI-NATURALISTIC CRITIQUE OF HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

Shazad Akhtar, B. A., M. A.

Marquette University, 2010

This dissertation deals with Merleau-Ponty's critical transformation of Husserl's phenomenology through a rethinking of the concept of "nature," which Husserl, Merleau-Ponty argues, fails to integrate or explain successfully in his philosophical system. The first chapter reconstructs Husserl's "transcendental-phenomenological" project in *Ideas I*, while the second widens the investigation to cover the ontologically-centered *Ideas II* and *III*. In my third chapter, I chart what I call Merleau-Ponty's "organic appropriation" of Husserl and the unique hermeneutical challenges it poses. Here the ambiguity of *Ideas II*, which both grounds subjectivity in the lived body and separates nature from "spirit" (*Geist*), plays a crucial role. The fourth chapter concentrates on the Merleau-Ponty's later meditations on the ontology of nature and subjectivity, particularly in his recently translated *Nature* lectures of 1959-61. Finally, the fifth chapter compares and contrasts Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, in terms of both substance and method, through a detailed examination of their different notions of (and ways to address) "paradox." I show how Merleau-Ponty's "paradoxical" thinking stems not from chance or mere temperament but a fundamental, systematic commitment to the self-contradictory (or "dialectical," but in a modified sense) nature of being and truth themselves.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Shazad Akhtar, B. A., M. A.

I owe the conception and fruition of this project above all to my director, Pol Vandavelde. It is in his classes that I first awakened to the importance of phenomenology and the power of its method. He has taught me the texts and styles of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and many other figures who have influenced my philosophical thinking and research decisively. I have learned tremendously from lengthy discussions over both his own and other authors' original works. If this dissertation is successful in any small measure, this is owing substantially to the guidance and influence of Dr. Vandavelde.

I have also my second reader, Dr. Sebastian Luft, to thank profusely for his energetic and generous aid to me over the years and in the completion of the present project. I have benefitted greatly from my years-long conversations with Dr. Luft on many topics ranging from phenomenology to Hegelian idealism and much more. His friendship, availability, and cutting-edge scholarship have been very valuable to me in my academic development.

In addition, I would also like to take the opportunity to sincerely thank Dr. Andy Tallon and Dr. Stephen Watson of Notre Dame for their encouragement and suggestions during my writing process.

I must add that I was greatly aided in completing this dissertation in a timely manner by the Marquette Graduate School and its generous financial support, through the Raynor Fellowship, through the 2009-2010 academic year. I am also deeply grateful to the Marquette Philosophy department for having nominated me for the award and, more generally, for having given me a first-class philosophical education that I will take with me and build upon, I am sure, for the rest of my life.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....   | i  |
| INTRODUCTION.....  | 1  |
| I. Present Status of the Problem   |    |
| A. Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl and Husserl's Conception<br>of Nature.....            | 4  |
| B. Merleau-Ponty's Later Ontology and Concept of Nature.....                                       | 6  |
| C. <i>Ideas I and II</i> .....   | 7  |
| II. Summary of the Dissertation  |    |
| A. Chapters One and Two.....   | 8  |
| B. Chapters Three and Four.....  | 11 |
| C. Chapter Five.....   | 15 |
| III. Conclusion.....   | 17 |
| CHAPTER ONE: HUSSERL'S TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGY IN <i>IDEAS I</i> : THE<br>BASIC POSITION..... | 19 |
| I. Introduction: <i>Ideas I</i> and the Project of Transcendental Phenomenology.....               | 19 |
| II. <i>Epoché</i> and Phenomenological Reduction   |    |
| A. Introduction.....   | 24 |
| B. The Natural and the Transcendental Attitudes.....   | 26 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| C. Phenomenological <i>Epoché</i> .....   | 32 |
| D. Phenomenological-Transcendental Reduction(s) .....   | 34 |
| E. An Interlude: On the Motivation of the Reduction.....  | 38 |
| III. Essences and the Eidetic Reduction.....  | 40 |
| A. Intentionality, Noesis and Noema, and Transcendence.....   | 43 |
| B. The Eidetic Distinction between Mental and Physical.....   | 49 |
| C. The Charge of Dualism.....   | 52 |
| D. Absolute and Relative Existence and the “World-Annihilation”<br>Experiment.....                  | 55 |
| E. Husserl’s Final Position: “Transcendental Idealism” .....  | 60 |
| IV. Concluding Reflections.....   | 65 |
| <br>CHAPTER TWO: THE CONSTITUTION OF NATURE, BODY, AND SPIRIT IN<br>HUSSERL’S <i>IDEAS II</i> ..... | 73 |
| I. Introduction.....  | 79 |
| II. The Ontological Matrix of <i>Ideas II/III</i>   |    |
| A. Introduction.....  | 79 |
| B. The Constitution of Worldly Reality  |    |
| 1. Material Nature.....   | 82 |
| 2. Animal Nature, or the Body-and-Soul.....   | 85 |
| 3. Ego.....   | 91 |
| 4. Spirit.....  | 93 |
| III. Analysis: Philosophical Difficulties of <i>Ideas II/III</i>                                    |    |
| A. Introduction: Phenomenological Monism, Ontological Dualism.....                                  | 99 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| B. Husserl's Naturalism.....  | 102 |
| C. The Priority Thesis.....   | 108 |
| D. Spirit and Consciousness.....  | 110 |
| E. The Question of the Body.....  | 114 |
| IV. Conclusion.....   | 118 |
|   |     |
| CHAPTER THREE: MERLEAU-PONTY'S ORGANIC APPROPRIATION OF HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY    |     |
| I. Introduction.....  | 122 |
| II. Merleau-Ponty's Relationship to Husserl: An Doxographical Overview and Critique |     |
| A. Introduction.....  | 127 |
| B. The "Strong View": Zahavi, Smith, and Barbaras.....                              | 129 |
| C. "Weak" and "Mixed" Views: Lefort, Richir, Madison, et al. ....                   | 130 |
| D. Four Weak Readings: Embree, Behnke, Seebohm, Bergo.....                          | 133 |
| E. Concluding Thoughts.....   | 140 |
| III. Merleau-Ponty's Husserlian Phenomenology: By Text                              |     |
| A. Introduction.....  | 141 |
| B. Husserl in <i>PP</i> .....   | 143 |
| C. Husserl in Merleau-Ponty's Later Work.....                                       | 146 |
| IV. Merleau-Ponty's Husserlian Phenomenology: By Theme                              |     |
| A. The Phenomenological Reduction.....  | 152 |
| B. Essences and the Eidetic Reduction.....  | 158 |
| V. Concluding Reflections.....  | 161 |



## CHAPTER FOUR: MERLEAU-PONTY'S MATURE ONTOLOGY OF NATURE

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| I. Introduction.....   | 166 |
| II. Nature and the Ontology of the Nature Lectures   |     |
| A. Introduction: The <i>Nature Lectures</i> , <i>The Visible and the Invisible</i> , and the Project of "Ontology" ..... | 168 |
| B. Defining "Nature" .....   | 174 |
| C. Nature and the Sciences of Life.....  | 181 |
| III. The <i>Nature Lectures</i> and <i>The Visible and the Invisible</i> : Towards a New Dialectical Onto-Phenomenology  |     |
| A. Introduction.....   | 190 |
| B. Reversibility.....  | 191 |
| C. Flesh.....  | 196 |
| D. Identity and Difference, the One and the Many: Dimensions of Merleau-Ponty's Dialectic.....                           | 200 |
| IV. Conclusion.....  | 205 |

## CHAPTER FIVE: MERLEAU-PONTY AND HUSSERL ON THE QUESTION OF THE PARADOX OF SUBJECTIVITY AND NATURE

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| I. Introduction.....                                      | 207 |
| II. Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Paradox                 |     |
| A. Overview of Merleau-Ponty's References to Paradox..... | 211 |
| B. Paradox and the "Perceptual Faith" .....               | 217 |
| C. Paradox and Philosophy.....                            | 220 |
| III. Husserl and Paradox.....                             | 221 |
| IV. The Paradox of Reflection                             |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| A. The Reflective Attitude.....   | 225 |
| B. “Hyper-Reflection” .....   | 229 |
| V. Merleau-Ponty’s Paradoxical Thinking In Relation to Other Styles of Thinking:<br>Dialectic, Skepticism/Quietism, and Mysticism |     |
| A. Merleau-Ponty and Hegelian Dialectic.....  | 234 |
| B. Merleau-Ponty and Skepticism/Quietism.....   | 237 |
| C. Merleau-Ponty and Mysticism.....   | 240 |
| VI. Conclusion.....   | 244 |

## CONCLUSION

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| I. Merleau-Ponty vis-à-vis Husserl.....                             | 247 |
| II. Merleau-Ponty and Some Other Philosophers.....                  | 251 |
| III. The “Personalistic Attitude” and the Limits of Reflection..... | 253 |
| IV. Phenomenology as Paradox.....                                   | 254 |
| V. Naturalism.....  | 255 |

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### I. Primary Literature (Husserl and Merleau-Ponty)

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| A. Husserl.....       | 257 |
| B. Merleau-Ponty..... | 258 |

### II. Secondary Literature and Other Works

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| A. Books and Monographs.....                              | 259 |
| B. Articles, Book Chapters, and Volume Introductions..... | 262 |

C. Miscellaneous.....268

## Introduction

The central dynamic of this dissertation is the creative encounter between Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), two of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. I explore this encounter—an “encounter” between two philosophies as opposed to two philosophers, as the two thinkers had never formally met and are separated by more than a generation—with respect principally to the ontological issues surrounding the classical division of “nature” and “spirit.” But in the case of phenomenology, ontological and epistemological issues cannot be cleanly separated. Thus major questions of epistemological significance, such as those of idealism and the nature of reflection, are also addressed and related to the question of what it means to do phenomenology—and even philosophy—itsself. Phenomenology, ontology, epistemology—all of these terms are negotiated and re-negotiated in the course of Merleau-Ponty’s sustained hermeneutics of Husserl’s work, a hermeneutics that opens up onto a hidden world of possibilities latent in the (ostensibly) simple phenomena of sensing, seeing, speaking, and reflecting.

Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Husserl has been commented on before. However, one of the unique contributions of the present research, I believe, is its use of the concept of “nature,” a fundamental concern of both thinkers but in very different ways, to go to the heart of the questions of phenomenological method and the relationship of human subjectivity to the world. This choice allows us to appreciate the motivations of Merleau-Ponty’s rethinking of phenomenology,

putting aside its challenge to classical metaphysical binaries such as “human-animal” and “nature-spirit,” in the context of a wider philosophical-ontological tradition (though still very much a “modern” one, for the most part). Merleau-Ponty’s critique of some elements of Husserlian philosophy clearly belongs to his general critique of modernism and, in turn, blend harmoniously with his positive appropriation of Husserlian phenomenology as a kind of unified-field theory of Being, once cleansed of its Cartesian presuppositions.<sup>1</sup>

In Husserl, “nature” appears primarily in three guises: as the “natural attitude”; as the regional domain of the “natural sciences”; and as the ontic-noematic correlate of “spirit” in the realm of worldly (non-transcendental) reality. For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, “nature” comes to emerge as a complex and nuanced “otherness” at the heart of subjectivity, manifesting itself most directly in the realm of “life,” especially animality, and yet also haunting consciousness, or spirit, with its “presence by absence,” its impenetrable “origin”-ality. It is, as Schelling says, a “wild Being” untamed by thought, yet also untamable, for there could be no thought without a horizon, and that horizontality is the depth that cannot be known without my vanishing from the world altogether and somehow “seeing it from above”—an impossibility even for a God, however, since, as both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty remind us, vision is a corporeal act.

In my interpretation, “Nature”—and then “Being,” and still again, the “flesh”—come, in Merleau-Ponty’s treatment, to quietly displace the “transcendental ego” of Husserl, itself a hold-over of the Cartesian-epistemological prioritization of

---

<sup>1</sup> It is in this light, too, that we can appreciate Merleau-Ponty’s endorsement of the work of Leibniz, Hegel, and Bergson, on the one hand, and his rejection of (much of) Kant and Sartre on the other.

the “inner” over the “outer.” Nature is ambiguously both inner and outer—an interiority qua exteriority, like the living organism, whose “outward behavior” can only be understood as living-out within the “internal” horizon of an *Umwelt*. The organism, most evidently in the simpler (but not the very simplest) forms, like crabs or worms, is radically self-centered (“in its own world”) at the same time that it lacks a center, an “ego” that can differentiate itself “absolutely” from a “world” apart from its interiority. The animal *is* its world. The living being in its unity with its world serves as a reminder of the pre-reflective life of consciousness that underlies—and *challenges from within*—the dualisms of reflective thought, including that of the “natural” and “spiritual,” the central division of Husserl’s *Ideas II*.<sup>2</sup>

While remaining a phenomenologist to the end, Merleau-Ponty rejected both Husserl’s “transcendental idealism”<sup>3</sup> as well as the latter’s implicit (and ironical) collusion with natural science over its definition of the “essence” of nature. It is not only in response to Husserl or *Ideas II*, of course, that Merleau-Ponty developed his ideas of nature; after all, he had been at work on the ontological implications of animality even before he became acquainted with Husserl’s works in a serious way, starting with his first major work *The Structure of Behavior* (1942).<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, in *Ideas II* he sees Husserl struggling with the consequences of dividing the world from consciousness and nature and animality from spirit, and his articulation of an

---

<sup>2</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Trs. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989

<sup>3</sup> It can be debated to what degree, of course; see Toadvine, Ted. “Leaving Husserl’s Cave? The Philosopher’s Shadow Revisited.” In *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 71-94).

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*. Trans. A.L. Fisher. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.

alternative cannot be fully appreciated without this work as a hermeneutical backdrop.

The remainder of this introduction offers an overview of the present status in the relevant secondary literature of the theme(s) of this work, as well as a preview of the contents of the dissertation chapter by chapter, culminating in a summary of the conclusions I draw from all of the foregoing studies.

## I. Present Status of the Problem

### *A. Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl and Husserl's Conception of Nature*

While there are a number of good articles on Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl, several of which are collected in the 2002 essay collection entitled *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*,<sup>5</sup> there is very little material written specifically on Merleau-Ponty's critique of Husserl's conception of nature,<sup>6</sup> let alone a sustained assessment of their respective philosophies through the lens of this idea. The dearth of material on the question of nature is probably due to the fact that Merleau-

---

<sup>5</sup> *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002. Other good articles include those by Taylor Carman and Anthony Steinbock for instance, which both compare Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian phenomenologies of the body, a major theme of *Ideas II*; Carman even explicitly discusses Merleau-Ponty's reading of *Ideas II*, though only in passing. This material is, however, only partially relevant for our present purposes. See: Carman, Taylor. "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty." *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 1999 (pp. 205-225); Steinbock, Anthony. "Saturated Intentionality." In *The Body*. Ed. Donn Welton, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999 (pp. 178-199).

<sup>6</sup> An exception is Stephen Crowell's essay "The Mythical and the Meaningless: Husserl and the Two Faces of Nature." Printed in *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*. Eds. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996. (pp. 81-106) This essay also contains much extraneous material, for our purposes, on the philosophy of mythology.

Ponty's most pointed criticisms on this issue are directly to be found in his lecture courses on nature, which were however published only relatively recently.<sup>7</sup> The present dissertation closes some of this gap in the scholarship.

Much of the discussion of Merleau-Ponty's reading of and philosophical relation to Husserl is polemical and in some ways parallel to the more standard "Husserl versus Heidegger" debate. Taylor Carman expresses a characteristic "pro-Merleau-Pontian" view:

"Unlike Husserl, but like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty looks beyond the subject-object divide to try to gain insight into the concrete structures of worldly experience... Indeed, taking the problem of embodiment seriously, as Merleau-Ponty does, entails a radical reassessment of the very conceptual distinctions on which Husserl's enterprise rests."<sup>8</sup>

Carman further claims that going beyond Husserl "would mean relinquishing the conceptual dualism on which [his] project rests."<sup>9</sup> Many Husserlians would dispute this characterization of Husserl, though I personally believe it is largely accurate,<sup>10</sup> though there are actually *several* "conceptual dualisms," not just one, that must be contended with and sorted through on their own terms, not all of which equate to a "substance dualism" of a sort one finds in Descartes (and is at least outwardly refuted in Husserl). I address this issue in Chapter 2.

---

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Compiled and with notes from Dominique Séglaard. Trans. Robert Vallier. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Carman, Taylor. "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty." *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 1999, p 206.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208

<sup>10</sup> Françoise Dastur, a careful and relatively non-polemical reader of both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, agrees with the latter that Husserl is basically dualistic. See Dastur, Françoise. "Husserl and the Problem of Dualism." *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Dordrecht: Springer, 1983 (pp. 65-77). Merleau-Ponty is routinely read as a zealous anti-dualist, a claim I will partially challenge in chapters 4 and 5.



Husserl has plenty of defenders, of course, some of whom, like Panos Theodorou, take issue with the widespread reading of *Ideas II* that understands it as validating, essentially, the natural-scientific view of nature.<sup>11</sup> J. Claude Evans agrees that this reading is misleading, and goes even further, arguing for the superiority of Husserl's account of nature and science in *Ideas II* over his later reflections on the life-world, definitely a minority position for those concerned with this problem.<sup>12</sup>

Within Husserlian scholarship, at least as evidenced by *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, a chief question lies in just how far Merleau-Ponty diverges from Husserl. For diametrical positions on this question, see for example Seebohm's and Zahavi's articles in said volume.<sup>13</sup>

### *B. Merleau-Ponty's Later Ontology and Concept of Nature*

In recent years there has been a spate of literature on Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy and his general "ontology." These include several book-length treatments, for example by Dillon (1998) and Barbaras (2004)<sup>14</sup>—two of the best available—as well as many articles, interestingly largely in English. (Merleau-Ponty has proven to be popular in America especially, though one should not fail to

---

<sup>11</sup> Theodorou, Panos. "Perceptual and Scientific Thing: On Husserl's Analysis of "Nature-Thing" in *Ideas II*." In *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* Volume 5, 2005. Eds. Burt Hopkins and Steven Crowell, 165-187. Seattle: Noesis Press, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, J. Claude. "Where is the Life-World?" Printed in *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*. Eds. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Seebohm, Thomas M. "The Phenomenological Movement: A Tradition without Method? Merleau-Ponty and Husserl." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 51-70); Zahavi, Dan. "Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: A Reappraisal." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 3-29).

<sup>14</sup> Barbaras, Renaud. *The Being of the Phenomenon*. Trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004; Dillon, M.C. *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988

mention that there is also a Japanese Merleau-Ponty Circle). One of these articles, by Geraets, deals with the theme of nature explicitly,<sup>15</sup> while others deal more with “the flesh” and other related topics from the later philosophy.<sup>16</sup> A comprehensive treatment of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature, one long overdue, has been recently authored by Ted Toadvine.<sup>17</sup>

### C. *Ideas I and II*

Regarding Husserl, there are innumerable works dealing with the central concepts of transcendental idealism and with *Ideas I*<sup>18</sup>, as a text, in particular—indeed, virtually every introductory text or statement on Husserl has to take this seminal work into account. My reliance on secondary literature for the section on *Ideas I* is minimal, however, for two reasons. First, I expound only the work’s most basic themes—*epoché* and reduction, noesis and noema, the transcendental ego, etc. Second, although these notions themselves are all controversial and contested throughout the Husserl literature, my aim is not to give a definitive interpretation of them, only to facilitate through my treatment of them a comprehensible discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s general appropriations and criticisms of Husserlian phenomenology.

---

<sup>15</sup> Geraets, Théodore F. “Merleau-Ponty’s Conception of Nature.” In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Dordrecht: Springer, 1983 (pp. 301-312).

<sup>16</sup> See for example Dastur, Françoise. “World, Flesh, Vision.” In *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*. Eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor. State University of New York Press. Albany: 2000 (pp. 23-50).

<sup>17</sup> Toadvine, Ted. *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009

<sup>18</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. F. Kersten. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983

Work on *Ideas II* is far less extensive than that on *Ideas I*, but there has been some noteworthy secondary scholarship in the last decade on *Ideas II*, some of it included in the volume *Issues in Ideas II*<sup>19</sup>, which draws together a number of essays on various aspects of the work. Other penetrating readings include those of Rockstad<sup>20</sup> and the already-mentioned Evans and Theodorou. *Ideas II* has of course been written about by major phenomenologists, including Ricoeur<sup>21</sup>, Landgrebe<sup>22</sup>, and (obviously) Merleau-Ponty himself. I have found that these, along obviously with the primary text, are still the most valuable elements in *Ideas II* scholarship at the present time.

## II. Summary of the Dissertation

### A. Chapters One and Two

In Chapters One and Two, I sketch a picture of Husserl of *Ideas I* and *II*, the “idealist” Husserl who, in the latter of these two works, nevertheless lays the foundations of most of what Merleau-Ponty will forge into a new vision of

---

<sup>19</sup> *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*, eds. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Rokstad, Konrad. “The Historicity of Body and Soul.” In *Phenomenology of Life -- From the Animal Soul to the Human Mind: Book I: In Search of Experience*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. (pp. 127-159). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2007; also, Rokstad, Konrad. “Nature, Subjectivity and the Life-World.” In *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research Vol LXXVII*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. (pp. 41-59). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*. Trans. Edward G. Ballard and Lester Embree. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967 (Third chapter: “Husserl's *Ideas II*: Analyses and Problems,” pp. 35-81).

<sup>22</sup> Landgrebe, Ludwig. *The Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl*. Ed. Donn Welton. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.

phenomenology and the nature-spirit relation. As just alluded to, the first chapter is a detailed overview of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology—the eidetic and transcendental-phenomenological reductions, the natural and transcendental attitudes, noesis and noema, intentionality, the transcendental ego, constitution, and the like.<sup>23</sup> The purpose of this chapter is mostly expository (some interpretation is involved, of course—as any genuine exposition in fact requires anyway); the demands of explaining Husserl's philosophical system, however, also happen to make it the longest chapter in this work.

The second chapter is a detailed exposition and reading of *Ideas II*<sup>24</sup>, with a focus on its onto-phenomenological meditations on the realms of “material nature,” “body and soul”, and “spirit,” along with the question of the enigmatic relation of these “constituted realities” and the transcendental subjectivity (or simply “consciousness”) of the transcendental reduction formally expounded in *Ideas I*.

---

<sup>23</sup> *A Note on the Choice of Text*: Husserl was constantly in the process of reinventing himself; *Ideas I* is only one of many possible “introductory” texts to use to present Husserl's “transcendental” version of phenomenology (*Cartesian Meditations* and the *Crisis of the European Sciences* come most quickly to mind, but there has even been a book-length introduction to Husserl, by Kockelmanns, based on his Encyclopedia Britannica article on phenomenology—see: Kockelmanns, Joseph J. *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*. Indianapolis: Purdue University Press, 1994). Why choose *Ideas I*? Aside from the reason that *Ideas I* and *II* belong together by their titles (*Ideas II* had been initially planned as a sequel and further explication of the thesis maintained in *Ideas I*), it is also true that *Ideas I* is sufficient to introduce most of the fundamental planks of Husserlian phenomenology. Whether or not Husserl eventually, in the 1930s, shifted his basic position to a more “existential” and “detranscendentalized” form of phenomenology, or whether the later “genetic” phenomenology is not merely an extension of the phenomenology of the *Ideas* but rather a far-reaching radical rethinking of it, are questions I will not and need not deal with here. For it would suit my purposes if the Husserl/s of *Ideas I* and *II* are regarded as just one (or two) of many actual or possible “Husserls,” only because the points I will be trying to make are basically systematic ones, which the texts at hand bring out sufficiently on their own.

<sup>24</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989. The year of publication of the original German-language edition was 1952.

In *Ideas II*, Husserl presents a picture of nature as a the lifeless, meaningless (*Sinnlos*) substrate of reality, a bare “physical thinghood” that distinguishes itself from life (soul, *Seele*), on the one hand, and mind (spirit, *Geist*), on the other. The lived-body, as presented by Husserl, is the “unity” of mind and matter, but, importantly, it is distinguishable from the “pure” forms of either. What shields Husserl from bald-faced “Cartesian” dualism is his claim, announced already in *Ideas I*, that pure or transcendental subjectivity—and here he follows (roughly) Kant, whose “Copernican turn” he broadly endorses—cannot be reduced to “thinghood” or “objectivity” of any kind. Pure subjectivity is more fundamental than any object, since it is the very condition for the possibility of objectivity in the first place. Husserl’s prioritization of transcendental subjectivity over empirical subjectivity radicalizes this difference by placing empirical subjectivity so completely in the grip of the “objective” and even “lifeless” world of “physical nature,” that we are forced to see that subjectivity strictly (or purely) speaking cannot be of the world, literally. This is not to say that it can exist without it, but it certainly can be conceived to do so—as demonstrated in a famous, and, to some, infamous, passage in *Ideas I* that is echoed in later writings as well. That Husserl was interested in making such an underlying point is clear from *Ideas II* and its other, complementary arguments against mind-body reductionism in that text.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> For a good treatment of this, see Marcelle, Daniel. “The Ontological Priority of Spirit Over Nature: Husserl’s Refutation of Psychophysical Parallelism in *Ideas II*.” In *Philosophy Today*, vol. 50 (suppl.), 2006 (pp. 75-82). Whether consciously or not, Husserl presents a kind of “ontological gambit” directed against the *naturalistic* or physicalistic philosopher. In this language, Merleau-Ponty’s concern might be that Husserl’s gambit fails, in the process conceding far too much to natural science. According to this view, then, the transcendental ego, that is, is too thin a reed to put the burden on, so that in the wake of the failure of transcendental phenomenology, there would be only

*Ideas II* was unpublished in Husserl's life-time but read and studied closely by Merleau-Ponty, whose positive appropriation of that work lies mostly in the area of the phenomenology of the body (the lived-body, or *Leib*).<sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty's reservations regarding the work as a whole, however, and in particular on what he regarded as its underlying conceptual confusions, were considerable. And the question of nature—what it is, and how human beings are to be understood in relation to it—occupied (as we have seen) great deal of Merleau-Ponty's mature thought, whose general thrust goes against the grain of Husserl's findings in *Ideas II*. Husserl does not seem either to recognize the tensions in *Ideas II* as fundamental ones or realize that nature poses a radical problem for the transcendental-phenomenological method itself. We might put it this way: whereas for Husserl nature has to be explained in terms of its "constitution" in transcendental consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, it is this very consciousness which would need explaining, in light of its obvious origination in the primordial experiences of the lived-body, which is itself an emblem of nature.

### *B. Chapters Three and Four*

Chapter Three addresses Merleau-Ponty's specific form of phenomenology in relation to Husserl's own. It essentially represents my take on the decades-old question of how best to understand Merleau-Ponty's often controversial reading of Husserl. The issue is complex, but after thoroughly documenting Merleau-Ponty's

---

the naturalistic-physicalistic option left, a disastrous option. Hence there is the need to rethink phenomenology in a wholly new light (though still rooted in perception, as Husserl had it).

<sup>26</sup> See for example Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Philosopher and His Shadow." In *Signs*. Trans. Richard M. McCleary. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964

re-envisioning of classic phenomenological motifs such as the phenomenological and eidetic reductions from the *Phenomenology of Perception* through *The Visible and the Invisible*, I argue finally that the French philosopher's manner of appropriation of Husserl is persuasive but also, more interestingly, highly "organic." I use this term not only in the sense that it draws on Husserl in a natural manner, so to speak, but more particularly in the sense that it embodies or instantiates Merleau-Ponty's style of philosophy and even his own ontology. For example, Merleau-Ponty's own notions of ambiguity, reflection, and paradox, among others, actually prove to be the key to unlocking the secret of his Husserl-reading. But this also means that the extent to which one agrees with Merleau-Ponty's reading correlates somewhat to the degree to which one accepts his overall philosophical vision, something that may account for at least some of the dogged opposition to him from certain members of the "strong Husserlian" camp, at least. (Merleau-Ponty's reading of *his own reading* of Husserl—his view of the degree of his own faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the source, for example—is also here largely confirmed through the prism of his own dialectical views and hermeneutics.)

The fourth chapter plumbs Merleau-Ponty's writings, most particularly the *Nature* lectures, to connect his reading of Husserl and "existentialization" of phenomenology to his newly developing conceptions of nature and, accordingly, the nature of humanity as well. The *Nature* lecture series is an excitingly detailed and dense tract of original research and textual and scientific interpretation that Merleau-Ponty gave as the head of the Collège de France over a period of several years, between 1958 and 1961, shortly before his untimely death. He delivered

them at the same time he was composing his unfinished masterpiece *The Visible and the Invisible*, also a text I will also heavily rely on in both Chapters 4 and 5 (it is effectively Merleau-Ponty's most significant work since the *Phenomenology of Perception*).

Merleau-Ponty's express aim in the lectures is to initiate a project of "ontology" starting from the idea of "nature" as it appears in the history of Western philosophy and science, particularly in the modern period down to his own present day. This is a surprising choice for a self-identified phenomenologist, but it is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's own famous assertion that the phenomenological method, including the phenomenological and eidetic reductions, are radically "incomplete" and thus, one is safe to conclude, unable to seal consciousness off from the empirical realm in the way Husserl, the progenitor of the method, had intended. (This is not to say that "natural" means "empirical," only that there is a "family resemblance" between doing existential phenomenology and an archaeology of nature, the root of our living "existence.")

Whereas in *The Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception* the focus had been on animality and the lived-body—the significance of which remains in the later philosophy (which I do not, as do some others, read in terms of a "break" with the old, rather only a deepening that occasionally prompts a correction), Merleau-Ponty now broadens his inquiry to Being as a whole, thereby finding himself inquiring into nature as a field of life prior to the division of "subject" and "object." Nature turns out to be nothing like either the "objective Nature" of scientists or the "noematic pole" of Husserlian transcendental consciousness, since



it is, in a profound sense, forever beyond any powers of “constitution.” Remarkably and importantly, Merleau-Ponty does not abandon the phenomenological attitude or stand-point of reflective thought in favor of a holistic immersion in pre-reflective life. His vision is one of the human being’s inevitable belongingness *and* alienation from nature—that is, from *himself/herself*. Human existence is therefore self-interrupting, though not to the point of realizing a Sartrean disconnection from the whole spectacle of Being, in whose internal “fold” human consciousness takes its rightful place. It is, however, a conditioned consciousness, just as freedom for Merleau-Ponty is a conditioned freedom. In either case, one can put the emphasis on either the first or the second term and find, in each case, an important nuance that illumines a unique side of existence.

Much of the most interesting material in the *Nature* lectures presents these ideas indirectly through Merleau-Ponty’s original interpretations of such philosophical figures as Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, and Bergson, as well the findings of contemporaneous scientists. Merleau-Ponty’s later conception of nature, and a new ontological vocabulary to go with it, had been gestating for a long time, since his first works in fact. Nature, as we have already seen, comes to take on the meaning of what Schelling called the “barbarous principle” of the real, or again “wild Being,” which cannot be brought in a transparent way within the orbit of reflection. Merleau-Ponty’s critique of transcendental phenomenology is apparent here (much as Schelling criticized the “reflexivity” of Hegel and idealism generally). It seems as though Merleau-Ponty’s “nature” is one which somehow, from within itself, gives rise to subjectivity and reflection—and thereby “transcends itself” while remaining

opaque to itself at the same time. (This opacity is reflected in the motto “we are given to ourselves.”) The parallel to Schelling’s own *Naturphilosophie* is unmistakable, as are the romantic resonances of his understanding of nature generally.<sup>27</sup> But what is gone is “intellectual intuition” or the claim to an insight into a “higher order” of being.

### C. Chapter Five

The final chapter is a systematic exploration of one fundamental difference between Husserl (and perhaps the vast majority of traditional philosophy) and Merleau-Ponty, and it pertains to their approach to philosophy—and thought—itsself. Is philosophy best appreciated as a problem-solving enterprise, as Husserl believes, or rather as a meditation on paradoxes, themselves beyond any simple “solution”? Merleau-Ponty finds the ultimate truth of the human condition to consist in a certain “dialectical” contradiction which, however, unlike Hegel’s version, does not find a resolution in something “higher,” such as an absolute stand-point. Merleau-Ponty is ultimately a philosopher of paradox, which is what explains the title of the present dissertation, “The Paradox of Nature...” It is regarding the problem of nature—at once the home of human spirit, as well as its permanent other—that Merleau-Ponty finds one of his most fruitful applications of what he calls in *The Visible and the Invisible* the method of “interrogation.”

---

<sup>27</sup> Watson mentions Novalis in this connection. (Watson, Stephen H. “Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenological Itinerary From Body Schema to Situated Knowledge: On How We Are and How We Are Not to ‘Sing the World.’” *Janus Head*, Winter/Spring Issue, 9.2, 2007. Amherst, NY: Trivium Publications, p. 534-549.) Robert Vallier has written his dissertation, not published unfortunately, on the topic of Schelling and Merleau-Ponty. (“Institution: Of Nature, Life, and Meaning in Merleau-Ponty and Schelling.” DePaul University, 2001)

Of course, Husserl himself makes “paradox” a central part of the discourse of phenomenology—in the narrow sense that he never ceases first of all to emphasize the utter counter-intuitiveness of the “revolutionary” perspective of transcendental phenomenology, of the enormous effort it takes to overturn (*para-*) the common view (*doxa*) that places subjectivity at the mercy of the spatio-temporal-causal world, rather than vice-versa. Yet he also speaks eloquently in the *Crisis* about what he calls the “paradox of subjectivity”—“paradox” here more in the more Merleau-Pontian sense of “antinomy”—namely the paradox that subjectivity is at once a part of the world (in its embodied form, in individual consciousnesses), even as it is the transcendental condition for the very possibility of the world (what Husserl controversially calls “absolute” existence as opposed to the “relative” existence of the world). In an important way, this, too, is a paradox of nature: for the world—nature—is both the condition of the possibility of consciousness, even as consciousness is the condition for the possibility of the world. But Husserl offers a “solution” to the paradox by making a distinction between two types of subjectivity, and offering one priority over the other. As we have already seen, such a solution will not do for Merleau-Ponty. And in the end, Husserl is no less sympathetic to antinomies than most of the canonical thinkers of the Western philosophical tradition, from Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, Book III) onward.

### III. Conclusion

In Husserl, the thematic of nature initially asserts itself in that philosopher's famous (though clearly ambiguous) rejection of the "natural attitude" and his strong distinction between "world" and "consciousness," and it extends in Merleau-Ponty's work to the latter's fine-grained attempts, through his life-long studies of biology and psychology, to negotiate between this sort of dualism and the equal danger, in his eyes, of a purely scientific "naturalism." Merleau-Ponty eventually settles on an interpretation of the "phenomenological reduction" as a deepening of the "natural" attitude rather than a flight to pure consciousness—or, as Merleau-Ponty paradoxically states it (in Hegelian terms), it is only a departure by way of returning to ourselves. In this way, Merleau-Ponty's lecture course on nature—a focal text of this dissertation, along with *Ideas I and II* and *The Visible and the Invisible*—can be seen to be the culmination of an on-going critique of Husserlian "transcendental" phenomenology in favor of a more "existential-naturalistic"—at once phenomenologically thick and scientifically informed—variety, which places human subjectivity at the heart of nature, or Being, rather than outside or above it. The consequence is that for Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is not a new science or a magic key to unlock philosophical puzzles once and for all; rather, it is the witnessing of the miraculous coherence of contradictory truths in the spectacle of existence.

From the beginning, Merleau-Ponty refuses to adopt a method that would allow for the world's thorough-going constitution in the mind. At the same time, he

explicitly prioritized what we might call the “first-personality” of the phenomenological method over the naïve-realist method of most so-called “naturalists.” The “naturalistic” method Merleau-Ponty and Husserl (not to mention Heidegger) oppose is that of taking the world as something first self-constituted, so to speak, and then later experienced or not experienced, depending on causal conditions that obtain between “subjects” and the world as “object.” In Merleau-Ponty’s way of thinking, human subjectivity, or “spirit” broadly speaking, bears an intrinsic relation with the world it lives-through, perceives, and understands, but at the same time, it is alienated from this world at a level which suggests a twisting or breaking-apart (*dehiscence*) at the root level of being itself. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of “nature” and phenomenology marks a turn towards what I call Merleau-Ponty’s “semi-naturalistic” version of the phenomenological project; “naturalistic” because it situates human subjectivity or spirit in terms that inscribe it in a larger matrix of being, but only “semi-” naturalistic because it is not the full-blown or “reductive” naturalism of a kind that, once again, both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty vigorously opposed.

## Chapter One: Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology in *Ideas I*<sup>28</sup>: The Basic Position

### I. Introduction: *Ideas I* and the Project of Transcendental Phenomenology

*Ideas I* demands our attention both for the boldness and originality of its ideas and for being an undeniable milestone in Husserl's career as well as a watershed moment in the history of the phenomenological movement. It is the first text in which Husserl, the effective founder of the movement as we know it today,<sup>29</sup> formally introduces some of his most famous and distinctive theories, including the phenomenological-transcendental *epoché* and the phenomenological-transcendental reduction.<sup>30</sup> It also contains preliminary attempts at a rigorous definition of

---

<sup>28</sup> The full title of the work is *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (First Book)*. I will refer to it throughout this text as *Ideas I* for short, as is common practice.

<sup>29</sup> Brentano, Husserl's teacher, revived the medieval notion of intentionality and practiced a rudimentary (and arguably "psychological") form of what he termed "phenomenology," but Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I* are generally credited for initiating the school known today as "phenomenology," though Heidegger's 1927 work *Being and Time* also contributed strongly to the way the idea of "phenomenology" eventually came to be received and interpreted.

<sup>30</sup> Husserl sometimes makes a strong distinction between the "phenomenological" and the "transcendental" reductions, which is something I will bring up again below (IID) with respect to Husserl's famous *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on phenomenology. But in *Ideas I*, he treats them as having the same extension, only referring to different aspects of a single process. Thus he distinguishes them as follows: "...we shall, on most occasions, speak of *phenomenological reductions* (but also, with reference to their collective unity, we shall speak of *the phenomenological reduction*) and, accordingly, *from an epistemological point of view* [my italics here], we shall refer to *transcendental reductions*." (*Ideas I*, 66) In other words, the distinction as given here is merely one of perspective, and accordingly I will often use the two terms—"phenomenological reduction" and "transcendental reduction"—interchangeably, except when the exposition demands that they temporarily be understood as distinct. (What goes for the reduction in this case goes for the *epoché* as well, for they are companion concepts.)

phenomenology as distinct from other sciences (“natural” and “human”) and the introduction of the terminology (noesis and noema, natural and transcendental attitudes, constitution) so characteristic of Husserl’s subsequent technical phenomenological discussions. It is, then, easily on par in importance with Husserl’s earlier and similarly path-breaking *Logical Investigations*.<sup>31</sup>

Yet even in comparison to other published texts by Husserl, *Ideas I* is not a particularly easy text to understand or unpack. It is highly abstract and rarely pauses to explain the significance or philosophical context of its analyses, taking this background more or less for granted. As Paul Ricoeur points out, the motivations of the work, rooted in a confrontation with skepticism, are best discerned through unpublished texts and lectures from the period between 1905 and 1913, as well as with the help of the writings of Husserl’s remarkable assistant Eugen Fink.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the actual text of *Ideas I* reads at times like a starter’s training manual, in this case for the practice of a new phenomenological method of thinking and analysis. Yet the “manual” is also a record of self-discovery and has the feel of a work in progress, as Husserl was himself working through many of its ideas and their implications, not all of which, as is clear from his later introductory texts, are fully worked out in its pages.

---

<sup>31</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Logical Investigations*. Trans. J. N. Findlay. London: Routledge, 1900/01 (2nd, revised edition 1913) (Hereafter *LI*)

<sup>32</sup> In Ricoeur’s words: “Finally, it must be said that *Ideas I* is a book whose meaning remains *concealed* and that one is inevitably inclined to look for its meaning elsewhere.” See: Ricoeur, Paul. *A Key to Edmund Husserl’s Ideas I*. Trans. Bond Harris and Jacqueline Bouchard Spurlock. (Trans. revised by Pol Vandavelde, ed.) Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996 (pp. 36-7) Hereafter *Key*. Ricoeur relies heavily on the Husserl-approved essay by Fink, “Die phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik” (1933), to fill in some of the gaps left by Husserl himself. Merleau-Ponty was to do the same later on.

It would be impossible to condense all of *Ideas I* in the space of one chapter, let alone to show how it builds on Husserl's considerable output before its publication, or for that matter how his still later thinking relates to *Ideas I*. Indeed, *Ideas I* is written with readership of the *LI* largely being presumed. Certain of the latter's ideas are revisited anew—intentionality, for example—while others are enfolded implicitly into the substance of newer reflections.<sup>33</sup> It is necessary for the purposes of the present work for us to sketch out *Ideas I*'s main argument (if this is the right word) and its basic orientation towards some of the fundamental questions it poses to itself, concerning especially: the nature of consciousness and the relationship of consciousness to the world; the definition of phenomenology as a “transcendental” (as well as eidetic) science that eschews the “natural attitude” while seeking to explain its contents; the ideas of “transcendence” and “immanence”; and the question of the scope and meaning of the phenomenological *epoché* and reduction, the latter question bearing of course on the central issue of the phenomenological method. These are all interrelated questions; indeed, one might even go so far as to say (in Heideggerian style perhaps) that they are “the same” question. For roughly, they all concern the underlying relationship of consciousness to world—or, put in another way, subjectivity and nature. We cannot

---

<sup>33</sup> For example, in *Ideas I* Husserl takes for granted the notion that phenomenology deals with “acts” of consciousness, whose “meaning-intentions” are either “empty” or “fulfilled.” This principle is of course foundational to Husserl's ideas on perception. For example, while I can see or “intend” one side of a die, I generally also “intend” its hidden sides as well. The former intention is fulfilled by intuitive evidence—the givenness of the die in its color, shape, etc., as it shows itself to me visually. The latter “signitive” intentions are not fulfilled and are thus “empty”—unless or until other sides of the die are seen by me. The distinction is important for it allows Husserl to explain how it is that we perceive *the die* and not merely “this side of” the die. We perceive objects, in other words, not merely profiles. This is one of Husserl's strategies, so to say, for overcoming the “appearance-reality” divide that has hampered previous theories of perception.



hope to do full justice to the many angles one might use to approach and address Husserl's multifaceted answer to these questions. To take one example, we will have to gloss over the significant controversies surrounding Husserl's concept of the "noema"<sup>34</sup> or of its relation to "fulfilment."<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, many of the sorts of fundamental problems that arise in such debates will be touched on in other sections of the overview provided below. This overview, along with some independent commentary and brief references to some of the secondary literature on *Ideas I*, will constitute the bulk of this chapter.

Yet given the relatively "intermediary" status of *Ideas I* in the course of Husserl's own lifelong task (from *Ideas I* onward) of explaining transcendental phenomenology, it might still be wondered why we are concentrating in this chapter on this particular text. Merleau-Ponty, for example, regarded *Ideas I* as a belonging to a "middle" or "transition" period between Husserl's "logicism," presumably culminating in the *Logical Investigations*, and the later supposed "existentialism" of

---

<sup>34</sup> This question has been written about endlessly, especially in context of the debate between those who interpret the noema as "percept" (Gurwitsch, Cairns, et al.) and those, lead chiefly by Føllesdal, who interpret it as a variant of Frege's *Sinn*. For a nice recap of the debate, see: Solomon, Robert C. "Husserl's Concept of the Noema." In *Husserl: Expositions and Appraisals*, Frederick A. Elliston and Peter McCormack, eds. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977 (pp. 54-69). Solomon begins his essay by noting: "It is generally agreed that the concept of the *noema* is one of the themes, if not the central theme, of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy." J. N. Mohanty is seemingly in perfect agreement when he makes a passing reference to "the all-important idea of *noema* and noetic-noematic structure, regarded by many as constituting the most important and original part of [*Ideas I*]." (Mohanty, J. N. *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl: A Historical Development*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 372) Another topic we will have to leave out, though in this case because it is almost wholly absent from the *Ideas* itself, is the topic of time-constitution, which later figures deeply in all of Husserl's most advanced analyses.

<sup>35</sup> For an excellent summary of the debate, see Pol Vandavelde's introduction to *Key* (pp. 16-20). Also of note is Ricoeur's remark, inspired also by the difficulties surrounding the noema, and quoted by Vandavelde in the introduction, that 'thus, reality always seems to escape transcendental constitution.'

the “life-world” philosophy, best known through the *Crisis*.<sup>36</sup> Given such views, why not review Husserl’s later reformulations of much of this material? Moreover, as mentioned above, Husserl himself later admits to the disadvantages—though not necessarily inadequacies—of the “Cartesian” way to the reduction presented herein. He also developed a new form of phenomenology, “genetic” or “dynamic” phenomenology, which supplements (and some say supplants) the “static” phenomenology of *Ideas I*.

The fact remains, however, that Husserl himself never totally abandoned either the static or the “Cartesian” phenomenological method. Regarding the latter, for example, no less than the author of the heterodox text *The Other Husserl*, Donn Welton notes that “[t]he existence of the *Cartesian Meditations*, and the fact that [Husserl] recommended its French translation to readers as late as 1933 even as he began developing the text of the *Crisis*...convincing us that [the Cartesian way to the reduction] was never overthrown.”<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Husserl never abandoned the basic framework of “transcendental subjectivity” and its wholly non-naturalistic essence. *Ideas I* presents a broadly faithful picture of the basic thrust of transcendental phenomenology, and this fact, combined with its historical importance and the fact that it is the “prequel” to *Ideas II*, a text equally if not more vital for our task, are, I believe, enough to recommend it for detailed investigation at the present time.

---

<sup>36</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Tr. Colin Smith. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962 (p. 320n). *Crisis* refers to Husserl’s text *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Trans. David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

<sup>37</sup> Welton, Donn. *The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000 (p. 118). Hereafter “Welton.”

## II. *Epoché* and Phenomenological Reduction

### A. Introduction

The heart of *Ideas I*, and probably the signature of phenomenology itself as it is popularly known, is the phenomenological reduction. It is all but impossible to give a brief definition of it, but any account must begin with the concept of “*epoché*” or the “suspension” or “bracketing” of all one’s beliefs regarding external existence of the objects of perception (and of course of any other mental act). Through this all-important suspension, one effects a radically new “attitude,” the phenomenological attitude, according to which the world is seen to be as it is for the consciousness, or subjectivity, that beholds it. In this way, all “objective reality” is “reduced” to its significance for consciousness—or, alternately, to its meaningfulness as a “noematic” correlate to the “noetic” acts of a consciousness in which the world is “constituted.”<sup>38</sup>

The jargon-laden definition given above must, however, be carefully explained. Furthermore, many possible misinterpretations must be obviated—at least regarding Husserl’s own intentions—such as the interpretation of the reduction as being a means to expose the illusoriness of the external reality. This is not at all Husserl’s intention or reflective of his actual view. At the same time, it

---

<sup>38</sup> This language will be explained below (IVA). Note that the term “reduction” does not have the modern meaning of “reductiveness” for Husserl; there is no question here of converting objective reality into a subjective substratum. “Reduce” means, etymologically, “to bring or lead back,” and this is Husserl’s intended meaning. The reduction leads back a consciousness that loses itself in its world—back to its own achievements as a sense-bestowing and world-constituting being.

cannot be denied that Husserl did *in some sense* prioritize subjectivity over objective “reality.” Husserl did not deny the existence of such a reality, but as we will see, under the reduction it acquires a wholly new sense—namely, that of being the *sense* “mind-independent reality” (along with innumerable other senses which give the world its “intelligibility”). To put it another (un-Husserlian) way, while we can say that there is a world that transcends the mind, it only does so *for* the mind,<sup>39</sup> acquiring its meaningfulness *as* such a transcendent being in this way alone. Thus, it can in a certain way be called independent (in its existence, or “thatness”) from the mind in one way and yet wholly dependent on it (for its meaning, or “whatness”) in another. Consciousness itself—in its “purified” and “transcendental” form—is, by contrast, dependent on nothing. And it is solely because of this asymmetry, and not because of some supposed “non-existence” of external reality, that Husserl calls consciousness (as opposed to the transcendent world as such) “absolute.” All of these notions will be further explored individually, however, in Part IV below.

In the sections that follow, I will proceed to describe the reduction as it is outlined in *Ideas I*. Along the way, I will be flagging some of the most significant and controversial issues of interpretation, as well as possible inconsistencies, mysteries, or ambiguities in Husserl’s account, which can be (and usually already have been) raised. In doing so, it is inevitable that some commentary be mixed with “pure” description (contrary to the spirit of Husserl’s own methodology!) even before the

---

<sup>39</sup> I will at times use the word “mind” for “consciousness,” despite the potential hazards that come therewith. “Mind” can easily be reified, whereas by “consciousness” (*Bewusststein*) Husserl means anything but an “object” or ‘substance’ in the classical Cartesian sense. Nonetheless, it is cumbersome to use the word “consciousness” solely to translate “*Bewusststein*,” and hence synonyms will occasionally, though cautiously be used.

final section, which is primarily commentary. But my underlying goal is to present Husserl's conception of the reduction as accurately as I can, and furthermore with minimal recourse to jargon (though Husserl is, after all, coining many new terms here), and in a way that is at least plausible as an interpretation of just what Husserl was after. Nonetheless, extended quotations are occasionally called for, as much is to be gained (and clarified) through a direct examination of Husserl's precise phraseology of his own main ideas.

### *B. The Natural and the Transcendental Attitudes*

The story of the reduction, so to speak, begins with a description of the "natural attitude."<sup>40</sup> So what, then, is the natural attitude? It would help to begin by contrasting it with what Husserl alternatively calls the "philosophical," "phenomenological," and "transcendental" attitudes (all of these being equivalent in the current context).<sup>41</sup> The natural attitude is the default, "normal" attitude in which we tacitly or non-tacitly frame our (mostly perceptual) experiences; the alternative attitude is one in which we have disengaged from the presuppositions of the natural attitude, particularly regarding objective existence and non-existence, and have taken up a new appreciation of the origins of meaningful experience in the depths of

---

<sup>40</sup>Of course, what is possibly most controversial about the reduction is how it can be "begun" at all, but we will come to that later (Part V).

<sup>41</sup> This picture of "attitudes" will become importantly expanded and enriched in *Ideas II*, in which the natural attitude is divided into "personalistic" and "naturalistic" forms. These will be discussed closely in the next chapter.

subjectivity—in ourselves: “I must lose the world by *epoché*, in order to regain it by a universal self-examination.”<sup>42</sup>

But what does Husserl mean by *attitude* (*Einstellung*)? Amazingly, Husserl nowhere defines his technical usage of the term in the text of the *Ideas* (or anywhere, as far as I can tell), perhaps owing to its status as basic to understanding the reduction itself. For now, we will see how Husserl uses the term; we will return to the question of how it might best be defined at the end of this section.

To describe the natural attitude, Husserl presents a series of observations of what experience in this attitude consists in:

“I am conscious of a world endlessly spread out in space, endlessly becoming and having endlessly become in time. I am conscious of it: that signifies, above all, that intuitively I find it immediately, that I experience it. By my seeing, touching, hearing, and so forth, and in the different modes of sensuous perception, corporeal physical things...are *simply there for me*, “*on hand*” in the literal and figurative sense...”<sup>43</sup>

In the natural attitude, he continues, “we... [are] human beings who are living naturally, objectivating, judging, feeling, willing.”<sup>44</sup> But animate beings and people are there for me also: “I look up; I see them... I grasp their hands...”<sup>45</sup>

The natural attitude is “natural” first of all in the sense of its everyday pervasiveness as well as its default character. It comes to us “naturally.” Roughly, then, we can characterize this as a condition in which we as normal, adult human beings find ourselves routinely and as it were automatically, just insofar as we are

---

<sup>42</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Trans. Dorion Cairns. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999 (p. 157). Hereafter *CM*.

<sup>43</sup> *Ideas I*, p. 51

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51

alive and awake (and maybe asleep and dreaming as well), in which we perceive there to be objects, as well as people and value-characteristics of things, to exist outside us and “on hand.” Husserl stresses that the world as we know it in the natural attitude is not simply the world of science or a “material world”; thus we “naturally” perceive a *“world of objects with values, a world of goods, a practical world...”*<sup>46</sup> In terms of “material” objects, we perceive not simply (or virtually ever, unless we are scientists in a “scientific attitude”) “matter,” but things like “tables” and “pianos”—objects with cultural meaning-accretions. The natural attitude is also one in which we think and cogitate, at least in the everyday (non-phenomenological!) way.<sup>47</sup> But most pertinently with regard to the phenomenological *epoché*, in the natural attitude we accept the world as a *“factually existent actuality and also accept it as it presents itself to [us] as factually existing.”*<sup>48</sup> Empirical science and its mode of cognition pertain to this world, precisely taken as existent in the sense outlined. Hence science (as an activity and a form of thought) itself belongs to the “natural attitude,” a fact Husserl never tires of exploiting to the advantage of philosophy as he conceives it.

Husserl regards his description of the natural attitude as pre-theoretical; that is, it is not a construct, but simply what is directly intuited to be the case about natural, non-transcendental experience:

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 53 (Husserl’s italics)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 53

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 57 (Husserl’s italics)

“What we presented as a characterization of the givenness belonging to the natural attitude, and therefore as a characterization of the attitude itself, was a piece of pure description *prior to any theory*.”<sup>49</sup>

He then notes that by “theories” he means “preconceived opinions of every sort.”

Husserl claims to “keep these at a distance” strictly, a stance he maintains throughout his career, in keeping with his commitment to go to “the things themselves” and by-pass the corrupting influence of “presuppositions” of any kind. (Hence his famous—and famously imperiled—dream of developing a “presuppositionless science.”) But while Husserl’s description of the natural attitude may be pre-theoretical, it is more than apparent from it that *we*, insofar as we dwell in the natural attitude, are all a type of “naïve realist,” to use the modern parlance. Thus, Husserl’s understanding of the natural attitude may best be understood through a simple consideration of what somebody unbiased by, say, “fancy” metaphysical theories understands himself to be experiencing everyday, in the most thoroughly ordinary sense imaginable, as a living human being. It is this thoroughgoing averageness, the basic mediocrity of existence, that Husserl continually contrasts with the disconcerting and vertiginous heights of the transcendental attitude. It is not as though Husserl dismisses natural experience; to the contrary, the whole purpose of phenomenology is to understand it. It is just this embrace of the ordinary that distinguishes phenomenology from more “speculative” sorts of philosophical endeavors. And yet there is a transcendental, “noetic-noematic” dimension of meaning-constitution, a realm in which ordinary experience becomes clarified in terms of its source and true meaning. It is through

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 56



transcendental investigation that natural consciousness comes to know the foundations of the experientiality it takes naïvely for granted. (I will explore the transcendental level in subsequent sections.) Sebastian Luft helpfully frames the natural/transcendental distinction in terms of the classical division between *doxa* and *episteme*:

“When Husserl conceives of the ‘natural’ in opposition to the ‘philosophical attitude’, this echoes the distinction between pre-transcendental and transcendental standpoints as a modern ‘version’ of the *doxa/episteme* distinction. The transcendental turn anticipated by Descartes, and taken by Kant, applies the realization of the subject-relativity of the world. The turn to the subject, the ‘reduction’ to the ego (*cogito*), becomes the foundation of science. The world is not an ‘absolute being,’ but is relative to the experiencing subject.” (Luft 203-4)

He further explains:

“The distinction of *doxa* and *episteme* ‘translated’ into this conception means: Philosophy that believes it can operate on a ‘realistic’ level is bound to the natural attitude and it cannot be critical in the transcendental sense. This is not only Husserl’s critique of pre-transcendental philosophy but especially of his pupils who neglected to pursue the transcendental path that he had taken up with *Ideas I* (1913).<sup>50</sup>

Luft’s explanation is useful, but it must be kept in mind, a fact I will come back to later on, that in addition to being “doxic” as opposed to “epistemic,” the natural attitude for Husserl is a *false doxa*, a “wrong view.” This is important because the natural attitude’s naïve realism is not only “naïve” but, precisely in showing a “blind[ness] to the correlativity of world and experience,” (Luft, 208) it wrongly pronounces against just this correlativity, falsely (though tacitly) affirming, as Luft points out, the world’s *absolute existence*.

---

<sup>50</sup> Luft, Sebastian. “Husserl’s Theory of the Phenomenological Reduction: Between Life-World and Cartesianism.” In *Research in Phenomenology* 34, 2004 (p. 204) Hereafter, “Luft.”

Let us first return to the initial question of what an “attitude” is supposed to be in the first place. If we take Husserl for his word, an “attitude” cannot be explained merely as a psychological state, as the word (in English) is routinely taken to denote. After all, only the natural attitude properly deserves to be called “psychological,” as Husserl himself on occasion does call it.<sup>51</sup> An attitude, then, I propose, might best be defined as the orientation in which the parameters of experience are delimited and defined. In the natural attitude, these parameters are defined, so to speak, by the internal and external horizons of transcendent things (and the “halos” that form the background in which we perceive them), by people and living beings, by various acts of fantasy and memory, and to an extent by our self-perception (and hence our own egos). But in the transcendental attitude, these parameters shift to something new, a field of *constitution*, as well as to the *transcendental ego* or “pure consciousness” in which all worldly beings, including the empirical ego, are themselves constituted (in which they come to being).<sup>52</sup> A shift in attitude is thus a shift of the entire matrix of intelligibility of things—a prefiguring, perhaps, of Heidegger’s later concept of “world.”<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 126: “In our case we have, accordingly, on the one hand, the *psychological attitude* in which our naturally focused regard is directed to mental processes—e.g. to a mental process of rejoicing—as a *sequence* of mental *states* of human or beast. On the other hand, we have the *phenomenological attitude*...” (Husserl’s italics) See also p. 172 for further clarification of what the psychological attitude involves.

<sup>52</sup> It is true that Husserl does not restrict the term “attitude” to the contrast of natural and transcendental attitudes: he also speaks of the “eidetic” attitude, the natural-scientific attitude, etc.. One may still apply our definition, however: for example, in the eidetic attitude the parameters of experience are essences, rather than facts. (It needs to be understood, of course—as I will discuss below—that the transcendental attitude presupposes the eidetic, while the natural may or may not overlap with eidetic attitude.)

<sup>53</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Pol Vandavelde for this language of “parameters” and “intelligibility,” as well as to his understanding of Heidegger’s conception of a “world,” though I would not presume to say he would endorse my application of these concepts under these circumstances.

### C. Phenomenological Epoché

Husserl begins his shift into the new attitude by noticing that, contrary to its spirit of total self-confidence, the natural attitude has some answering to do. For there are “presuppositions” to its “psychological experience”<sup>54</sup> that remain so far unexplored and unknown (to natural consciousness itself). Husserl wants to investigate these. Here now a “radical alteration” is called for: “a new *style of attitude* is needed which is *entirely altered* in contrast to the natural attitude in experiencing and the natural attitude in thinking.”<sup>55</sup> In order to demonstrate this transformation, Husserl calls fatefully upon the example of Descartes and the latter’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Subsequently, the way to the reduction outlined in *Ideas I* is typically called the “Cartesian” way. Husserl certainly believed that Descartes had opened the way to a wholly new field of being, which Husserl himself calls “transcendental subjectivity,” but he also believed that Descartes did not properly understand his own achievement and hence fell away from the new perch almost as soon as he reached it, as we will see below.

Husserl exploits the Cartesian “method of doubt” in a new and original way. Through his own confrontation with skepticism, Descartes enacted this famous method in order to reach the foundation of knowledge, the self-certain “I think, I am” (*cogito*). Husserl now practices a variation of this method in order to reach a similarly self-evident sphere, something he is about to call a sphere of pure consciousness or immanence. But Husserl does not want to actually *doubt* anything, certainly not the indubitable existence of the world (which is always presupposed in

---

<sup>54</sup> *Ideas I*, xix

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, xix

consciousness as its ultimate horizon). What he is interested in is the “*attempt*” at doubt. For while we cannot doubt certain things, “we can *attempt to doubt* anything whatever, no matter how firmly convinced of it, even assured of it in an adequate evidence, we may be.”<sup>56</sup> The nature of such an act, the attempt at doubt, is to hypothetically place the existence of that which is doubted into metaphorical “brackets” or “parentheses.” It “*effects a certain annulment of positing* and precisely this interests us.” There is no question of negating that which exists, i.e. denying its existence. But there is a sudden neutrality with regard to this entire question—something “*wholly peculiar*.”<sup>57</sup> The question of the existence of things is suddenly “put out of action,” and in my words, *into* a kind of purgatorial “maybe” that nevertheless allows one to focus on something else—in this case, on the manners of givenness of things. This new focus<sup>58</sup> automatically implicates them as experienced by someone, i.e., shows them in their “self-givenness.”

As we have said, the “parenthesizing” of “positings” of existence is what is called the “*epoché*.” More specifically, there are several types of *epoché*. What is at issue now, however, is not, for example, the kind of *epoché* one speaks of in regards to the “bracketing” of features unrelated to the study at hand (for example, a scientist brackets all value-predicates of “physical” objects and focuses on their spatiotemporal determinations solely, a phenomenological psychologist brackets all material or biochemical aspects of an living organism, etc.), but rather the full and

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 58

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 58

<sup>58</sup> It might be noted that this sort of language—“changing focus”—would not really be sufficient for Husserl to capture the radicality of the new attitude, since it is itself borrowed from experience within the natural attitude.

total bracketing of the question of existence (or non-existence) of the entire world (including even oneself insofar as one is part of the world, though this comes later)—the “thesis of the world” (*Weltthesis*). But can we effect a *global epoché* of this sort? Can we put the *whole* of reality in brackets? This is a question we will come back to at the end of this chapter.

#### *D. Phenomenological-Transcendental Reduction(s)*

The bracketing of transcendent things is not for Husserl sufficient, however, to reach the transcendental ego.<sup>59</sup> It only goes as far as sealing the psyche off from what might be called (from a natural-attitudinal stand-point, anyway) the “external world.” It is here that Husserl makes another interesting departure from Descartes. The ego, too “[is] a real Object like others in the natural world.”<sup>60</sup> This is not true only in the sense that I have a physical body, but also in the sense that “I effect cogitationes, acts of consciousness in both the broader and the narrower sense and these acts, as belonging to the human subject, are occurrences within the same natural actuality.”<sup>61</sup> (This principle of the naturalness of “psychic”—as opposed to transcendental—consciousness will once again become a central theme in *Ideas II*.) In later writings, Husserl distinguishes between the “phenomenological reduction” and the “transcendental reduction,” characterizing the latter as a further step beyond the former, precisely in terms of the further bracketing of the ego. The phenomenological reduction on this understanding effects a universal *epoché* on the

---

<sup>59</sup> More is said about this concept in this section below.

<sup>60</sup> *Ideas I*, p. 64

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

natural world, but not upon the ego itself. Hence it is a reduction to what might be called “phenomenological psychology” or the intentional life of consciousness, but without an explicit recognition—only to be supplied through the final, transcendental reduction—of the ultimate *source* of meaning, the transcendental ego:

“If the transcendental relativity of every possible world demands an all-embracing bracketing, it also postulates the bracketing of pure psyches and the pure phenomenological psychology related to them.”

And so,

“Accordingly, the consistent reflection on consciousness yields him time after time transcendently pure data, and more particularly it is intuitive in the mode of new kind of experience, *transcendental “inner” experience*.”<sup>62</sup>

In *Ideas I*, Husserl later comes to understand these two distinct steps to have been conflated.<sup>63</sup> Once it is kept in mind, however, it is sufficient for our purposes to keep them both as comprising what Husserl treats in *Ideas I* as a single “phenomenological reduction”—a reduction to phenomenological consciousness and, therewith, the transcendental ego.

Husserl’s bracketing of the (empirical) ego is a major development that, in Husserl’s understanding, distinguishes his own method, at this point, from

---

<sup>62</sup> These quotes are from Husserl’s *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article of 1928 (trans. Richard E. Palmer), reproduced in full in: Kockelmanns, Joseph J. *Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology*. Indianapolis: Purdue University Press, 1994 (p. 209) Kockelmann’s source for the translation is *Husserl: Shorter Works*. McCormack and Elliston, eds. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981 (pp. 21-35).

<sup>63</sup> See fn. 3, above.

Descartes.<sup>64</sup> For the reduction does not retreat into a private “cogito” or its theater of consciousness; neither does it merely seize on the essence of consciousness, when taken in the mundane sense (this is still the task of “psychology”).

“Even more inaccessible to him [Descartes], and naturally so, was the consideration that the ego as it is disclosed within the *epoché*, existing for itself, is as yet not at all “an” ego which can have other or many fellow egos outside itself. It remained hidden from Descartes that all such distinctions as “I” and “you,” “inside” and “outside,” first “constitute” themselves in the absolute ego.”<sup>65</sup>

Husserl understands Descartes to have *correctly* discovered the “absolute ego” as the “indubitable” ultimatum of transcendental inquiry, only to have then misinterpreted his own discovery in an important way. In particular, he failed to properly grasp the nature of the “I” of the self-certain “*I think, I am.*”<sup>66</sup> The “I” in question is not *me, Descartes* or even some possible individual empirical ego, at least not *qua* psychophysical being, but rather transcendental subjectivity—not *a* thinking subject but *the thinker as such*, transcendently considered, for whom and in whom an entire world is constituted and, hence, available in full “self-evidence” for my knowing regard. Furthermore, while Husserl endorses Descartes’ thesis that the “I” is in some way more certain than the very question of the existence of the world, he laments the latter’s failure to see that the world is still preserved *as a phenomenon* in the reduction. What Descartes fundamentally misunderstood is that the indubitable self is not the mere “ego-pole” of consciousness or even psychic empirical consciousness itself. It is transcendental subjectivity.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> *Ideas I*, p. 68

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82

<sup>66</sup> My italics on the Cartesian quote

<sup>67</sup> *Crisis*, p. 81. One can also see here the language of Descartes’ “self-misinterpretation.”

Yet what remains after the reduction is nonetheless a “stream” of mental life. Is this the notorious “transcendental ego”? Just what Husserl means by the “transcendental ego” is one of the very difficult problems to solve in Husserl scholarship. According to David Bell, “...the transcendental ego is nothing but the ordinary, common-or-garden *mind*, albeit viewed from within a philosophical or transcendental perspective.” In support of this thesis he cites the following passage from the *Crisis*: “As transcendental ego, after all, I am the same ego that in the worldly sphere is a human ego. What was concealed from me in the human sphere I reveal through transcendental enquiry.”<sup>68</sup> In this spirit, we would perhaps not do badly to understand the transcendental ego of *Ideas I* as the self *qua transcendental sphere of noetic-noematic consciousness*, with all of its acts and intentional objects included, and understood to constitute itself through the laws of temporality (though Husserl elaborates on this last part later). Of course, this definition might seem to conflict with Husserl’s enigmatic post-*Ideas I* claim that the meaning of transcendental subjectivity is transcendental *intersubjectivity*.<sup>69</sup> But we will have to presently leave that complex issue aside.

---

<sup>68</sup> Bell, David. *Husserl*. New York: Routledge, 1990 (p. 207), hereafter “Bell”; the Husserl quote can be found in *Crisis*, p. 264

<sup>69</sup> The subtitle of the Fifth Meditation of the *CM* (p. 89) states the point directly: “Uncovering of the Sphere of Transcendental Being as Monadological Intersubjectivity.” There can be no question but that Husserl views “intersubjectivity” here (and for the rest of his career) as the authentic meaning of transcendental subjectivity. The transcendental ego is not a you or me, but neither is it an empirical community (as this could lead to relativism, one of Husserl’s avowed enemies), but somehow an “I” that is a “we” in a transcendental register. We cannot here rehearse the steps of Husserl’s elaborate description of the manner in which the being of *other egos* is “evinced and verified in the realm of the transcendental ego.” (p. 90) For a detailed exposition and interpretation of Husserl’s view see: Zahavi, Dan. *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity: A Response to the Linguistic-Pragmatic Critique*. Translated by Elizabeth A. Behnke. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001. (See especially pp. 159-66).



*E. An Interlude: On the Motivation of the Reduction*

Before further exploring the philosophical and ontological implications of the reduction (see Part IV below), we might at this stage ask what actually motivates it in the first place. So far, we have presented the reduction largely as Husserl (in *Ideas I*) himself does, namely as a procedure for getting at the truth of experience and the world. But what makes Husserl think *this particular method* is necessary, as opposed to others? Here it is important to understand that Husserl fits into a very old tradition in philosophy, namely the quest for what might be called real and secure knowledge. Along these lines, the philosopher speaks of the elemental quest for *freedom*—in this case the “epistemic freedom” that can also be described as the freedom from error and bias, illusion and empty abstraction. For it is the pursuit of certainty, clarity, and freedom from prejudice that conspire to produce the precisely Husserlian version of phenomenology that bursts forth out of *Ideas I*. See, for example, Husserl’s reference to “*genuine freedom from prejudice*”<sup>70</sup> in the first part, or Husserl’s own declaration that the goal of the phenomenological reductions is to reach “the free vista of ‘transcendentally’ purified phenomena and, therewith, the field of phenomenology in our peculiar sense.”<sup>71</sup>

What we can gather, then, is that (transcendental) phenomenology is motivated by a thirst for a certain *freedom*, in particular a freedom from *presuppositions*. But if freedom *from* presuppositions motivates the reduction, what is this supposed to be a freedom *to*? In short, Husserl was in search of the foundation of knowledge. We must be free from bias in order to gain access to a

---

<sup>70</sup> *Ideas I*, p. 36 (my italics)

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, xix

secure zone of knowing, a direct access to reality. Logic, science, and mathematics make the most vigorous claims to knowledge in our and Husserl's era, but Husserl became convinced that even they needed securing on a more fundamental basis. But Husserl was not simply a "meta-scientist." Instead of being merely fixated on giving these sciences a foundation, he came also to be fascinated for its own sake with the realm of meanings in which consciousness revealed all things in their essence. He came to regard philosophy—understood in a new and non-dogmatic way—as *the* indispensable science and the foundation of all knowledge. It alone bears the customary role—and the responsibility—of answering the skeptic who denies the possibility of knowledge, and he does this by showing the way to an indubitable, undeniable source of apodictic evidence. Husserl's striving for knowledge is so deep and thorough that he is willing to revise himself ruthlessly. Husserl did not think philosophy was a science *among* sciences—i.e., as just another "formal" or "material" ontology that makes claims and arguments about a certain region of reality. So unlike previous philosophers, Husserl—in large agreement with Kant, his "transcendentalist" ancestor—placed all his trust not in some realm of metaphysical truths, intuited or learned through revelation (such as Platonic Forms, God, Absolute Spirit), from which to derive and secure others, but simply in *experience*. Philosophy's role is to draw its evidence from the well of experience—acts of consciousness and the things of which it is conscious (*ego cogito cogitatum*)—through a method in which everything *but* this purified experientiality is suspended indefinitely, and "put out of action" for the transcendental gaze.

In this way Husserl's philosophical orientation, broadly construed, is radically "epistemological." But this does not mean Husserl was concerned with "epistemology" in the narrow sense in use today—Husserl was not overly concerned with defining "knowledge" as "justified true belief" or something else, for example. And he is not, once again, obsessed with the "subjective" side of "knowing" ("noetic phenomenology") in the way traditional epistemology is (excepting the "causal" and "externalist" models, of course), as he gives ample attention to the various objects that are known ("noematic phenomenology"). It does mean, however, that for Husserl, to discover *how knowledge takes place* is both a necessary and a sufficient task for philosophy as such, regarded in its purest essence.

### **III. Essences and the Eidetic Reduction**

Besides the phenomenological reduction, there is another, no less important type of reduction whose performance is also necessary for phenomenology as Husserl conceives it: the eidetic reduction. Husserl begins the version of *Ideas I* eventually published with a tacked-on but (to his mind) crucial discussion of the "eidetic" nature of phenomenology, trying to classify phenomenology among and as against other "sciences." This material is very interesting, but we can only touch on it briefly here, insofar as it is relevant to our task.

There is, for Husserl, a fundamental divide between “matters of fact” (in much the “Humean” sense) on the one hand and “essences” (or *eidē*) on the other.<sup>72</sup> Overlapping with this distinction is that between “reality” (the real, which is to say factual) or “the empirical” on the one hand, and “essentiality,” on the other. What exactly is a Husserlian essence, or *eidos*? Is it, for example, a “universal”? Such a question may not be terribly helpful, given the contestedness of the question of universals itself, but Husserlian essences are “universal-like” in that they are multiply instantiable and “non-particular.” That is, they are not “singular” in the way “existent” particulars are. However, it is not technically true to say that they are outside of space and time; they do not subsist like Platonic Forms in a supra-spatiotemporal order, as Husserl forcefully underscores.<sup>73</sup> Essences are also *ontological* in a strong sense—that is, they are not purely “linguistic” or “conventional.” We do not decide “as a community” what is or is not an essence, at least as pertains to the natural and spiritual furniture of the world; we discover such essences.

The clear grasp of essences is achieved through a method known as “imaginative variation.” In the eidetic reduction—which is to be performed before the phenomenological reduction—one is to bracket out all particular, factual, and contingent features of things perceived (or remembered, imagined, etc.) and to seize only those features that belong to the object necessarily—i.e., that make the object what it is. In other words, the eidetic reduction distills those categorial forms that we intuit in things. Yet how does one clearly distinguish between the essential and

---

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-42

inessential aspects of things? This is where imaginative variation as a multiply-repeatable exercise becomes crucial: we are to imagine the things in many different circumstances and undergoing many changes. In each change of circumstance, some feature or property of the thing is altered. Does the object survive as *just the object that it is* even after this alteration? Then the property altered must have been inessential. After varying the object enough, it is to become apparent what the essential features of the object are.

Hence, in keeping with a tradition inaugurated by the Greeks and sustained by the scholastics, essences reveal the *what* of things (and people), the essential “nature” of things, and, to this extent, their *being*. All the same, there are two distinct senses of the word “being”—essence and existence.<sup>74</sup> It would seem that the essence of a thing cannot exist without there existing things that instantiate that essence.<sup>75</sup>

There are, then, at least these two options for the theoretical regard of an object or “real” (a thing or state of affairs, for example): to view it as factual and spatiotemporally located, or to view it in its essentiality, i.e. in terms of the essences it instantiates. The distinction does not, however, correspond to that between the natural and transcendental attitudes; for transcendental reflection is not the only science done in the “eidetic attitude.” Essences are not the province only of phenomenology. Phenomenology is an *eidetic* science, but not all eidetic sciences—e.g., logic and mathematics—are *per se* phenomenological. Phenomenology, in Husserl’s conception, is therefore one of many eidetic sciences. (To be more precise

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>75</sup> At times, it does seem as though Husserl goes even further: “Positing of... essences implies not the slightest positing of any individual factual existences; pure eidetic truths contain not the slightest assertion about matters of fact.” (*Ideas I*, p. 11; Husserl’s italics)

still, one might say that there is nothing phenomenological in the “eidos” of the “eidetic,” but very much something “eidetic” in the “eidos” of the “phenomenological.”)

Husserl makes much depend not only on the eidetic reduction, but also on the strict and absolute difference between facts and essences, the empirical and the eidetic. Essentialism also becomes extremely important for Husserl’s purposes in terms of his distinguishing between the essences of “mental processes” on the one hand and “physical things” on the other.<sup>76</sup> Thus it will be central to Husserl’s delineations of the essences of consciousness and reality, as we will see below.

#### **IV. Consciousness and World**

##### *A. Intentionality, Noesis and Noema, and Transcendence*

For Husserl, as for his teacher Brentano, the most fundamental fact about consciousness is that it is intentional—it is intrinsically “about” or “of” something.<sup>77</sup> From the perspective of the traditional issues in modern “philosophy of mind” and epistemology, the phenomenological notion of intentionality, already anticipated by Kant<sup>78</sup>, could by itself be seen to solve, as it were, the old question of how something like “consciousness,” which is “inner,” can “transcend” itself and reach out to a world

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 98

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-5

<sup>78</sup> See, for example: Russell, Matheson. *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum Books. New York: 2006 (p. 47). Hereafter “Russell.” The concept is also present in medieval writers.

that is outside of it—“outer.” For intentionality reveals an intimate, indeed unbreakable bond between an act of consciousness (“noesis”) on the one hand, and an “intentional object” (“noema,” vaguely akin to Kant’s “phenomenological object”—*Gegenstand*) on the other. One might at first be tempted to say that such a relationship takes place within consciousness itself, but “consciousness” should now be seen as an equivocal term. Consciousness as intentionality houses both a “subjective” pole as well as an “objective” one; consciousness in *this* sense is not “mere” subjectivity. While this is not so much a “proof” that there exists an “outside world,” since this is built into the very definition of experience (at least for Husserl), it is a fundamental problematization of the very “inner/outer” distinction philosophy had been taking for granted pre-phenomenologically (or pre-“critically” in the Kantian sense). There is simply no *sense* in the idea of a consciousness essentially unrelated to an intended world, horizon, or object.

Most commentators have generally found the referent of the term “noesis” to be unproblematic to grasp, but not so “noema.” As mentioned, the term “noesis” refers to intentional acts of consciousness and “noema” to the objects so intended (and *qua* intended). In Husserl’s words:

“Corresponding in every case to the multiplicity of Data pertaining to the really inherent noetic content, there is a multiplicity of Data, demonstrable in actual pure intuition, in a correlative “noematic content” or, in short, in the “noema”—terms which we shall continue to use from now on.”<sup>79</sup>

Husserl gives an example, pertaining to the experience of seeing a tree:

“the *tree simpliciter*, the physical thing belonging to Nature, is nothing less than this *perceived tree as perceived* which, as perceptual sense, inseparably belongs to the perception. The tree can burn up, be

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 214

resolved into its chemical elements, etc. But the sense—the sense *of this* perception, something belonging necessarily to its essence—cannot burn up; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties.”<sup>80</sup>

However, the noema is not for Husserl a “really inherent” part of consciousness. The noema “tree,” says Husserl, is “*no more contained inherently than is the tree which belongs to actuality.*”<sup>81</sup>

Hence the “noema” of a perception is simply the *perceived as perceived*. This would apply across the board to all the various types of act: the noema of a recollection is the recollected as recollected, the noema of a fantasy is the fantasied thing as fantasied, etc. Husserl also calls the noema or “noematic correlate” the “sense” of an act. How this definition of it matches up with the first is a deep source of debate, but it cannot be furthered addressed here.<sup>82</sup>

As hinted at already, the noetic-noematic bifurcation allows Husserl to claim that phenomenology is not merely about consciousness in the narrow sense of “subjective” consciousness—since this is only the “noetic” pole of experience—but also about the objects experienced (as experienced)—the “noematic” pole. Every conscious experience, without fail, has both a noetic and a noematic side. It makes no sense to isolate the “consciousness-of” from that of which there is consciousness—a point Mohanty makes eloquently in speaking of the irreducibility of the phrase “consciousness of something”:

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 216

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 237

<sup>82</sup> Once again, Bell’s way of characterizing the issue is helpful for our present narrow purposes: “...something is noematic in so far as it is an immanent, but non-real contributory factor in the possession by an act of significance or meaning.” (Bell, p. 180)



"Consciousness is... a correlation between *noetic* acts and noematic meanings. The world is a structure and interconnectedness of such meanings, and is the correlate of consciousness. The two, consciousness and world, together, in their correlation, constitute transcendental subjectivity... The true transcendental foundation is: *consciousness-of-the-world*. Realism deletes the hyphens... but it cannot in fact do so. I want to keep them tied together."<sup>83</sup>

If consciousness itself has an "inner" and "outer", a "here" and "there," a subject and object, then it is already, in a sense, self-transcending; and so immediately one can see how "transcendence" becomes a fundamental theme in the structure of consciousness. Husserl generally speaks of "transcendence" in the context of the transcendent intentional object, including, most importantly, the "necessary transcendence" that belongs to the essence "physical thing." But it is important to see that because transcendence is first predicated on intentionality, and intentionality is a structural feature of (noetic-noematic) consciousness as such, the transcendence of the world, whatever form it will take, will be such as not to leave consciousness trapped in a skeptical impasse or locked into the "private theater" of the mind. Once again, Husserl's theory could be seen as an advance over less sophisticated "modern" theories of mind and world.

But what exactly is Husserl's conception of "transcendence"? It is important here to trace the exact sense in which Husserl employs the term, for this will have enormous consequences for the general philosophical implications of Husserl's final "transcendental-phenomenological" position. To begin with, Husserl denies the

---

<sup>83</sup> Mohanty, J. N. "My Philosophical Position/Response." In *The Transcendental and the Empirical*. Ed. Bina Gupta. Oxford, England: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000 pp. 261-2 (my italics). In this way, the noetic-noematic structure of consciousness (in the wide sense) can be seen to follow from the original thesis of intentionality itself. Yet it also confirms Husserl's interest in the "appearing as appearing" of things (in the wide sense). It is not things in their "real" existence, but things "as they appear," that concern us within the phenomenological reduction. We do not worry about whether or not there "really is" an apple tree before us; we are concerned with the *noema* of "the apple tree." Reality qua real existence is not denied, just put out of play.

Kantian distinction between the phenomenon and the noumenon.<sup>84</sup> The thing-in-itself is not unknowable—precisely the opposite. But how can it be knowable, if it is also transcendent? It is knowable in degrees or “adumbrations”—the profiles of things as seen from different angles; hence it is known, in Husserl’s terminology, “inadequately”—and not just for finite observers but for any observer whatsoever, including God. (This reflects the intrinsic nature of perception, understood as a general relationship of consciousness to extra-conscious reality). Hence the thing is “transcendent” only after a peculiar way—not wholly other than or alien to consciousness, but in a way that belongs to it noetically-noematically, through adumbrations, yet not with respect to the whole of the object all at once. Things are encountered as transcendent—they have this “meaning”—but such “transcendence” amounts only, ultimately, to a kind of regulative Idea (roughly in the Kantian sense) of “adequate” objectivity—the infinite limit of full, adequate givenness of the object in all of its profiles at once. Transcendence is thus not a property of things but the *idea* of a complete unity of adumbrations, the sum of profiles of a thing. Warns and clarifies Husserl:

“...one must not let oneself be deceived by speaking of the physical thing as transcending consciousness or as ‘existing in itself.’ The genuine concept of the transcendence of something physical which is the measure of the rationality of any statements about transcendence, can itself be derived only from the proper essential contents of perception or from those concatenations of definite kinds which we call demonstrative experience. *The idea of such transcendence is therefore the eidetic correlate of the pure idea of this demonstrative experience.*”<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> See, for example: Husserl, Edmund. “Kant and the idea of transcendental phenomenology,” trans. Ted E. Klein, Jr. and William E. Pohl. *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*, 5.3 (1974), p. 11 (citation found in Russell, p. 91)

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106 (my italics)

Fundamental to this picture is the notion of *givenness*. In the words of one commentator, “the given...includes not only that which is immanent in a real sense but also the transcendent, provided that it is given.”<sup>86</sup> This also allows Husserl to convert all transcendence into what he calls “immanent transcendency.” With respect to physical things this term denotes that “...the transcendency belonging to the physical thing as determined by physics is the transcendency belonging to a being which becomes constituted in, and tied to, consciousness...”<sup>87</sup>

Yet in this case, one might suspect that Husserl has secured access to the “things” at a bit of an unfair price. Such a criticism might run as follows: Either things are not truly transcendent, or they are not necessarily known—unlike their phenomenal appearance, which may, after all, with Kant, be conditioned by our own cognitive apparatus. But Husserl despises both subjectivism and constructivism as equally unbearable concessions to the skeptic (or the strict Kantian), so these options are closed by him. Husserl wants a pure transparency of being—a pure knowing—as well as the otherness, so to speak, of this being, or the object. But can he have this?

Husserl would probably argue that the counter-argument sketched above rests on a false dilemma that transcendental phenomenology moves beyond. The critic does not see a third possibility between transcendental realism and skepticism, namely the possibility of a transcendental level at which the world is revealed to be integrally unified with consciousness. This is but a brief pre-sketch of

---

<sup>86</sup> DeBoer, Theodore. *The Development of Husserl's Thought*. Trans. Theodore Plantinga. The Hague, the Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978, p. 314

<sup>87</sup> *Ideas I*, p. 123

one way Husserl could respond to the objection. I will say much more about this way to approach the “consciousness/world” relation and its potential for success, however, in the concluding thoughts of this chapter.

### *B. The Eidetic Distinction between Mental and Physical*

Husserl’s quasi-“Cartesianism” does not end with the “Cartesian way” to the reduction. It is also evident in his effort to distinguish the essences of the “mental” and the “physical” on several grounds. For instance, it belongs to the essence of mental phenomena that they are *indubitable*, of physical phenomena that they are not. “Every perception of something immanent [i.e., in the sphere of consciousness] necessarily guarantees the existence of its object.”<sup>88</sup> However, “[a]ccording to eidetic law it is the case that *physical existence is never required as necessary* by the givenness of something physical, but is always in a certain manner contingent.”<sup>89</sup>

What Husserl is indicating, of course, is that I cannot be wrong about the existence of something’s appearing to me *as such-and-such* thing. For example, while I can be wrong that a monster is standing in front of me, I cannot be wrong that it *appears* as though one does. Even the Pyrrhonian skeptics were indeed comfortable with this much. But does this reveal something about the “mental” and the “physical,” or merely our cognitive relation to ourselves on the one hand and transcendent realities on the other? This question reaches back to the question of whether Descartes’ own “real distinction” is invalid on the grounds that he confused the epistemological properties of the mind with real properties of minds and

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 100

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 103

extended things. But in Husserl, as opposed to Descartes, this question cannot arise, because after the phenomenological reduction and overcoming of the natural attitude, it makes no sense to speak of anything but meanings. To speak of things as being totally disconnected from consciousness is, as we have seen, meaningless; so we have to take the manner of givenness of objects in perception as revealing something essential about these objects themselves, and not only as telling us about “ourselves” as perceivers.<sup>90</sup>

Physical things, by contrast to mental processes and appearances, are, as we have already seen, transcendent. That is, the meaning “physical thing” contains this transcendence. As transcendent, physical things somehow do not possess the seal of self-evidentness of immanent mental phenomena. For this is something that belongs essentially to the nature of “the physical.” In sum (notice the continuous emphasis):

*“Over against the positing of the world, which is a “contingent” positing, there stands then the positing of my pure Ego and Ego-life which is a “necessary,” absolutely indubitable positing. Anything physical which is given “in person” can be non-existent; no mental process which is given “in person” can be non-existent. This is the eidetic law defining this necessity and that contingency.”<sup>91</sup>*

The “real” (Descartes’ term) or “eidetic” (Husserl’s) distinction between physical and mental is established in other ways as well. Let us return to the issue of perception. As we have said, transcendent things—“the world,” collectively regarded—present themselves to consciousness in profiles or “adumbrations.” We see only the sides of things, and can never—not even in principle—view all sides of a thing at once, for perception is irreducibly perspectival. Therefore, we can say this

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 92

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., Husserl’s italics. Husserl’s quotation marks here are not meant to be ironic, they are simply designating essential types.

much about transcendent objects: they are always given *inadequately*. We never have a totalistic perception of an object, but just as truly, objects do not *give themselves* in full adequacy.<sup>92</sup> By contrast with physical objects, pure cogitata and mental appearances *are* given adequately. For example, I do not conceive of a triangle in its adumbrations, but adequately and all at once. Husserl generalizes the point to include all “mental processes,”<sup>93</sup> concerning which he remarks, “Where there is no spatial being it is senseless to speak of a seeing from different standpoints with a changing orientation in accordance with different perappearances, adumbrations.”<sup>94</sup>

Herewith Husserl once again establishes that there is an essential difference—with echoes here again of Descartes’ “real distinction”—between consciousness and reality. Consciousness is a sphere of immanence, in which the objects of thought are given adequately, whereas (physical) reality is a sphere of transcendence—unqualified transcendence, to be precise—whose objects are given to consciousness inadequately. Husserl actually makes two important relevant *essential* distinctions: between that of perception and non-perceptual mental processes on the one hand, and between perception and “*depictive-symbolic objectivation*,” or, more simply, “sign-consciousness,” on the other.<sup>95</sup> In this way, Husserl tries to set phenomenology apart from the following alternatives, long familiar from traditional or modern “epistemology”: pure idealism (which would

---

<sup>92</sup> This does not, by the way, mean that we only perceive “parts” of objects when we see them—we generally perceive the whole object, *through* its profiles or adumbrations. Hence the “adequacy/inadequacy” relation cannot be correlated with the part-whole relation.

<sup>93</sup> *Ideas I*, p. 91

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93

deny the first distinction), representationalism of a Lockean variety (which would deny the second), and naïve realism (which does not consider consciousness to have its own essence in the first place). To this we must add the distinction between phenomenology and Kantianism. For as we have pointed out, Husserl denies the phenomenon-noumenon distinction. Thus he stresses that:

“...in immediately intuitive acts we intuit an ‘in itself’, and that in perception the ‘it itself’ is further characterized in its peculiarity as ‘in person’ in contrast to its modified characteristic as ‘floating before us,’ as ‘presentiated’ in memory or in free phantasy.”<sup>96</sup>

Owing to his maintenance of an essential distinction of consciousness and reality, not to mention his own invocation of Descartes, Husserl could easily be suspected of espousing at this point a Cartesian *dualism* as well. We will look at this charge below. To see fully how he would distinguish phenomenology from that dead end, we will eventually have to turn to his arguments about the primacy of consciousness *over* reality, in the subsequent sections. Such an asymmetry, if successful, would definitively render the impossibility of Cartesian dualism. In the meanwhile, I will try to dispel the specter of straightforward Cartesian dualism below.

### *C. The Charge of Dualism*

The charge of “dualism” could superficially be leveled at Husserl, but if what is meant by this is Cartesian “substance” dualism, it is clearly unfair. Husserl decisively rejects this sort of dualism, and it is already clear from his own analysis that he never regards “external reality” as truly and absolutely “external.” How

---

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 93

could we know it in the first place, or perceive the world—“it itself”—in acts of perception, if this were the case? This sort of comparison to Descartes would be especially irresponsible given Husserl’s trenchant critique of that philosopher’s view, already partially laid out above (IIB).

Whatever Husserl’s position with respect to his argument for transcendental phenomenology, it should be clear by now that he has rejected naïve realism, Kantian dualism, representationalism, and Cartesian dualism alike. Indeed, it is better to start on his own terms—that is, in terms of “transcendental idealism.” Consciousness is transcendental in that it makes both experience—“natural” experience—and the world so experienced, possible. Transcendentality is not, however, a sufficient condition for the existence of transcendent objects. Husserl does not deny the reality of nature—of a realm of purely transcendent being (albeit defined under conditions in which such transcendence obtains in necessarily co-subjective terms).

None of this is to deny, however, that Husserl can sound *like* a dualist much of the time. With the transcendental reduction, Husserl frees transcendental consciousness from the “real world.” Thus he speaks of the “essential detachableness of the whole natural world from the domain of consciousness”<sup>97</sup> and proclaims that a “veritable abyss yawns between consciousness and reality.”<sup>98</sup> His words here admittedly concern not “natural” consciousness—or the human or animal psyche—but “pure” consciousness. Yet even so, they raise concerns about the possibility that Husserl has descended into a Cartesian-style dualism. Husserl

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 104

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 111



himself seems to relish emphasizing the absolute distinctness of transcendental subjectivity and “Nature”:

“Everything which is purely immanent and reduced in the way peculiar to the mental process, everything which cannot be conceived apart from it just as it is in itself, and which eo ipso passes over into the Eidos in the eidetic attitude, is separated by an abyss from all of Nature and physics and no less from all psychology—and even this image, as naturalistic, *is not enough to indicate the difference.*”<sup>99</sup>

But how, we might wonder, would a *non*-dualistic view like this really work?

And how, as Husserl claims, can there be any form of consciousness *essentially* disconnected from the human ego, the latter of which now relegated to the “real” or “natural” world? If this possibility is denied, Cartesianism might be seen to be the inevitable result. But Husserl is not one to hedge his bets; everything rests on the possibility of transcendental subjectivity in the strict, “irreal”<sup>100</sup> sense in which he understands it. Husserl’s enterprise in its radicality of purpose would be completely misunderstood, in my view, by one who softens or blurs this emphasis on this radical separability of consciousness and world. For it is precisely the inversion of the naturalistic prioritization of the “real” over subjectivity that needs to be effected, in Husserl’s view, before phenomenology is ever to come into its own and appear as itself, and he says this repeatedly throughout his work.<sup>101</sup> A philosophy that does not cross the threshold of transcendental consciousness, making a clean break once and for all from naturalism, is simply a form of “psychology.” It does not recognize

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 217 (my emphasis)

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>101</sup> To take one example, see *Crisis*, p. 200: “the complete inversion of the natural attitude, thus into an ‘unnatural’ one, places the greatest conceivable demands upon philosophical resolve and consistency.” This sounds exactly like a “conversion” experience.

the autonomy of the subject, and hence it is destined to remain enthralled by “science” and “scientism.”<sup>102</sup>

#### *D. Absolute and Relative Existence and the “World-Annihilation” Experiment*

Husserl’s ultimate contention with respect to the relationship of consciousness and reality is that the being of consciousness is “absolute” whereas the being of the world is merely “relative” (namely, to consciousness). Thus Husserl is not content with merely making an eidetic distinction between the “mental” and the “physical.” He also explicitly assigns *priority* (in a sense yet to be determined) to the former over the latter, at least when it comes to *transcendental* consciousness in its relation to the material world (and those “strata”—psychical, for example, that are founded upon it). We have already seen that from the point of view of experience—and, importantly, there is no other point of view!—the world’s existence is not, strictly speaking, necessary, but the existence of consciousness is. Yes, perceptual consciousness, in which we are continually enmeshed directly or indirectly, is consciousness of the world; but perceptions may be merely fantasies.

---

<sup>102</sup> However accurate or misguided this position may be, it is powerful enough to exert considerable pressure over a later, “post-transcendental” phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty. For his part, Merleau-Ponty was equally opposed to scientific naturalism, but not on the grounds that it was correct in its own domain, yet overly presumptuous in taking the “natural” world as the domain of all being. Husserl widens the net, preserving science wholesale in its most basic objectivist assumptions, while Merleau-Ponty attacks transcendentalism (in both its Kantian and Husserlian forms) and scientific naturalism alike, in search for a holistic alternative, one might say. Yet all the same, Merleau-Ponty would have to struggle with the problem of distinguishing philosophy’s task compellingly from those of the sciences; he was to settle finally on a notion of reciprocity, contrary to Husserl’s uncompromising, but to some, more appealing absolutism.

For with any given case of (possible) perception, “the possibility of the non-being of the world is never excluded.”<sup>103</sup> Or again:

“What hovers before one may be a mere figment; the hovering itself, the inventive consciousness, is not itself invented and there belongs to its essence, as to any other mental process, the possibility of a perceiving reflection which seizes upon absolute factual being.”<sup>104</sup>

Besides, the existence of external objects is established only on the basis of coherent patterns of experience over extended periods of time—but what if these were to dissolve into full-blown incoherence, i.e. “chaos”? “The world” would not now “exist”, but consciousness (of a real or imagined world) nonetheless would.

This latter notion—featured in Husserl’s “world-annihilation” experiment—is perhaps the most radical thought in all of the *Ideas I*, as well as perhaps its most contested, even by many Husserlians. The thought experiment is designed to show the ultimate asymmetry of consciousness and world—and subsequently to lend further proof of the independence of transcendental phenomenology from the empirical sciences of the “natural attitude.” Husserl observes that the meaning “world” is established as a certain harmony of appearances. That is, physical things can by definition never become completely immanent, and hence we cannot know them absolutely and directly. So the only way we come to understand them to exist transcendentally is through the regular ways in which they appear to us. It is on the basis of appearances or presentations of things to consciousness that we posit (as it were) the existence of a transcendent world—only then does its “meaning” as

---

<sup>103</sup>*Ideas I*, p. 103

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101

“transcendent” (Kant’s “transcendental object=X”<sup>105</sup>) become constituted. The appearances must have a certain regularity, and they must “appear” in a way that satisfied a minimal level of expectation on our part. For example, we would not at first take a flashing “object,” which popped into and out of existence randomly and rapidly, as an external object, even if it were one; we would likely take it to be an hallucination.<sup>106</sup> But suppose this regularity were to break down at a fundamental level, such that, effectively, *there ceases to be a world*.<sup>107</sup> Does this automatically entail the abolishment of *consciousness*? Husserl thinks not:

“...while the being of consciousness, of any stream of mental processes whatever, would indeed be necessarily modified by an annihilation of the world of physical things its own existence would not be touched.”<sup>108</sup>

Mental processes could still occur—why not? After all, according to the method of *epoché* and reduction themselves, we have no right to assume that consciousness is causally dependent on, or interdependent with, the world. All such presuppositions, as well as notions of causality, have by now been exposed for exactly what they are, and they have been bracketed accordingly. What remains is what Husserl calls the “phenomenological residuum,”<sup>109</sup> or a certain “stream” of conscious life.

All the same, it is very important to note that we are not in the Berkeleyan camp with this argument. For nowhere does Husserl suggest that physical things themselves, in their transcendent being, depend on the existence of consciousness

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 342-3

<sup>106</sup> If others reported seeing it as well, this would begin to change our view. But then again, they would not report it, either, unless there were some reason—a harmony of appearance and satisfied expectations over time—to do so.

<sup>107</sup> *Ideas I*, p. 109

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 109

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 65

or perception (“*esse est percipi*”). His point is that we would have no reason to *posit* the existence of transcendent things in the first place, were it not for the deliverances of consciousness in the form of adumbrated appearance-perceptions. Yet in its reflexive moment of self-perception, the same cannot be said of consciousness itself: it can be sure of its existence, an existence that is therefore, in this sense, “absolute.” And it can see self-evidently that it exists, even if there is no maturely formed “ego” there to be able to articulate this. This much of the Cartesian legacy survives in *Ideas I*.<sup>110</sup> For Husserl, consciousness’ knowledge of itself, at some deep level, is absolute. This is enough to ground transcendental phenomenology—namely on a “pure” level of experience in which all objects, on the noematic side, as well as all perceivings and thinkings, on the noetic, are constituted.

To deny that this sort of asymmetry exists might be tempting, but on what grounds could we do so after the *epoché*? Certainly there are no grounds to speak of a *causally* necessary relationship of world to consciousness, for it is precisely any possible causal relation between the two that Husserl purposefully brackets and

---

<sup>110</sup> It is true that there follows from Husserl’s view the distinct possibility of solipsism, at least of a “transcendental sort”: “Only for *an Ego*, or a stream of mental processes, in relation to itself, does this distinctive state of affairs exist; here alone there is, and here there must be, such a thing as perception of something immanent.” (italics added) The problem of solipsism is one Husserl tackles memorably in later works, particularly the *Cartesian Meditations*, though to questionable success. The problem is roughly this: Does the reduction reveal the necessity solely of *myself as transcendental ego*, in the sense that the world is the “transcendental phenomenon” (Husserl’s term) for *my* transcendental ego? This would indeed be a disastrous consequence for the transcendental reduction, if it were true. It is in the Fifth Meditation of the *Cartesian Meditations* that Husserl finally reveals that transcendental subjectivity resolves into *transcendental intersubjectivity*, which already presupposes a multiplicity of ego’s and, subsequently, the world of “Objective Nature” as decisively shared by these egos in a common space and time. (CM, p. 130) It is only with the introduction of transcendental intersubjectivity that one can answer in a full and positive way the charge that transcendental phenomenology is a form of “transcendental solipsism” that collapses the being of the world and of other people to a kind of absolute transcendental “*intra*-subjectivity.” Nonetheless, Husserl’s solution is strictly “transcendental” and never presupposes the actual existence of anyone at all. Compare with his remarks on the tree that need not exist in being perceived (IVA above) and the world that need not exist for me to have conscious experience (present section).

ignores. But how are we to avoid the consequence of a complete collapse into idealism—to an embrace of the possibility of a self-sufficient Ego, in which the “world as such” finds its true home? Here it might seem, in other words, that there is no way to prove—or to discover in the first place—just what “the world” is like, as a transcendent world, apart from its manners of givenness to consciousness, so that, if we are to reject subjective idealism, we seemingly must grant the existence of a transcendent world only as a matter of prejudice. But this is not acceptable, certainly not for Husserl. This sort of prejudice or “blind assumption” is exactly what Husserl wants to avoid, and it is why worldly existence must prove itself through experience, and not vice-versa.

Husserl’s experiment has not been convincing to many people, but it should probably be viewed as a perfectly reasonable illustration of the more basic Husserlian principle—namely the possibility of a *global epoché* and transcendental reduction. That is, if we wish to question the world-annihilation experiment, perhaps we need first to question this possibility of a *global epoché*. It is precisely over this point that the phenomenologist Jan Patocka, to take one prominent example, takes Husserl to task, arguing that a bracketing of the very existence of the *world itself* is impossible, for we can only do this for a subset of the world. Moreover, Patocka argues that the existence of the world is something we could never even *attempt* to doubt. In his book on Husserl, he begins by pointing out that “...the world as a whole is ever-present, present as a horizon; this horizontal givenness is something original. For the horizon is neither a particular perspective nor an

anticipation. Perspectives and anticipations are possible only on the basis of it.”<sup>111</sup> He then goes on to dispute Husserl’s equation of a “chaos” with the absence of a “world”: “A chaos, though, is something different than *no world at all*; it is precisely an *un-ordered world*. An un-ordered world does not mean the non-existence of the whole, only the nonexistence of a whole *of a certain type*.”<sup>112</sup> In this way Patocka correctly connects the world-annihilation experiment directly with the notion of a global transcendental *epoché*, regarding the rejection of the one as entailing the rejection of the other.<sup>113</sup>

#### *E. Husserl’s Final Position: “Transcendental Idealism”*

If Husserl is not a simple Cartesian dualist, then what is he? First of all, he takes himself to be starting a *sui generis* enterprise that is wholly incomparable to any prior philosophical system. He also takes himself to have gone beyond the one-sided debates of realism and idealism and taken a higher route, like Kant. However, in fact, he calls his own view “transcendental *idealism*” (my emphasis). In this way he invites the view that he is somehow “anti-realist,” to use the modern turn of phrase.

Many of Husserl’s critics, both on and off the Continent, contemporaneously as well as more recently, have regarded him suspiciously because of this self-declared “idealism.” In this label they have seen the vestiges of an old mistake,

---

<sup>111</sup> Patocka, Jan. *An Introduction to Husserl’s Phenomenology*. Trans. Erazim Kohák. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1996. (p. 105) Hereafter “Patocka.”

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105

<sup>113</sup> Patocka’s conclusion is that the “thesis” of the world “as a whole” “does not in principle reduce to any givenness of a particular, so that its thesis can never be excluded by suspending the theses of such particulars.” (Patocka, p. 105) And under this view, the reduction has to presuppose the world, for transcendental reflection itself requires it.

namely to conflate experience with that which is experienced. Indeed the philosopher J. N. Findlay, English translator of the *Logical Investigations*, rejected Husserl's later philosophy in part because of just this turn towards "idealism."<sup>114</sup> And this is coming from an self-avowed "rational mystic"! But the same was true of a very different group of thinkers, Husserl's own sometime followers—including Alexander Pfänder, Adolf Reinach, and Johannes Daubert—of the so-called "Münich" school of "realist" phenomenology. Daubert had written a detailed commentary on *Ideas I* in shorthand, only recently translated, again taking issue with its idealism.<sup>115</sup> (Daubert argues for the "primacy of the real" and for consciousness as a mere "function" of reality.) Husserl himself rarely uses the term "idealism" in *Ideas I*, but there is no doubt that the text embraces a kind of idealism, which we will investigate below, in his effort to secure for phenomenology the position of "first philosophy."<sup>116</sup>

In Husserl's account, consciousness is not closed, but open-to-the-world. The meaning "the world" very much belongs to conscious experience as an integral and necessary part of it—and certainly in acts of sense-perception, in which the intentional objects are things like "chairs" and "cats," encountered physically-transcendently—but also, less directly, in all other acts. Husserl was thus not a

---

<sup>114</sup> See, for example: Findlay, J. N. *The Discipline of the Cave*. New York: George Allen and Unwin, 1966, p. 162: "This is why a deeply reflective thinker like Husserl, whose whole training in the thought of Brentano made him wary of all the more facile snares of idealism, *nonetheless veered towards idealism in his later phenomenology.*" (my italics) See also the interesting article by David Carr entitled "Findlay, Husserl, and the *Epoché*" (Ch. 5 of *Studies in the Philosophy of J. N. Findlay*, eds. Cohen, Martin, and Westphal, Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), esp. pp. 154-5

<sup>115</sup> The "code-breaker" was Karl Schuhmann. See the essay by Schuhmann and Barry Smith entitled "Against Idealism: Johannes Daubert vs. Husserl's *Ideas I*." *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (1985), pp. 763-793.

<sup>116</sup> Of course, there are scholars who would dispute even this claim. Dallas Willard insists that Husserl is in fact a "realist," for example. But since Husserl called himself a transcendental idealist, it seems to behoove us at least to understand in what sense he might have taken himself to be one.



subjective idealist, certainly not by design.<sup>117</sup> For him, the world exists very much independently of particular acts of consciousness. The *a priori* correlativity (as he was to later term it) of world and consciousness is a matter of the world's giving itself to consciousness in certain fixed and uniform manners, which are themselves anchored in certain essential types of subjectivity and "subjective accomplishment."<sup>118</sup> In other words, it is to say that we cannot make sense of a world that has no intrinsic connection to a potential or actual subjective experiencing *of* that world, just as there is no way to understand such an experiencing without a concomitant principle of an objective or noematic pole through which the world becomes manifest and given in its actuality in perceptual experience.

But one of the consequences of Husserl's idealism is the denial that there is any meaningful sort of reality, such as physical reality, that can become de-coupled from the mind at all levels. Husserl's way of putting the point is as follows:

"...the whole *spatiotemporal world*...has the merely *secondary* sense of a being *for* a consciousness.... It is a being...determined and intuited only as something identical belonging to motivated multiplicities of experience: *beyond that* it is nothing."<sup>119</sup>

From the point of view of the phenomenological attitude (as opposed to the natural one), *what things are* is simply *what they are for consciousness*. But since the phenomenological attitude is philosophically truer and superior<sup>120</sup> to the natural

---

<sup>117</sup> He explicitly rejects the label in *Ideas I*, 129

<sup>118</sup> Crisis 159-60

<sup>119</sup> *Ideas I*, p. 112

<sup>120</sup> Cf.: "From the transcendental standpoint one understands the natural attitude as a 'lower' stance, or which says the same, the natural attitude is already transcendental, yet without knowing it. The

(because it is freer of “presuppositions”), it follows that we should obey its authority when it reveals that the essence of worldly being is to be dependent on *another*, in a way that does not apply symmetrically to consciousness itself. We are still not talking about existential-causal dependence, however. We are not claiming that the world is a fiction generated by the imagination, or that it is merely a variant of consciousness itself. After all, because consciousness is inherently intentional, it is always already a consciousness “of” things, of its “surrounding world”—which Husserl also makes clear is a constant ground in a way that imagined and remembered worlds are not. So the world cannot be dismissed or subjectivized; but it *can* be revealed as a being dependent for its meaning on another, and this is consciousness.

Yet can we not turn this argument back, and argue that consciousness is similarly dependent for its meaning—*as consciousness*—on the world? Not for Husserl, crucially. The reason is remarkably simple: a certain sort of primordial subjectivity remains, as a residue, after all other things—all existential claims—have been bracketed. Acts of consciousness remain, and they remain intuitively accessible as just what they are, without the interference of any “presuppositions.” The *existence* of consciousness is not something we claim; it—the “transcendental ego”—is the basis for the making of any valid claims whatsoever. It is the ultimate, timeless, and primordial source of meaning. Husserl does not claim for it the status

---

natural attitude is ‘implicate’ in the transcendental perspective.” (Luft, 225) Only, we might wish to make a distinction between raw natural experience and such experience as laden with realistic “assumptions,” the latter being the full “natural attitude” as Husserl describes it.

of a godhead, however. Strictly, it is neither “human” nor “divine.” (!) Yet it certainly is self-contained:

“[C]onsciousness considered in its *purity* must be held to be a self-contained complex of being, a complex of *absolute* being into which nothing can penetrate and out of which nothing can slip, to which nothing is spatiotemporally external and which cannot be affected by any physical thing...”<sup>121</sup>

Now ironically, this sort of remark has precisely the effect of *circumventing* the possibility of dualism. For what Husserl is telling us is that (pure) consciousness is not something on the same level as either “physical” things or “mental” ones (non-“purified” subjective things like particular human egos and their “real” components), and that it is not indeed a thing at all, but the basis on which all things become known and defined. Whether we agree with him or not, we must take seriously his own claim to be revealing an undiscovered country, as it were, whose terrain has never before been seen. It is as if to say that Husserl claims to have found (or rediscovered, after Descartes and others) the access point, itself neither part of the world nor other than it, to the comprehensibility of that world (and itself). This structure is the ultimate concern of “philosophy,” now understood as “transcendental phenomenology”—the study of the underlying structures, or again the *origins* of,<sup>122</sup> experience and experienceable reality.

We might end this section with an extended quote from Husserl, in which he himself neatly summarizes the bulk of his position in *Ideas I*. Hopefully, by now the reader will be familiar with the concepts discussed herein:

---

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p 112

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 131

“The realm of transcendental consciousness as the realm of what is, in a determined sense, ‘absolute being,’ has been provided us by the phenomenological reduction. It is primal category of all being (or, in our terminology, the primal region), the one in which all other regions of being are rooted, to which, according to their *essence*, they are relative and on which they are therefore all essentially dependent. The theory of categories must start entirely from this most radical of all ontological distinctions—being *as consciousness* and being as something which becomes ‘manifested’ in consciousness, ‘transcendent’ being—which, as we see, can be attained in its purity and be appreciated only by the method of the phenomenological reduction. In the essential relationship between *transcendental* and *transcendent* being are rooted all the relationships already touched on by us repeatedly but later to be explored more profoundly, between phenomenology and all other sciences—relationships in the sense of which it is implicit that the dominion of phenomenology include in a certain remarkable manner all other sciences.”<sup>123</sup>

Of particular note here, for our purposes, is the repeated deployment of variants of “being” and “ontological,” as well as the notion of a “realm” of “transcendental consciousness.” Transcendental phenomenology is both an epistemology as well as a kind of higher-order ontology—a science, to modify Aristotle, of “being qua *known*.”

#### **IV. Concluding Reflections**

Part of the deep appeal of Husserl’s phenomenology is its appeal to intuition, to experience, and to evidence. This “evidentialism” (my word) gives philosophy a mandate to be “responsible” to the facts, so to speak, and accordingly to the “things themselves.” It is why Husserl could speak of phenomenology as the “genuine”

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 172

positivism.<sup>124</sup> On the other hand, Husserl's definition of experience and intuition are broad enough to appeal to non-empiricists (and even Kantians), for whom sensory experience is the only true form of intuition. Husserl includes such acts as categorial intuition and ideation. We are able to "experience" logical entities and mathematical ones, and, through acts of imagination and memory, non-existent ones. There is only one ultimate principle of evidence to which one must strictly adhere—the so-called "principle of principles":

*"No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the principle of all principles: that every originative presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originarily...offered to us in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there."*<sup>125</sup>

Husserl makes knowledge a much more "democratic" enterprise than was ever before conceived—all intuitive evidence of any kind can take on cognitive validity. At the same time, Husserl forces the phenomenologist to be disciplined by remaining true to this evidence and *only* this evidence in making knowledge claims.

But if this is all that phenomenology consists in—evidentiary rigor and a wide scope for cognition—then it is unlikely Husserl would have attracted so much opposition by later (and contemporary) phenomenologists themselves. To understand this reaction one must turn to the bold and challenging form of intentional "idealism" that *Ideas I* erects. It is, essentially, an explanatory framework for the possibility of knowledge in light of the *seeming* gulf between, as McDowell

---

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.; Husserl's italics

has memorably put it, “mind and world.”<sup>126</sup> Husserl shows us that in fact, the two are intertwined at all levels, even though eidetically distinct. But how is this possible? How can there be a world that gives itself *to us* even while this *givenness* is subject to strict rules governed by the life of an essentially un-worldly Ego? How is this not to be thought of as anything more than an arbitrary positing of a quasi-Leibnizian “pre-established harmony”? What is the essential, inner law that would make the fusion of the real and the ideal an actuality, and not a blind hope?

It would seem that Husserl’s “transcendental ego” does not so much offer a solution as it literally gives a name to just this hope—it is a promise, an earnest, rather than a solution. It does not improve on Hegel’s “Absolute Spirit” and in fact lacks the latter’s univocal (in this case, ideal) nature. Husserl’s theory asks for a separation of essence from fact, real from ideal, transcendental from natural—all the while insisting that no such cleavages compromise his vision of pure and direct cognition of the “things themselves.” This is a tough sell. For is there not an unavoidable tension between any form of transcendental idealism and the notion of “transcendent things”? So long as these are merely “immanent transcendencies,” does not Husserl’s position veer precipitously towards subjective or absolute idealism, albeit clearly against his own intentions? It is in fact the latter hidden possibility—the possibility of an “absolute” idealism—that hovers constantly over his work in the idealist phase. Yet there are even deeper reasons—reasons that the structure of Husserl’s own system provides us with—to believe that Husserl’s “transcendental idealism” is intrinsically oriented towards absolute idealism, by

---

<sup>126</sup> McDowell, John. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1994

tendency that is. This can be seen through the inevitable logic of “attitudes” that Husserl leaves for the most part inexplicit.

Husserlian transcendental idealism, as we have seen, depends on the crucial distinction of the natural and transcendental attitudes, and hence on the possibility of a transcendental reduction. In this respect it is exceedingly important to regard the two attitudes—natural and transcendental—as being at different *levels*. That is, the natural attitude is not merely replaced by the transcendental; from the natural attitude, we *trade up* to the transcendental attitude. On its own, the natural attitude is false, since it makes assumptions about the indifference of mind and world that are themselves false. The natural attitude has to be overcome and replaced by the transcendental if we are to do real philosophy and hence “know” the world around us. So much is merely review. The transcendental attitude is the one in which reality is known as it *really* is; the natural attitude is but a prelude. Yet, do we ever stop being “naïve realists”? Is there not an “everydayness” that pervades even the transcendental philosopher’s existence? It is impossible in Husserl’s system to have both attitudes at once, however, since the natural attitude contains commitments that have to be given up in the transcendental attitude; they are mutually exclusive. Yet if they were merely incommensurable, one could not be called superior to another, and the result would be a form of relativism. But since the transcendental attitude is clearly superior for Husserl, who was strongly anti-relativist we might add, it would seem to me that it is only logical to conclude the following: that the transcendental attitude is at a *higher* level than the natural, but also *contains* all the truth and legitimacy (basically, the raw intuitivity, without for example the mistaken

theoretical assumptions regarding the real existence of intuited objects) of the former, and in such a way as to *sublate* it. Thus we can still experience the natural attitude legitimately, so long as we subordinate it to the transcendental as soon as we are in a position to begin to truly understand what we experience “naturally.” The transcendental attitude is thus an improvement over the natural attitude; it is a clear-eyed view of the bilateral constitutive nexus of experience and that-which-is-experienced, grounded in intuitive evidence which comes to us “naturally.” And so the natural attitude is thus *overcome* by the (phenomenological) philosopher, who goes beyond it while retaining the first-order experiential data, morphic and hyletic, disclosed in its domain.

What does this picture tell us, finally? It explains exactly Husserl’s own conviction that the transcendental attitude, which is itself the attitude of transcendental consciousness, discloses a self-standing realm of being that includes but overcomes the being of Nature, which is merely dependent on the “pure” Being of Consciousness. External existence in the “naïve-realist” sense, so to speak, is revealed to be a *fiction* native to the *natural attitude*. It is not to be taken seriously by those that *know* better, namely that “external existence” is itself only a “meaning” generated in and through consciousness—namely perceiving consciousness. I call this “absolute idealism” not simply to echo Hegel or the German Idealists but to draw on Husserl’s own language—he himself uses “absolute” to describe the being of consciousness (qua phenomenological residuum). The phenomenological reduction is thus akin the opening of an eye, a delivery from darkness. It is no mere modification of the psyche—indeed, it leaves the psyche itself behind!



There is a pressing general question, therefore, regarding the “bracketing” procedure, or at least the way Husserl employs it in *Ideas I*, namely whether it necessarily entails a sort of subjectivism from which there is, properly, no return. Husserl’s transcendent world is preserved nominally after the reduction, but only as a “meaning.” Husserl’s understanding of transcendence is complex, and it may legitimately be wondered whether he has truly repelled the ghost of subjectivism from entering his system. This has been perceived as a lack of appreciation of the depth of the “alterity” of things, much in the way Husserl has been similarly criticized for not sufficiently explaining the otherness of other people.

Another question that arises in reading Husserl regards the very possibility of transcendental phenomenology in the first place. This is the source of one of the great puzzles and challenges of transcendental phenomenology. That is, how can we overcome the natural attitude, as Husserl insists that we must in order to enter into knowledge, if it is already so successful, by its very nature, in binding us to its doxic spell? Husserl frames the task of breaking free as a matter of being disciplined and rigorous, but the question really has more to do with principle than with degree. For just how is it that it is even *possible* to know one’s experiential life *as it is lived* without remaining somehow *in* that very experientiality—that is, in the “natural attitude”? This is not merely a question of the possibility of “reflexivity.” For reflexive consciousness can still be explained within the natural attitude: I can think about my thinking, treating it as an object like anything else. The transcendental attitude involves more than this; it involves a reflexivity blended together with a thoroughgoing “bracketing” of the whole world I take for granted in everyday life. It

involves the rejection of naïve realism in the most categorical of terms. So how is transcendental phenomenology itself possible?

It is in connection with this question that we come to a characteristic hermeneutic difficulty in *Ideas I* and transcendental phenomenology generally.<sup>127</sup> To be able to *see* the natural attitude *as such*, to be able to form the essential concept of it and make it a theme of reflection, is to have to presuppose the self-transcendence of the natural attitude. One is already in the transcendental attitude, in other words, from the very *beginning* of the text of *Ideas I*—or at least, one has to be there to properly grasp its contents. Yet how are we to get there, without first using the phenomenological method, that is, without first bracketing our own assumptions, etc.?

The phenomenological reduction has a distinct “double meaning.” There is an obvious and important sense in which the *epoché* involves a kind of “withdrawal” from the world. It is an exclusion, or “bracketing,” of the natural “factual” world, a flight to a level of “pure” insight. But transcendental phenomenology is also a move away from the “theories” developed in the “natural attitude” and hence a return to a more primordial and authentic layer of experience—of the natural, factual world! To over-emphasize the former aspect is of course to push Husserl into mysticism, while the latter presses him too deeply, potentially, into the bowels of *nature*, the dreaded zone of opaque “fact.” Yet unless we accept a story of sublation, in which Husserl comes dangerously (to his mind) close to absolute idealism, there would seem to be an unresolved tension between transcendental subjectivity and the “natural order”

---

<sup>127</sup> This was already pointed out astutely by Ricoeur. See *Key*, p 42 & pp. 48-9

at the heart of Husserl's system.<sup>128</sup> It is my considered view, then, that Husserl must be an absolute or unmitigated idealist—one who denies any co-ultimacy of “natural” reality with transcendental consciousness/subjectivity—on pain of the potential for his system to dissolve into incoherence and permanent vacillation between transcendence and transcendentality.

---

<sup>128</sup> Some contemporary Husserl commentators, for example Donn Welton, have argued that it would be a shame to base one's entire understanding on Husserl's transcendental project on *Ideas I*. In Welton's words, the “Cartesian” approach of this text is “trapped in transcendental psychologism,” and should be contrasted with the much more promising “Kantian” approach Husserl later (insufficiently) developed. (Welton, p. 287) This may be so, but as we have seen already, even Welton recognizes that there are multiple and parallel paths in Husserl's own thinking. Whether Husserl ever truly resolved the tensions I speak of is an open question.

## Chapter Two: The Constitution of Nature, Body, and Spirit in Husserl's *Ideas II*<sup>129</sup>

"If philosophy begins with the natural attitude, will it ever leave it behind, and if it could, why would it? Such are the questions that bother Husserl, and which explain the contradictory positions that he took on the constitution of Nature."

--Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>130</sup>

### I. Introduction

If *Ideas I* aims through the *epoché* and reduction to introduce Husserl's transcendental-phenomenological method, then *Ideas II* aims to show us the being of the world as revealed by this method. The latter text is thus, one might say, the ontological complement to its more epistemological-methodological predecessor, while the brief *Ideas III*<sup>131</sup>, the final piece in the triad, is a kind of hybrid of both. The

---

<sup>129</sup> *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Trs. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989. (Hereafter *Ideas II*.) The present chapter covers both *Ideas II* and *Ideas III*. (*Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Third Book: Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences*. Trans. Ted Klein and William E. Pohl. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1980. Hereafter *Ideas III*.) But I will talk less frequently of the latter, owing to its brevity and relative lack of substance, as compared to either of the first two volumes. It does, however, contain some useful material for our purposes. Brief attention will also be given to one of Husserl's lectures from 1919. (Husserl, Edmund. *Husserliana Materialienbände, Band IV. Natur und Geist: Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1919*. Ed. Michael Weiler. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002. Hereafter *Husserl 1919*.)

<sup>130</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Compiled and with notes from Dominique Séglaard. Tr. Robert Vallier. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2003 (p. 79)

<sup>131</sup> It is of course the middle, much longer and denser text that is the primary subject of this chapter.

latter two volumes presuppose a prior performance of the *epoché* and reduction, along with the transcendental-idealistic turn that go with them. This allows Husserl to dive into the burning question, left wide open after *Ideas I*, as to just what the world is supposed to *look like* once the reduction has taken place—not only the world, of course, but the world-occupying self who, in its transcendental guise, has made these new vistas possible.

*Ideas II* is thus both an extension as well as a deepening of its nominal predecessor, though it's true that the two texts hardly have a comparable history of development. Although much of it was written around the same time (1912-1915) as *Ideas I*, *Ideas II* was being revised throughout Husserl's life, and he was never satisfied to have it published.<sup>132</sup> *Ideas III* also remained unpublished in Husserl's life-time, but it was revised hardly at all between the time it was first drafted and Husserl's death.<sup>133</sup> The published and author-endorsed *Ideas I* was hugely influential, both positively and negatively, but amazingly, so was the long-underground *Ideas II*. No less than Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty were shaped decisively by the work, while many others—Alfred Schütz, Paul Ricoeur, etc.—felt compelled to comment on the work and respond to its remarkable contents.<sup>134</sup> As

---

<sup>132</sup> Some make much of the fact that Edith Stein gave a good deal of the shape (and overall title) to the work in her 1918 redaction. I will address one particular scholar's (Elizabeth Behnke's) thoughts on the matter in the next chapter.

<sup>133</sup> For detailed information on the publication history of *Ideas II*, see the Translator's Introduction to the English edition of the work (*Ideas II*, xii-xvi).

<sup>134</sup> The case of Merleau-Ponty is clear and obvious from his own writings, as we will see in this and subsequent chapters. As for Heidegger, Nenon makes a convincing case that Heidegger was "directly and immediately" influenced by Husserl's notions of the "personalistic attitude" and "*Umwelt*." (See: *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*. Eds. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996, p. x. Volume hereafter referred to as *Issues*.) Luckily, a lengthy synoptic study has been done by Paul Ricoeur, whose numerous judicious observations we will have multiple occasions to consult and interpret in the course of the present study. See: Ricoeur, Paul. *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*. Trans. Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree. Evanston: Northwestern

for the relative dearth of literature on the book and its rings of influence, in the words of the editors of a recent collection of essays on the work, “there is an almost inverse proportion between the influence that Husserl’s *Ideas II* exercised on important philosophical developments in this century and the attention it has received in secondary literature.”<sup>135</sup>

The fact is that *Ideas II* is an amazing, as well as fearsomely complex, foray into a large array of problems, among them the mind-body problem, the so-called problem of the human sciences (what they are and how they differ methodologically and regionally from natural sciences), the problem of personal identity and motivation, and many others, all united in tenuous ways under the banner “studies in constitution.” *Ideas II* complements *Ideas I* but also goes well beyond it in many regards. It can fruitfully be read as a supplement to or foreshadower of all phases of Husserl’s later thought. For example, it anticipates and even partially develops some of the main themes of the *Cartesian Meditations* (intersubjectivity, empathy, “monadology”) as well as the *Crisis of the European Sciences* (the life-world, or, as it were, the “surrounding world”—*Umwelt*), and while mostly “static” (like *Ideas I*), it begins to incorporate elements of genetic phenomenology as well, at least in its third part. It stands on its own, however, as well. It features the most detailed examination of the body Husserl ever produced—this being the probable root of its singular impact on subsequent Continental thought. It is also the source of

---

University Press, 2007. (pp. 35-81) Hereafter “Ricoeur.” There is also a shorter but important early essay on *Ideas II* written around the same time by Alfred Schütz, which I will unfortunately not have time to address in this chapter. See: Schütz, Alfred. “Edmund Husserl’s *Ideas, Volume II.*” In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 13: (pp. 394-413)

<sup>135</sup> The editors are Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. (*Issues*, p. ix)

numerous insightful distinctions between nature, soul, spirit, Ego, and person—though these are often impossible to reconcile with one another harmoniously, as we will see. For ultimately, *Ideas II* is simply *too* stuffed with good ideas to make a single consistent argument (or, phenomenologically speaking, a consistent set of eidetic descriptions), which may be one of the reasons Husserl was never fully satisfied with it. Indeed, much that is introduced and partly developed in *Ideas II* is not developed all the way, even by Husserl’s standards. The history of the text and its editing by multiple hands (Husserl, Stein, Landgrebe) also means that it is highly uneven and disorganized in places, and can hardly be said to have a conventional or even logically sound structure.

It is wise then, on the one hand, not to treat *Ideas II* as a unified whole so much as a collection of investigatory strains. On the other hand, the skeleton of *Ideas II* as a text is the closest we will come to a glimpse of what might be called a complete “Husserlian (regional) ontology.”<sup>136</sup> Husserl’s constitutional analyses, taken at their face value as grounded intuitively, are meant to reveal to us the being of the whole world of positive being, of “what is” (*panta ta onta*), from the lowest or most foundational stratum, that of “physicalistic” nature, to the highest, the reflecting personal (or “spiritual”) Ego, along with its collective cultural formations (“personalities of a higher order”). And all of this has intrinsic philosophical interest for a myriad of questions usually understood as “metaphysical”—materialism and

---

<sup>136</sup> Husserl distinguishes between formal ontology and regional ontology. In this chapter we are concerned with the latter, that is, with the kinds of *beings* that make up the world, specifically the “ontological regions” of material nature, animal nature, and spirit. (See: Drummond, John J. *Historical Dictionary of Husserl’s Philosophy*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2008, pp. 78-9, 151, 180. Hereafter “*Dictionary*.”)

the mind-body problem, for example—in the same way, perhaps, that the phenomenological theories of intentionality or perception address classical questions of “epistemology.” As I will argue in this chapter, I read the text to be a continual balancing-act—which resembles more so a see-saw—between naturalistic and anti-naturalistic strains in Husserl’s philosophy, both of which are strongly on display in the text. The contradictions of the text are useful for the study of Husserl generally because they are reflective of the deepest underlying tensions of his phenomenological system. They go to the very issues—the nature of idealism and the transcendental ego, the nature-spirit divide and the division of natural and human sciences in their relation to phenomenology—that occupied Husserl, and remained unresolved, until the end of his life.

Of course, these are also the very issues that concern us in our study of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on the question of the meaning of nature and its relation to “spirit” and consciousness. *Ideas II* (and *III*) teach a confusing double lesson—on the one hand, the “spirituality of nature” (as Husserl puts it in another text<sup>137</sup>), particularly in the form of the living, feeling organism *as* living; and on the other hand (and this is what dominates Husserl’s account, all things considered), the strict bifurcation of nature and spirit, not necessarily in terms of distinguishing the transcendental ego (consciousness in its “irreal” iridescence) from reality, but in terms of carving out two separate ontological orders within the realm of the “real” itself (and within which the “body” figures very differently in each respective sphere). Combined with these difficulties is the equally central confusion between

---

<sup>137</sup> Husserl 1919, 186



the nature of “spirit” vis-à-vis that of “consciousness” or “transcendental subjectivity,” the latter of which of course figures so ubiquitously in the scheme of Husserl’s project as a whole. This particular issue goes to the heart of the ambiguity between Husserl’s distinction between ontology and phenomenology, the real and the transcendental, and, in addition to the prior ambiguities about nature and the body, make it possible to see where Husserl’s transcendental-phenomenological project starts to unravel somewhat from within. Or more charitably speaking, these problems seem to call for a transformation of Husserlian phenomenological project in a more unified direction, one of which happens to involve a more immanentized and embodied conception of the ego (which ought not be entirely aloof from ontology) and a more ecstatic, “enworlded” conception of the body (which ought not to be entirely aloof from the ego). This is the direction ultimately taken by Merleau-Ponty, for whom the transcendental ego must situate itself somehow (and never wholly comfortably) in nature itself, namely as a power of finite reflection, capable of a certain “eidetic seeing” but incapable of absolute transparency or a final victory over its all-too-natural *Grund*. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s entire original project, one might say, is first made possible by the volatile ruptures of *Ideas II*.<sup>138</sup> But we will have to wait before we examine this “second half” of the story in more detail, in Chapter 3 (and briefly, in the conclusion of the present chapter).

In part II of this chapter I will provide a detailed outline of the general ontological matrix sketched out by Husserl in *Ideas II* (and continued in *III*),

---

<sup>138</sup> Of course, here it is well to keep in mind Voltaire’s highly appropriate maxim about the mistakes of “true genius”: “*C’est le privilège du vrai génie et surtout du génie qui ouvre une carrière, de faire impunément de grandes fautes.*” (*Siècle de Louis XIV*, ch. 32)

accompanied by some critical commentary. Then, in part III, I will produce a textual analysis in which I both lay out what I take to be the most interesting problems—in both the neutral and pejorative senses of the terms—of Husserl’s presentation. I will conclude with some reflections on *Ideas II* and, as mentioned above, some thoughts on how Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy can be understood as a response to and development of the themes (and tensions) of text. Ultimately I will argue that what emerges from Husserl’s ontological matrix (in combination with the position already stated in *Ideas I*) is a complex, and finally self-inconsistent, combination of ontological dualism and phenomenological monism, in spite of an otherwise promising foray into the hybridity of the living body.

## II. The Ontological Matrix of *Ideas II/III*

### A. Introduction

As we have already indicated, *Ideas II/III* concerns the “constitution” of reality. In the words of one commentator, “*Ideas II* can be regarded as the attempt to regain [after *Ideas I*] reality by catching it up in the same net with pure consciousness.”<sup>139</sup> That is, whereas the subject (in the sense of “topic”) of *Ideas I* is consciousness and its general intentional structure, that of *Ideas II* is the reality

---

<sup>139</sup> Tymieniecka, Anna-Teresa. “From Husserl’s Formulation of the Soul-Body Issue to a New Differentiation of Human Faculties.” In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983 (p. 4)

constituted *in* consciousness, a reality which has its own various kinds, strata, and types of givenness to be distinguished and related. In this way, reduction and constitution eventually emerge as two complementary poles of phenomenological method<sup>140</sup>, and they have remained so ever since.

But what, precisely, is “constitution”? Defining it is a bit tricky. As Dermot Moran explains, it is more of an “operative” as opposed to “thematic” concept in Husserl, and thus it typically remains undefined by him.<sup>141</sup> One could, however, define it roughly in terms of the spontaneous production (in the sense of “making available,” not “creation”) of *objects*. One speaks, for example, of consciousness’ constitution “of the material world,” for example, or again of “other people” (in the sense of intersubjectivity)—in the sense that consciousness makes such beings available. Thus, the notion of constitution emphasizes the “objective” aspect of the “correlational *a priori*” of consciousness and object, while reduction, by contrast, emphasizes the subjective, or “constituting” aspect. Now the principle of constitution is what allows us to speak of Husserl’s “ontology,” that is, of the “being” of things “in themselves,” in terms of what they fundamentally (essentially) are, so long as we remember, in the words of Cobb-Stevens, that “transcendental philosophy refuses to be absorbed either by a sociology of personal reciprocity or a philosophy of objective spirit.”<sup>142</sup> That is, we can speak of Husserl’s understanding of the “being” of things (broadly speaking) but only *in terms of* their noematic

---

<sup>140</sup> *Dictionary*, 54-5

<sup>141</sup> Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. New York: Routledge, 2000 (p. 164)

<sup>142</sup> Cobb-Stevens, Richard. “Body, Spirit, and Ego in Husserl’s *Ideas II*.” *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. (p. 252) Hereafter “Cobb-Stevens.”

“sense,” itself revealed via the phenomenological (and obviously eidetic) reductions. Husserl’s ontology is therefore the study of reality-as-constituted-in-transcendental-consciousness.<sup>143</sup> This is noematic, as opposed to noetic, phenomenology.<sup>144</sup> (At any rate, the disciplines of phenomenology and ontology are parallel for Husserl, differing only through “shift in view”—that is, the phenomenological reduction.<sup>145</sup>)

*Ideas II* presents an exhaustive ordering of the various sense-layers of objectivity—materiality, animality, humanity, sociality, etc., plus many intermediate layers—that are constituted by consciousness.<sup>146</sup> Both *Ideas II* and *III* have the same order of presentation, in terms of starting first with the “lowest” (and self-independent, in purely material “things”<sup>147</sup>) stratum of material nature, and moving “upwards” to pure spirit. This ordering is curiously the exact inverse of the “ontological priority” Husserl gives to spirit and the “spiritual attitude” in which things are first constituted not as purely material at all. But this is just one of the

---

<sup>143</sup> Thus while “naïve realism” is destroyed through the reduction and the transition to the transcendental attitude, it is important to keep in mind that phenomenology is not phenomenism; it does not reduce reality to appearance, it studies reality *in its appearing* (as well as the subjectivity to which reality appears, which can in turn be studied for its own sake as well).

<sup>144</sup> A more technical definition of “constitution” is offered by Ricoeur: “To constitute signifies only to interrogate a sense by explicating the signification intentions to which the sense correlates. Hence, the job of constitution remains below the level of interpretation.” (Ricoeur 65) Overgaard offers perhaps the simplest way to understand the relation between reduction and constitution: “...the actual relation between constitution and transcendental phenomenological reduction can be described as one between what we want to understand and the method by which we are able to understand what we want to understand.” See: Overgaard, Søren. *Husserl and Heidegger on Being in the World*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2004 (pp. 59-60) Hereafter “Overgaard.” Gadamer offers this: ““Constitution” is nothing but the “movement of reconstruction” [*Wiederaufbaubewegung*] that follows after the reduction has been performed.” (Cited by way of Overgaard, 59.)

<sup>145</sup> “But all clarifying ontological insight executed in the framework of axiomatic clarity that is not directly phenomenological becomes such by a mere *shift of view*, as conversely in the whole of phenomenological insights there must be those which become ontological through a mere shift of view.” (*Ideas III*, 90)

<sup>146</sup> Although this is not discussed in as much detail, consciousness also constitutes itself, insofar as it makes itself an object of observation and (self-)perception.

<sup>147</sup> See fn 27, below.

many paradoxes of the text.<sup>148</sup> It is also important to note that from the very beginning of the text, Husserl's examination of ontological regions is correlated with a type of scientific or theoretical activity—for example, pure nature with physics, the soul with psychology, the living body with the (seemingly invented) science of somatology, etc.—as well as, in most cases, an *attitude*, another central but operative Husserlian concept or device, already discussed in our chapter 1 (pp. 8-11.) The ontological region of spirit, studied by the “human sciences,” is correlated with the “personalistic” or “spiritual” attitude, and the regions of material and animal nature with the “naturalistic” attitude. As Husserl now puts it in *Ideas II*, “A change in attitude means nothing else but a thematic transition from one direction of apprehension to another, to which correspond, correlatively, different objectivities.”<sup>149</sup>

## *B. The Constitution of Worldly Reality*

### 1. Material Nature

Ricoeur remarks that Husserl's gesture in the reduction of *Ideas I* is to “reject nature as ‘alien,’ as ‘another being.’”<sup>150</sup> It does this, of course, to make way for a sense of “consciousness” not reducible to that of “nature”—to effect a Kantian “Copernican” turn, so to speak. In *Ideas II*, Husserl softens the “otherness” of nature by giving both a “material” as well as “animal” dimension. Thus there are these three

---

<sup>148</sup> It can actually be explained, however, in terms of what I will later call Husserl's “naturalism”—his implicit acceptance and adoption of the modern-scientific conception of nature.

<sup>149</sup> *Ideas II*, 221

<sup>150</sup> Ricoeur, 57

divisions of the text: “material nature,” “animal nature,” and “spirit.”<sup>151</sup> Already from this it is clear, however, that the underlying *dichotomy* in Husserl’s constitutional analysis in *Ideas II* is that of “nature” and “spirit.” Husserl himself confirms the impression when he announces: “...we have *two poles*: physical nature and spirit and, in between them, Body and soul.”<sup>152</sup>

But what does Husserl mean by the term “nature” or “natural”<sup>153</sup>? Husserl speaks of “nature” in a double sense,<sup>154</sup> its referring on the one hand only to the “physical,” and on the other hand to both the physical and psychic as a single reality (the psychophysical, living-ensouled, etc.). The former is “*nature in the first and original sense*.”<sup>155</sup> In the latter case, the psychic “stratum” is “founded” on the more basic material sub-stratum. This point is central to Husserl’s ontology and is stressed by him in the following quote (from *Ideas III*):

---

<sup>151</sup> Husserl addressed the “nature/spirit” divide repeatedly in his work, from his lecture “Logik als Theorie der Erkenntnis” (1910/11) to his last full work, the *Crisis* (1936), usually in the context of the question of the relations between the natural and human sciences, and between all such sciences and phenomenology. For an overview of his treatments of these topics see Michael Weiler’s extensive Editor’s Introduction to: *Husserliana XXXII, Gesammelte Werke: Natur und Geist: Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1927*. Ed. Michael Weiler. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001, pp. XVI-L. (Volume referred to hereafter as “Husserl 1927.”)

<sup>152</sup> *Ideas II*, 298

<sup>153</sup> At this point, a further terminological note is in order. Several terms (and their cognates) must be distinguished from each other, namely “nature/natural,” “physical” or “material,” and “real.” Husserl assigns these terms more or less technical meanings. We may thus regard the relationship between nature, reality, and physical (or material) in the following way: nature in the “first” sense is the purely physical or material; nature in the second sense is the realm of animality or “embodiedness” and “ensouledness”; nature, taken in its two senses together, is still not all of “reality,” for reality encompasses nature and *spirit*, which, taken by itself, is strictly *non-natural* in Husserl’s sense. Thus for Husserl there is a distinction between “all there is”—the totality of “worldly” (or “intramundane,” by another locution) reality—and nature as “the *field of transcendent—specifically, spatio-temporal—realities*” that is “nature.” (*Ideas II*, 3). All of these distinctions will come into play abundantly as we proceed.

<sup>154</sup> Husserl’s expression: *Ibid.*, 145

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 171. Compare: “the soul, too, is of course a persistent being. But this persistent being is no ‘nature.’” (*Ideas II*, 355) See also Husserl’s remark that “reality” is to be spoken of “in the first place as nature” (*Ideas II*, 420)... He also refers to the former sense of “nature” as the “strict” sense. (See *Husserl 1919*, pp. 136-7) Unless otherwise specified, I too will use the term “nature,” in reference specifically to Husserl’s views thereof, in this strict sense.

“...psychic reality is founded in the organismal matter, but this is not conversely found in the psyche. More generally we can say: the material world is, within the total *Objective world* that we call *nature*, a closed world of its own needing no help from other realities. On the other hand, the existence of mental realities, of a real mental world, is bound to the existence of a nature in the first sense, namely that of material nature, and this is not for accidental but for fundamental reasons. While the *res extensa*, if we inquire of its essence, contains nothing of mentalness and nothing that would demand beyond itself a connection with real mentalness, we find conversely that real mentalness essentially can be only in connection to materiality as real mind of an animate organism.”<sup>156</sup>

Husserl also regards nature to be (as is stated already in the first line of the work!) the “*object of the natural sciences*.”<sup>157</sup> Such an early and explicit invocation of natural science, perhaps seemingly innocuous to some, in fact represents a huge and fateful concession to the modern physicalistic world-view, which Husserl will be at pains to reverse in ways that compound the latent dualistic tendencies of his thinking. All of this will hopefully become clearer as we proceed, especially in part III.<sup>158</sup>

Husserl’s notion of nature is thus at once scientific, in the sense of “Galilean-Newtonian,” as well as broadly “Kantian.” Nature is by its essence “extended,” has a definite spatiotemporal location, is governed by the law of causality, is “in itself” devoid of secondary qualities, etc.<sup>159</sup> Though a species of the natural attitude, the natural-scientific or naturalistic attitude involves a kind of *epoché* and reduction of its own, a bracketing in this case of all axiological and practical predicates.<sup>160</sup> In this

---

<sup>156</sup> *Ideas III*, 104

<sup>157</sup> *Ideas II*, 3

<sup>158</sup> It is not the purpose of the current chapter to offer an alternative conception of nature, but this will come in chapter 4, which is devoted to this topic as it is developed by Merleau-Ponty in his *Nature* lectures and other later works.

<sup>159</sup> *Ideas II*, 80-2. It should be added that the full sense of “nature” is utterly intersubjective. That is, a solipsistic subject cannot conceive of that basic natural entity, the “thing,” as opposed to what Husserl describes at length (and for the first time in *Ideas II*) as the “phantom.”

<sup>160</sup> Though it is not merely a matter of bracketing but of subordinating them: “From the standpoint of nature, everything personal is subordinate.” (*Ideas II*, 194) Husserl does not give any indication that the naturalistic attitude is—as it appears to some modern readers to be—thoroughly historical and

way, “nature” purely speaking does not have any human significance, value, or utility; it simply “is.”<sup>161</sup> This will eventually lead to the need to place “spirit” above “nature” in “ontological priority,” but this does not so much as dignify nature as swallow it up in human cultural activity.<sup>162</sup>

## 2. Animal Nature, or the Body-and-Soul

When Husserl speaks of the body, he sometimes describes it in terms of a “plus” that is appresented in some physical “things,” to which belongs the new sense of “living beings” (or bodies), something more than mere materiality, though something that is, again, also dependent on materiality as its “substratum.”<sup>163</sup>

Husserl generally treats the Body<sup>164</sup> (*Leib*) in conjunction with the soul (*Seele*, *Psyche*). However, it is important for *us* to distinguish this “psychophysical” composite, i.e., the living “ensouled” organism, from the “body” regarded as a *double reality*<sup>165</sup>—i.e., as that which is either “body” (*Körper*, body-thing, *Ding*) or “Body” (*Leib*, living body). In fact, the relevant distinctions to make are at least the following five:

a) The body as a Janus-faced “double reality,” to which pertain two lines of real circumstances,” material and psychic. (I will refer to this as simply “the body.”)

---

conditioned by the vagaries of the epoch. Instead, he presents it as a “timeless” attitude, which even the ancients, for example, may have performed, but simply did not have the right information to do.  
<sup>161</sup> Perhaps in the Sartrean sense of absurdly being “there,” *de trop*? This would help explain Sartre’s own dualistic appropriation (“in itself” and “for itself”) of Husserlian (by way of Hegelian) phenomenology.

<sup>162</sup> See fn 106, below, and also fn 107.

<sup>163</sup> *Ideas II*, 97-99

<sup>164</sup> I am following the useful convention of the English translators of *Ideas II* of signifying *Leib* with “Body” and other references to the body with the lower-case “body.” (*Ideas II*, XIV-XV)

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 297



- b) The body as body-thing, or slab of matter in space and time, subject to forces of natural causality. (“body” when the context is clear, otherwise “*Körper*” or “body-thing”)
- c) The body as a “thing” “inserted” between the rest of the material world and the “subjective” sphere;<sup>166</sup> also “own body”
- d) The body as *Leib*, the living animate organism, or animal, which possesses a psychical or soulish stratum, appresented with its material substantiality.
- e) The soul or psyche itself, which forms the upper stratum of the *Leib*, the lower stratum of which is material Nature.

Of course the picture is still more nuanced. For example, there is at the level of the Body the level of sensations, including kinaesthetic sensations, which is the “aesthesiological body,” while at a higher level there is the “volitional body,” which is responsible for “acting” in the sense of “willing” and acting on the “I can.”<sup>167</sup>

Husserl’s treatment of the body-soul relation is very interesting. The soul and the Body are intertwined. Thus in this respect, Husserl sides with Aristotle, so to speak, rather than Plato: “the soul is indeed ever one with the Body.”<sup>168</sup> There can indeed never be a separation of soul and Body, a point Husserl makes dramatically through a detailed discussion of the a priori eidetic necessity for even a *ghost* to have a Body. Without a body of any sort, no ghost, here by definition a “phantom” in Husserl’s unique sense, could be perceived or apperceived (or for that matter hallucinated); presentation of the psyche always occurs through perception of certain kinds of bodies.<sup>169</sup> This sort of discussion in fact raises the interesting counter-image to that of the mind as a “ghost in the machine.” For in the case of

---

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 169

<sup>167</sup> Husserl speaks of the “I can” as a practical to-be-able-to that is prior to doing (e.g., Ibid., 273), an “original consciousness of abilities” that helps us to constitute the world with which I may interact. “What I can do, what is in my power, what I know myself capable of and am conscious of as such, that is what a *practical possibility* is.” (Ibid., 270) It is only this that “can be a theme of my will.”

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 176

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 100-2

Husserl, the image couldn't work: for the ghost, being already embodied, could not be said to need yet another body ("machine") to be "in." In this way it becomes obvious that Husserl's conception of the "*leibisch-seelisch*" being, the psychophysical organism, cannot be identified with, say, Plato's or Descartes' explicit remarks on the separability of mental and physical substances, if we mean by this what Husserl calls "soul" and "Body."<sup>170</sup>

But does Husserl actually go *too* far in the direction of anti-dualism of Body and soul? There is a sense, for example, in which Husserl's view is epiphenomenalistic.<sup>171</sup> Remarking for example that "the thing and the whole of nature are sealed off," he goes on to argue: "Psychical consequences are joined to natural processes, just as psychical causes have consequences in nature, but they are such that in truth they have no influence on nature."<sup>172</sup> Husserl seems to seal the deal as he describes the nature of causality itself: "It is clear that causality of physical nature has in fact a pre-eminent sense. This causality is a constitutive idea for the idea of nature, for the idea of a physical thing... For reasons of principle, the psychic is outside this nexus."<sup>173</sup>

---

<sup>170</sup> We have already seen in the previous chapter how Husserl departs from Descartes in this respect; as we will see, however, Husserl's issues with ontological dualism remain, now with respect to an alternate dichotomy of "nature" and "spirit." Thus Husserl closes one door to dualism only to open another. Ricoeur puts it well: "the psyche animating the body is not equivalent to the cultural and communal realizations of man. In reintroducing the dimension of person and that of community Husserl completes the ego-psyche polarity with a new schema where spirit (*Geist*) is not the empirical counterpart of the pure subject of phenomenology but is rather a sort of cultural equivalent much more awkward to situate in the phenomenological structure." (Ricoeur, 68-9)

<sup>171</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, 67

<sup>172</sup> *Ideas II*, 355

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 353. See also: "the soul is a being that is related conditionally to Bodily circumstances, related in a regulated way to circumstances in physical nature." (*Ideas II*, 356) Nonetheless, "epiphenomenalism" is not the only possibility for what Husserl is describing, which is also, for example, consistent with a kind of Leibnizian parallelism.

But before we further investigate Husserl's notion of the soul, let us come back to the body as (a), as double reality. Already at the level of its material thinghood (b), the body is special. That is, it has a particularly high value and central importance for the animal or human subject. It is, first of all, central to perception. It governs the system of unfolding of adumbrations, for example, depending on its position in space and time, the position of the eyes and limbs, and so on. As a thing *perceived*, the own-body is certainly a thing of a unique "type"—for example, as being the center, or the *Nullpunkt*, of orientation, in reference to which all other "things" are constituted in terms of their nearness or farness, aboveness or belowness, rightness or leftness to my "absolute here." The 'subject of the Body' is of course always "here" and "in the center," even as the body as material thing is constantly in movement.<sup>174</sup> Furthermore, because "I do not have the possibility of distancing myself from my Body, or my Body from me," subsequently, the body is for me, perceptually speaking, a "remarkably imperfectly constituted thing."<sup>175</sup> There are parts of the body that I cannot see, some (such as my eyes, or my back) even in principle. There is no other possible material object of which this may be said. As "my" *Körper*, then, the own body is highly unique. And this is of course to say nothing of its axiological and practical importance to us, matters which are bracketed in the naturalistic attitude. It is not a thing just like other things, even insofar as it *is* merely a "thing."

As living-body (d), however, the body is not a "thing" at all—its essence is wholly other than this. Because the living body and the soul are intertwined, it is

---

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 166

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 167

possible and even proper to speak of “myself” as a living body. (“I am hurt”—not “this leg is impaired, but I am okay.”) As we have seen, what distinguishes the living body from the sense of material thing is the element, or stratum, of soul. How is soul first constituted? Essentially, it is first constituted by the solipsistic subject with respect to the “own” body and, only later, extended through empathy to other Bodies. The question of the constitution of the souls of others is essentially the same question as that of intersubjectivity, which was to be dealt with more memorably and extensively in the *Cartesian Meditations* (and the *Intersubjektivität* Husserliana volumes).<sup>176</sup>

The way we experience the own body in its psychical aspect (indeed as one’s *own*) is through the body’s being the “localized bearer of sensations.”<sup>177</sup> This is essentially the experience of *tactility*. Thus it is *on my hand, here in this spot* that I can feel the warmth of a glowing light-bulb, or *back there in the middle of my back* that I can feel this twinge of pain. In this way, I come to know my body as a feeler of sensations, and through these sensations—including kinaesthetic sensations—I can in fact experience myself as being in space, occupying this or that region, my fingers being in such and such position, etc. In this way, the Body is, in the first place, “medium” or “organ” of perception.”<sup>178</sup> Equally, however, my body is the “*one and only Object* which, for the will of my pure Ego, is *moveable immediately and spontaneously* and is a means for producing a mediate spontaneous movement in

---

<sup>176</sup> Of course, Husserl’s notions of empathy vary. But in *Ideas II*, the emphasis on methodological solipsism seems to be strong. Thus at the level of intersubjective apprehension, I see that “...my appearances belong to me, his to him.” And thus we each belong to “subjective worlds” of our own. And so on. (*Ideas II*, 166-7)

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-5

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

other things...” Hence Husserl’s definition of the Body as “freely moved totality of sense-organs.”<sup>179</sup> In any case, all of these definitions are ultimately to be (in effect) subordinated to how the Body is constituted for consciousness in the spiritual attitude, specifically as the “expression” of spirit.

Since so much in the distinction of *Körper* and *Leib* turns on the soul, we must ask, what exactly is the *soul*? As a region of reality or objectivity, we have already seen that it is inseparable from the Body. But it is also, Husserl says, a stratum founded on material nature, and—in the classical Greek sense—it is what “animates” this matter and invites us to apperceive a “motivating agent” behind it. Husserl himself defines it formally (but circularly) as “...the bearer of a psychic life together with the subjective possessions of that life, and as such it is a unity extending through time (the same time in which the Body endures).”<sup>180</sup> Ricoeur cryptically describes Husserl’s psyche as “a constituted reality woven into the surrounding world of the pure ego,”<sup>181</sup> which is to say, that it is not to be confused with the ego or the personal spirit. After all, even the lowest of animals (Husserl says remarkably little about plants) has a soul but no ego or *Geistigkeit*.<sup>182</sup> Yet apart from its interrelatedness with the Body, the status of Husserl’s “soul,” at least in *Ideas II*, is more than a little murky.<sup>183</sup>

---

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 61

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 134 (my emphasis)

<sup>181</sup> Ricoeur, 52

<sup>182</sup> “The person as spirit, as person, has self-consciousness or an Ego (which is the same); a soul does not need to have self-consciousness.” (Ibid., 361)

<sup>183</sup> Ricoeur, too, sees a basic ambiguity in the soul (my letter-designations of different meanings of the body are in brackets): “Thus we are led to the ambiguity of the psyche. It participates in subjectivity since it is the soul [e, in terms of the menu of body-meanings above] that has its body [d], and also in objectivity, since it is the body-thing [b] that has sensations [c]. This body is a part of things, and yet the psyche which inhabits it is the center around which the rest of the world is

### 3. Ego

The question of the psyche is inseparable from that of the “ego,” especially in human subjects.<sup>184</sup> As we know from the turn towards the ego after the *Logical Investigations*, the ego has been central to Husserl’s phenomenological concerns. In *Ideas II*, Husserl argues that the ego “cannot be thought of as something separated from... lived experiences, from its ‘life,’ just as, conversely, the lived experiences are not thinkable except as the medium of the life of the Ego.”<sup>185</sup> Husserl’s ego is also described as a “ruling part” of the soul.<sup>186</sup> It would seem, then, that the Ego being discussed now is the mundane one, the “empirical ego” *as opposed to* the “transcendental” one. This is certainly true of the following: “We can also understand that in constituted nature, the Body and the Body-soul unity are constituted and that the empirical Ego is the Ego of Bodily-psychic nature. The Ego is not itself the Bodily-psychic unity but lives in it. It is the Ego of the soul...”<sup>187</sup>

But the entire discussion in *Ideas II* of the ego as such is, in fact, framed around what Husserl calls the “pure ego.” And the *pure* ego is, Husserl explains, “immutable,”<sup>188</sup> being clearly unlike either the soul or the Body. Much of what Husserl says about in the ego in this vein is familiar from *Ideas I*, except that here, in *Ideas II*, it is, again, the “pure ego” rather than the “transcendental ego” that is under

---

grouped.” (Ibid., 64). Husserl seems to be aware of the ambiguity insofar as he assigns the body a “quasi-nature” and “quasi-causality.” (*Ideas II*, 145, 356)

<sup>184</sup> “...the exploration of the psychic apperceptive Ego is only one level of the general investigation of the psyche.” (*Ideas III*, 17)

<sup>185</sup> *Ideas II*, 105

<sup>186</sup> The “personal Ego...functions so-to-say as the ruler of the soul.” (Ibid., 150)

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 350

<sup>188</sup> “...in itself the pure Ego is immutable.” (Ibid., 110) The “immutability” of the ego has nothing of course to do with immortality, but means rather that “...instead of *generatio* and *corruptio*, to the pure Ego there pertains only the essential property that has its stepping forth and its receding, that is begins to function and hold sway actively and that it ceases to do so.” (Ibid., 110)

discussion. But they are, finally, probably the same. Ricoeur tacitly acknowledges this himself: “The distinction between the *pure ego, product of the phenomenological reduction*, and the human ego, a reality of this world, is a constant in Husserl’s thought; it separates phenomenology from psychology.”<sup>189</sup> That the discussion of the pure ego seems to be hard to distinguish from that of the transcendental, is evident from passages like these:

“In fact, the pure Ego is indeed nothing other than what Descartes, in his marvelous *Meditations*, grasped with the insight of genius and established as such once and for all, the being of which it is not possible to doubt and which in any doubt would itself necessarily be found again as the subject of doubt.”<sup>190</sup>

“Therefore it is not to be confused with the Ego as the real person, with the real subject of the real human being. It has no innate or acquired traits of character, no capacities, no dispositions, etc.”<sup>191</sup>

“The Ego...does not appear...is given in absolute selfhood... As pure Ego it does not harbor any hidden inner richness; it is absolutely simple and it lies there absolutely clear.”<sup>192</sup>

Husserl does not make things more clear when he identifies *spirit* with the *ego cogito* (evidently then distancing spirit from person<sup>193</sup>), aligning *it* now with the Cartesian “I think.”<sup>194</sup> In that case, the “pure ego” would encompass both empirical (spiritual) and transcendental poles. But we will leave the matter here until we take

---

<sup>189</sup> Ricoeur, 52 (my emphasis)

<sup>190</sup> *Ideas II*, 109

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 110

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 111

<sup>193</sup> Cobb-Stevens defines the person as the “full concrete unity of soul and body.” (Cobb-Stevens, 250) To say this of the transcendental ego would be to mundanize it in a way unacceptable to Husserl. On the distinction of person and transcendental ego, Cobb-Stevens writes: “the person is too involved in the *Umwelt* by reason of pragmatic motivations to be completely identified with the philosophical voice that describes the stratum of spirit.” (Cobb-Stevens, 253)

<sup>194</sup> See for example, *Ideas II*, 109.

up in part III the question of the relation of the transcendental ego (consciousness) with our next concept-theme, “spirit.”

#### 4. Spirit

Suddenly in *Ideas II* Husserl (or, if we like, the “narrator”) signals a radical shift in perspective that will usher in the third section of already exhaustingly demanding work: “the analysis of [material and animal] nature in our consideration of nature thus proves to be in need of supplementation. It harbors presuppositions and consequently points beyond to another realm of being and of research, i.e., the field of subjectivity, *which no longer is nature.*”<sup>195</sup> Thus, we enter into the realm of spirit, home of the human sciences, culture, personhood, and everything that, in the classical humanist-philosophical tradition, makes human beings supposedly stand out from nature qua nature, material or animal. Accordingly Husserl says of the distinction of *soul* and *spirit* that it “is the fundamental one in this entire group.”<sup>196</sup> This at first surprising remark (is not the distinction of “nature” and “spirit” in fact the most important?) is motivated by the fact that the soul, while certainly not a “thing” in the narrowest sense, is still enveloped in the closed circuit of the natural order. *The soul is still a natural being.*

Related to this is the “personalistic” attitude as a variation, or rather a privileged type, of “natural attitude.” In *Ideas I*, we were made aware only of a division between natural and transcendental attitudes, and not of any internal division or hierarchy within the natural attitude itself. But now, in *Ideas II*, we learn

---

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 180 (my emphasis)

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 181



that the natural attitude is divided into at least these two: the “naturalistic,” which takes its cues from natural science, and the “personalistic,” which is closer to the everyday life and everyday world in which we naively, but meaningfully, exist. Thus Husserl announces:

“[The] ‘naturalistically’ considered world is of course not *the* world. Rather, given prior is the world as the everyday world, and within this arise man’s theoretical interest and the sciences related to the world, among which is natural science under the ideal of truths in themselves.”<sup>197</sup>

Husserl adds immediately that “this pregiven world is investigated *first* [my italics] with respect to *nature*. Then animalia have their turn, human beings before all others.” Be that as it may, the scientific-theoretic world of *blosse Sachen* is itself “reduced” out of the raw material of lived, personal and interpersonal, functionally and axiologically meaningful life, a life lived in what Husserl now calls the *Umwelt* (“surrounding world”).<sup>198</sup>

It is evident from various supplemental sections<sup>199</sup> that in *Ideas II*, Husserl is developing his notion of “spirit” through a thinking-through of the distinction of natural and human—that is, cultural—sciences. Husserl’s so to say concession to natural science, granting it free reign over the human soul in the forms of biology and psychology, has seemingly triggered a certain need to regain for humanity a dignity and singularity. After all, it is we who do phenomenology—or, it is *in us* that

---

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 219. Given Husserl’s position that both the natural and human sciences are theoretical, and that the naturalistic and personalistic attitudes are correlated to them respectively, the claim that the latter is prior to “theory” is confusing, but perhaps just more evidence of Husserl’s conflation of the transcendental and spiritual attitudes. (See Part III below.)

<sup>198</sup> Cf. *Dictionary*, 234-4

<sup>199</sup> Supplement XII, II, for example, makes it very clear the extent to which Husserl’s conceptions of “spirit” and “the person” are developed in the context of distinguishing natural from human sciences. (*Ideas II*, 351-82)

phenomenology occurs. Inasmuch as it is regarded as a founded stratum of the Body, itself a “double reality” whose aspect as “material thing” places it squarely within the “causal nexus” of “nature,” the human being is an object of natural science. But Husserl wants to add to this picture by arguing that there is another sense to the “human being,” a non-naturalistic sense, that regards him/her as “subject” of action, feeling, valuation, and so on, rather than as, say, thing or animal. But once again, Husserl probably goes too far in the process of compensation (if that is what he is doing). For from the perspective of the human sciences, natural science is itself, as a whole, nothing but a cultural achievement, an accomplishment of persons acting in concert. Husserl now completely *supplants* the independent integrity of the natural sciences, which he elsewhere seemingly struggles to maintain, and, as we will see below, falls into a pure subjective idealism.

As we have already seen, Body and soul, and hence animality, are excluded from the realm of the strictly spiritual. Admittedly, “...Body and soul are “*nature in the second sense*” properly speaking only according to the side turned toward physical nature.”<sup>200</sup> On the side “turned toward spirit,” Body is in fact the “expression” of spirit, like the meaning of a word that is expressed by the letters on a page. But just as ideality is not simply located in the words, neither is spirit located, as is the psyche, in the living body. It is key to realize that when we discuss spirit, we are already in the personalistic attitude. This is why, as Cobb-Stevens puts it, spirit is not simply grafted on soul, like soul on body.<sup>201</sup> Spirit is not simply another founded “strata” on material and psychic nature, in the sense that to

---

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 298

<sup>201</sup> Cobb-Stevens, 252-3

constitute it is already to have shifted out of (so to speak) the naturalistic, and into the “personalistic,” attitude, for which the psycho-physical composite studied in science simply does not appear in this form. It is perhaps for this reason that Husserl says (relatively) little about the interrelation of the regions of “spirit” and “soul,” but oddly, this is certainly not true about the relation of spirit to *Body*. Indeed, Husserl’s remarks on this particular relation are some of the most provocative but also confusing and contradictory in all of his ontological investigations. On the one hand, it might seem as though Husserl wants to claim that spirit and Body are to be distinguished in the strongest of terms:

“What we find then is ourselves as the spiritual Ego related to the stream of experiences—‘spiritual’ here is used in a mere general sense, referring to the Ego that has its place precisely not in Corporeality; e.g., I ‘think’ (*cogito*), i.e., I perceive, I represent in whatever mode, I judge, I feel, I will, etc., and find myself thereby as that which is one and the same in the changing of these lived experiences, as ‘subject’ of the acts and states.”<sup>202</sup>

But upon scrutiny, it appears likely that the “spiritual Ego” being referred to here is actually not human spirit at all, but the transcendental ego. Still, the mixing of the language of “spirituality” with the “I think” in its non-Corporeality is a clue of difficulties inherent in Husserl’s conception of a “non-natural” reality that is nonetheless different than transcendental subjectivity.

At any rate, Husserl repeatedly states the view that Body has a distinct role to play in the realm of spirit and (what amounts to the same) culture. “For phenomenology...the Body plays an expansive role in the realm of spirit.”<sup>203</sup> For one, it is the “expression” of spirit in a most provocative sense. It is that by which one

---

<sup>202</sup> *Ideas II*, 103

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 295

grasps the humanity of a human being, the “person there, who dances, laughs when amused, and chatters...” And it is not the “apprehension of a spirit fastened to a Body,” but the apprehension of the person *through* his body.<sup>204</sup> Thus I can say of man, in this attitude, that he “*has* a Corporeality, [he] has a body which is a physical thing with such and such qualities...” Sometimes it is not clear whether Husserl is speaking of soul or spirit, as in a nearby section he speaks of the fact that “each movement of the Body is, as Body, filled with the soul through and through... Body is full of soul.” Husserl’s point is that a *personality* emerges through, say, a particular Body’s movements. Husserl points out that this is true not only of the corporeal Body but of any “body” or “material thing,” such as texts, which are cultural expressions of a uniquely significant kind.<sup>205</sup> This is a useful clue that the relation of Body and spirit that Husserl is outlining here is in fact a relation of spirit and body as (a), namely as *both Körper* and *Leib*. That is, spirit is related to the materiality of the body as well as to its soulish aspect, as *Leib*. The body as complex duality-in-unity is transformed from a “natural” complex to a “spiritual” one through a change in attitude, but in either case, it retains its Janus-faced nature.<sup>206</sup>

---

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 252

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 248-50. One may speak of art-works or religious artifacts as well presumably.

<sup>206</sup> In all of this we are focusing on individual spirits. Husserl himself recognizes what he calls “personalities of a higher order” or, what amounts to the same thing, collective “spirits,” such as nations, clubs, churches, families, and the like. (See for example: *Ideas II*, 377; or, for parallel talk of individual and collective subjects, see *Husserl 1919*, 135.) This resembles the Hegelian notion of “objective spirit,” but for Husserl, communal subjectivity is founded on the interactions of individual subjects. Out of these interactions, emergently perhaps, higher “wholes” or organic unities that deserve the name of “persons” appear. Husserl seems to base this on the fact that we commonly speak of the will, desires, attitudes, etc., of groups of people organized in coherent wholes, not only of individuals. This is not merely analogous or figurative language for him. Now if true, it would radically alter our conception of what counts as a “person” and could have real legal ramifications. This would be relevant to the current debate over the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent ruling on the legal rights of “corporations” under the U.S. Constitution. (See: *Citizens United v. FEC*)

Related to its sense as spiritual expression, the Body is the means by which spirit "...in its freedom moves the Body and thereby can perform a work in the spiritual world."<sup>207</sup> As Ricoeur notes, everything now is a "performance" of spirit.<sup>208</sup> But this actually points to one of the more Platonist aspects of Husserl's understanding of the Body in the personal attitude, already hinted at above. The Body is for me to "use" as "organon of my will." And the Body in the spiritual attitude is merely "mine"; I am not of the Body:

"It is absolutely out of the question that I am here encountering or intending myself as something in the Body, as founded in it... the Body is *my* Body, and it is mine in the first place as my 'over and against,' my *ob-ject*, just as the house is my object, something I see or can see, something I touch or can touch, etc. These things are mine, but not as component pieces of the Ego..."<sup>209</sup>

Admittedly, this kind of description then becomes hard to square with what Husserl calls the "unity of Body and spirit."<sup>210</sup> But the unity of Body and spirit in particular is complex, in multiple senses (i.e. complicated, compounded) of that word:

"[The body] is at the same time a part of nature, inserted into the nexus of causality, and the spiritual life, which we grasp through the Bodily expression and understand in its nexus of motivation, appears, in virtue of its connection with the Body, to be conditioned itself by natural processes and to be apperceived as something of nature. The unity of Body and spirit is a two-fold one, and, correlatively, a two-fold apprehension (the personalistic and the naturalistic) is included in the unitary apperception of the human."<sup>211</sup>

What this indicates, perhaps, is that Body and spirit are "one" only to the extent that the latter is apperceived through the former, namely via the Body's appearing as an

---

<sup>207</sup> *Ideas II*, 295

<sup>208</sup> Ricoeur, 75

<sup>209</sup> *Ideas II*, 223. This language is already in the early part of the text: see "my material Body," p. 111.

<sup>210</sup> For example, *Ibid.*, 259

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 259

expression of Spirit. This itself occurs in the personalistic attitude, but it is with the naturalistic addition that we come fully to grasp spiritual life as belonging to the natural causal order—which, without naturalistic interference, is not in fact the case. For spirit is defined by motivation and freedom, not natural causality. The body in this way is the “point of conversion from spiritual causality to natural causality.”<sup>212</sup>

### **III. Analysis: Philosophical Difficulties of *Ideas II/III***

#### *A. Introduction: Phenomenological Monism, Ontological Dualism*

Throughout the *Ideas* volumes, and his philosophy generally, Husserl makes a firm distinction between phenomenology and ontology.<sup>213</sup> Sciences of (regions of) “beings” presuppose a “transcendental sense.”<sup>214</sup> Thus phenomenology is first in methodological priority, being the “maternal-ground of all philosophical method: to this ground and to the work in it, everything leads back.”<sup>215</sup> Because of this clear prioritization and talk of a “ground,” elsewhere described as the transcendental ego, it becomes possible to think of Husserl as a kind of “monist,” namely a *phenomenological (or transcendental) monist*. At the same time, Husserl’s “ground”

---

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 299

<sup>213</sup> Cf. *Ideas III*, 117: “For in itself...ontology is not phenomenology.”

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 66-7

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 69. Husserl goes on to indicate that phenomenology allows “ontologically founded investigation” to “unfold its full power” and “receive its full certainty.” But phenomenology is more fundamental, and “owes nothing” to ontologies!

is not a “part” of the “world”—a “tag-end” like Descartes’ non-transcendental “cogito”—and therefore cannot be understood in terms of an *ontological* monism. The realm of world-ontology remains relatively under-thought in Husserl, and though no single consistent position can be teased out of *Ideas II*, in my view the text comes closer to a form of ontological dualism than Husserl would have wanted to admit. Some of the evidence for this view has already been furnished above, but more will be provided below. Much of the remainder of this chapter is devoted to discussing some of the underlying philosophical issues and pressures which lead to the dualistic position, as well as some of the ways in which Husserl’s text seems to veer away from such a result, generally without success.

The charge of “dualism” is an old one as applied to Husserl, and it should not be bandied about carelessly. For one thing, there is a certain nebulosity in the question of Husserl’s dualism because of the question of *which* “dualism” one is referring to. In my view, the kind of dualism in Husserl, at least in *Ideas I-III*, is that specifically of nature and spirit, not (for instance) of body and soul, or of consciousness and reality. We have already seen how inseparable Body and soul are from one another; indeed, Husserl stresses the point when he claims that “what we have to oppose to material nature as a second kind of reality is not the ‘soul’ but the *concrete unity* of Body and soul, the human (or animal) subject.”<sup>216</sup> Now even this dichotomy, that between “thing” and “animal”—including human being as

---

<sup>216</sup> *Ideas II*, 146. This would seem to rule out a separable ‘soul-substance,’ but Husserl does not allow this to prevent him from speaking, in the mode of imaginative variation, of the “departure” of the “soul” (*Ibid.*, 100), which leaves only “dead matter” behind. Here Husserl’s point is that it is the soulish or psychic dimension of the human or animal being that makes it *such*, as opposed to simply “material nature.”

psychophysical composite—is not technically a *dualism*, because “thing” and “animal” both go under the genus, so to speak, of “nature.” Finally, consciousness and reality do not comprise a dualism for the reasons already indicated; the first is the ground of the second, and thus they have no parity. There is no reality or world without consciousness; but there is at least conceivably consciousness without reality or world (cf. the world-annihilation experiment, which Husserl upholds in no uncertain terms in both *Ideas II* and the *Epilogue to the Ideas* volumes).<sup>217</sup>

Rather, *nature* and *spirit* are dualistic because neither can be exhaustively explained through the other, and they do not overlap. They are both “absolutes,” correlated to alternative versions of the natural attitude, each retaining pride of place in its respective attitude.<sup>218</sup> This is not to say one cannot find talk of an overlap between nature and spirit in Husserl; but when Husserl speaks of this, of a “spirituality in nature” for example, he is typically referring to “animal nature” and does not lose sight of the fact that such animality is a founded stratum on material nature, or, more importantly, that such “spirituality” is fundamentally outside of the realm of “culture” or the personalistic attitude, in which the body becomes mere

---

<sup>217</sup> *Ideas II*, 303. From the Epilogue (written as late as 1930/31): “the non-existence of the world ever remains thinkable...” (*Ideas II*, 420) Husserl here draws the familiar lesson from this: “...the being of transcendental subjectivity has the sense of absolute being, that only it is ‘irrelative’...whereas the real world indeed is but has an essential relativity to transcendental subjectivity, due, namely, to the fact that it can only have its sense as being only as an intentional sense-formation of transcendental subjectivity.”

<sup>218</sup> To claim that Husserl is a *phenomenological monist* is simply to affirm the fact that Husserl was never unclear about his prioritization of “transcendental” or “phenomenological” or “pure” consciousness over “reality,” which, taken “on its own” so to speak, lacks all sense and “being” in the fullest sense, and is hence consciousness-dependent. Husserl’s commitment to transcendental subjectivity, which was first formally introduced (in print) in *Ideas I*, never wavered. But for Husserl, it had always been somehow pre- or trans-ontological; “ontology” comes to have a restricted sense in Husserl, already prefiguring Heidegger’s distinction between the “ontic” (beings) and “ontological” (for Husserl, something like “transcendental consciousness,” the source of all meaning—though falling short of “Being” in Heidegger’s sense).



organ of spirit. The foregoing remarks are nonetheless not without counter-examples in the course of *Ideas II* and *III*. But we will examine all of these things in more detail in the sections below.

### *B. Husserl's Naturalism*

Husserl's opposition to scientific naturalism is legendary—so how can one speak of his views as “naturalistic”? The answer has to do ultimately with the parallelism of phenomenology and ontology; all that differentiates them is the “shift of view” that is brought about through the *epoché* and phenomenological reduction. Thus it is entirely possible in Husserl's framework to accept the meaning science gives to “nature,” its “object of study,” while also claiming to find the *source* of this meaning in transcendental subjectivity, which is revealed through the phenomenological reduction. And this is just what Husserl does, as I will now try to show.

As mentioned in part II of this chapter, one of the important features of Husserl's concept of nature is its tacit acceptance of the definition of nature given by those who could be described as scientific “naturalists.” In Dastur's words, “[In *Ideas II*...science is considered as a definitive though indirect continuation of perception.”<sup>219</sup> As Overgaard notes, moreover, Husserl claims elsewhere<sup>220</sup> that the

---

<sup>219</sup> Dastur, Françoise. “Husserl and the Problem of Dualism.” *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. (p. 72) Hereafter “Dastur.” Dastur claims in this same quote that the *Crisis* does the same thing, but this is a controversial point. The relevant material to interpret includes this telling line from the latter work: “the contrast between the subjectivity of the life-world and the ‘objective,’ the ‘true’ world, lies in the fact that the latter is a theoretical-logical substruction, the substruction of something that is in principle not perceivable, in principle not experienceable in

natural conception of the world is in no need of correction, a remark which Overgaard rightly notes should be taken “very seriously.”<sup>221</sup> This sort of affirmation of the scientific conception is indeed manifest throughout Husserl’s “eidetics” of nature in *Ideas I-III*, since he defines nature’s essence precisely in terms of that which is the subject of “natural science”; in other words, nature is an ontological region with a strictly prescribed essence, known by the sciences already at their own level:

“...what underlies natural science is always an *idea of the essence of nature*, if only an implicit one. Correlatively, the consciousness which functions as natural-scientific experience, and thus also as the thinking pertaining to natural-scientific experience, has its essential phenomenological unity, and *this* consciousness has its essential correlate in nature.”<sup>222</sup>

Husserl goes on to say in the quoted passage that the task of phenomenology is merely to “bring...to clarity” the “natural-scientific sense” already so implicit in natural scientific consciousness itself. And later on he states:

“To make all these things clear and to outline *a priori* the form of a possible determination of what is in itself true of nature, a determination which is relatively true and relatively necessary for every stage of experience—this is the theory of natural science; as method: the theory of natural-scientific method.”<sup>223</sup>

Yet in perhaps an even stronger statement than all of the above, Husserl’s declares:

“But it must be understood from within, from phenomenological sources, that this abstraction from predicates belonging to the spheres of value and practice is not a matter of an arbitrary abstraction,

---

its own proper being, whereas the subjective, in the life-world, is distinguished in all respects precisely by its being actually experienceable.” (*Crisis*, 127)

<sup>220</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Husserliana XIV, Gesammelte Werke: Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Zweiter Teil*. 1921-28. Ed. Iso Kern. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973 (p. 278)

<sup>221</sup> Overgaard, Søren. *Husserl and Heidegger on Being in the World*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2004

<sup>222</sup> *Ideas II*, 3-4

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 305

left to one's own discretion, for as such, it would in fact produce no radically self-enclosed idea of a scientific domain and thus also no idea of a science self-contained a priori. Yet we do gain such an a priori closed idea of nature—as the idea of a world of mere things..."<sup>224</sup>

The argument that a "world of mere things" is an "abstraction" for Husserl *and therefore can be downplayed* does not carry much water, because an abstraction is not necessarily distortive or arbitrary, and in the case of nature Husserl makes it clear that such an "abstraction" is in fact grounded in the essence of nature itself.<sup>225</sup>

The reason for emphasizing all of this here is to establish what we have been seeing inchoately all along, namely the implicitly "naturalistic" bent in Husserl himself. Indeed, consider the all-encompassing extension assigned by Husserl to the concept of material nature: "Nature...in its forms of space and time, encompasses all factual realities but also includes, obviously on essential grounds, *all apriori possible realities* as well."<sup>226</sup> And again: "What we have here is the one "Objective" world, with the one space and the one time, in which "everything" is ordered—*persons as well*, who, in union with their Bodies, lead their personal lives."<sup>227</sup> Because all realities are constituted as higher "strata" of materiality, whose basic causal commerce defines the natural and animal worlds, nature in the pure, physicalistic sense has the sense of being the substrate of any other type of being whatsoever.

---

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 27

<sup>225</sup> Husserl 1919, 132. There is, admittedly, some dissent on the question of how closely Husserl adheres to the scientific notion of nature. Thus Theodorou, in a recent article argues that "...in *Ideas II*, nature-things are described from a phenomenologically legitimate theoretical attitude that *does not necessarily adopt* the verdicts of natural scientific theories about what is 'mere nature.'" See: Theodorou, Panos. "Perceptual and Scientific Thing: On Husserl's Analysis of "Nature-Thing" in *Ideas II*." In *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, Volume 5, eds. Burt Hopkins and Steven Crowell. Seattle: Noesis Press, 2005 (p. 169) As the author fully admits, however, Husserl is unclear from the beginning about this question, and presently this is the more important fact.

<sup>226</sup> *Ideas II*, 30; emphasis added

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 219; emphasis added

“Nature” has the sense of being the ground of “all that is” because of the fact that anything else that is perceived, co-perceived, or apperceived must be a higher stratum of a reality that must be, at its most basic level, “natural” in the sense of “material.” And again, what is key here is asymmetry. There cannot be a purely spiritual being, with no material substrate, but there can be and of course are material things with no higher stratum. All of this will make it very hard to understand Husserl’s sudden declaration of the “ontological priority of spirit over nature” (the “Priority Thesis” as I will be calling it for short).

Yet Husserl would surely respond that all of this is supposed to be predicated on the *naturalistic* attitude solely, not the *personalistic*. The danger then becomes that of dualism. It is here that the actual role of the Priority Thesis can be properly ascertained—namely to avoid just such a dualism. For under the spiritual attitude, the natural-scientific view and its implicit naturalistic bias (which is somehow valid) can be assigned a decisively subordinate status<sup>228</sup>:

“It is the character of the human sciences to posit subjectivity as absolute, to acknowledge nature only as the intuitively existing surrounding world, or as represented, thought, and intended surrounding world of persons, and to take mathematical Objective nature, which previously was the ‘true reality,’ only as (what in fact it merely is) a theoretical though rational construction on the part of man as the subject of scientific activities...”<sup>229</sup>

And again:

“It is not the natural sciences but the human sciences that lead into the ‘philosophical’ depths; for the philosophical depths are the depths of ultimate being.”<sup>230</sup>

---

<sup>228</sup> See also *Husserl 1927*, 192-5

<sup>229</sup> *Ideas II*, 374

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 376

Ironically, it is along these lines that commentators like Ulrich Melle and Steven Crowell in fact develop favorably humanistic interpretations of Husserl's ontology. Nature "matters," for Husserl, because it has significance—utility, beauty, goodness—for human beings. From this point of view, a respect for human spirit emerges indirectly as the last hope for a rescue of the environment. Thus Melle remarks:

"...it is clear that nature plays only a subordinate role for Husserl. Husserl's idealistic conception of the relationship between nature and spirit is radically spirit-centered. Nature in itself and independent of spirit and its meaning-giving acts is first of all only an abstraction and secondly a mere substrate for the meaning-giving acts and goal-directed activities of spiritual beings.... Protection of nature for nature's sake would therefore not make any sense to Husserl, and any naturalistic axiology and ethics is nonsensical for him."<sup>231</sup>

In an interesting book-length study of Husserl and the body Dodd comes to a similar conclusion, comparing Husserl's view (favorably, one might add) to that of Plato from the *Phaedo*: "For, I would like to suggest, there is much in this passage [*Phaedo* 66b-67b3] that should remind us of Husserl, and there is much in Husserl's analysis of the body that should remind us of Plato, or at least of a tradition that sought to put some sort of distance (of whatever type) between body and whatever can be identified as that which we most truly are."<sup>232</sup>

For his part, Crowell celebrates Husserl's "disenchantment" of nature as a triumph of ethical thinking. States Crowell: "Critics of Husserl (e.g. Merleau-Ponty) have suggested that the meaningless nature of the naturalistic attitude is an

---

<sup>231</sup> Melle, Ulrich. "Nature and Spirit." In *Issues*, p. 34

<sup>232</sup> Dodd, James. *Idealism and Corporeity: An Essay on the Problem of the Body in Husserl's Phenomenology*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997 (p. 119)

abstraction, that genuine nature is the primordial realm of an originary logos, the origin of meaning. To this sensibility, Husserl's rather traditional gnosticism seems out of place. But perhaps Husserl is right... Husserl's critics seek to revive a *mythical* conception of nature..."<sup>233</sup> Crowell criticizes Merleau-Ponty for suppressing the "absolutism of reality" and he opposes him unfavorably to Levinas, who thankfully "vindicates the disenchantment of nature" found in Husserl!<sup>234</sup> Crowell interprets Merleau-Ponty to be arguing for a view of nature such that "nature already harbors a certain sensuous meaningfulness, a certain mythical 'fulness' that enraptures and fascinates and is not at all a 'mere' thing experience..."<sup>235</sup> He then observes that Merleau-Ponty's view is incompatible with Husserl's "phenomenological account of nature" in most of *Ideas II*, which itself signifies a "break" with the mythical fulness of meaning "adumbrated in the sensuous." Again, for Crowell, this break is necessitated by the discovery of the "ethical," which it is Levinas' great achievement to have reminded us of: "For Husserl [as for Levinas] it is the destiny of this separation to leave nature behind altogether, and so it is important to ask whether what lies at its origin—the reversibility of touch—is sufficient to account for the

---

<sup>233</sup> Crowell, Steven Galt. "the Mythical and the Meaningless: Husserl and the Two Faces of Nature." In *Issues*, p. 82. Article hereafter referred to as "Crowell." Crowell means something specific by "mythical." The mythical is borne out of a desire to suppress the "absolutism of reality" that forces itself upon us as human beings. (Crowell, 84)

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 85. Crowell goes on: "Merleau-Ponty sought to trace the origin of meaning to the element. His elemental nature—as "wild meaning," an "ideality that is not alien" to the flesh—evinces a mythical imagination." (Crowell, 94) It is interesting to note that Ricoeur, who disagreed with Merleau-Ponty's "existential" appropriation of *Ideas II* (see Ricoeur 41, 69), would not, with his characteristic sense of moderation, go this far. In contrasting *Ideas I* and *II*, Ricoeur states, "the style of *Ideas I* requires subordinating the union of consciousness with reality through incarnation [which is what is done in *Ideas II*] to its union with reality through perception." (Ricoeur, 55) Of course, the "union" that Ricoeur speaks of may just be better spoken of as a "disjunction"—that is, *Ideas I* provides us with the disjunction of subjective immanence and objective transcendence, *Ideas II* and *III* with that of nature and spirit. But the point is that Ricoeur sees an attempt at a fusion that is closer to what Merleau-Ponty has in mind than what Crowell does.

<sup>235</sup> Crowell, 94-5

radicality of the break.” Merleau-Ponty makes much of such “reversibility,” as we will see in subsequent chapters. He also will try to account for the “radical break” in terms that can nonetheless explain how it is possible in the first place to have identified with nature; one cannot break from that to which one is not already attached. Merleau-Ponty’s use of “paradoxical thinking” will ultimately be employed in the service of this difficult problem.

### *C. The Priority Thesis*

The Priority Thesis is one of the most problematic positions advanced by Husserl in the text. The priority of spirit over nature follows from the privileging of the “personalistic attitude,” and while it certainly circumvents dualism (by dint of its very title), it raises other perplexities. For one thing, it squares badly with the notion that spirit is somehow itself dependent on “reality” as determined primarily by materiality. Husserl can maintain this position *or* the Priority Thesis, but not, I think, both. Consider the following claim: “In its spiritual acts, the spirit is dependent on the soul... The spiritual Ego is dependent on the soul, and the soul on the Body.... Consequently the spirit is conditioned by nature...”<sup>236</sup> Husserl even goes so far as to state outright that spirit “belongs to nature,” though what he means here is not clear, as he also refers to nature and spirit as “two realities.”<sup>237</sup>

A second reason and deeper reason to suspect the Priority Thesis is that it would appear to commit Husserl to an ontological monism of a highly subjectivistic sort. Husserl’s own words make the dangers immediately evident:

---

<sup>236</sup> *Ideas II*, 295

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 296

“The realm of nature is the realm of the ‘phenomenal’; that means here the realm of the real unities constituted in or by means of ‘presentation.’ The realm of spirit, however, is the realm of the realities given in absolute manifestation (self-manifestation and manifestation through comprehension), realities having behind themselves only the pure Ego as the irreal, absolute substrate of all manifestations of reality.”<sup>238</sup>

It is very possible that, as some writers have commented, Husserl has in mind something like a modified (transcendentally purified) monadological idealism along the lines of a Leibniz, whose very idea of the monad he adopts, at least in part, not only in *Ideas II* but most memorably in the *Cartesian Meditations*. But the passage just quoted does not present us with a transcendental idealism, insofar as it stresses the realm of *spirit*; here, we are only at the level of the natural attitude and, correlatively, reality. It goes without saying that the “dogmatic” idealism of the Leibnizian variety and the “transcendental” idealism Husserl is aiming are two radically different things, at least from Husserl’s stated perspective. The final reference to the “pure Ego” is itself unclear, due to the ambiguities in this very concept, discussed already above.

A related confusion arises over how Husserl interprets the superiority of spirit in the following quote:

“Nature is a field of relativities throughout, and it can be so because these are always in fact relative to an absolute, the spirit, which consequently is what sustains all the relativities. ... That is to say, if we could eliminate all the spirits from the world, then that is the end of nature. But if we eliminate nature...there always still remains something: the spirit as individual spirit.”<sup>239</sup>

---

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 337

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 311



He is saying now of “spirit”—a sector of constituted reality—what he normally says only of transcendental subjectivity, for example in the world-annihilation experiment. I will further address these unsettling conflation below (section D).

Aside from the other problems with Husserl’s argument, the basic mystery at the heart of his view as stated in the Priority Thesis is this: how are we to understand how scientists could have arrived, simply from the spiritual attitude, at naturalistic conceptions of nature and matter and its absolute status—unless they were simply *wrong* about this, say out of a certain arrogance? By defining the essence of nature as purely material, and nature as the basis of reality, Husserl himself has ensured that the scientific conception of nature could not truly be supplanted by another, except by recourse to the seeming invention of a “new” and “different” “natural attitude”—a bifurcation that reinforces rather than softens his dualistic stand.

#### *D. Spirit and Consciousness*

The Priority Thesis is so flawed, in fact, that its very existence presents a profound hermeneutical mystery. What is it doing in Husserl’s philosophy at all? I think the reason becomes clear upon some reflection of what the supposed advantage of spirit over nature is supposed to lie in, namely *subjectivity*. The personalistic attitude is subject-centered, integrating meaning and subject-relative values, feelings, and so on, into the matrix of perception and action. In this way, it begins to turn in the direction of phenomenology itself, especially when one considers that phenomenology is a human, cultural, and hence “spiritual” activity. It

is easy, in fact, to see Husserl's *Ideas II* concepts of the personalistic attitude and *Umwelt*<sup>240</sup> as crucial anticipations of the life-world and life-world phenomenology.<sup>241</sup> The trouble, however, is that in Husserl's own view, a huge gulf separates phenomenology from other sciences, i.e., from reality. Struggling with this problem, Ricoeur offers his best attempt to reconcile spirit and transcendental consciousness: "...*Geist* is [perhaps] nothing other than the ego of phenomenology, but without the light of the phenomenological reduction."<sup>242</sup> But if true, this would have serious consequences. First of all, Husserl in fact takes pains to distinguish the human sciences from (transcendental) phenomenology throughout his writings. If spirit and transcendental ego are roughly equivalent, then the natural attitude would not have two sub-species—naturalistic and personalistic—but would be univocal. At least, the personalistic attitude would have to be sub-divided into "natural" and "transcendental" aspects. But as things stand, the former option would concede the natural attitude entirely to the natural sciences, given the authority Husserl cedes them over the "natural" world, while the latter, more plausible option would nonetheless make the the need for the reduction hard to understand. Doesn't the personalistic attitude already interpret the world as a world of sense, rather

---

<sup>240</sup> Thomas Nenon concurs: "the *Ideas II* shows [sic] that the concept of *Umwelt*, which would be replaced by that of the life-world in the 20's and 30's..." (*Issues*, x; emphasis added)

<sup>241</sup> The word "*Lebenswelt*" can, surprisingly, be found in *Ideas II*. See, for example: *Ideas II*, 187. In the "Translator's Introduction" to the English-language version of *Ideas III*, Ted Klein and William Pohl claim that, in their understanding, the life-world is present from the beginning of that text as well. (*Ideas III*, viii-ix)

<sup>242</sup> Ricoeur, 80. Ricoeur identifies the "spirit/consciousness" ambiguity as a central mystery of *Ideas II*—or in his more blunt words: "As we are going to see, this pre-eminence itself [referring to the Priority Thesis] is what poses the most embarrassing question of *Ideas II*: that of situating what in this work Husserl calls spirit (*Geist*) in relation to that which his works generally call 'consciousness,' the subjective life of consciousness reached by the phenomenological reduction." (Ricoeur, 76)

than of mere “things”? Ultimately, the natural attitude itself is in need of a radical rethinking.<sup>243</sup>

The fundamental and well-known ambiguities of the “life-world” are rooted in the ambiguities of the spiritual attitude and the notion of “spirit” itself. Spirit is a realm of reality, the realm of persons, culture, and societies or social structures—as well as their *historical* (diachronic) dimension; consciousness in the “transcendental” and “phenomenological” sense is none of these. The “pure Ego” of *Ideas II* now appears to be almost purposefully ambiguous: at once having a foot in “personhood” and another outside it. We have already asked whether the “pure Ego” is the same as the “transcendental Ego,” as constituting consciousness itself, and decided that it probably has to be. On the one hand, one wants to infer that when the phenomenologist comes upon the pure Ego, he/she comes upon himself/herself, as transcendental ego, in the act of self-constitution and self-reflection. This would essentially comprise a performance of the reduction. (Husserl does after all call the pure Ego the “irreal, absolute substrate of all manifestation of reality.”<sup>244</sup>) But as we have seen, Husserl describes the Ego in terms of spirit, and as the “ruler of the soul,” for example, so its role as a “real” component of the objective world sits uneasily (or too easily) alongside its “transcendentality.”

---

<sup>243</sup> I suspect that this is why David Carr, in his “Translator’s Introduction” to the *Crisis*, distinguishes sharply between the “natural attitude” of *Ideas I* (and therefore, I would say, *Ideas II* and *III* as well), which is still “theoretical,” and what he terms the “primordial natural attitude” of the life-world. See: *Crisis*, xxxix. Between the naturalistic natural attitude and the personalistic (itself being vaguely transcendental) attitude, there seems to be *no true natural attitude* in the *Ideas* volumes. The task of phenomenology as a phenomenology precisely of the natural attitude becomes much more subtle and elusive than before, since it becomes a task of elucidating the pre-theoretical world, what Merleau-Ponty will for his part call the “tacit logos” of nature. We will say more about this in subsequent chapters.

<sup>244</sup> *Ideas II*, 337

A life-world connection does, however, allow us to re-interpret Husserl's Priority-Thesis-engendered "spiritual monism" in the safer (or more familiar) direction of *transcendental* monism, the standard Husserlian position that all reality is constituted in and by transcendental consciousness, the source of all meaning and being. Under this interpretation, then, in elevating the "human sciences" above the natural sciences, what Husserl is in fact doing is imprecisely expressing his conviction in the superiority of *phenomenology*, as the study of *consciousness*, to the study of *reality*, which, Husserl seems to feel, has been monopolized by the natural sciences. The elevation of the human sciences can be seen as a protest against this naturalistic bias, but to that extent it overstates the case and ultimately makes all of perceived material reality the province of subjective *Umwelten*, which cannot have been Husserl's intention. It becomes increasingly apparent that the "problem of the natural and human sciences" was one that became grafted onto phenomenology after it became known to Husserl through contact with the works of Dilthey. It turns out to be hard to synthesize these very different types of discourse in a single framework.<sup>245</sup>

Thus in light of the foregoing, the *Crisis'* investigations into the life-world may now appear in a new light, namely as an attempt (itself admittedly groping) at a final solution to the ambiguity of spirit and consciousness. The transcendental

---

<sup>245</sup> What is at stake in all of this is more than just the "paradox of subjectivity," that is, what Husserl later calls the phenomenon of "real" egoity combined with "transcendental" egoity. For that problem, addressed at length in the *Crisis* (*Crisis*, 178-85), concerns the duality of empirical and transcendental egos, not the specific problem of the ambiguous ontological status of the transcendental ego itself, a transcendental ego both worldly and non-worldly, so to speak, at the same time. In *Ideas II*, consciousness belongs to Egos, and these Egos are part of the "real" order of the world, namely the summit of its "spiritual". Thus transcendental subjectivity can be said to both belong to the world and constitute it "from outside," so to speak.

reduction to the life-world preserves what was crucial in *Ideas II*'s discussion of the *Umwelt* and the personalistic attitude, namely its involvement in the axiological and practical spheres of meaning—even in assigning them *priority* over a conception of a purely “meaningless” nature.<sup>246</sup>

### *E. The Question of the Body*

Husserl's depicts the living body or animal organism as its own ontological region, distinct from pure “materiality” on the one hand and pure “spirituality” on the other. Husserl elsewhere calls the body a “connecting bridge” in this respect.<sup>247</sup> However, these could actually be seen to represent two very different claims, which can nonetheless be easily conflated. This is exactly what occurs in a recent (schematic) attempt to develop a recent unified interpretation, by Luis Rabanaque, of Husserl's idea of the living body. Rabanaque draws on both *Ideas II* and *Husserl 1919*<sup>248</sup> to argue that the body in Husserl can be understood as a “third noematic region” between nature and spirit (or culture). On its own this is not controversial (depending, crucially, on how one understands the interrelations of the “regions,” as I will address below), but the paper equally draws on the “connecting bridge” metaphor between subjectivity and physical thinghood. The full quote from Husserl, in which this metaphor is used, goes as follows:

---

<sup>246</sup> But where exactly, then, does the life-world leave the role of the human sciences and the “spirit” specifically as such? This question is beyond the scope of this chapter or dissertation, but it may have to do with the “ontology of the life-world” that Husserl hints at but never fully develops in the *Crisis*. (*Crisis*, 173)

<sup>247</sup> See fn 127.

<sup>248</sup> Rabanaque, Luis. “The Body as Noematic Bridge Between Nature and Culture?” In: *Epistemology, Archaeology, Ethics: Current Investigations of Husserl's Corpus* (Eds. Pol Vandavelde and Sebastian Luft). New York: Continuum, 2010

“We see thereby already that, phenomenologically considered, subjectivity (soulish spirit) in the world and physical thinghood in the world are not two separate and externally related groups of real occurrences, but rather that there is produced in the form of Corporeality, which in itself has its own deepest layer of being in sensibility and free mobility, a connecting bridge, which, through the singular spirituality in nature, can have a position in the realm of *physis*.”<sup>249</sup>

The metaphor of a bridge in this context is a powerful one because it seems to offer a possibility of resolving or at least softening the otherwise stark disparity between physical thinghood and human spirit. It is not surprising that Husserl should look to animality to fill the role of “missing rung” in the Great Chain of Being-like ladder he has built. But in Rabanaque’s reading, the “body *qua* body” is a “third noematic region” that “cannot be assimilated to either nature or spirit.” In other words, the body is somehow different, in an irreducible manner, from egoic consciousness as such and physical thingliness as such. First of all, Husserl himself states quite to the contrary that the body is a part of nature (“animal *nature*,” nature in the “second sense,” etc.). And secondly, Rabanaque seems to have tacitly combined the notions of a plurality of noematic regions on the one hand and an “integrated” (his word) totality—with the body as “midpoint” between *extensio* and *cogito*, sharing in “features common to *both* the lower and upper regions”—on the other. In doing so he proves of course the dictum that it is possible to be too faithful to a text. For the idea of the body as a “bridge” between nature and spirit, and its being an irreducible “third noematic region” in addition to the natural and the spiritual, are obviously two very different, and mutually incompatible, claims. In the first case, we might have a case of ontological monism—a sliding scale of being, perhaps from the most

---

<sup>249</sup> Husserl 1919, p. 186 (my translation)

inert to the most “enspirit-ed.” This would be reminiscent of the Neoplatonism-tinged ontology of some German Romantics, or perhaps distantly of Spinozism. But if spirituality and physicality fuse or blend in the middle—in the body as “midpoint” of extension and thought, in Rabanaque’s image—then it would seem that the notion of “noematic regions” in the *plural* must be dispensed with altogether. For in that case material thinghood and psychic egoity would not be two distinct noematic regions at all in the first place, let alone leaving room for a third, the body.

The first, monistic view suggests a kind of vitalism, or panpsychism, that Husserl expressly rejects with respect to Leibniz (and Bruno).<sup>250</sup> Furthermore, this would be a case in which *Leiblichkeit* would define the whole continuum of which extension and thought are merely poles on either end. Yet this would clearly be unacceptable to Husserl, as it would call into question the founding-founded relationship of the physical and psychical, the latter of which being founded on the former, as well as remove the privileged perch of the Cartesian “I think.” The fact is that Husserl *did* posit multiple irreducible (the Priority Thesis aside) “ontological regions”—two in particular, nature and spirit. The body falls in the former column. Of course, there is one more provocative thought experiment to consider. In talking about the relation between the psyche and the body, Husserl invokes the following image:

“Let us imagine a consciousness... which would stand in relation to a locomotive, so that if the locomotive were fed water this consciousness would have the pleasant feeling that we call satiety; if the locomotive were heated, it would have the feeling of warmth, etc. Obviously, the locomotive would not, because of the make-up of such relationships, become ‘animate organism’ for this consciousness. If, instead of the thing that I at the time call my animate organism, the locomotive

---

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 132

stood in my consciousness as the field of my pure Ego, then I could not call it animate organism also, for it simply would not be an animate organism.”

The image has intuitive appeal, but why? Husserl immediately goes on to explain the reason the locomotive and my consciousness would not make up an animate organism at this point:

“...a considerable part of the large content-class belonging to the sphere of consciousness under the title ‘*material of consciousness*’ is so intimately at one with the material animate organism that in the intuitive givenness not merely connection but precisely unity is shown.”<sup>251</sup>

Not merely connection *but unity*. This seems a very strong statement indeed. An animate organism is already more than a material thing in its essence. It has a “stratum” of the psychic, belonging to the whole of the organism “from the outset.” But really, all this means is that the animate organism is such that in it, its Body and soul are one. We have gone through all of this already. In spite of this “unity,” there is also, still, a founded-founding relation between the first and second (“psychic”) stratum; they’re not equal, in this sense. This is what allows Husserl to speak of the body as a “sensing physical thing” that is “covered or filled with feelings.”<sup>252</sup> Its materiality is primary, its psychic dimension an add-on, albeit one woven into the essence of some beings, the “animate” ones. So unfortunately, the unity of Body and soul fails to provide the needed evidence of either a radical union of or a “middle region” between nature and spirit.<sup>253</sup> Indeed, it is arguable that Husserl’s treatment

---

<sup>251</sup> *Ideas III*, 104

<sup>252</sup> *Ideas II*, 105

<sup>253</sup> Further (indirect) evidence of this is the unconvincing treatment of “somatology” as its own discipline in *Ideas III*, for example.



of the body is itself dualistic, having the two sides, material and psychical, but in truth, this would probably be to use the term “dualistic” too loosely.<sup>254</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that Husserl’s acceptance of the natural-scientific sense of material nature as the absolute basis of reality, the substrate upon which higher strata of reality are “founded” in a unidirectional way, has severe consequences that reverberate throughout the *Ideas* series and maybe Husserl’s philosophy as a whole. It pushes the body and living nature into the purview of the inherently reductive “natural sciences,” all the while precipitating a crisis whereby “spirit” must be rescued from the clutches of brute materialism—and hence must be dualistically sealed off from “nature” itself. Husserl’s world is bifurcated in such a way that the *unity* of the world cannot be found *in* it, but only in the fact that both sets of realities are *constituted* in common through the *transcendental ego*, i.e., *phenomenologically*. If the transcendental ego and phenomenological monism fail, the world does not have the resources to maintain internal cohesion. This view is highly Platonic in a *certain* very specific sense, that is, in reference to a split universe whose unity is

---

<sup>254</sup> Taylor Carman argues that the *Körper/Leib* distinction is dualistic. (See: Carman, Taylor. “the Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.” *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 1999, p. 206. Hereafter “Carman.”) I do agree with both Carman and Dastur that Husserl’s overall position is dualistic in some important sense. (Carman, 208 and Dastur, 73)

provided by something from “above,” “participating” in what is “below.” In Husserl’s case, the transcendental ego is not a “thing” like the Forms, it is rather an attitude, a kind of consciousness. But to call Husserl’s view “transcendental Platonism,” while being more accurate, does not drain the comparison of its present relevance.

But if *Ideas II* promises more than Husserl himself delivers, that is also because it promises so very much. It harbors the sorts of fertile ambiguities that have led quite naturally to the ontological shift in phenomenology that took place through Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, among others. And over the *Crisis* and other later (at least among published) writings, genetic or static or both, it has the advantage, ironically, of greater *inconsistency* and thus a greater sense of *possibility*. Much of this possibility arises out of Husserl’s justly influential treatment of the body. The body had already been a major concern of Continental philosophers like Bergson, Marcel, and Scheler (who was influenced by Husserl, albeit), but through the vehicle of *Ideas II* its place in the horizon of foundational philosophical problems, at least in the Continental tradition, was permanently established.

In all of this, Husserl of course does not seem either to recognize the tensions in *Ideas II* as fundamental ones or to realize that the question of *nature* poses a radical problem for the transcendental-phenomenological method itself. As we have seen, he presents a kind of “ontological gambit” directed against the *naturalistic* or *physicalistic* philosopher. If Husserl’s gambit fails, it will have in the process conceded so much to natural science and, in the wake of the failure of transcendental phenomenology, there would be only the naturalistic-physicalistic option left. Something has clearly gone wrong. At its best, the examination of the

body in *Ideas II* raises the possibility of a rethinking of phenomenology and the natural attitude, an uncovering of evidence that shows powerfully that there is a kind of deep inter-connectivity and overlap of nature and spirit. There is a certain volatility in Husserl's handling of these concepts, a volatility that reappears in intermittent bursts throughout *Ideas II*. Thus, like intentional consciousness itself, *Ideas II* as a text points necessarily beyond itself.

For his part, Merleau-Ponty adopts many of Husserl's insights as his own but goes with them in a different direction. We might put it this way: whereas for Husserl nature has to be explained in terms of its "constitution" in transcendental consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, it is this very consciousness which needs explaining, in light of its obvious origination in the primordial experiences of the natural lived-body. The body becomes the site of a paradox that will never be "resolved," because it is definitive of the human condition. Ontologically, the body as *Leib* blurs the line of subjectivity and objectivity in a way even more decisive than (theoretical) intentionality, since it has no "directionality," and it is not simply the "body-subject" (as Merleau-Ponty himself came to recognize) but something like the criss-crossing or intertwining of being with itself—a knot at the heart of the universe. The intimacy of nature and spirit allows philosophy, and not just natural science, to have a say in defining what it is, even while itself being susceptible to having to revise its own beliefs in light of these explanations. In Merleau-Ponty, "naturalism" is defeated, paradoxically, by becoming transformed through a much more robust definition of "nature" than scientists have traditionally permitted. This is no victory of a higher idealism or spiritualism. Contrary to what some have

claimed, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy does not "re-enchant" nature so much as remove any hard, essentialist barriers between the various—real—divisions within "being." It is in this sense precisely a philosophy of "promiscuity," to use Merleau-Ponty's word, rather than of romantical unity.

Let us now turn to Merleau-Ponty's own multi-faceted appropriation of Husserl's thought, *Ideas II* included.

## Chapter Three: Merleau-Ponty's Organic Appropriation of Husserlian Phenomenology

“We know that Husserl never made himself too clear on these questions.”  
--Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>255</sup>

### I. Introduction

The question of what phenomenology is—and what its ultimate tasks are—has never ceased to be posed ever since its inception. Naturally, people have looked to Husserl, the effective founder and pioneer of this philosophy, for answers to such questions—but while some find them here, others see only more questions. Merleau-Ponty was unique, in this regard: he found an answer, but it happens to be one that continues to surprise us because of its counter-intuitivity. On Merleau-Ponty's reading, Husserl's questions are ultimately those of human existence, the paradoxes of incarnate subjectivity, the finitude of human knowledge—none of which the “textbooks” at first suggest to be central to the German philosopher's agenda. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that ever since Merleau-Ponty introduced his Husserl to the world, phenomenology has not been able to stop wondering over the enigma that is the Merleau-Ponty/Husserl relationship.

---

<sup>255</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “The Philosopher and His Shadow.” (Hereafter “PS.”) In *Signs*. Tr. Richard M. McCleary. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (p. 165)

The stakes are as high as ever, as evident from a (relatively) recent account like this one by Lester Embree:

“It is daunting to recall the historical era in American phenomenology of our youth that is best called ‘Phenomenology and Existentialism’ if only because, in that great upsurge of energy, Husserl was, incredibly, read by so many as the father of existential phenomenology, a paternity that still needs challenging.”<sup>256</sup>

There are many, particularly on the “Husserlian” side (hopefully this sort of label will mean less by the end of this chapter), who share Embree’s disenchantment with what they perceive to be Merleau-Ponty’s misappropriation of Husserlian phenomenology.<sup>257</sup> There are also those from the “Merleau-Ponty side” of things who lament the French philosopher’s constant references to Husserl, finding them unnecessary and misleading given the ultimately trans-phenomenological nature, they claim, of Merleau-Ponty’s undertaking. Others, of course, stress the indissoluble link between the two philosophers.

It is certainly hard to deny that a significant link exists, but the precise relation between Merleau-Ponty and Husserl is an uncannily difficult code to crack. “Does Merleau-Ponty get Husserl right?” is just the first of many questions that arise. Others include: Is there a “right” Husserl—a “true” Husserl, at all? Should Merleau-Ponty’s self-described fidelity to Husserl’s ideas be trusted? Should we see *Merleau-Ponty* as a kind of *Husserlian*, finally, and even *Husserl* (or one of possibly several “Husserls”) as a *proto-Merleau-Pontian*?

---

<sup>256</sup> Quoted in: Bernet, Rudolf; Iso Kern; and Eduard Marbach. *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993 (p. xi) I reproduce and respond to a fuller version of the same quote below.

<sup>257</sup> For example, Elizabeth Behnke, as discussed further below.

To start at the end and work backwards, so to speak, my quick answers to these questions, respectively, would be: yes, Merleau-Ponty gets something profoundly right about Husserl, that is a particular strain of him that must be separated carefully from the rest; no, there is no “true” Husserl, since many live possibilities remain open in his cavernous thought; yes, Merleau-Ponty’s self-understanding as a phenomenologist of a Husserlian vein is grounded in truth; and finally, yes, there is a sense in which Husserl and Merleau-Ponty are reciprocally intertwined, such that, to use the latter’s words when speaking of himself and Husserl, “it is not possible even in principle to decide at any given moment just what belongs to each.” (PS 159)

This is a lot to show, however, in a dissertation chapter, so I have limited my goals presently to these four: First, to briefly sketch the historical background of the relationship; Second, to provide an overview and critical assessment of a variety of positions taken on this relationship in the recent secondary literature; Third, to show, through a study of the relevant texts, how I understand Merleau-Ponty to read and appropriate Husserl; and Fourth, to suggest ways in which his relationship<sup>258</sup> to Husserl exemplifies and embodies certain Merleau-Pontian (but also, implicitly, Husserlian) “figures of thought.” That is, I will want ultimately to show—and here is at least one clue as to why some readers don’t accept Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl—that Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Husserl follows the same pattern as

---

<sup>258</sup> Husserl and Merleau-Ponty did not have a personal acquaintance, so by “relationship” I have of course been referring (and will continue to refer) throughout this chapter to the relationship between their philosophies.

his general philosophy, such that to accept one is, to a large degree, to accept the other—or at least to be prepared to do so more readily.<sup>259</sup>

Merleau-Ponty did not begin his philosophical career strictly as a “phenomenologist,” but he gradually grew into the role. He was interested in Husserl as early as 1934, but even as late as his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, his primary focus seemingly lies elsewhere. However, reading Husserl (or about him, as through Eugen Fink’s important *Kantstudien* article of 1933<sup>260</sup>) evidently had a great cumulative impact on him, such that, as one chronicler notes, “[his] attention to Husserl increases rather than diminishes over the course”<sup>261</sup> of the progression from *The Phenomenology of Perception (PP)*, his well-known 1945 masterpiece, to *The Visible and the Invisible (VI)*, which was left unfinished at the time of the author’s untimely death. Unlike Eugen Fink, Martin Heidegger, Aron Gurwitsch, and other students of Husserl’s, Merleau-Ponty did not have a personal relationship with Husserl, although he may have attended at least one of his lectures.<sup>262</sup> Complicating matters further, Husserl was clearly only one of many influences on the sponge-like French thinker. This is because Husserl’s

---

<sup>259</sup> An important but deliberate omission from this discussion is any extended discussion of hermeneutics for its own sake. For example, I touch only indirectly the perennial question of whether there is in fact such a thing as a “correct” interpretation of a work, or even whether there is such a “work” to begin with. (Besides, Merleau-Ponty’s is a case in which it is not the meaning of individual texts that are usually at stake but the tendencies and “inner logic” of the thinker’s corpus as a whole, an even more elusive animal.) These are surely questions that deserve replies and would have significant bearing on the present inquiry, but they also lie just outside its necessarily restricted scope.

<sup>260</sup> See: Fink, Eugen. “Die phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik.” In: Fink, Eugen. *Studien zur Phänomenologie 1930-1939*. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966

<sup>261</sup> The chronicler is Ted Toadvine. See “Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview.” In: *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (p. 228). Hereafter “Toadvine.” (The essay collection as a whole is referred to hereafter as “Reading.”) Toadvine’s chronicle has been extremely useful for this section.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 227-33



phenomenology, largely through the influence of Sartre, was only one of many dominant philosophical options in 1940s France, when Merleau-Ponty forged the core of his philosophical vision.<sup>263</sup>

Nevertheless, Husserl's influence turned out to be the most decisive in the end. In the "Preface" of PP, Merleau-Ponty adopted the fundamental Husserlian insights and concepts, working them into his own brand of "existential" phenomenology, and he was the first so-called "outsider" to be granted private and in-depth access to Husserl's archives in Louvain, which were at that time filled with reams of unpublished material that Merleau-Ponty happily devoured and communicated, fragmentarily, to a wider circle of scholars and intellectuals.<sup>264</sup> Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl is critical of some of Husserl's tendencies, particularly what have been variously labeled and identified as his rationalism, idealism, essentialism, and foundationalism. Merleau-Ponty disliked each of these "styles" of thinking, but he clearly regarded Husserl as "more than the sum" of these philosophical parts. It is also true, however, that each of the above labels can be challenged as overly simplistic stereotypes when applied to Husserl, as they all apply chiefly (though by no means exclusively) to the early published works of Husserl during his, primarily, "static phenomenology" period—most especially,

---

<sup>263</sup> For example, Alexandre Kojève had memorably re-introduced Hegel to French students, including Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger and Scheler and their criticisms of Husserl were also influential to Merleau-Ponty, as were Sartre's existentialism, Bergsonianism, (eventually) Marxism, and other philosophies—to say nothing of the central impact of Gestalt Psychology on the young thinker. On the (mostly) negative side, the influence of French Neo-Kantianism should be mentioned. I will further address Merleau-Ponty's consistent opposition to Kantianism in later sections.

<sup>264</sup> According to Dan Zahavi, it was in fact *Ideas II*, the then-unpublished sequel to *Ideas I*, that had had the greatest impact on Merleau-Ponty. (Zahavi, Dan. "Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: A Reappraisal." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002. (p. 6—hereafter "Zahavi.") This idea is supported indirectly by the way Merleau-Ponty essentially reconstructs his own philosophy on the basis of "some lines" of *Ideas II* in PS.

Husserl's *Ideas I*, which we have examined in the first chapter. Merleau-Ponty recognized in Husserl's thought over time a distinct philosophical maturation, as well as a movement *away* from the style of *Ideas I*. Merleau-Ponty thus divides Husserl's thought into three distinct periods: logicist, idealist (or simply "middle"), and existentialist phases.<sup>265</sup> Merleau-Ponty sides with the third, "existentialist" phase in Husserl's thought, but the fact is that he never denied the complexity and even contradictoriness of Husserl's philosophy even at the end—though given his temperament and penchant for *l'ambiguïté*, he almost certainly admired Husserl all the more for this than not.

## II. Merleau-Ponty's Relationship to Husserl: An Doxographical Overview and Critique

### A. Introduction

To raise the question of Merleau-Ponty's relationship to or reading of Husserl is to do so against the backdrop of a lively and vigorous debate, one that begins early<sup>266</sup> and continues to this day. Here I will examine the parameters of this debate,

---

<sup>265</sup> Two distinct places in which he advances the idea show how enduring it was in Merleau-Ponty's mind: PP, p. 317, fn 274; and, much later, PSM 46 and 48. See also fn46, below.

<sup>266</sup> As of 1964, Edie reports accusations against Merleau-Ponty, for example by Maurice Natanson, that had already begun to arise over the accuracy or reliability of Merleau-Ponty's citations of Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences* (particularly quotes to the effect that for Husserl "transcendental subjectivity is an intersubjectivity"). Surely James Edie was presciently correct in musing: "That Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl has been and will continue to be contested is beyond doubt." See the Preface of: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Primacy of Perception*. Ed. John Wild. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (pp. xvii-xviii, fn10) The namesake essay (actually a lecture and a discussion) from this volume is referred to hereafter as "Primacy."

beginning also, through a critique of some of the extant literature, to offer my own interpretation. The positions I will address cannot necessarily be placed on a single spectrum, since there is no single question that they all address in the same way. Some authors, for example, discuss the extent of the influence of Husserl over Merleau-Ponty, while others concentrate on the *fidelity* of Merleau-Ponty to Husserl on given issues (or as a whole). But my goal is not to analyze this discussion into their individual components but to provide a more or less holistic overview of the discussion itself, for all aspects of it are relevant to any general assessment of Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Husserl.

I have divided various views as either "strong" or "weak." Weak views, on this definition, tend to downplay the philosophical association between the two thinkers, while strong views tend to emphasize and attach great importance to it. Some readers, of course, like Stephen Watson, combine both aspects in their considered view. As a general rule, weak readings are more common than strong ones, for a variety of reasons. I touch on some of the notable exceptions first—relatively briefly, since I generally agree with the strong orientation myself and seek to be offering one of my own as I proceed. That is, instead of rehearsing positive strong accounts already made, I have deemed it more important finally to answer weak readings instead.<sup>267</sup>

---

<sup>267</sup> My placement of a treatment of the secondary literature first, before a direct analysis of the primary texts, is motivated by my hope that it will be useful to have the context in which the significance of such an analysis can be duly measured. The review is restricted mostly to recent literature, both for reasons of limited space as well as to make it as current as possible.

*B. The “Strong View”: Zahavi, Smith, and Barbaras*

Dan Zahavi, while acknowledging differences between the two thinkers, surprisingly (given his strong “Husserlian” credentials) stresses the continuity between them and argues that Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl is in many ways prescient and ahead of its times.<sup>268</sup> For his part, A. D. Smith argues that Merleau-Ponty’s ideas in *PP* are fundamentally Husserlian, though stated with a different emphasis and through different rhetoric. He also argues that Husserl has the resources to account for the special significance accorded by Merleau-Ponty to the “bodily schema,” against the view of Shaun Gallagher, for example.<sup>269</sup> Both Zahavi and Smith have in common a vast command over the *Husserliana* archives, and hence call upon material that cannot be expected to be known by even some advanced phenomenologists. The pivotal *Ideas II* has come to be increasingly well-known, of course, but there are on this front detractors of the Stein- and Landgrebe-edited volume we have before us today.<sup>270</sup>

In addition to Zahavi and Smith, who write primarily on Husserl, there is also the case of a Merleau-Pontian who fully acknowledges the profundity of the link between the two philosophers, namely Renaud Barbaras. Thus in the conclusion of his book *De l’être du phénomène*, Barbaras states: “...Merleau-Ponty’s ontology does

---

<sup>268</sup> Text cited above as “Zahavi.” For an instance of his spirited defense of transcendental subjectivity in Husserl, see for example, Zahavi, Dan. *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity: A Response to the Linguistic-Pragmatic Critique*. Tr. Elizabeth A. Behnke. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001

<sup>269</sup> Smith, A. D. “The Flesh of Perception: Merleau-Ponty and Husserl.” In *Reading Merleau-Ponty: On the Phenomenology of Perception*. Ed. Thomas Baldwin. New York: Routledge, 2007 (pp. 1-22) Note in particular the summary remark, “...I have suggested that there is nothing *radically* new in Merleau-Ponty, as compared with Husserl. They occupy the same terrain in philosophical space.” (p. 20)

<sup>270</sup> See for example: Behnke, Elizabeth. “Merleau-Ponty’s Ontological Reading of Constitution in *Phénoménologie de la perception*.” In *MR*, p. 34; hereafter *Behnke*. Behnke argues that Stein had already “steered” *Ideas II* in a realistic direction, one more congenial to Merleau-Ponty’s intentions than to Husserl’s own.

not break with phenomenology; it is rather phenomenology's most significant achievement..."<sup>271</sup> Of course, Leonard Lawlor and Ted Toadvine, in the "Introduction" to their English translation of the book describe it as having as one its main aims to "confront Husserl's phenomenology" and that it concerns the "transformation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology into ontology." Importantly, however, these remarks pertain to Barbaras himself, rather than to Merleau-Ponty. For Barbaras tacitly admits that Merleau-Ponty did not fully effect the desired "transformation" himself, and has benefited from his own efforts to finally do so.<sup>272</sup>

C. "Weak" and "Mixed" Views: Lefort, Richir, Madison, et al.

Notwithstanding the positions of the three eminent scholars just mentioned, the opposite view is rather much easier to find. This is true of Merleau-Ponty's one-time student Claude Lefort, for example, as well as March Richir, both of whom speak of Merleau-Ponty's ultimate "break" with phenomenology.<sup>273</sup> Still on the

---

<sup>271</sup> *The Being of the Phenomenon*. Trs. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004 (p. 312) Barbaras' full quote bears almost exact resemblance to something Merleau-Ponty had written before. Barbaras: "Also, Merleau-Ponty's ontology does not break with phenomenology; it is rather phenomenology's most significant achievement. It aims to recognize what Husserl had foreseen, namely, 'a type of being which contains everything'; it aims to make a return from an objective world to a *Lebenswelt* in whose continual flux are borne Nature and the objects of perception, as well as constructions..." Merleau-Ponty, from a lecture on the "life-world": "...the return from an objective world to a *Lebenswelt* in whose continual flux are borne Nature and the objects of perception, as well as the constructions through which we grasp them with Cartesian exactness." (Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960*. Tr. John O'Neill. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1970, p. 108. Hereafter "Themes.")

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, ix

<sup>273</sup> See: Lefort, Claude, *Sur une colonne absente: Ecrits autour de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) and Richir, Marc, "Le sens de la phénoménologie dans *Le visible et l'invisible*," in *Esprit*, no. 66 (June 1982), p. 125. I get these citations by way of Bettina Bergo's "Philosophy as *Perspectiva Artificialis*: Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Husserlian Constructivism." Printed as the "Afterword" of: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. Ed. Leonard Lawlor with Bettina Bergo. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2002, p. 178. This article is referred to hereafter as "Bergo."

Merleau-Ponty side (so to speak), there are the cases of Gary Madison and M. C. Dillon, both of whom underplay the role of the phenomenological reduction in Merleau-Ponty.<sup>274</sup> For Dillon, even the early Merleau-Ponty “uncritically appropriated” Husserlian terminology for different purposes.<sup>275</sup> Such sentiments are common among Merleau-Ponty scholars. In his book on Merleau-Ponty, for example, Lawrence Hass argues that Merleau-Ponty goes beyond Husserl definitely from phenomenology to “expression”<sup>276</sup>, while Hubert Dreyfus comments that Merleau-Ponty’s anti-dualism conflicts directly with what makes the transcendental reduction in Husserl possible<sup>277</sup>. Taylor Carman and Françoise Dastur, both from very different perspectives, both agree on a certain “dualism” in Husserl which clashes with Merleau-Ponty’s anti-dualist agenda. Argues Carman, for example:

“Unlike Husserl, but like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty looks beyond the subject-object divide to try to gain insight into the concrete structures of worldly experience... Indeed, taking the problem of embodiment seriously, as Merleau-Ponty does, entails a radical reassessment of the very conceptual distinctions on which Husserl’s enterprise rests.”<sup>278</sup>

For his part, Xavier Tilliette reinforces this divide when he remarks that

“...Husserl was not an instructor of Merleau-Ponty as much as an initiator and a

---

<sup>274</sup>Gary Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: The Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 194-5 and 332-3, and Martin Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 71-2, 120 (hereafter “Dillon”). Cited by way of: Sara Heinämaa, “From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty’s Interpretation of Husserl’s Reduction.” (Hereafter “Heinämaa.”) In “Reading” (pp. 127-148)

<sup>275</sup> Dillon, p. 83. Dillon does however note on p. 87 the “usual” way in which, almost as a kind of *modus operandi*, Merleau-Ponty picks up and develops a “seminal thought” of Husserl’s.

<sup>276</sup> Hass, Lawrence. *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008 (pp. 198-9)

<sup>277</sup> Dreyfus, Hubert. “Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Husserl’s (and Searle’s) Concept of Intentionality.” In *Rereading Merleau-Ponty*. Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2000 (p. 37)

<sup>278</sup> Carman, Taylor. “The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.” *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 1999, p 206. For Dastur’s similar but slightly more nuanced position, see: “Husserl and the Problem of Dualism.” In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983 (pp. 65-77).

revealer,” going on to add that “Merleau-Ponty has traced out new furrows, concerned to free up the implicit Husserl who resembled him like a brother,”<sup>279</sup> an interesting twist of course in which *Husserl* is said to resemble *Merleau-Ponty*, as opposed the other way around!<sup>280</sup> Tilliette is ambiguous, however, about the issue of Merleau-Ponty’s originality, as when he writes, “In reality, [Merleau-Ponty] did not carry out detailed pioneer work, but rather picked out passages and formulas that electrified his own meditation. He was not and did not want to be a scholiast nor even an historian of philosophy.” Did he carry out pioneering work or didn’t he?

In a recent essay, Stephen Watson offers something like an intermediary position, a “mixture” of the strong and the weak ingredients.<sup>281</sup> On the weaker side, he emphasizes the critical aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with Husserl: “Merleau-Ponty has given up on phenomenology as a strictly foundational science in order to articulate phenomenology as part of our conceptual history and coherence, a situated knowing and a situated knowledge.”<sup>282</sup> Watson seems to suggest that Merleau-Ponty’s radical rethinking of the role of history, factuality, and generally the “relation of structure and sense,”<sup>283</sup> while still perhaps “phenomenological” in a loose sense, is sufficiently radical to indicate a profound disengagement from the

---

<sup>279</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Texts and Dialogues*. Ed. Hugh Silverman and James Barry, Jr. Tr. Michael Smith et al. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992 (p. 162)

<sup>280</sup> We also must be careful in following him as he continues this passage, however: “He approached Husserl with ulterior motives, knowing by divination what he would find there...” (Cited by way of Lester Embree’s Preface to “Reading,” p. xiii) Tilliette admits to have acquired this latter insight second-hand from a former colleague of Merleau-Ponty, who knew him as of 1938. His belief that Merleau-Ponty chiefly brought out the hidden “implications” of others’ thoughts is not incorrect, but if one does this at a masterly enough level, it becomes unclear who is more responsible for the fully developed thought—the original author or the commentator.

<sup>281</sup> Watson, Stephen H. “Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenological Itinerary From Body Schema to Situated Knowledge: On How We Are and How We Are Not to ‘sing the World.’” *Janus Head*, Winter/Spring Issue, 9.2, 2007. Amherst, NY: Trivium Publications. (pp. 535-549)

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 544

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 545

original, more positivistic version of phenomenology that Husserl had laid out. “We must conclude that on its own phenomenology is not explanatory [in the way Husserl had claimed]. It attains no explanatory ‘role’—certainly not that of determining our concepts—without being brought together with the facts and their history.”<sup>284</sup> Watson’s rich argument, which itself combines historical fact and systematic analysis in tracing Merleau-Ponty’s critical break from elements of both Husserl’s and his own earlier phenomenology, nevertheless makes a compelling indirect (and, for lack of a better word, performative) case for the inextricability of a comprehension of Merleau-Ponty’s task without reference to Husserl as a kind of permanent horizon—much in the same way perhaps that Merleau-Ponty (cited by Watson) argues for the dialectical-relational importance of science to phenomenology.<sup>285</sup> It is this that can be said to comprise the “strong” element in Watson’s reading of the Merleau-Ponty/Husserl relationship.

#### *D. Four Weak Readings: Embree, Behnke, Seebohm, Bergo*

In the rest of this section I will deal at greater length with the “weak” views of three phenomenologists of high repute: Lester Embree, Elizabeth Behnke, and Thomas Seebohm. I quote these authors at length in order to deal with their claims in close detail.

---

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 545

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 540. The original citation is from *Primacy*, 29. Watson also cites Gurwitsch’s well-known remark to the effect that the “life-world” in Husserl cannot be understood apart from its polemical relation to the scientific attitude.



For Embree's view, I will simply reproduce an expanded version of the quote provided at the outset of this chapter:

"It is daunting to recall the historical era in American phenomenology of our youth that is best called 'Phenomenology and Existentialism' if only because, in that great upsurge of energy, Husserl was, incredibly, read by so many as the father of existential phenomenology, a paternity that still needs challenging. That was challenged chiefly on the basis of what Merleau-Ponty confected in reference to a book whose English title actually is *The Crisis of the European Sciences*. No competent reader can study the present work [an introduction to Husserl's phenomenology] and fail to comprehend (a) that Husserl's was from about 1905 through to the end of his life a transcendental philosophy and (b) that Husserl's focus was in the philosophy of science. Existential phenomenology is not transcendental and, although not lacking in interest in science theory, is more concerned with human existence."<sup>286</sup>

Several things can be said to challenge these sentiments, though none definitive. For example, on one reading, Merleau-Ponty does not renounce the transcendental attitude, and at times in fact embraces it explicitly.<sup>287</sup> On this view, it is the "absoluteness" or "priority" of it that he challenges, not its rightful place in phenomenological praxis. Also, it is arguable that Merleau-Ponty's intensive engagement with the sciences—at least at the first-order level (meaning, the creative interpretation of its "results")—not only matches but surpasses that of Husserl himself.<sup>288</sup> Finally, to argue that Husserl was concerned with "science" as opposed to "human existence" might be a false dilemma, especially in Merleau-

---

<sup>286</sup> Quoted in: Bernet, Rudolf; Iso Kern; and Eduard Marbach. *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993 (p. xi)

<sup>287</sup> See for example the following passage on p. 63 of PP: "But now that the phenomenal field has been sufficiently circumscribed, let us enter into this ambiguous domain and let us make sure of our first steps as far as the psychologist is concerned, until the psychologist's self-scrutiny leads us, by way of second-order reflection, to the phenomena of the phenomenon, *and decisively transforms the phenomenal field into a transcendental one.*" (italics added) Reference provided by Heinämaa (p. 129) See also Ted Toadvine's article, also in MR (pp. 71-94), entitled "Leaving Husserl's Cave? The Philosopher's Shadow Revisited." Toadvine argues that the PS is an example of Merleau-Ponty's "reformulating the relation between the transcendental and the mundane." (p. 71)

<sup>288</sup> And he is no stranger to the "philosophy of science" as such, either. See for example what Merleau-Ponty says about science in his *Eye and Mind* (In *The Primacy of Perception*, tr. Carleton Dallery. Ed. John Wild. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) pp. 159-61.

Ponty's case, but also, arguably, in Husserl's. Embree, one of the most eminent scholars of phenomenology today, is obviously aware of all of this, so this is more than a matter of lining up citations to prove one side or the other. As I will try to argue later, how one reads the Merleau-Ponty/Husserl relationship is partly a function of one's receptivity to the kind of "ambiguity"—a *good* ambiguity, mind you<sup>289</sup>—that Merleau-Ponty wants to introduce to philosophy and hermeneutics alike.

Behnke begins a recent essay by arguing that "Merleau-Ponty's 'reading' of Husserl is simultaneously a 'writing' of Husserl—a writing that appropriates and develops, but also deforms and occludes."<sup>290</sup> It is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty himself endorses the notion that it is a false dilemma to say that "interpretation is restricted to inevitable distortion or literal reproduction." (PS 159) Yet one wishes to ask how it is possible to develop someone's ideas by *deforming* them? Does not the notion of "development" presuppose a certain lack of completed *form*, and hence a malleability or "potentiality" that makes it hard to define in the first place? With this ominous phrasing, Behnke goes on to explain why she faults Merleau-Ponty's approach and manner of appropriation, as in this telling quote:

"On the whole, then, Merleau-Ponty's Husserl-reading is characterized by an interpretive engagement with the content of Husserlian texts rather than a concern for adopting a phenomenological attitude, consulting experiential evidence for ourselves, and carrying Husserl's research tradition further. ...And since Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl has had a profound influence on the way Husserl's work has been received in general, the overall effect has been to

---

<sup>289</sup> For the expression "good ambiguity," see Primacy, 11.

<sup>290</sup> "Merleau-Ponty's Ontological Reading of Constitution in *Phénoménologie de la perception*." In MR, p. 31

perpetuate a climate of interpretation in which Husserlian themes and terms are typically approached in light of received philosophical problems and received ways of posing them, all at the expense of the possibility of appropriating phenomenology as a living research horizon." (Behnke, 49-50)

Read closely, this emerges as a particularly stinging critique of Merleau-Ponty, at least *qua* "phenomenologist." By not consulting "experiential evidence for ourselves" or, what Behnke mentions just before, cleaving to "description" rather than "explanation" (Behnke, 49), Merleau-Ponty is perhaps not so much a "phenomenologist" at all, but closer to a simple dogmatist, that is a metaphysician who engages in "received philosophical problems and received ways of posing them." Behnke's sticking point is Merleau-Ponty's abandonment of Husserl's strict methodological directives, something neither he nor I would entirely dispute. Behnke adds yet another dark twist, however, by suggesting, like Embree, that the reception of Merleau-Ponty as a representative phenomenologist has damaged Husserl's legacy. Obviously Behnke is not trying to cast aspersions on Merleau-Ponty himself, but simply to describe what she sees as a case of all-too-successful appropriation (her word) of Husserl's program. But Merleau-Ponty has, in Behnke's words, performed a "disservice" to Husserl's work.<sup>291</sup> There is perhaps a certain assumption here that Husserl's own self-defined project—without intervention by Merleau-Ponty—is vital on its own, a powerful philosophical system or methodology that has been overshadowed by an inferior product. However, it is not clear in this case that Merleau-Ponty would have marked out any sort of

---

<sup>291</sup> Behnke singles out that "major element of Husserl's work as a whole" that is "constitution." (Behnke, 48) Behnke's remarks here are somewhat surprising given her intensive engagement with Merleau-Ponty, particularly over the issues of embodiment and nature, in recent years. See for example: "From Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Nature to an Interspecies Practice of Peace." In *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology, and Animal Life*. Albany: State University Press, 1999 (pp. 93-116)

“development” of Husserl’s thought, so much as wrong-headedly misconstrued what Husserl was finally up to.

These sorts of sentiments stand of course in significant contrast with Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of his own relationship to Husserl’s thought, which, as we will see in the next section of this chapter, is closer to the strong views briefly covered above. It is in light of this self-interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s that Thomas Seebohm develops an interesting psychological hypothesis, suggesting that Merleau-Ponty knew of the distance at some level in his mind, but tried in any case to “cover up” this distance. Why would he do this? Again, a long but rich quote:

“As in the case of Fichte and Kant, the *topos* serves as a cover-up of a critique, and this critique has the character of deconstruction. Fichte showed with respect to Kant, and Merleau-Ponty with respect to Husserl, that what they believed to be the last word in philosophy is built on ‘unthought’ suppositions. These lurk behind the hidden contradictions of the criticized position... The new task is the recognition and explication of these presuppositions, thus asking for the possibility of the criticized positions. A deconstructive critique has, taken for itself, the character of a more or less complete rupture and radical rejection of the positions in question. But the goal is also to claim some kind of continuity.”<sup>292</sup>

And he adds elsewhere,

“Merleau-Ponty is in every respect honest in his attempts to ‘save the face’ of his honored master in the light of the new developments introduced by him and others.”<sup>293</sup>

Thus Merleau-Ponty overplayed the connection between himself and Husserl in at least one way: for the (ironically) *benevolent* purposes of disguising certain jarring discrepancies between the two. (Merleau-Ponty evidently wanted to save Husserl’s

---

<sup>292</sup> Seebohm, Thomas M. “The Phenomenological Movement: A Tradition without Method? Merleau-Ponty and Husserl.” In MR (p. 59)

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., p. 55

face by giving him a kind of “face-lift”!) If it is being implied that this kind of face-saving, well-intentioned as it may be, is nonetheless counter-productive, because for example it tends to mislead readers as to what Husserl really meant, then we come full circle back to Behnke’s criticism about legacy and occlusion. The “face-saving” hypothesis is tempting, given Merleau-Ponty’s generally non-confrontational style of engaging friends and enemies alike, but it faces a real difficulty: why should Merleau-Ponty have felt obliged to discuss Husserl in the first place, and to the extent that he does? Out of some strange emotional attachment to Husserl, a man he had never met, and whose work he had every reason to downplay with respect to figures like Heidegger, Hegel, and others?<sup>294</sup> This does not seem wholly convincing.

If there is any personal responsibility Merleau-Ponty would feel towards Husserl, it would probably be as a grateful student to a (virtual) teacher. Having benefitted from reading Husserl’s private meditations in the Husserl archives, concealed to most of the public, and which often conflicted with the tendencies of the published works, Merleau-Ponty probably felt increasingly responsible to revivify Husserl in the eyes of a public that remembers him in a one-sided way. This is the distinct impression that I get as I read the opening of the PS. He did not *have to* cite Husserl as often as he does, but not to have done so would have eventually appeared, to many, as a bit dishonest, given the role Husserl plays in his own thinking. And if it is true that Merleau-Ponty’s thought is a kind of “deconstruction” of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty himself does not really give this indication. Even when he

---

<sup>294</sup> The reference to “deconstruction” should not be ignored, as it goes to the issue of Merleau-Ponty’s manner of interpreting philosophers, but we will come to this in the next section when we examine PS in detail.

claims to expose a contradiction in Husserl himself,<sup>295</sup> for example, he quickly adds that Husserl was at least semi-aware of it and moving towards a satisfactory resolution of it, namely in the last phase of his philosophy. Merleau-Ponty is not deconstructing so much as *reconstructing* Husserl—from out of Husserl’s own writings, no less.

Bettina Bergo’s interpretation of the Merleau-Ponty/Husserl relation builds on something Merleau-Ponty himself comments on, namely a certain tension in Husserl’s thought, which, says, Bergo, “lies between the search for a ground, a *unifying principle*... and, on the other hand, the conviction that the ground...is ultimately never wholly reducible and so cannot serve as an epistemic foundation.” (Bergo, 159) On Bergo’s view, Merleau-Ponty effectively chose sides (my words) by taking the “an-archic phenomenological option.” (Bergo, 160) The tension Bergo cites is real, yes—but she, unlike Merleau-Ponty, expresses it here in solely “static” or “synchronic” terms. Merleau-Ponty, instead, provides a more diachronic account, according to which Husserl’s texts were emerging into a certain “an-archism” quite on their own.<sup>296</sup> If this is true, then Merleau-Ponty’s autonomy as a “chooser” is diminished; he is following Husserl’s lead even in thinking against Husserl. That, indeed, is a fitting way to characterize the depth of Husserl’s influence over Merleau-Ponty, if by a circuitous route. Bergo interestingly calls this influence into question over the issue of Husserl’s late text *Erfahrung und Urteil*, a text that has

---

<sup>295</sup> See for example: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Compiled and with notes from Dominique Séglaard. Tr. Rober Vallier. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2003 (p. 79)

<sup>296</sup> One instance of Merleau-Ponty’s position comes at the conclusion of a long assessment of Husserl’s thinking in PS: “Originally a project to gain intellectual possession of the world, constitution becomes increasingly, as Husserl’s thought matures, the means of unveiling a back side of things that we have not yet constituted.” (PS 180)

been shown to have many parallels with (or anticipations of) Merleau-Ponty's writings. But because Merleau-Ponty was not aware of the text's existence, Bergo concludes that the coincidence says more about Merleau-Ponty's independent train of thought than Husserl's *influence* on Merleau-Ponty. However, a third option seems to be that Merleau-Ponty was at some point "keyed in" to a certain logic of Husserl's thoughts, and so could anticipate many of the things Husserl might have said, without having actually had acquaintance with them. I am not sure Bergo has convincingly foreclosed this possibility.

#### *E. Concluding Thoughts*

Notwithstanding its many twists and folds, the Merleau-Ponty/Husserl debate's dominant undercurrent is something like whether Merleau-Ponty should be understood as a "thing apart" from Husserl or somehow a continuation, even a mere echo, of the latter. One of Bergo's intriguing ideas, drawn from some accounts of Lefort, is that Merleau-Ponty is a peculiar sort of reader of philosophers generally, one whose appropriation of others on distinctly Merleau-Pontian terms is so seamless as to make one believe that the source author "really meant," all along, what Merleau-Ponty says they meant. (Bergo, 158-9) Of course this might be said of many philosophers; I am sure, for example, that Aristotle's students were convinced by his tendentious treatment of the pre-socratics. But I think the claim is that Merleau-Ponty is particularly effective in effacing *himself* from the equation, almost in terms of a sort of "appropriation by stealth"—as opposed to an overt Aristotelian-Hegelian teleologism ("all of this leads to *my* theory.") An image that is brought to

mind is one of a planet (Merleau-Ponty) whose pull brings philosophers (Hegel, Heidegger, Bergson, Schelling, Scheler, Marx, etc.) and non-philosophers (Uexküll, Proust, Freud, Cézanne, Valéry, etc.) alike into its orbit, revealing them to be (or bending them to become) just so many compliant moons. All of this may be true in the case of the figures just listed, but it is not true, I would insist, with respect to *Husserl*. It would go too far to say Husserl is to Merleau-Ponty what a *star* is to this *planet*, so perhaps a more fitting image is that of the twin stars of the binary Sirius star system, working in tandem to produce a potent luminosity in the night sky.

### III. Merleau-Ponty's Husserlian Phenomenology: By Text

#### A. Introduction

I would like to begin this section with a (second) epigraph of sorts, an early (1947) quotation from Merleau-Ponty which sets the stage for the rest of his (prematurely curtailed) philosophical career.

“When philosophers wish to place reason above the vicissitudes of history they cannot purely and simply forget what psychology, sociology, ethnography, history, and psychiatry have taught us about the conditioning of human behavior. It would be a very romantic way of showing one’s love for reason to base its reign on the disavowal of acquired knowledge. What can be validly demanded is that man never be submitted to the fate of an external nature or history and stripped of his consciousness.”<sup>297</sup>

---

<sup>297</sup> See: “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences.” (Tr. James Edie) In “Perception,” p. 24. This was a talk (and ensuing discussion) originally recorded in 1947, shortly after the publication of PP. Hereafter “Primacy.”



In a certain way, this passage conveys the essence of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of man<sup>298</sup>: the enigmatic nexus of the inner life of consciousness and the outer being of Nature, the ambiguous middle-space in which human existence unfolds and (partially) finds itself. In Merleau-Ponty's view, Husserl saw the same enigma, and increasingly came to see that it could not be solved through an appeal to "absolute consciousness," a reflective-constitutive "possession" of the world,<sup>299</sup> any more than it could be solved by scientific naturalism and its deterministic laws. Hence the "existential" thrust of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and the persistent Merleau-Pontian claim that Husserl himself enters "existentialism" in the third, "life-world"-themed phase of his philosophy. But how does Merleau-Ponty get all of this from Husserl, and how does he parlay it into a new vision of "human reality"?

The current section is one of two that reconstruct Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a "Husserlian" phenomenology. Because Merleau-Ponty generally writes *pieces* and not *piecemeal* (a reflection of his largely becoming an essayist between PP and VI), it is important to examine this material *text by text*; but at the same time, this approach tends to occlude the genuinely systematic way he engages with the principal themes of Husserl's phenomenology, such as the two reductions. I have thus tried to combine both approaches—textual-historical and thematic-systematic—by organizing the second section around the same material discussed

---

<sup>298</sup> Here as elsewhere, I use "man" instead of "humanity" only in order to reflect the style of the source author. I do of course use the latter term wherever I am representing my own views alone.

<sup>299</sup> "Originally a project to gain intellectual possession of the world, constitution becomes increasingly, as Husserl's thought matures, the means of unveiling a back side of things that we have not yet constituted." (PS 180) See also Merleau-Ponty's warning in the same essay: "To think is not to possess the objects of thought; it is to use them to mark out a realm to think about which we therefore are not yet thinking about." (PS 160)

in the first, only now by theme. Different things become apparent through each approach.<sup>300</sup>

### *B. Husserl in PP*

PP is dominated by the preoccupations and methodological innovations of phenomenology. And Merleau-Ponty makes it clear in his famous “Preface” that it is Husserl’s version of phenomenology that he has chiefly in view.<sup>301</sup> Most if not all of the major issues in the Husserl/Merleau-Ponty nexus, and Merleau-Ponty’s manner of interpreting Husserl, are present in at least germinal form in the short but pregnant “Preface.” Merleau-Ponty enumerates the three major themes of Husserlian phenomenology—the phenomenological reduction, eidetic reduction, intentionality—and, one by one, endorses and repackages them in “existential” terms. Thus we learn that the phenomenological reduction in fact “belongs to existentialist philosophy.”<sup>302</sup>

---

<sup>300</sup> In terms of texts, I will draw primarily on the “Preface” to PP, the essays PS and “Phenomenology and the Human Sciences” (In *The Primacy of Perception*. Ed. John Wild. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964; hereafter “PSM”), and VI. (Note: I will be citing from the *paperback* edition of the Smith translation of PP; amazingly, page numbers of the hardcover and paperback editions for the most part do not align.)

<sup>301</sup> After all, he explicitly relegates *Being and Time* (Heidegger being the other major phenomenological alternative to Husserl, excepting Sartre, who himself appropriates Husserl and Heidegger) to the status of a detailed development of Husserl’s own philosophy. This stated preference for Husserl over Heidegger (and Scheler) is repeated elsewhere, for example, in PSM: “Husserl, who defined philosophy as the suspension of our affirmation of the world, recognized the actual being of the philosopher in the world much more clearly than Heidegger, who devoted himself to the study of being in the world.” (PSM, 94) Merleau-Ponty calls Heidegger “dogmatic” in the same passage. This attitude towards Heidegger suggests that Merleau-Ponty is, in a way, “taking Heidegger back” for Husserl. Thus when Merleau-Ponty uses a term like “being-in-the-world” or “facticity” in the “Preface,” it is always, ironically, to the benefit of Husserl. Against those who would argue for an equal Husserl and Heidegger (at least the Heidegger of *Being and Time*) influence on the thinker, I think these indications help dispel that impression, though there is admittedly much room for debate on the matter.

<sup>302</sup> Lest we imagine this to be a veiled attack on Husserl, we need only consult a later footnote later in which Merleau-Ponty defines Husserl himself as “existentialist”—in his last or “third” period of

On what basis does Merleau-Ponty argue for a specifically *existentialist* understanding of phenomenology? In a footnote (one of many with revealing remarks about Husserl) later in the book, Merleau-Ponty explains the link as follows:

“Husserl’s originality lies beyond his notion of intentionality; it is to be found in the elaboration of this notion and the discovery, beneath the intentionality of representations, of a deeper intentionality, which others have called existence.” (PP 141n)

This “deeper intentionality” is of course what Merleau-Ponty variously calls “motor intentionality” or “operative intentionality,” the spontaneous, pre-conscious (or “anonymous”—another Husserlian word) intentionality of the body oriented towards its environment. Husserl himself had a great deal to say about such “operative intentionality”—it is in fact his idea. Thus Merleau-Ponty is—under this meaning of “existence”—merely emphasizing a certain line of Husserlian investigation.

One of the consistent themes of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking—it is, in fact, one of the fundamental premises of his general philosophical outlook—is his opposition to “idealism.” The reason—or one of them—is that of the “opacity” of the world to consciousness. Idealisms (speaking now especially of the “transcendental” rather than “phenomenalist” sort) manage to render consciousness “transparent” to the

---

philosophizing, that is. Indeed, this “tripartite” division of Husserl’s thought becomes, as we have already seen, a regular motif in Merleau-Ponty’s Husserl-interpretation. For as in PP, in PSM Merleau-Ponty singles out for their importance Husserl’s “last ten years” (PSM 46), though he also claims that “from the beginning to the end of his career, Husserl tried to discover a way between logicism and psychologism” (PSM 48)—that is, between strict logical necessity and the pure contingency of facts. Thus it is useful to note that already in the “Preface” Merleau-Ponty makes reference to Husserl as a contradictory philosopher. (PP viii)

world.<sup>303</sup> Merleau-Ponty's opposition to "idealism" is therefore clear, but whose "idealism" he is referring to—Kant's or Husserl's, for example—is not. There are some who take it to be motivated against Husserl<sup>304</sup>, but A. D. Smith, to take an excellent recent example, shows convincingly that it is only a Kantian (or Neo-Kantian) kind of idealism—which Merleau-Ponty targets repeatedly throughout PP as the quintessential form of "intellectualism"—that threatens to imply this kind of transparency, namely by building it into perception as a condition of any sort of experience at all.<sup>305</sup> Husserl's opposition to Kantian "humanist" constructivism in fact paves the way for Merleau-Ponty's own appreciation of perception as an "openness" to the world. (PP xix) We are open to the world, but it is not enclosed within us or pre-fitted to our categorial thought. This is exactly why the determination of the world through essences is always fraught with peril and shot through with contingency.<sup>306</sup> But it is also why Husserl's return to the "things themselves" is so important and revolutionary.

---

<sup>303</sup> "...a logically consistent transcendental idealism rids the world of its opacity and its transcendence." (PP xiii)

<sup>304</sup> See, for example, Bergo, 162: "It seems fair to conclude that Merleau-Ponty set about to clear any idealist residue from the path of the later Husserl, and, in so doing, pushed numerous concepts of his own." Is this sort of characterization right? I, at least, certainly don't read Merleau-Ponty as having 'set about' to re-interpret Husserl; on my reading, he simply set about to philosophize, and Husserl gave this philosophizing its shape and texture.

<sup>305</sup> Smith, A. D. "The Flesh of Perception: Merleau-Ponty and Husserl." In *Reading Merleau-Ponty: On Phenomenology of Perception*. Ed. Thomas Baldwin. New York: Routledge, 2007 (pp. 10-11)

<sup>306</sup> Merleau-Ponty's strong emphasis on "opacity" and "contingency" does, of course, expose him to the dangers of skepticism and relativism, both of which he confronts as necessary threats to face. He sides with the skeptics like Hume and Montaigne up to a point—arguing that they are nevertheless "too timid in the return to the positive aspect after their skeptical criticisms." (Primacy, 29) He addresses the challenge of relativism and the threat of scientism exhaustively in PSM, which we will come to below. (We might wish to keep in mind that the same "soft relativism" that emerges in Merleau-Ponty may have begun to creep into Husserl already in the latter's investigation into the multiplicity of historical and cultural "life-worlds"—the Zulu, etc.)

As a general rule, most of Merleau-Ponty's declarations in the "Preface" can be seen to be in conflict with many features of, say, the Husserl of *Ideas I*, though much less so with the "genetic phenomenology" of Husserl's later period. Take, for example, Merleau-Ponty's statement that phenomenology is a "phenomenology of origins," or that it captures meaning "as it comes into being." (PP xxiv) This is nothing but Husserl's "*Sinn genesis*," as Merleau-Ponty himself acknowledges. (PP xxi) And while it is hard to see Husserl saying "the world is not what I think, it is what I live through" (PP xix) using just these words, what does come to mind is Husserl's intensive later investigations into "passive synthesis"—the pre-thetic constitution of the world. That is, I "live through" the world even as I constitute it because I constitute it "anonymously," much in the way I so orient myself to the world through "bodily intentionality."

### *C. Husserl in Merleau-Ponty's Later Work*

It is only appropriate to begin here with PS, which chronicles the lasting philosophical significance of Husserl (and his "shadow"). By itself it demonstrates much of what I am trying to show in this chapter, namely the inseparability of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical contribution and his reading/appropriation of Husserl.

The piece begins with some crucial remarks on Merleau-Ponty's own hermeneutical approach to past philosophers like Husserl, some of which have been cited already above. Merleau-Ponty warns against our being seduced into "reducing" a philosopher strictly to what he said—to what is "objectively certified" of him.

Merleau-Ponty's "middle way" in this particular case is between "objectivism," on the one hand, and pure arbitrariness, on the other. Thus: an "objective" history of philosophy would "rob" great philosophers of "what they have given others to think about." Yet neither should we engage in "meditation disguised as a dialogue." He points out (as we indicated above) that it is a false dilemma to claim that interpretations of others' work leads either to "inevitable distortion" or "literal reproduction."<sup>307</sup>

Merleau-Ponty then quotes favorably from Heidegger on the "unthought-of" elements in philosophers' works; in Husserl there is an "unthought-of element in his works which is *wholly his* and yet opens up onto *something else*." (PS 160, my italics) Note the paradoxical "is wholly his" and "onto something else." Merleau-Ponty is tracing out Husserl's own process of self-transcendence—and thereby making manifest what is latent, but of course the full "manifestation" turns out to be (more immanent in) the texts of *Merleau-Ponty*. The boundaries of "self" and "other" are porous indeed. The "unthought-of" in Husserl is thereby given voice in Merleau-Ponty, but it is important to realize that there is no clear dividing line between "unthought-of" and "thought-of" in this, or perhaps in any other, case. Thus in Husserl, existential phenomenology is half-thought, or somewhat-thought, while in Merleau-Ponty it is more-fully-thought or re-thought.<sup>308</sup>

---

<sup>307</sup> PS 159-161. Both of these positions have the common premise of "positivism"—here, another word for "objectivism"—according to which, I take him to mean, there is some fully determinate and finished text before us, which we may either duplicate or distort, but nothing in between.

<sup>308</sup> Reading Merleau-Ponty on the "unthought," Bergo echoes the common view when she states that "the question of Merleau-Ponty's reading... is a question of finding the latencies in the text and developing them such that they appear to bring to light an unthought dimension." (Bergo 158-9) Taken on its own, this is too simplistic. This becomes evident when one observes the sheer volume of

As we have seen already, Merleau-Ponty consistently maintained the belief that Husserl evolved over time into the “existential” Husserl of the “life-world” philosophy. In reference to Husserl’s idea of the life-world Merleau-Ponty urges:

“These late analyses are neither scandalous nor even disturbing if we remember everything which foretold them from the start. They make explicit that ‘world’s thesis’ prior to every thesis and theory, this side of understanding’s objectifications, which Husserl has always spoken of, and which has simply become in his eyes our sole recourse in the impasse into which these objectifications have led Western knowledge.” (PS 180)

He knows that Husserl would protest. Hence, later on, we encounter this revealing phraseology: “Willy-nilly, *against his plans and according to his essential audacity*, Husserl awakens a wild-flowering world and mind.” (PS 188-9, my italics) Husserl’s later thought—very much building on the earlier—suggests a new direction without necessarily fully taking it. Merleau-Ponty revels in showing through liberal quotations that in *Ideas II*, Husserl freely grants ontological priority to material Nature over Spirit in one breath, even as he prioritizes transcendental consciousness in another. (PS 164-5, 171) From these and other hints he concludes that: “Husserl’s thought is as much attracted by the haecceity of Nature as by the vortex of absolute consciousness.” (PS 165) Merleau-Ponty then stresses the mutual “encroachment” (PS 176) and reciprocal *Fundierung* (PS 173, 176-7) of different orders of being, sensible and ideal,<sup>309</sup> citing Husserl’s own words again to seal the case. (PS 177)

---

quotations Merleau-Ponty uses in a way that employs their literal and overt meaning. One is tempted to say that so many of Husserl’s “latencies” manifest *themselves* quite well!

<sup>309</sup> It would of course take a detailed study of *Ideas II* (as undertaken in Chapter 2) to confirm Merleau-Ponty’s reading of it; but even a noted Husserl scholar like Steven Galt Crowell concedes that there is at least the appearance of this sort of paradox in the text: “In the course of his attempt to

PSM, an essay from 1961, offers a more prosaic but also thoroughly revelatory assessment of Husserlian thought and his own self-circumscription within its berth. It represents the thinker's mature conclusions on one of the major themes of phenomenology since its inception, namely its precise relation (or non-relation, as the case may be) to the sciences—both natural and “human.”<sup>310</sup> It is primarily psychology that Merleau-Ponty is concerned with, not surprisingly (given his long engagement with Gestalt psychology in particular). The central problematic here is the “paradox” of essence and fact. The essay is particularly illuminating because of the way it demonstrates Merleau-Ponty's strategy of striking a “middle way”—through, and not despite Husserl—between historicism and relativism, on the one hand, and essentialism (and, implicitly, determinism), on the other. What Merleau-Ponty wants to maintain, and claims that Husserl himself achieves even if belatedly, is truth in the midst of indeterminacy, essence within existence, and, strikingly, “eternity” along with “contingency.” (PSM 92) In all of this, he views the human sciences sympathetically (and in fact all sciences—there is no clear separation made here between natural and human sciences ontologically speaking, even if their methodologies differ). The reason for this sympathetic view is that

---

determine the idea of nature in *Ideas II*, Husserl encounters an apparent “vicious circle”... Are persons “components of nature,” then, “subordinated” to it, or does the very constitution of nature presuppose the non-natural realm of spirit?” See: Crowell, Steven Galt. “The Mythical and the Meaningless: Husserl and the Two Faces of Nature.” In *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*. Eds. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996 (p. 81).

<sup>310</sup> By the “sciences of man” Merleau-Ponty has primarily psychology and, to a lesser degree, sociology and ethology in mind. Another lecture course entitled “Phenomenology and Sociology” focuses on some other aspects of the same problem, this time emphasizing the namesake science, though it uses much of the same language as PSM, and is much shorter. Of course, what is arguably most important of all for Merleau-Ponty is the relation of philosophy to *history*. But although we call history one of the “humanities” as opposed to “social sciences,” it is precisely the empirical, contingent factor of historicity that makes it akin to the human sciences in Merleau-Ponty's sense. This is also why he treats the threat of “historicism” along with that of “relativism” as he opens the essay.



human sciences, in their own way, are doing precisely the same balancing act, albeit without the self-reflective anxiety that philosophy brings with it. It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty declares that there is no clear dividing line between the two. (PSM 72) Once again he seems to be at odds with Husserl, who insists on the separateness of transcendental phenomenology from all sciences, but Merleau-Ponty tells a different story that relies, as usual, heavily on “evolutionary developments” within Husserl himself. Merleau-Ponty sees a burgeoning recognition in Husserl of the “reciprocal envelopment” of psychology and phenomenology but also, more broadly, fact and essence. Thus he makes several detours to chronicle the story of Husserl’s “profound development” away from absolute essentialism, for example with the case of language<sup>311</sup>. (PSM 80)

In PSM, what is key to note in all of this is not just what Merleau-Ponty says but why he is saying it: he draws Husserl into his own fight against the naturalism of psychology and the empirical sciences, invokes him to make his own case—indeed, to defend his own *phenomenological approach* to the questions at hand. It is in this light that we can appreciate Merleau-Ponty’s description of phenomenology itself as a negotiated mean between skepticism and absolutism. Merleau-Ponty does not so much want to modify the phenomenological method as bring it into living contact with the rest of the intellectual conversation:

“Husserl is seeking to reaffirm rationality at the level of experience, without sacrificing the vast variety that it includes and accepting all the processes of conditioning which psychology, sociology, and history reveal. It is a question of finding a method that will enable us to think at the same time of

---

<sup>311</sup> Thus for the later Husserl, argues Merleau-Ponty, “There is no question any more of constructing a logic of language, a universal grammar, but rather of finding a logic already incorporated in the world.” (PSM 82)

the externality which is the principle of the sciences of man and of the internality which is the condition of philosophy..." (PSM 52)

Husserl thereby finds the "roots of reason in our experience" (PSM 52)—just as Merleau-Ponty, we might add, finds his own roots in Husserl.

*VI* is the hardest of Merleau-Ponty's works to assess in terms of its relationship to Husserl. Partly this is because the work is unfinished, with explicit references to Husserl lying in a large number of "Working Notes" whose proper interpretation is anything but clear<sup>312</sup>; but also because its references or allusions to Husserl are by now so interwoven in Merleau-Ponty's philosophical imagination that they come and go veiled or unannounced. This is not the case entirely: the last page of the final famous chapter "The Intertwining—the Chiasm," for example, has fulsome praise for the German founder.<sup>313</sup>

Nonetheless, at least two of the chapters, the first and third—"Reflection and Interrogation" and "Interrogation and Intuition"—can be read fruitfully as critical meditations on Husserl. Just as one could easily say that *PS* deals primarily with the phenomenological reduction and *PSM* with the eidetic, the same, I think, can be said for chapters 1 and 3 of the *VI*, respectively. Once again it becomes clear, when one sees it this way, just how systematic Merleau-Ponty's reading and re-readings of Husserl truly are. The substance of the *VI* chapters will be brought out throughout the following section.

---

<sup>312</sup>I have tried presently to avoid the use of the fragmentary "Working Notes" that accompany these chapters due to their indeterminate nature. I have also stayed away from the important but slightly over-exposed (no pun intended) notion of "the flesh." There is luckily plenty of remaining relevant material for the present task from the rest of the text.

<sup>313</sup>"In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring the power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience..." (VI 155)

#### IV. Merleau-Ponty's Husserlian Phenomenology: By Theme

##### A. The Phenomenological Reduction

It is a bromide by now that there is no issue more important in Husserl's thought than the phenomenological reduction (and *epoché*).<sup>314</sup> So suspicions have arisen over Merleau-Ponty's having supposedly curtailed or compromised the purity of the reduction, chiefly and most famously in the "Preface" of PP:

"...we must break with our familiar acceptance of it [the world], and also, from the fact that from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world. The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction." (PP xv)

But these famous or infamous sentences do not, in Merleau-Ponty's eyes, indicate a break from Husserl. They merely stress consciousness' "...dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation..." (PP xvi) According to Merleau-Ponty, again, Husserl already thematized this life as the problem of the "life-world," having stressed the primacy of facticity and existence over the once- or twice-removed approaches of, say, scientific empiricism, on the one hand, and Kantian idealism, on the other. The point of the passage is to reveal the paradoxicality of the reduction, namely, the fact that it is only through an act of *total commitment to reflective life* that the *impossibility of such a commitment* is revealed. In this way, the reduction

---

<sup>314</sup> Again for this chapter, as for the rest of this dissertation, I am not making a distinction, as Merleau-Ponty did not, between the "phenomenological" and the "transcendental" reductions, but rather am treating them as one.

gives us over to our existential selfhood. And this is why the phenomenological reduction “belongs to existentialist philosophy.”

I don't think we should undervalue the fact that Merleau-Ponty *endorses* the phenomenological reduction. Indeed, he regards it as central to his philosophy. It is, after all, the reduction that brings us to the “natural attitude” before “naturalism” and its *blasse Sachen*. (PS 163) It is what allows us to “slacken the intentional threads which attach us to the world” ever too tightly to see ourselves. (PP xv) He later describes the reduction in similar terms as “the link, which is indeed a schism[,] established by life between our thought and our physical and social situation,” adding that it nevertheless “never leads us in any way to negate time or pass beyond it into a realm of pure logic or pure thought.” (PSM 49) In other words, then, Merleau-Ponty accepts even the “schismatic” aspect of the reduction<sup>315</sup>, so long as it is not taken to mark a total departure from the finitude of lived horizons.

Merleau-Ponty's reduction consists in two movements: the movement “out of” nature—that is, the moment in which one breaks out of one's “natural” condition, the passive slumber of everyday life; and the movement back into it, that is, to a recognition of one's finitude.<sup>316</sup> Initially, through bracketing and the shift from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude, I “see” or “gain possession of myself”; reflection sharpens my consciousness and brings it into *self-*

---

<sup>315</sup> Indeed, Merleau-Ponty insists elsewhere that “the sensible order is *being at a distance*” (PS 167-8) in order to stress the futility of teleological accounts of the world that bind the “inner” and the “outer” by a secret “aim.”

<sup>316</sup> One might call this a “circle of finitude” which, moreover, bears obvious and open affinities with aspects of Hegelian thought.

consciousness. But the self is not apart from nature; in some way it cannot account for itself, it belongs to nature even as it (apparently) transcends it.

The second part of this movement is what Merleau-Ponty thinks must be reasserted against certain trends—and not just those of “transcendental Husserl”:

“...the essential difference between my point of view and that of a philosophy of understanding is that, in my view, even though consciousness is able to detach itself from things to see itself, human consciousness never possesses itself in complete detachment and does not recover itself at the level of culture except by recapitulating the expressive, discrete, and contingent operations by means of which philosophical questioning itself has become possible.” (Primacy 40)

Closely tied up with the phenomenological reduction is the dialectic of the “natural attitude” and the “transcendental attitude.” Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of these attitudes preserves elements of both continuity and discontinuity between them, in keeping with the paradoxical nature of the reduction.<sup>317</sup> On the one hand, the reduction takes us beyond natural attitude, but this is only “half the truth.” (PS 162) Merleau-Ponty’s considered judgment is that “It is the natural attitude which, by reiterating its own procedures, seesaws in phenomenology. It is the natural attitude itself which goes beyond itself in phenomenology—and so it does not go beyond itself.” (PS 164) The transcendental attitude is not abandoned or declared nonsense; but one attitude does not relate to the other as “false” to “true.”<sup>318</sup> In the

---

<sup>317</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960*. Tr. John O’Neill. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1970. (p. 108) Hereafter “Themes.” Merleau-Ponty approvingly speaks of the moment when “philosophy becomes the enterprise of describing living paradoxes.”

<sup>318</sup> It is interesting in this regard to note that Husserl had already been writing—privately—of “*Der transzendente Idealismus als Synthesis von natürlicher und transzendentaler Einstellung*.” (Husserl’s emphasis) See: Husserl, Edmund. *Husserliana XXXIV: Zur Phänomenologischen Reduktion (Texte aus dem Nachlass 1926-1935)*. Ed. Sebastian Luft. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002, p. 15 (Hereafter “Husserl”)

end, we must embrace the “contradictory characteristics”—which, says Merleau-Ponty, Husserl himself purposefully assigns it—of the reduction. (PS 161)

It is true that Merleau-Ponty cannot accept some of what Husserl regards to be the consequences of the reduction, such as the privileged perch of “absolute” (reflective) consciousness.<sup>319</sup> After all, the “incompleteness” of the reduction also means the limitedness, in that sense, of reflective thought. But in reading the later Merleau-Ponty in particular, it becomes increasingly clear to one that he has essentially folded the transcendental attitude, the stand-point of *phenomenological* consciousness, onto that of self-consciousness or “reflection” as such. This is neither mere semantic sloppiness nor an obvious transgression against Husserl himself. It is a consequence of his rejection of the strong division between psychology and philosophy, manifest throughout PSM, for example; reflection is not merely a “naturalistic” psychic act, to be sharply delineated from the heroic heights of the transcendental reduction. Given this re-orientation, Merleau-Ponty’s attacks in *VI* on the “philosophy of reflection,” as he calls it (*VI* 43), appear to be directed not at Husserl as such but at a kind of idealism that Husserl sometimes affirms, but which stems more originally from Kant.

At first, this is admittedly not obvious. Take the following passages:

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

and again:

---

<sup>319</sup> Merleau-Ponty critiques the annihilation of the world experiment (see, for example, PS 173-4) but otherwise gives even the description of the reduction in *Ideas I* a warm reception. (See PSM 56)

“...let us repeat that we reproach the philosophy of reflection not only for transforming the world into a noema, but also for distorting the being of the reflecting ‘subject’ by conceiving it as ‘thought’—and finally for rendering unthinkable its relations with other ‘subjects’ in the world that is common to them.” (VI 43)

It may seem now that Merleau-Ponty, after years of “face-saving” acrobatics, is now “finally” jettisoning Husserl for good. But the fact is that none of Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms here are new. Merleau-Ponty has already rejected transcendental idealism in PP, with its assumptions of the “transparency” of the world to reflective thought.<sup>320</sup> Indeed, the ghost of the “Preface” haunts this chapter of the *VI* in more ways than this: “It is essential to the reflective analysis that it start from a *de facto* situation” (VI 44) and “The search for the conditions of possibility is in principle posterior to actual experience...” (VI 45) are nothing more than restatements of the “existential” turn taken in PP and already discussed above.

But a careful reading of this chapter reveals that Merleau-Ponty’s real target is Kantian constructivism, which he gives credit to *Husserl* for piercing through:

“This is what Husserl brought frankly into the open... that is: every effort to comprehend the spectacle of the world from within and from the sources demands that we detach ourselves from the effective unfolding of our perceptions and from our perception of the world, that we cease being one with the concrete flux of our life in order to retrace the total bearing and principal articulations of the world upon which it opens.” (VI 45)

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty is not so much against “reflection” (or the transcendental attitude) as he is against a certain philosophy *of* reflection which effectively excises all consideration for the role of the “pre-reflective” in epistemological life. This is the

---

<sup>320</sup> “A logically consistent transcendental idealism rids the world of its opacity and its transcendence.” (PP xiii)

heart of his opposition to Kant and, indeed, the Kantian inflections of Husserl's own self-styled "transcendental" phenomenology.<sup>321</sup> A philosophy of reflection by itself

"...leaves untouched the twofold problem of the genesis of the existent world and of the genesis of the idealization performed by reflection and finally evokes and requires as its foundation a *hyper-reflection* where the ultimate problems would be taken seriously." (VI 46)

This, in effect, is Merleau-Ponty's identification of the "limits of phenomenology"—and a fulfilment of his promise to make of phenomenology a "phenomenology of phenomenology."<sup>322</sup> But because the "foundation" Merleau-Ponty refers to is in fact *less* determinate than reflection, and more of an exploration of its never-fully-recoverable under-side, it is not a replacement of what is provided by the "existential Husserl" but is in fact merely a further development of it. Merleau-Ponty's disagreement is with "pure correlation" of "subject and object," at least in an idealistic or quasi-idealistic construction (VI 47), and again with the notion of a "universal mind" (VI 49). But he sees Husserl as on the path of questioning these: "In recognizing that every reflection is eidetic and, as such, leaves untouched the problem of our unreflected being and that of the world, Husserl... agrees to take up the problem which the reflective attitude<sup>323</sup> ordinarily avoids—the discordance between its initial situation and its ends." (VI 46; compare: PS 163 and 179)

---

<sup>321</sup> Merleau-Ponty announces his position clearly already in the "Preface" of PP: "Descartes and particularly Kant *detached* the subject, or consciousness, by showing that I could not possibly apprehend anything as existing unless I first of all experienced myself as existing in the act of apprehending it." (PP x) Merleau-Ponty calls *this* the "idealist return to consciousness" which he expressly disavows. See also: "Husserl's transcendental is not Kant's..." (PP xv) It is of course the Kant of the first "Critique" that Merleau-Ponty has in mind in such remarks. He is far more sympathetic and even indebted to the third "Critique."

<sup>322</sup> Husserl's phrase, in fact. See Husserl, p. 176

<sup>323</sup> Note the terminology—"reflective" for "transcendental."



Merleau-Ponty finally comes to the idea—by way of Schelling, it would seem<sup>324</sup>—that philosophy as “reflection” must ultimately give way to a thinking of the rich middle between the knowable and the unknowable, the ideal world of thought and the real world of “wild being.” For this is the spring of human spirit, the soil of the self. Remarks Toadvine, “This state of continual beginning, of the need for continual reexamination of the paradoxical foundations of a reflection that attempts to grasp its own unreflective origins, could be considered the orienting theme of Merleau-Ponty’s own phenomenological method.” (Toadvine 240) It can scarcely be missed that this sort of method converges with Merleau-Ponty’s own “re-examination” of Husserl, the origin of phenomenology itself, and the (at least hitherto) “un-reflected.”

### *B. Essences and the Eidetic Reduction*

Commentators are divided over whether Merleau-Ponty accepts the eidetic reduction, but the evidence is plain that he was deeply preoccupied by the Husserlian notion of “essences” from first to last. It is true that he has little patience for the intuitionist resonances of Husserl’s *Wesenschau*, which he here calls a “myth” (VI 115-6) and there redescribes as the “emergence of truth in and through the psychological event.” (PSM 53) What becomes clear is that Merleau-Ponty is seeking a middle way between essentialism and nominalism, and he thinks Husserl, in the

---

<sup>324</sup> Schelling is discussed in detail in Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on “Nature.” (*Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Compiled and with notes from Dominique Ségler. Tr. Robert Vallier. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2003, esp. pp. 36-52) For an excellent treatment of Schelling’s role in Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy see: Patrick Burke, “Creativity and the Unconscious in Merleau-Ponty and Schelling.” In *Schelling Now: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Jason M. Wirth. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005

end, was doing exactly the same. This is why he cites the Husserlian distinction between “exact” and “morphological” essences (PSM 67), the unlikeness of mathematics to phenomenology (PSM 67), Husserl’s own strict parallelism between the realms of the eidetic and the empirical and a random passage to this effect in “Die Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft,” (PSM 72) and so on. Furthermore: “[Husserl’s] notion of an experienced essence, or an eidetic experience, contains in germ the consequences I have just drawn from it.” (PSM 72)

What Merleau-Ponty is communicating is a shift he sees in Husserl from a pure philosophy of reflection—an orientation towards the logical, theoretical, transcendental, eidetic—to a philosophy of existence *in which*, we find out, reflection plays a crucial but non-foundational<sup>325</sup> role. It is in this light that Merleau-Ponty understands both the phenomenological and eidetic reductions. To take the latter first, Merleau-Ponty explains that phenomenology is about not only “essences” but also “facticity.” This follows from phenomenology’s being about “achieving direct and primitive contact with the world.” (PP vii) Ideality is now characterized in purely instrumental terms: the eidetic reduction “prevail[s] over facticity” through ideality, though the “prevailing” is for the sake not of ideality but rather for a grasping of the things themselves—the “fish” that are caught in the “fisherman’s net.” Surely Merleau-Ponty is right that we do not reach the *things* by dwelling only in *essences*. We may not reach the things as completely as we wish, but there is something between absolute knowledge and total ignorance. In this respect it is

---

<sup>325</sup> In a strictly ontological sense, that is—reflection is still for Merleau-Ponty the foundation of the activity of philosophy, since “unreflective experience is known to us only through reflection...” (PP 49) It is this sort of insight that sets the stage for the later notion of “hyper-reflection.”

helpful to remember that Husserl himself embraced a version of the term “empiricist,” which must have meant that he privileges facts over essences, but was vaguely aware of the fact that reflection can only know essences—hence engendering the most enduring epistemological paradox of Merleau-Ponty’s meditations.<sup>326</sup>

Just what are essences? Essences are the manner and style of being only: the *Sosein* and not the *Sein*. And just as there is an essential “incompleteness” with respect to the phenomenological reduction, so there is a limit also on imaginative variation—thus there is no pure *eidos*, no “total variation.” Furthermore, eidetic variation is not just done in phenomenology, but in all sciences. In one place Merleau-Ponty admits: “In presenting the matter as I have, I am pushing Husserl further than he wished to go himself.” (PSM 72) Merleau-Ponty wants to admit of a “fundamental homogeneity” of the “inductive and essential” modes of knowledge, which Husserl always maintained was impossible. But Husserl’s own thinking, including his focus on the concrete and lived stream of life, forces on us an “inevitable dialectic of the concept of essence.”

All of this allows Merleau-Ponty finally to say:

“...we can say that the problem with which we were concerned at the beginning [of PSM]—must we be for fact or for essence, for time or eternity, for the positive science of man or philosophy?—was bypassed in the later thought of Husserl. Here he no longer considers essence as separated from fact, eternity from time, or philosophic thought from history.” (PSM 93)

---

<sup>326</sup> See PP 57fn44

## V. Concluding Reflections

I began this chapter by suggesting an integral relationship between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and his reading of Husserl. I hope to have shown this through the course of my recapitulation of and commentary on this reading, but these may now be supplemented and reinforced with some analogies. Thus, Merleau-Ponty stands to Husserl, I want to say, much as humanity, in Merleau-Ponty's Husserlian philosophy, stands to the "world," that is "the...pre-existent Logos" (PP xxiii) or "that jointing and framing of Being which is being realized through man" (PS 181). Or again, Merleau-Ponty is to Husserl as language (or logos—the "theme of philosophy") is to the "pre-language of the mute world" (VI 126), or finally, as Spirit is to Nature, the first finding a voice in the second, the second finding its depth in the first. The holistic vision that emerges here—of man and world, spirit and nature—is only prefigured or sketched in outline in Merleau-Ponty's writings, but it is determinate enough to show how Merleau-Ponty could have ascribed so much of his philosophy<sup>327</sup>—in my view validly—to another philosopher, Husserl, who for his part nevertheless went so much of the time in a contrary direction. Merleau-Ponty's views of reciprocity and reversibility, identity and difference, paradox and the "between"—they are all relevant to and implicit in his developmental—and *organic*—appropriation of Husserlian thought.

---

<sup>327</sup> Obviously I do not make a sharp distinction between the philosophies of the "earlier" and "later" Merleau-Ponty. The material presented in the present chapter alone afford, I think, ample (though perhaps not sufficient) evidence that this is so.

Is Merleau-Ponty finally, in the end, just a mere “reader” or “commentator” of Husserl? This is the wrong question to ask. Should Plotinus be relegated to being a commentator of Plato and Aristotle? Should Averroës be dismissed as a commentator of Aristotle? Surely great philosophy can be done through commenting, bringing as it were “new truths into being,” as Merleau-Ponty himself puts it. The commentator is not likely to be celebrated as a trailblazer, but without good commentators, it is unlikely that any coherent “trails” could be discerned from the dense, sometimes contradictory outpouring of a thinker like Husserl. All the same, Merleau-Ponty does not merely comment—he has the talent to develop, to take further and radicalize and see the hidden implications of, the texts he analyzes. The texts speak to him, and he speaks back.

Merleau-Ponty’s “version” of phenomenology has been disavowed by certain Husserlians, but it must be said that their “Husserl,” while consistent for the most part with Husserl’s own self-declarations of the nature and consciously stated intentions of his own philosophizing, is not always easy to defend philosophically. A narrow interpretation of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty would argue, would fatefully turn its back on Husserl’s own underlying sensitivity to the inadequacies of his own earlier conceptions, as he himself surged forward. In other words, the “strict Husserlian” would fall well short of Husserl’s own level, to say nothing of expanding on him! Some Husserlians have of course embraced Merleau-Ponty, but selectively, if only to demonstrate that Husserl either anticipated or fully explicated the same things Merleau-Ponty discusses, and perhaps in an even better way. Merleau-Ponty would of course have been happy to acknowledge his debt (egotism is not one of his

vices), but he would also insist that Husserl himself remains too inconsistent for us to try to rely on him exclusively as the “voice of phenomenology.” There are too many strains in him, and it is necessary to editorialize, to edit and to bring to light what is true and false, necessary and dispensable in his thinking.

There are obvious but fateful consequences to this sort of reading of the Merleau-Ponty/Husserl relationship. If we accept Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl, we implicitly reject much of *Husserl’s* self-interpretation—his stated intentions, and his framing of the transcendental-phenomenological project. But is this not familiar hermeneutical territory? It is indeed an invoking of the hermeneutic *topos* of “knowing the philosopher better than he/she knew himself/herself.” But even this is not so simple, since, on Merleau-Ponty’s account, Husserl *already knew* what Merleau-Ponty “knows” about Husserl, just not with the same clarity or univocity. It is to Merleau-Ponty’s lasting credit that, decades before Donn Welton’s *The Other Husserl*<sup>328</sup>, the French thinker had already painted a vivid portrait of the inner conflictedness of Husserl’s thought. He had already identified and embraced “the other Husserl,” who he knew already as the “pre-jection” (my word, but Merleau-Pontian in spirit) of himself. It is true that Merleau-Ponty does not feel himself constrained by the history of “traditional” interpretation of Husserl’s works, or by what Husserl may have believed he himself was accomplishing through his own philosophizing. But in this way Merleau-Ponty’s attitude towards Husserl is much like that of a healthy child towards its parent:

---

<sup>328</sup> See: Welton, Donn. *The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000.

adulation is balanced by critical judgment, emulation by creative initiative. Would we want anything else?

In one place Merleau-Ponty nicely summarizes his understanding of the meaning and progress of Husserl's philosophy:

"Thus, a philosophy [Husserl's] which seemed, more than any other, bent upon understanding natural being as the object and pure correlate of consciousness rediscovers through the very exercise of reflexive rigor a natural stratum in which the spirit is virtually buried in the concordant functioning of bodies within brute being."<sup>329</sup>

Traditionally, the plausibility of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl has been thought to turn on this: whether one sees Husserl as a self-divided, Janus-faced figure, working progressively to an adequately transcendental-existential conception of phenomenology, or whether one sees him rather as a more or less consistent Olympian thinker of absolute consciousness. But what I have tried to do, in my small way, is to say rather that what makes Merleau-Ponty's reading plausible is an acceptance of Merleau-Ponty's own style and substance of thought. But this brings out a kind of special paradox, whereby the line between the two thinkers becomes wholly blurred, exactly as if we were entering the "*intermonde*" Merleau-Ponty writes about in the later works.<sup>330</sup> For if Merleau-Ponty is right *that he is (in so many words) a Husserlian thinker*—at least, a thinker of Husserl's inner thoughts—then it turns out that to accept Merleau-Ponty's "Husserl" under the banner of accepting *him* (Merleau-Ponty) is to have *already* accepted *Husserl*. This

---

<sup>329</sup> Themes, p. 83

<sup>330</sup> He uses the term in *VI* (48, 84) The term is mentioned already at the time of *PP*, but in a slightly different sense. See also the reference to "intercorporeality" in *PS* (168)

might for some be hard to believe, but then again, perhaps, in its own way, it may only be the radical fulfilment of the idea of a “hermeneutic circle”!



## Chapter Four: Merleau-Ponty's Mature Ontology of Nature

"We will show how the concept of Nature is always the expression of an ontology—and its privileged expression."

--Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>331</sup>

### I. Introduction

Some of Merleau-Ponty's most important final writings, I would argue, are found in *The Visible and the Invisible*<sup>332</sup>, which Merleau-Ponty had been working on as a major statement of his philosophy at the time of his sudden death. The goal of the present chapter is to convey some of the essential features of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, as developed in the aforementioned work, as well as his increasingly "dialectical" understanding of nature and spirit, all the while emphasizing the "(semi-) *naturalistic*" element therein. Accordingly it will undertake a detailed examination of the *Nature* lectures of 1956-1960 (as they come down to us, mostly in the form of meticulous student notes), in conjunction with *VI*, exploring the ways in which Merleau-Ponty thinks through the questions of being, consciousness, and their reciprocal relationship with the help of an intensive investigation of "Nature," particularly in the biological sciences and the history of philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty's treatment of "nature" is to this day little known, despite the fact that the *Nature* lectures collectively comprise a volume of roughly equal length

---

<sup>331</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Compiled and with notes from Dominique Séglaard. Tr. Rober Vallier. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2003. (p. 204) Hereafter designated as "N" in all citations, and "the *Nature* lectures" inside the body.

<sup>332</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Tr. Alphonso Lingis. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1969. Hereafter "VI."

to *VI*. It is true that the lectures were not intended to be published as a book precisely in the form we have them, but it is also true that Merleau-Ponty intended to use much of the material from them as parts of his published writings, including sections of *VI* itself.<sup>333</sup> From a detailed examination of both texts I conclude that Merleau-Ponty's often commented-upon rejection of dualism—which of course hardly distinguishes him in the history of philosophy both before and after Descartes—is in fact most properly characterized as a philosophy of complementarity, one that seeks to understand the principles of identity and difference, both in the broadest of ontological contexts as well as narrower ones (such as the ontology of the body), in a way that does justice to the role that each of them plays in the structuration of Being, that is, the structure of the “visible/invisible” world. This discussion will also take us well into the fifth chapter and dissertation conclusion, which ascertain the “upshot” of Merleau-Ponty's dialectic for the phenomenological method.

It is my view that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is “dialectical” but in a wholly new sense, one that is driven by the exigencies of thinking the “natural” origins of subjectivity (in the sense of spirit, or human consciousness) from within, and of thereby recasting the phenomenological project as one that inheres in “ontology” in a broader sense. From the course and progression of the *Nature* lectures, one can see Merleau-Ponty's thought grow more *organicist*—concerned

---

<sup>333</sup> See for example: N, xvi (from the “Translator's Introduction” by Robert Vallier). Some of the material does in fact make it into various essays, such as “Bergson In the Making” and the already examined “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” and certain concepts—the “flesh,” for example—are discussed in both texts in some detail, as we will see below. See: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “Bergson in the Making.” Tr. Richard C. McCleary. In *Signs*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964. (pp. 182-191); Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “The Philosopher and His Shadow.” Tr. Richard M. McCleary. In *Signs*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (pp. 159-181)

with the principle of “wholeness” and its realization in the “organic forms” of “life.” Of course the “naturalism” Merleau-Ponty espouses is not the “naturalism” embraced by scientifically-minded modern writers, whose form we also find in Husserl’s writings, but another, more at once phenomenologically-rooted and romantically-inspired kind, which develops throughout the *Nature* lectures explicitly and in the rest of Merleau-Ponty’s other work implicitly. Ontology will, it is true, “take precedence,” in a certain way, but *not* because it is the “foundation” of phenomenology, in the way Husserl conceived phenomenology to be the foundation of ontology. Merleau-Ponty’s intention is not to invert this order of dependence, but rather to make phenomenology answer to its existential situation, which now comes to mean, to bear the shadow of its natural, wild, and pre-reflective origins.

## II. Nature and the Ontology of the *Nature* Lectures

### *A. Introduction: The Nature Lectures, The Visible and the Invisible, and the Project of “Ontology”*

In the *Nature* lectures, Merleau-Ponty declares, “The ontological problem is the dominant problem, to which all other problems are subordinated.” (N 134) What exactly is the ontological problem? Merleau-Ponty does not answer this question directly, but we have some telling clues. What Merleau-Ponty wants to avoid, he indicates, are at least three “isms”: “Naturalism, humanism, theism... These three words have lost all clear meaning in our culture, and they ceaselessly pass into one

another.” (N 135) We have an even better specification of the problem in a roughly contemporaneous working note, in which Merleau-Ponty writes:

“Necessity of a return to ontology—The ontological question and its ramifications: the subject-object question, the question of inter-subjectivity, *the question of Nature*. Outline of ontology projected as an ontology of brute Being—and of logos. Draw up the picture of wild Being, prolonging my article on Husserl. But the disclosure of this world, of this Being, remains a dead letter as long as we do not uproot ‘objective philosophy’ (Husserl). An *Ursprungklärung* is needed.” (WN 165, my italics)

The reference to Husserl is clearly positive. What is needed is an alternative ontology—clearly inspired by Husserlian phenomenology, particularly the “genetic” variety—to that of objectivism. The “question of Nature” is supposed to fit right into this project. The problem, in short, is how to forge this new ontology, how to overcome the “strabism” of Western ontology since Descartes (N 165), but also, to some extent, of phenomenology itself (N 72), which in its “idealist” (i.e., Husserlian) form is still somewhat haunted, we might say, by Descartes’ ghost.

*VI* has proven to be a stumbling block for some, as it can come across as a curious amalgam of philosophy and poetry. At times highly esoteric (especially when the “working notes” are factored in, some of which are brilliantly clear, others all but inscrutable), it leaves readers with a certain sense of puzzlement, even bewitchment, through its extensive use of metaphor and new terminology. A good way to appreciate Merleau-Ponty’s increasingly nuanced and technical explorations, his new phenomenological ontology, is in fact to consult his investigations of nature. Of course, these are not at all sufficient in themselves to expose Merleau-Ponty’s ontological project, since they are intended explicitly to be preparatory<sup>334</sup> to

---

<sup>334</sup> Explains Merleau-Ponty: “...the ontology of Nature as the way toward ontology—the way we prefer because the evolution of the concept of Nature is a more convincing propaedeutic, [since it]

something else, namely a fuller engagement with some of the themes Merleau-Ponty is more well known for, including perception and embodiment. Merleau-Ponty's treatment of *these* topics in the *Nature* lectures is indirect, for example through the study of animal "*Umwelten*" or the study of the ontological implications of their physiology.

There are other interesting differences between the two texts, when compared side-by-side. Thus while *VI* emphasizes discontinuity between past and present philosophy and speaks of radical renewal (*VI* 83, 165), etc., the lectures reflect the flip-side, offering a critical commentary that establishes links to the past and seeks to "rectify" it. (N 186) Through a critical engagement with the philosophical tradition and examination of the science of his day, Merleau-Ponty in the latter text strives for a balancing of opposites and, in effect, a new equilibrium, between theoretical poles like "finalism" (teleology) and "mechanism."

The multi-disciplinary *Nature* seminars cover a vast amount of terrain, exploring no less than the scientific, theological, and philosophical underpinnings of Western notions of nature, animality, God, and the human mind. Through an early rejection of the views of Laplace—a kind of "stand-in" for modern-scientific views analogous to Augustine's role at the start of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*—Merleau-Ponty reveals himself in the *Nature* lectures to be a champion of temporality, becoming, and holicity, as against an (exclusive or lop-sided) emphasis on spatiality, being, and analyticity.<sup>335</sup> In this way he is working in

---

more clearly shows the necessity of the ontological mutation." (N 204) (It is not clear from this part of the text what the author is referring to as the "ontological mutation.")

<sup>335</sup> Take, for example, N, 89; in his stating of Laplace's views, he is negatively also giving his own.

obvious concert with “life philosophy” as well as figures such as Bergson and Whitehead, only now in a more deeply phenomenological register that, once again, comes more significantly to the fore in *VI*—notwithstanding those readings of the text that, rather unjustifiably in my opinion, downplay its phenomenological character. The contents of *VI* in fact bear continuity in substance, if not always in style, to *The Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>336</sup> and its questions of mind and body, perception and reflection, language, and the nature of phenomenology and Husserl’s thought. However, the latter text is more intent than ever, it seems, to describe the ultimate nature of reality itself—or at least, to describe the task of “interrogation” that circles around this ontological ultimacy. The questions of “Being” and “Nature” come to the forefront in the later philosophy; the issues of perception, embodiment, intersubjectivity, etc., are treated as illustrative or disclosive of the depths of Being and human involvement in it. The influence of Heidegger is unmistakable, but for the most part unspoken; this is probably because it is more so Heideggerian themes (many of which are anchored in Husserl) that Merleau-Ponty appropriates, and less so Heideggerian conclusions. It is also important to realize that Merleau-Ponty has been interested in ontology, particularly the nature-spirit question, from the first; *The Structure of Behavior* is a kind of (evidently inadequate) phenomenological ontology in its own right.<sup>337</sup>

---

<sup>336</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Tr. Colin Smith. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962 (Hereafter “PP.”)

<sup>337</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Structure of Behavior*. Tr. A.L. Fisher. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963. For a good discussion of that text with respect to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature, see: Toadvine, Ted. *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009

After that earlier work, however, Merleau-Ponty took his point of departure more explicitly from Husserl and the phenomenological reduction, as we have already seen. *PP* is essentially motivated by the paradox of perception whereby the world—the things—become really (and not merely “subjectively,” as through a representation) available to me, despite the fact that they are transcendent to me. This specifically phenomenological paradox made it necessary to rethink the real nature of the “I-think” or ego who perceives—far from being a disembodied *cogito*, the “I” must be a body, the “body-subject,” whose very being is worldly in the same sense that the world’s is. Body and world form a circuit, a system of reciprocity, which, as we will see, Merleau-Ponty continues in the later writings to meditate on intensively, though with reference to what he terms an essential “fold” or “hollow” in Being.<sup>338</sup>

However, on its own, *PP* is, in a certain respect, locked in its own form of Husserl-inherited subjectivism, permitting the world to arise in consciousness, albeit pre-intentionally (or through a deeper “motor” or “operative” intentionality), but not explaining at all how it is that this *world*, or transcendent Being, could and does give rise to *consciousness*—and, more basically, to *organic life*. That phenomenology instructs itself explicitly to avoid this kind of question does not prevent Merleau-Ponty from broaching it fulsomely anyway. Dupond describes

---

<sup>338</sup> Here are two of the many instances in which Merleau-Ponty makes use of this idea, both taken from working notes: “It is not the eye that sees (the eye thing). But it is not the soul. There is a ‘body of the mind’ (Valéry), something that is gathered in the apparatus of vision and hollows out the place there from which one sees. ...” (VI 222); “—And what replaces the antagonistic and solidary reflective movement (the immanence of the ‘idealists’) is the fold or hollow of Being having by principle an *outside*, the architectonics of the configuration.... There are fields in intersection...” (VI 227)

thusly the difference in approach to nature that we find between Merleau-Ponty's earlier and later philosophy:

"In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the relation between nature and spirit [*esprit*], as the reciprocal foundation (*Fundierung*) and the gateway to the enigma of the world, was dealt with by way of spirit (incarnated in nature) rather than nature—a posture which reiterates the duality of subject and object). In the [*Nature*] courses at the Collège de France, the relation between nature and spirit is one of reciprocal envelopment, and the gateway to this enigma is nature rather than spirit."<sup>339</sup>

If it is true that phenomenology abstains on principled grounds from questions about life or being "before" consciousness—and going against this, to some extent, is the significance of an inquiry into "Nature" from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological vantage-point—this does not mean it cannot contemplate the paradoxical distance (unknowability, opacity, "depth") of Nature as the source of life and thought and yet also the continuity of consciousness with Nature itself—or, put differently, the "prolongation" of consciousness in "the things" that Merleau-Ponty claims to characterize vision, for example. (VI 271) Merleau-Ponty spends a good deal of time thinking about both the activity or "autoproduction" of sense in and by Nature *itself*, on the one hand (this is most evident through the activities of organic life, whose seemingly "miraculous" developmental processes defy causal explanation), and the naturalness of human existence, as revealed through the "intertwining" of body and world already laid out for us; he further considers the implications of this unity for the reconceptualization of the questions of subject/object and intersubjectivity (the latter of which we will be able to say little, unfortunately, in the present chapter).

---

<sup>339</sup> Dupond, Pascal. *Dictionnaire Merleau-Ponty*. Paris: Ellipses, 2008. (p. 153; my translation) Hereafter "Dupond."



### *B. Defining "Nature"*

As we have already seen, Merleau-Ponty is thoroughly opposed to conceiving Nature as "object," including lifeless "mass of matter," and so on. What it is, in itself, is not the "in-itself" of the tradition, strictly opposed to a "for-itself," but rather what Merleau-Ponty calls (after Schelling) "wild Being," or the "barbaric principle," which is more basic than the subject-object distinction (similarly to the "flesh," a related notion, as we will see below). (VI 200) The "wildness" of nature is not such that it is something that must be "molded" or "informed" in a Kantian way in order to be made sense out of, but rather that it contains all potentialities, it is all things, but without having become, qua Nature itself, any of them. (N 212) At the outset of the lectures, Merleau-Ponty offers several important indications pertaining to his developing concept of nature. Here I will quote them in full and then comment on subsequently:

"There is nature wherever there is a life that has meaning, but where, however, there is not a thought; hence the kinship with the vegetative." (N 3)

"Nature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduction of meaning." (N 3)

"[Nature] has an interior, it is determined from within; hence the opposition of 'natural' to 'accidental.' Yet nature is different from man: it is not instituted by him and is opposed to custom, to discourse." (N 3)

"Nature is the primordial—that is, the nonconstructed, the noninstituted; hence the idea of an eternity of nature (the eternal return), of a solidity. ...It is our soil [*soil*]—not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us." (N 3)

The sentiments expressed in these four quotations are clearly meant to set the direction of the investigations that are to follow. To recapitulate, they describe Nature in the following positive and negative terms: 1) possessing or embodying a meaning, 2) producing a meaning in or out of itself, 3) not having to do with or being posited by thought, 4) possessing an interiority, 5) being distinguishable from the artificial, conventional, or man-made, 6) being eternal and primordial, and 7) lying not “before” us but rather “beneath” us—and, as Merleau-Ponty will also say, within us. (N 212-3) These are admittedly schematic properties, and it is not yet clear how or if they interlock, but already they reveal quite a bit. Merleau-Ponty’s conception of Nature is that of an ontological ground (of sorts) that is non-objective (cf. its “interiority”) and radically primordial—and thus pre-reflective: “...a type of englobing being in which we discover ourselves already invested prior to all reflection.” (N 84) That is, it is both “non-instituted” (a reference to Husserl’s notion of *Stiftung*, institution or establishment) and *essentially* so (it is non-*institutable*). But even more important, it is presupposed in every institution, in every human project, indeed, in embodiment and perception themselves. At times, Merleau-Ponty singles out this property of Nature most, namely its haunting “presence by absence,” or, temporally speaking, its being a “permanent past,” always behind us.

What Merleau-Ponty is trying to get at here is perhaps best seen through his critique of Bergson, who he clearly admires but also faults for having missed this all-important feature of the natural. Merleau-Ponty attributes this blindness of Bergson’s to a certain “positivism.” Merleau-Ponty begins his critique by acknowledging favorably that “Bergson... posits consciously a paradox inherent to

perception: Being is anterior to perception, and this primordial Being is conceivable only in relation to perception.” (N 55) But he goes on to criticize Bergson for “making of this prehuman a being with which we coexist.” (N 58) There can be no *simultaneity* of reflection (or “intuition”) with Nature—a major point that Merleau-Ponty will stress again and again, coming from the epistemological side of the question of Nature. Merleau-Ponty’s verdict: “In Bergson, the official position of positivism also ruins the idea of Nature.” (N 70)

Husserl, Merleau-Ponty claims, improves on Bergson in this regard, in a passage that calls to mind what we have already said about the continuity of world and consciousness:

“Husserl rehabilitated the idea of Nature by this idea of jointure to a common truth that subjects would continue but of which they would not be the initiators. All that happens is not explained by interiority, or by exteriority, but by a chance that is the concordance between these two givens and is assured by Nature.” (N 78)

That *chance* plays a part in the “explanation” of the inner/outer structure of Being once again underscores that there is no complete “logos,” no complete explanation, of Being, or Nature, in itself—not, however, because it is just out of our “finite” human grasp, such that God could understand it whereas “we” cannot, but because there is a “savage” principle of being that underlies the essential polarities encountered in reflexive thought, something connected with “the flesh,” which we will discuss later on.

Merleau-Ponty is also interested in the “productivity” of nature:

“The concept of Nature does not evoke only the residue of what had not been constructed by me, but also a productivity which is not ours, although we can use it—that is, an originary productivity that continues [to operate] beneath the artificial creations of man. It both partakes of the most ancient, and is something always new. Nature is, as Lucien Herr said in his article dedicated to Hegel in *La grande encyclopédie*, an untamed thing: ‘Nature is there from the first day.’ Nature is not exhausted or used up by the very fact that endures.” (N 125)

Thus, part of what lends opacity to nature is its never-ceasing capacity for invention and self-renewal. This is something Bergson of course was highly impressed with as well (not to mention Whitehead, who Merleau-Ponty favorably comments on and for whom the principle of “creativity” is the “ultimate category,” higher even than divinity). As is clear from the passage cited above, the relation of natural productivity to human creativity for Merleau-Ponty resembles that assigned by some of the German Romantics to art.<sup>340</sup> Like artistic creation, indeed, Nature’s “autoproduction” of meaning is open, fluid, and always unfinished—a point Merleau-Ponty makes through a reference to Heraclitus: “Heraclitus says that nature is a child at play; it gives meaning, but in the manner of a child who is playing, and this meaning is never total.” (N 84)

Finally, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of Nature should be understood in relation to that of “spirit”—mind, consciousness, language, thought. Toward the end of the *Nature* courses he offers the following telling recap: “Our subject: Regarding Nature, the concern was to study it as an ontological leaf—and in particular, regarding life,

---

<sup>340</sup> Though I cannot explore this connection fully here, there are many other indications that Merleau-Ponty is turning to the German Romantics where they left off in terms of the philosophy of nature. Above all, he writes very glowingly about Schelling’s conception of nature, as we will see below. And like the German Romantics and German Idealists, he cites Kant’s third *Critique* repeatedly, and in much the same spirit as they do: in order to draw it out beyond itself, in order to attain a more satisfactory result of Kant’s inaugural investigations into the real nature of life, the organism, creativity, and teleology. Also, it is important in this respect to look at the way that Kant’s third *Critique* somewhat challenges the framework of his own transcendental idealism, in a way that Schelling later does more definitively, and in the way that Merleau-Ponty tries to do in relation to Husserl. For some references along these lines see: N, 83, 84

the concern was to study the unfolding of the leaf of Nature—*regarding the human*, the concern is *to take him at his point of emergence in Nature.*” (N 208, my emphasis) Dupond helpfully captures the sense in which the concept of “spirit” (*l’esprit*) ties in with that of what Merleau-Ponty is calling “the human,” and which Husserl has identified with the “personal”:

“The notion of spirit habitually designates a figure of being in which man recognizes his originality or his own proper mode of being. It thus forms a network with other notions which also have the function of naming the ‘escape’ of man from nature: culture, history, *Logos*, reason.” (Dupond, 70)

Dupond further explains the sense in which Merleau-Ponty’s attitude towards Nature vis-à-vis Spirit should be appreciated historically: “[Merleau-Ponty inverts] the movement of the history of modern thought, which enters philosophy via spirit, [and starts from] nature, in allowing himself the possibility of comprehending the emergence, the *surgissement* of spirit...” (Dupond 70, my translation)

Merleau-Ponty’s principal historical inspiration concerning his conception of Nature appears to be Schelling. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty seems to identify at least partially with “romantic naturalism” as opposed to “scientific naturalism”—a distinction he himself fitfully makes. (N 135) Thus he argues that we must preserve the idea of “savage nature” from the Romantics, saving it for example from Kantian-humanist designs of a thinker like his own contemporary Neo-Kantian Léon Brunschwig. (N 35) What Merleau-Ponty finds most impressive about Schelling’s notion of Nature are the same things he tends to emphasize in his own explorations of it, for example its description as “wild Being” that haunts consciousness as an irrecoverable ground, as well as the idea of “...the subjective-objective that Nature

will always be.” (N 70) What Merleau-Ponty finds in this idea of the “subjective-objective” is illustrated by him with reference to a kind of reciprocity of the two orders, subjective and objective, in a quote that also helps to remind us of how far Merleau-Ponty is from abandoning a phenomenological first-person perspective for, say, third-person “realism”:

“We are the parents of a Nature of which we are also the children. It is in human being that things become conscious of themselves; but the relation is reciprocal: human being is also the becoming-conscious of things.”<sup>341</sup> (N 43)

Scientific naturalism, as this term is widely taken, of course would deny both of these conclusions. It does not see the sense in which “we are the parents of Nature” because it denies any ontological or constitutional role to perception (fearing idealism), and it does not think of human beings as the seat of Nature’s own reflexivity because it has tacitly accepted the Cartesian principle of the pure exteriority, and hence deadness, of natural being. There is no “autoproduction” in Nature, there are only causal-mechanistic processes governed by the “laws of nature,” set in motion by the mysterious burst of energy called the “Big Bang.”

Of course, there is always the danger of “anthropomorphizing” nature, making it into a kind of intelligence or consciousness, which Merleau-Ponty is well aware of: “If Nature is not an object of thought, that is, a simple correlative of a thought, it is decidedly not a subject either, and for the same reason: its opacity, its enveloping. It is an obscure principle.” (N 120) Merleau-Ponty’s “Nature” is not, therefore, like Hegel’s “Spirit,” that is, a “self” that finds itself reflected back to itself

---

<sup>341</sup> Compare: “Not only must Nature become vision, but human being must also become Nature...” (N 47) And notice the phraseology here: “Becoming-nature of man which is the becoming-man of nature.” (N 185)

in (or as) nature. Rather, it is an “obscure principle” that unfolds partially in consciousness, yet also partially outside of it—because it is more “ancient” than consciousness itself and stands in irreducible tension with it.

Schelling’s philosophy of Nature thus teaches Merleau-Ponty key lessons about the limits of objective thought and of reflection, which objectify nature but must fail to capture its depths. Thus, invoking Schelling, Merleau-Ponty observes:

“A poetic consciousness recognizes that it does not possess its object totally, that it can understand it only by a true creation, and that it creates clarity by an operation that is not deductive but creative. Poetic consciousness, overcome by its object, must get hold of itself again, but without ever being able to separate itself from its history.”<sup>342</sup> (N 50)

The theme of non-coincidence of reflection and object-of-reflection is of course a major one in Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology (and epistemology) generally, lying at the root of his conception of “hyper-reflection” and the method of “interrogation.” What Merleau-Ponty finds, in other words, is that Schelling’s is a “phenomenology of pre-reflexive Being” (N 41) that effects a “reflection on what is not reflection.” (N 45) Thus Merleau-Ponty’s own particular fascination with Schelling does not lie simply with the latter’s anti-Cartesianism but also, one might say, with his anti-Kantianism (and anti-idealism generally).<sup>343</sup> Schelling, like Merleau-Ponty, denies that consciousness is coextensive with meaning. (Husserl, with genetic phenomenology and the concept of the “life-world” lying beneath the constructions

---

<sup>342</sup> These ideas reappear in reference to Whitehead’s philosophy. “It is this stubbornness that subtends all creation: ‘it belongs to the essence of the universe to pass into a future.’” (N 121) In stark contrast, there is the devastating assessment of Sartre’s philosophy that it has “no place for a conception of Nature or for a conception of history.” (N 70) This follows from Sartre’s dualism of the in-itself and for-itself, of which Merleau-Ponty never tires in criticizing.

<sup>343</sup> See in this regard Merleau-Ponty’s interesting remark: “[Schelling’s] conception is the only possible form of realism.” (N 50)

of thought, had surely been heading in this direction, Merleau-Ponty would add, but the seductions of an all-encompassing transcendental consciousness remained.)

In my view, what is key to Merleau-Ponty's appreciation of Schelling is the fact that the German thinker stood at the summit of—and he effects a certain reversal of—a mature tradition of idealist thinking, beginning at least with Kant and culminating in Hegel's "System." That Merleau-Ponty understands his own role to parallel Schelling's in this regard is evident from a passage like this one:

"Schelling started from transcendental idealism around 1800 and wondered how to rehabilitate the idea of Nature in the framework of reflexive philosophy. *Yet this problem of transcendental idealism is also Husserl's.*" (N 71; my emphasis)

In terms of Schelling's infamous relation<sup>344</sup> to Hegel and the latter's "dialectical" system, Merleau-Ponty's verdict is accordingly favorable to the former: "Schelling thought this thesis of speculative philosophy at a higher level of rigor than did Hegel because of his conception of the empirical; the identity of the finite and the infinite is thought by him in a more decisive way."<sup>345</sup> (N 47)

### *C. Nature and the Sciences of Life*

Because of its pre-reflective and non-objective character, Nature is hard to investigate "frontally," so to speak, which is what allows Merleau-Ponty to begin to

---

<sup>344</sup> Hegel drew copiously from the younger Schelling but famously criticized the latter in the preface of the *Phenomenology*, albeit veiledly, calling Schelling's Absolute "the night in which all cows are black." Schelling would go on to heavily criticize Hegelian philosophy—or at least its pretensions to completeness—throughout his long career, well after Hegel's own death.

<sup>345</sup> Hegel is of course famous for having identified a "true infinity" which incorporates finite difference into its make-up, as opposed to the "bad infinity" that merely negates the finite. Schelling's thinking does not, however, allow infinity to have the "last word," so to speak, in *any* sense. It is in this sense that he thinks their "identity" more thoroughly. (We will examine the theme of "identity and difference" more closely below.)



try lateral approaches to it, including the study of the work of the natural sciences, above all modern (in his time, up-to-date) biology. But how exactly does Merleau-Ponty see as the link between biology and his own philosophical investigation of nature? He begins to explain it through the notion of “experience”:

“...Nature is an all-encompassing something we cannot think starting from concepts, let alone deductions, but we must rather think it starting from experience, and in particular, experience in its most regulated form—that is, science.” (N 87)

What Merleau-Ponty means by “science” is broadly encompasses all controlled, observation-based procedural disciplines, including psychology.

Merleau-Ponty’s use of science is extremely subtle and sophisticated. It certainly does not consist of a simple appropriation of the “scientific method,” but is instead an interrogation of experience—the domain common to philosophy (at least as phenomenology), science, and even religion, art, and literature (Merleau-Ponty famously turns to painters and writers for inspiration, and the *Nature* lectures are no exception in this regard, as demonstrated by an extended discussion of Proust therein). Though he undertakes an overview of the physical sciences, including relativity theory and quantum mechanics, of which we will say a bit more later on, he primarily examines the researches of scientists who focus on animality and behavior, familiar old themes in Merleau-Ponty’s work.

Merleau-Ponty’s method is not inductive. Philosophy does not simply generalize from results, if this is indeed what scientists do; it interprets science according to philosophical categories whose legitimacy depends not merely on

external verification-procedures but, we might say, also on phenomenological authenticity. Philosophy and science are to be conceived as partners in a dialogue.

Indeed, on science and scientific consciousness, there are ways in which Merleau-Ponty's position has in fact not changed significantly from Husserl's (from the later period especially). Take, for example, the following remark:

"Science is not an unmotivated instance. We have to psychoanalyze science, purify it. Scientific consciousness lives in the natural attitude, as Husserl said, and it ignores Nature because it is there: it is a naïve and uncritical enjoyment of the natural certitude." (N 85)

And again:

"The concern of the philosopher is to see; that of the scientist is to find a foothold. ... The philosopher must see behind the back of the physicist what the physicist himself does not see." (N 86-7)

In other words, the war of philosophy and science is a false one; even Husserl's strict division between eidetic and non-eidetic disciplines, as we have seen, is believed to be exaggerated by Merleau-Ponty. Scientific evidence aids and instructs the philosopher, even as philosophy puts scientific research into perspective. Indeed philosophers, too, can be reckless in their own way, as Merleau-Ponty makes clear in his rebuke of Heidegger's spurious etymologies, concluding from this that "...it is dangerous to leave all freedom to the philosopher."<sup>346</sup> (N 86-7) The philosophy of Nature is thus not a kind of secret knowledge or "superscience" to rival science (N 204), in the way, perhaps, Heideggerian philosophy (or "poetry,"

---

<sup>346</sup> There is also here a dialectic of the negative and the positive with respect to the proper role of science. For example, one can find Merleau-Ponty on more than one occasion stressing the negative role of science in helping to eliminate false or empty possibilities. See: N, 100, 106.

*Dichtung*) might be a secret knowledge of (or access to) Being that eludes scientific and metaphysical understanding.<sup>347</sup> Thus it is simply a matter of having a “reading of science itself as a certain (reduced) ontology in the broader context of the relation with the most primordial being,” that is, with Nature itself. (N 206)

One of the more challenging sections (at least for philosophers!) of the *Nature* lectures is its long assessment of the biology of his day. A great deal of ground is covered in a short amount of time, all the more impressive as Merleau-Ponty is hardly stingy with details.<sup>348</sup> What is the point of this study of animality, according to Merleau-Ponty? The key lines in this respect are these:

“The organism is not defined by its punctual existence; what exists beyond is a theme, a style, all these expressions seeking to express not a participation in a transcendental existence, but in a structure of the whole. The body belongs to a dynamic of behavior. Behavior is sunk into corporeity. The organism does not exist as a thing endowed with absolute properties, as fragments of Cartesian space. An organism is a fluctuation around norms, which are events enframed by a structure that would not be realized in another order, but has relations with these events.” (N 183)

What is key here are the specifically ontological implications of organic life. What the work of leading biologists show, he finds, is that organisms exhibit a specifically holistic and non-localizable style: “The reality of the organism supposes a non-

---

<sup>347</sup> Compare with these remarks from a working note: “The search for a ‘wild’ view of the world nowise limits itself to a return to precomprehension or to prescience. ...A return to prescience is not the goal. –the prescientific is only an invitation to comprehend the meta-scientific and this last is not non-science.” (VI 182) It is true that Merleau-Ponty himself, at one point, identifies his own “Being” with Heidegger’s. But the methodological difference has deeper implications: by involving natural science, not to mention metaphysical thinkers like Leibniz, Schelling, Whitehead, and Bergson, Merleau-Ponty is undermining the Heideggerian suspicion of naturalism the latter inherited, arguably, from certain features of Husserl’s (and Kant’s) transcendentalist framing of phenomenology.

<sup>348</sup> Though it would require a certain amount of biological expertise to determine the contemporary validity of the science Merleau-Ponty deals with, much of it concerns simple (though systematic) observation of animal behavior, in which interpretation plays a significant role.

Parmenidean Being, a form that escapes from the dilemma of being and nonbeing.”

(N 183)

The principle of wholeness or totality (which are equivalent for Merleau-Ponty) is central to Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on organic life and indeed ontology generally. Thus he explains:

“Hence the organicist idea supported by [biologist G. E.] Coghill, according to which, inasmuch as we analyze the organisms piecemeal, we find opposed only physiochemical phenomena, but when we rise to the consideration of the whole of the organism, the totality is no longer describable in physiological terms; it appears as emergent. How are we to understand this relation of totality of parts as a result? What status must we give to 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.*” (N 145; my italics)

Merleau-Ponty spends a great deal of attention on one particular 1929 study by Coghill, on the axolotl lizard.<sup>349</sup> The axolotl “...is a very long lizard, about seven inches, which as a tadpole lives in the water, then, once it has four legs, develops on land.” (N 140) What is curious about the animal (which is really more of a paradigmatic case than an anomaly) is the way that its anatomical developments mysteriously (and non-causally) parallel its adapted behaviors; there seems to be no strictly causal-physiological explanation of the coordination. The lizard’s embryology, recounted by Merleau-Ponty in painstaking detail, really suggests, for Coghill and Merleau-Ponty, that, “A ‘reference to the future’ ...already exists in the embryo. [Thus] We cannot define the animal by its immediate functioning: here the apparatus has meaning only for a future.” (N 144) For example, the “order of the nervous cephalo-causal development envelops [i.e., anticipates] swimming; there is

---

<sup>349</sup> “This book [*Anatomy and the Problem of Behavior*] has still not been exceeded, but we haven’t yet measured all its weight.” (N 140)

the possible in the organism.” This notion of “the possible,” a “what it can do” that “is realized at the same time” as the lizard develops physiologically, already places us, Merleau-Ponty points out, “beyond the physiological definition of the organism by its real functioning.” (N 144) Merleau-Ponty sees here the importance of a sense of the *totality* of the organism, one that is immanent already in the organism’s behavioral as well as anatomical development, even in the earliest phases. But he does not want to suggest a simple teleology, for reasons that will become clearer as we proceed.

It is useful in all of this to have before one’s mind one of Merleau-Ponty’s favorite images or metaphors for the kind of wholeness or totality that he has in mind, namely that of the melody. The melody is a metaphor for the organism; indeed, Merleau-Ponty adapts it from famous biologist and ethologist Jakob von Uexküll, who says of the *Naturfaktor*—his own explanatory notion for organic development—that it is not an entelechy but a “melody singing itself.” (N 173) What is key about the melody is this: “At the moment when the melody begins, the last note is there, in its own manner.” (N 174) This is clear enough: a “first note” of a melody is not the *first* note without the *complete* melody’s being at least implied—even if not yet fully thought out, since the melody may be in the middle of being created!<sup>350</sup> (This of course is one of the reasons that Merleau-Ponty opposes teleology or “finalism”: that it presupposes a completeness that does not make intelligible the imperfections of the processes of either natural productivity or

---

<sup>350</sup> There is a connection here with the “flesh.” See: “Then past and present are *Ineinander*, each enveloping-enveloped—and that itself is the flesh.” (VI 268)

artistic creativity.) Merleau-Ponty explains animal behavior exactly in terms of the melody, in the following passage:

“Behavior cannot be understood if we understand it moment by moment. Certainly we still find sufficient conditions from moment to moment, but then we do not grasp the relation of meaning. Each part of the situation acts only as part of a whole situation; no element of action has a separate utility in fact.” (N 175)

It is of course characteristic of Merleau-Ponty to fuse art and science in this inimitable way!

For his students to gain a toehold in this notion of wholeness, Merleau-Ponty suggests that perception is helpful: “We find models of this idea of totality in the world of perception.” For example,

“Psychology does easily what science finds difficult to do, namely to allow for an organizing principle within totality. In effect, perception does not give us the things, but what we see. In the phenomenal milieu, nothing impedes the whole from being other than the sum of the parts without being for all that a transcendent entity.” (N 153)

It is clear that Merleau-Ponty is referring to the thesis of Gestalt psychology, with which he regained interest at the time of his later work. But what is key for us here is that we can see what sort of conception of totality interests Merleau-Ponty: one that is non-transcendent and yet also non-immanent (if one means by this entirely engulfed by the sum of the parts). The same idea applies at the level of organic life. The organism does not embody a timeless Platonic Form, or even an Aristotelian one, but this does not mean that its development or its behavior can be explained in reductive, nominalistic, or mechanistic-causal terms. Thus there is a “...truth of the whole that does not signify a truth of the detail.” (N 31) But though the animal has a

“why,” as it were, this “why” is an open, groping, and incomplete one. Merleau-Ponty calls on Hegel’s image of the cyclone to illustrate what he has in mind: “Hegel already compared life to a cyclone. The cyclone is nothing other than water, but its form is not explained by water.” We must not seek an organic totality “behind the observable phenomena” (N 152), any more than we would seek to reduce the whole to its “individual components.” Thus Merleau-Ponty concludes, “The organism would not be a transcendent totality, any more than it would be a totality by summation.”<sup>351</sup>

The fact that organic totality is not anchored in a positive principle, such as “life” (vitalism) or an entelechy (Aristotelianism), resonates throughout the *Nature* lectures in a number of ways. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “life” is essentially a reaction against vitalist positivism—again, as typified by Bergson—as well as, as always, scientific naturalism. Thus he pronounces that “...it is not a positive being, but an interrogative being which defines life.” (N 156) Indeed, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly stresses this “negative principle” within the organism. (N 155) What does he mean by this? The “negative principle,” he explains somewhat obliquely, “is less identity-with-self than non-difference-with-self. This absence becomes a factor only by negation of its own negation.” But unlike what is found in Hegel, the “double negation” never becomes resolved into a “concrete whole,” such as Life, God, Spirit, or *Der Begriff*. In the case of a Hegelianism, Merleau-Ponty observes critically,

---

<sup>351</sup> There are several stunning “holistic” metaphors and images in *VI*, for example that of mirrors facing one another, in which we find “...a couple more real than either of [the mirrors individually].” (*VI* 139)

“Life would be Spirit-in-itself, and Spirit would be life for-itself. But life is not yet Spirit in-itself. We find in Hegel the same retrospective illusion as in Aristotle. To grasp life in the things is to grasp a lack in the things as such.” (N 157)

What Merleau-Ponty seems to mean is here 1) that the organism lacks an “in-itself,” and hence (obviously) cannot be the “in-itself” of Spirit, and 2) that this “lack” constitutes (or is a condition of) what it means to be “alive.” This negativity is intertwined with a certain interiority; for there is “...a natural negativity, an interiority of the living organism...” (N 210) But this is not to say that life is a “for-itself,” a consciousness. Just as Nature was said to be neither subject nor object, the same holds for the organism as such. (We might recall that Husserl struggled with this very issue in *Ideas II*, when discussing animality and the soul.) But this interiority has to do with the symbolic depth of living beings, a meaning-generativity which is reflected in the structure of behavior (and the quasi-interiority of the *Umwelt*<sup>352</sup>), not in the presence of a (substantial) “consciousness.” Comparing machines and animals (excepting the limit-case as it were of the simplest of organisms, which Merleau-Ponty calls “animal-machines”), the philosopher

---

<sup>352</sup> In addition to organic holism, Merleau-Ponty assigns a particular importance to the concept of the *Umwelt*, as developed by legendary ethologist Jakob von Uexküll. (N 167) The untranslatable term (which we, following Kersten, had earlier translated as “the surrounding world” in reference to Husserl’s notion in *Ideas II*), is defined best through Merleau-Ponty’s own descriptions of it and its significance. He describes it as “[marking] the difference between the world such as it exists in itself, and the world as the world of the living being.” That is, it is beyond the distinction of the “objective” and the “subjective.” Essentially, it is the world of an animal—an animal *life-world*, in effect. “The *Umwelt* is the world implied by the movement of the animal, and that regulates the animal’s movements by its own structure.”<sup>352</sup> (N 175) And again: “[It] exists for the behavior of the animal, but not necessarily in its consciousness; it is the environment of behavior as ‘opposed to the geographical environment.’” (Uexküll himself labels the “*Umwelt*” of higher animals the “*Gegenwelt*.” (N 172)) The *Umwelt* is key to the explanation of animal behavior because “...between the situation and the movement of the animal, there is a relation of meaning which is what the expression *Umwelt* conveys.” (N 175) And finally: “The notion of the *Umwelt* no longer allows us to consider the organism in its relation to the exterior world, as an effect of the exterior world, or as a cause. The *Umwelt* is not presented in front of the animal like a goal; it is not present like an idea, but as a theme that haunts consciousness.” (N 178)



concludes: “There is no operating meaning within the machine, but only within the living thing.” (N 163) The machine is pure exteriority in relation to life, a mere simulacrum, while on the side of pure interiority would lie presumably a fully developed and reflective egoic consciousness. Merleau-Ponty’s brief but fascinating commentary on machines and life culminates in a perceptive remark on artificial intelligence. There is a certain “bad faith,” he argues, in the modern zest for creating artificial organisms:

“We are amused to give birth to a phenomenon of life, and we deny that this phenomenon refers to an authentic phenomenon, even though it is interesting only to the extent that it is an imitation of life. It is in this way that Malebranche would not have beaten a stone as he beat his dog, saying that the dog didn’t suffer.” (N 166)

### **III. The *Nature* Lectures and *The Visible and the Invisible*: Towards a New Dialectical Onto-Phenomenology**

#### *A. Introduction*

What is the place of Nature in a general ontology? How does what Merleau-Ponty is doing in the *Nature* lectures inform his detailed investigations of the “visible” and the “invisible,” the “sensible” and “sentient,” “touching” and “touched” that we find in *VI*, the much better known work? The existence of the *Nature* lectures poses a certain hermeneutical challenge for those seeking to piece together Merleau-Ponty’s mature ontology. This is because many of the terms that have become familiar to us from an acquaintance with Merleau-Ponty’s later work, such

as “flesh,” “chiasm,” “reversibility,” and so on, appear only sparsely in his lecture courses on nature, lectures which employ and adopt the working terminology of the sciences and, in some cases, the history of philosophy. Even in the *Nature* lectures, however, we can find the same sorts of insights that drive Merleau-Ponty’s ontological vision in the more well-known work. The purpose of the present section is to discuss the basic ideas of this ontology in a way that weaves the *Nature* lectures and *VI* together, or at least understands them as possessing a common front.

There are several powerful ideas which dominate Merleau-Ponty’s mature thinking, and almost all of them can be considered as ways to understand the “identity and difference” of the two orders of being—sensible and sentient, objective and subjective—and of course the “dimensionality” opened up by their beautiful but often baffling style of commerce. I will try to show in the following several sections how Merleau-Ponty’s key concepts are based on this underlying “identity-and-difference” theme and a corresponding type of dialectic that emerges therefrom. This will open up a discussion that will eventually take us through to the end of this dissertation.

### *B. Reversibility*

The foundation of Merleau-Ponty’s dialectic is the phenomenon, or concept (it is in fact both), of “reversibility.” In my own reading, there are two fundamental points of reference for Merleau-Ponty regarding this concept, the one historical and the other systematic. The former is the mind-body problem as inherited by Descartes, while the latter is the phenomenon of self-sensing, the observation of

which Merleau-Ponty borrows from Husserl (but expands in ways we will see below). We will deal with the latter point of reference first.

Merleau-Ponty's classic phenomenological example of reversibility is Husserl's own observation of the reversibility of touch, or the phenomenon of the "left hand touching the right hand..."<sup>353</sup> Merleau-Ponty notes, like Husserl, that to "touch" something, when that something happens to be another part of one's body, is also to be "touched" by that something. "Subject" here becomes "object," and vice-versa. The most dramatic case is that of hands touching one another; but Merleau-Ponty extends this phenomenon of "reversibility" beyond the sense of touch to include vision, which explains the title of his projected work and the repeated references to, for example, the "strange adhesion of the seer and the visible." (*VI* 140) Husserl had initially distinguished touching from vision by noticing that while touch is reversible, vision is not. That is, we cannot see ourselves seeing in the way we can touch ourselves touching. But Merleau-Ponty questions the validity of this distinction on two counts. First, vision could not truly "see" the world if the world did not "adhere" to its glance; and second, even in self-touching, there is no complete coincidence of sensing and sensed—"non-coincidence" is in fact one of Merleau-Ponty's fundamental ideas, and it applies as truly to this case as to any other. As he explains in one characteristic passage:

"To begin with, we spoke summarily of the reversibility of the seeing and the visible, of the touching and the touched. It is time to emphasize that it is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things; but I never

---

<sup>353</sup> Merleau-Ponty's references to this trope and to reversibility are frequent. Some of the most interesting in the texts we are examining include the following: *N* 217; *N* 224; *VI* 272; *VI* 141-2; *VI* 147, 148; *VI* 4 154, 155; *VI* 223.

reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over into the ranks of the touched, or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it*—my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering.” (VI 148)

Thus while it is true that we cannot truly “see ourselves seeing,” in that the eye cannot bend its vision back upon itself, neither, finally can touch.<sup>354</sup> And to the extent that either sense is reversible, it is reversible in this complex manner—that is, with a combination of identity and difference. As for the relation of touch and vision to one another, Merleau-Ponty notes that while they are in some sense incommensurable (we will see below that he makes similar remarks concerning all of the senses taken together), they are nonetheless united in one aesthesiological nexus, rendering back to us a unified world: “Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.” (VI 134)

Reversibility is, of course, a phenomenon we notice first of all with regard to the body, which for its part is “...interposed [not as] a thing, an interstitial matter, a connective tissue, but a *sensible for itself*...” (VI 135) The lived body is thus always already “aware” of itself and the world, which, through its *Umwelt*, is “present” before it immanently and not merely as an externality. But Merleau-Ponty’s discourse about the “body-subject,” while legitimate in its own right, had tended to obscure the “world” side of this (literal) equation. The world, nature, the sensible—these are the complementary poles to the body, the mind, and sentience. Therefore what we find above all in the later writings is Merleau-Ponty’s parlaying the insight

---

<sup>354</sup> Reversibility is thus, in the words of Dastur, “never finished and always in the making.” See: Dastur, Françoise. “Merleau-Ponty and Thinking from Within,” tr. Paul B. Milan. Printed in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*. Eds. Patrick Burke and Jan Van Der Veken. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993 (p. 26) Hereafter referred to as “Dastur.”

of reversibility and the body into a general ontological principle, using it to meditate on the reflexive depths of Being as a whole, the subjectivity-objectivity *Ineinander* as such:

“To touch is to touch oneself. To be understood as: the things are the prolongation of my body and my body is the prolongation of the world, through it the world surrounds me...” (VI 255)

This move towards generalization is accompanied by a more ontologically general (though somehow still thickly carnal) language than we find in his prior phenomenological analyses. This language which may even come close to sounding like a new “metaphysics.” Instead, it is intended to be taken as a way to frame the results of phenomenology in a coherent or systematic way. As I will argue below (as I have already begun to do in Chapter 3), Merleau-Ponty’s objection to his own prior researches is directed principally to their lack of balance, not to their radical misguidedness.<sup>355</sup>

As I read it, there are basically three fundamental lessons or themes Merleau-Ponty takes from reversibility. The first is that of the unity or “chiasm” of subject and object, touching and touched, sentient and sensible, etc.; the second is, in apparent opposition to the first, “non-coincidence”; and the third is the interplay of identity and difference, chiasm and non-coincidence, that produces the paradoxical “sameness without identity” (VI 261) that we experience with respect to the world as well as other people (for example, in the paradigmatic case of a shaking of hands).

---

<sup>355</sup> The case of Heidegger is a good one for the sake of comparison; his own “*Kehre*” from Dasein/Being to Being/Dasein is not entirely unlike Merleau-Ponty’s own turn from the body-subject to the structures of being itself, though in Merleau-Ponty’s case it is more of a matter of mundane self-correction than it is in Heidegger’s.

After all, the phenomenon of reversibility could not become known to us if it were merely a difference or merely an identity. Clearly the sensible and the sentient are not simply *two* but rather in some way *one* (or else how could they be reversible and simply “trade places”?), and yet they *are* two, since if they were simply *one*, they could not produce an experience or the “distance” of mind and things. This intercrossing of identity and difference also helps to explain why Merleau-Ponty speaks of the “indivision” (VI 208, 255) of Being in the same breath as its “self-splitting.” Further, it is embodied in Merleau-Ponty’s reciprocal expressions “difference without contradiction” and “identity without superposition.” (VI 135)

As I mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty also develops his basic ontological ideas in explicit reference to the history of philosophy, especially modern philosophy and the mind-body problem as it emerges in Descartes. This becomes abundantly clear in the *Nature* lectures, where Descartes emerges as his main philosophical “rival”—though hardly in the Manichean terms this term could be taken in.<sup>356</sup> Merleau-Ponty states Descartes’ difficulty (which is also his own) in the following terms:

“There is an extraordinary difficulty in thinking according to both the first and the second order [physical and mental] at the same time. It is difficult to conceive the soul and the body as one and the same thing, while at the same time thinking of them as distinct. *Union and distinction are, however, both required, yet they are unthinkable both at the same time.*” (N 17-8, my emphasis)

This quote refers to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of non-coincidence, as well as that of intertwining—hence, the Cartesian problematic teaches us the same lessons taught

---

<sup>356</sup> It is interesting to note in this regard that M. C. Dillon presents Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as a “critical assessment of Cartesianism” throughout his work, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) (The quoted phrase is from p. 6 of that work).

by the phenomenon of self-sensing. Cartesian dualism has to be replaced with another, more flexible and dialectical model. Accordingly, Dastur asserts that Merleau-Ponty's "entire philosophical undertaking led him to promote a kind of thought which would no longer oppose interiority and exteriority, the subject with the world, structures with living experience."<sup>357</sup> (Dastur 25)

### *C. Flesh*

The notion of the "flesh" (*chair*) is meant to convey the commonality of both "orders of being," subjective and objective, while refusing to synthesize them into a solid or substantial "this." It is not a *causa sui* or a Spinozistic "substance," much less a neutral "substrate" of being. It has "...no name in traditional philosophy" since it is neither subject nor object but something else entirely, a kind of "element" (VI 146) or the site of an ontological exchange that *itself* comes close to defining what Merleau-Ponty means by "wild being."<sup>358</sup> This becomes clearer when Merleau-Ponty aligns the flesh with the idea of "life" he is developing in the *Nature* lectures:

---

<sup>357</sup> Dastur also uses one of Merleau-Ponty's more interesting tropes, that of narcissism, through which to understand—and subvert our own potential *misunderstanding* of—Merleau-Ponty's basic insight into the way the "seer and the visible" relate. Thus while at first it seems as though the narcissist is "egocentric" in the way he sees *himself* in the *object* (think of Narcissus staring into the pond), nonetheless this is not the "second, more profound meaning of narcissism," which is the "feeling [that one is] looked at by things, by an inversion of the look that transforms subjective activity into ontological passivity, so that vision no longer has an identifiable author, so that vision becomes general visibility." (Dastur 30) This notion that it is not only we that look at things but things that *look at us* is one of the most original and challenging of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts, though it can be seen to follow logically from the notion of "reversibility."

<sup>358</sup> The flesh can be imagined as a field of "assemblage" and "dehiscence" of sentience and sensibility, similar perhaps to water or air (hence the notion of "element"), in the sense of permitting and facilitating forms of creation and destruction, coming-together and coming-apart.

“It is not that life is a power of being or a spirit, but rather, that we install ourselves in perceived being/brute being, in the sensible, *in the flesh* where there is *no longer the alternative of the in-itself and the for-itself*, where perceived being is eminently in being.”<sup>359</sup> (N 210, my emphasis)

Indeed, what Merleau-Ponty is getting at with this concept of the flesh is often best understood laterally, through other, related notions, including “nature” or “wild Being,” as we can see from the following (dense) “working note”:

“Solution: recapture the child, the alter ego, the unreflected within myself by a lateral, pre-analytic participation, which is perception, *ueberschreiten* by definition, intentional transgression. When I perceive the child, he is given precisely in a certain divergence (*écart*) (*originating presentation of the unrepresentable*) and the same for my alter ego, and the same for the pre-analytic thing. Here is the common tissue of which we are made. The wild Being.” (VI, 203)

This passage reveals that for Merleau-Ponty we are always already, in perception, separated off from ourselves—or from something, as it were, with which we are still connected, with which we share a togetherness, and of course which is also the very site of our conjunction, since it makes possible the experience of things—or “phenomena”—in consciousness. Thus it seems what flesh, wild being, the “common tissue” or “element,” etc., are trying to name, is precisely the phenomenon of identity-and-difference of sensible and sentient orders, a primordial intertwining that expresses itself, paradoxically, in a certain “separation.” The flesh turns out to be an inevitable corollary to reversibility itself; it is the flesh that “is” reversible, moving between the “flesh of the body” and the “flesh of the world.”<sup>360</sup> That the flesh

---

<sup>359</sup> In one place he even equates the flesh with Nature. He tells himself: “Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother.” (VI 267) Merleau-Ponty broaches the concept of the flesh towards the end of his third *Nature* lecture, itself contemporaneous with the writing of the draft of VI. Indeed, some of his most revealing thoughts on the flesh occur in these lectures.

<sup>360</sup> Fred Evans makes much the same point when he observes: “The flesh holds seers and the visible together (they are of the same flesh), while still respecting their difference and keeping them apart (as respectively, the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world).” Evans, Fred. “Chiasm and Flesh.”



is at the heart of reversibility also explains why Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh the “miracle that is the sense organ.” (N 209) As we have seen, the sense organ, for example the skin in its tactility, demonstrates this reversibility in a paradigmatic way.

The identity, as it were, of intertwining and separation (*ségrégation*) is parallel with that of distance and proximity, which defines our strange intimacy with things, even as they remain outside what in Husserlian parlance is called the “sphere of immanence.” Indeed, Merleau-Ponty takes the notion of an “immanent transcendency” of things in consciousness to its logical conclusion:

“By definition perception puts us in the presence of a definitively opaque term. In other words, the Nature that we perceive is as distant and as close as possible, and for the same reasons. There is nothing between me and the Nature that I perceive. When I perceive a thing, I cannot conceive of a perception interposed between me and the object.” (N 118)

He reiterates the same idea in the *VI*:

“...this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it.” (*VI* 135)

And in a similar vein:

Vision does not completely blend into visible; nonetheless we are close to it, palpation, gaze envelops things, clothes them with its own flesh. (*VI* 131)

It is important to realize that “distance” is in this sense a crucial concept<sup>361</sup> insofar as it is precisely such distantiation that is denied, overlooked, suppressed, and “forgotten” by both flat-naturalistic and idealistic ontologies. But Merleau-Ponty’s innovation is to understand, in a deeply Heraclitean way, this distance as constitutive of and defining of its seeming opposite, proximity, in the matrix of perception. *We are* what we see, which also means, once again, that what we see *sees us* as well, in a way that transcends mere metaphor. Perception is of course equivalent to the body, *Leib*, in the sense that to perceive is to be corporeal, and vice-versa. Thus Merleau-Ponty observes, “...The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, *by making myself a world and by making them flesh.*” (VI 135) In this way the body is not simply the “body-subject” of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, but that pole of the “body-world” circuit now having been named the “flesh”; indeed, it is the “flesh of the body.”<sup>362</sup>

In stressing the entwinement of sensibility and sentience over Cartesian-style dualism, Merleau-Ponty becomes acutely aware of the need to stress their difference as well, yet of course without lapsing back into dualism. To express the complexity of this relationship, what Merleau-Ponty searches for is a kind of dialectic—but what kind of dialectic emerges? To begin with, it cannot be a dialectic of “synthesis,” since it must include non-coincidence, somehow, at its core. Yet non-

---

<sup>361</sup> The idea of “distance” has been emphasized recently in a work by Renaud Barbaras: *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*. Tr. Paul B. Milan. Stanford University Press, 2006

<sup>362</sup> Compare: “The world seen is not ‘in’ my body, and my body is not ‘in’ the world ultimately: flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it.” (VI 138)

coincidence is a function, ironically, of a certain identity of seer and seen. As

Merleau-Ponty explains in a working note:

“The very pulp of the sensible, what is indefinable in it, is nothing else than the union in it of the ‘inside’ with the ‘outside,’ the contact in thickness of self with self.—The absolute of the ‘sensible’ is this stabilized explosion i.e. involving return.”<sup>363</sup>

That such a “coincidence” is incomplete, never-finished, always-in-the-making, etc., helps to explain why facticity alone cannot explain existence, that is, why transcendence or self-distantiation—which are the twin bases of the possibility of reflection and the “transcendental attitude” as a reflective stance—are equally necessary determinants of the existential situation.

*D. Identity and Difference, the One and the Many: Dimensions of Merleau-Ponty’s Dialectic*

The unity or “chiasm” of mind and world, spirit and nature, generates a sense of a kind of “pre-established harmony” (VI 133) as well as a sense of primordial, but strictly unthematizable, mutual belonging, of the two nonetheless-distinguishable orders. Merleau-Ponty treats this harmony usually as a brute fact of sorts, though he does at times understand it as expressing a deeper logic of reciprocity: “...since vision is a palpation with the look, it must also be inscribed in the order of being that it discloses to us; he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at.” (VI 134) Merleau-Ponty expresses this idea of harmony in many ways—for

---

<sup>363</sup> VI 268. Elsewhere Merleau-Ponty refers to this “explosion” as the “dehiscence” or “*écart*” that marks the flight of being from itself—which is nevertheless, as Hegel says, a return to itself. See also: “The true philosophy [is to] apprehend what makes the leaving of oneself be a retiring into oneself, and vice versa./Grasp this chiasm, this reversal. That is the mind.” (VI 199) Relatedly, elsewhere Merleau-Ponty describes the flesh as an “anonymity innate to myself.” (VI 139)

example, with regard to nature within and without: “By the nature in us, we can know Nature, and reciprocally it is from ourselves that living beings and even space speak to us...”<sup>364</sup> (N 205) Central to this notion is the ultimate continuity of the visible and the invisible: “The superficial pellicle of the visible is only for my vision and for my body. But the depth beneath this surface contains my body and hence contains my vision. My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle.” (VI 138) Again, this is a continuity “interrupted,” but not before it makes itself known *as* a continuity. Thus I would wholly agree with Fred Evans that “...the direction of truth Merleau-Ponty speaks of, even if it can never be fulfilled in principle, does seem to put a premium on perceptual and epistemological convergence rather than divergence...” (Evans, 191)

Of course, the notion of the flesh has generated many controversies and misunderstandings, one of them being that Merleau-Ponty is a monist and that the flesh is, as already alluded to negatively above, a kind of ontological substrate. Merleau-Ponty certainly is a *non-dualist*; he does not use the word, now associated with strains of “Eastern” (especially Buddhist) philosophy, but I think this much can be admitted. For example, he makes clear in one place: “There is no intelligible world, *there is* the sensible world.”<sup>365</sup> (VI 214) Yet from this alone it does not follow that Merleau-Ponty is a monist. His point in this quote, for example, is that the “invisible” is *of* this world, it is “that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this [visible, sensible]

---

<sup>364</sup> Compare: VI 99 “...the homogeneity of the measured and the measuring implies that the subject makes common cause with space.”

<sup>365</sup> In some places, “Nature” is equated (or aligned) with the “sensible.” See, for example: “The sensible, Nature, transcend the past present distinction...” (VI 267)

being.” (VI 151) Or stated in other terms: “Meaning is *invisible*, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (*membrure*), and the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it...” (VI 215) What we see here is a kind of reflexivity that is totally foreign to, say, Spinoza’s monistic system, though to be fair, Spinoza’s “dual attribute” theory is not wholly incompatible with Merleau-Ponty’s intentions. The matter is highly complex, chiefly because Merleau-Ponty is trying to re-draw the terms of this very distinction between “monism” and “dualism.”

It is important, however, to do some disambiguation at this stage. There are actually two different kinds of questions with respect to the question of “monism.” There is monism (or pluralism) of *types* of being—Spinoza may not fit this category, but Berkeley, James, or Quine do—and a monism of just how *many* beings there are, that is, just one (a cosmic whole, substance, etc.) or many (monads, Aristotelian substances, etc.). Regarding this latter question of monism or pluralism, what is really key for Merleau-Ponty is the principle of a unity *in* the many. Evans put it this way:

“What [Merleau-Ponty] offers is...closer to what we might call a ‘unity composed of difference’ rather than a collection of separate, merely externally related entities or a unity formed through domination by one of the elements of that unity—he eschews, in other words, both pluralism and monism.”  
(Evans 191)

Merleau-Ponty illustrates the idea of unity-in-many through the expression “total part,” that is, a part of a whole which, even as it is a part, captures the whole, as it were, “partially.” As an example of what Merleau-Ponty means by “total part,” let us

consider what he says about the case of the senses (the quote is long but very important in illustrating what Merleau-Ponty is getting at—possibly a truly revolutionary new contribution to the ancient puzzle of the one-and-the-many):

“Each ‘sense’ is a ‘world,’ i.e. absolutely incommunicable for the other senses, and yet construing a *something* which, through its structure, is from the first *open* upon the world of the other senses, and with them forms one sole Being. ... The ‘World’ is this whole where each ‘part,’ when one takes it for itself, suddenly opens unlimited dimensions—becomes a *total part*. Now this particularity of the color, of the yellow, and this universality are not a *contradiction*, are *together* sensoriality itself: it is by the same virtue that the color, the yellow, at the same time gives itself as a *certain* being and as a *dimension*, the expression of *every possible being*.—What is proper to the sensible (as to language) is to be representative of the whole, not by a sign-signification relation, or by the immanence of the parts in one another and in the whole, but because each part is *torn up* from the whole, comes with its roots, encroaches upon the whole, transgresses the frontiers of the others.” (VI 218)

These powerful statements essentially comprise the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s answer to the question of the relation of the many—for example, many subjects, or multiple orders of being—to the one or the whole, and what he says of the senses, or of colors, applies to many other things, from the coordinated anatomical/behavioral development of organisms, already looked at, to the “becoming of a painting” out of many strokes of the brush and even to sexuality.<sup>366</sup> It is important to stress all of this because of Merleau-Ponty’s own remark, quoted above, that the principle of “totality” might be the central one in all philosophy.

This quasi-holistic approach is characteristic of how Merleau-Ponty deals with issues of opposition and dialectic. For it in fact goes specifically to his understanding of what constitutes the “complementarity” of opposites. “There are

---

<sup>366</sup> There is something analogous in Merleau-Ponty’s description of what Matisse’s method of painting and the “body of behavior” in the organism have in common: “Threads are tied up, which come from everywhere, and which constitute independent forms, and the same time, he finds that these threads realize something which has a unity.” (N 154) Elsewhere: “Thus the sexual is coextensive with the human not as a unique cause, but as a dimension outside of which nothing exists.” (N 282)

two 'sides' of an experience, conjugated and impossible, but complementary. Their unity is irrecusable; it is simply as the invisible hinge on which two experiences are articulated—a *self torn apart*. [my emphasis] ...contradiction, understood as interior to Nature, must be assumed. We must admit the idea of an operating negation in Nature..."<sup>367</sup> (N 65-66) Merleau-Ponty's use of the term "complementarity," is not, I believe, accidental. I believe it is a deliberate reference to Bohr's theory of quantum mechanics by the same name, a subject to which he devotes a good amount of attention in the *Nature* lectures themselves. (N 89-100) In a sense, he applies what is true of sub-atomic particles, in particular the symmetrical applicability of mutually incompatible wave-theory and corpuscular theory to the description of elementary particles, to being itself: "...the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet not superposable." (VI 134) (Note again the idea of a "total part.")

In an interesting kind of convergence, Husserl scholar Sebastian Luft has expressed the view that Husserl's philosophy as a whole, with its twin poles of the "Cartesian Way" to the reduction and the "Life-World" method, can itself be summarized in terms of two incommensurable and yet complementary "maps":

"Thus, the interpretation [I present] attempts to overcome the common assertion that there is a 'contradiction' between Husserl's Cartesian position and his account of the life-world. I have tried to show that a philosophical thematization of the life-world is not possible without a transcendental question as to its origin in (inter-)subjectivity. In Husserl's eyes, both agendas are correlative. At the same time, I would like to insist that Husserl's Cartesian account of the subject and his life-world ontology present two distinct and in this sense, separate programs. They are projects Husserl pursues with different aims: Whereas the 'Cartesian Husserl' pursues a path of scientific grounding and foundationalism, the 'life-world Husserl' is interested in what can be called a hermeneutics of the world of everyday life. Both projects are set squarely against each other, not in the sense that

---

<sup>367</sup> The notion that Being contains its own negation ties in with the second of Merleau-Ponty's lessons learnt from the reversibility of touch—that is, the impossibility of pure coincidence or a simple "identity of opposites." (VI 250-1)

they contradict or cancel each other out, but in that they pursue two different agendas. They are located on two different 'maps.' One can pursue one while completely neglecting the other.<sup>368</sup>

In this way, a distinctly Merleau-Pontian concept (presumably independently arrived at by Luft) ironically comes usefully to define the career arc of Husserl himself.

#### IV. Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty begins the *Nature* courses, as we have seen, with an investigation into the history of philosophy. He later shifts his interest to an examination of contemporary science. But these *prima facie* unconnected discourses are, as is customary in Merleau-Ponty's singularly syncretic approach, united in a common purpose. The conjunction is revealed in telling working note, in which the philosopher speaks of what is to be discussed in *VI*:

"I must therefore show in the introduction that the being of science is itself a part or aspect of the objectified Infinity [of Descartes] and that the *Offenheit* of the *Umwelt* is opposed to both of these [i.e., Cartesian ontology and science]. Whence the chapters on Descartes, Leibniz, Western ontology, which indicate the historico-intentional and ontological implications of the being of science."<sup>369</sup> (*VI* 176)

---

<sup>368</sup> Luft, Sebastian. "Husserl's Theory of the Phenomenological Reduction: Between Life-World and Cartesianism." In *Research in Phenomenology* 34, 2004 (p. 226)

<sup>369</sup> Relatedly: "I clarify my philosophical project by recourse to Descartes and Leibniz." (*VI* 177)



Merleau-Ponty's notion of Nature is "polymorphous." Phenomena such as life and animality, wholeness and organic form, growth and creativity, "natural" origins and processes—these are all phenomena that reveal different clues about the non-fully-constitutable core of the world and of our own humanity. Naturality does not exhaust the meaning of Being, but it does encircle all beings in its berth, and ultimately, no one ever fully breaks away from it, just as Merleau-Ponty already observed about the "natural attitude" of Husserl. Thus it is fitting to end with the following quotation, which neatly summarizes Merleau-Ponty's attitude towards nature and its place in ontology:

"Nature... By examining it, we have retrieved everything, not that everything is in nature, but because everything is or becomes natural for us. *There are no substantial differences between physical Nature, life, and mind.* [my emphasis.] We passed between causal-realist thinking and philosophical idealism, because we found in brute, savage, vertical, present Being a *dimension* that is not of representation and not that of the In-itself." (N 212)

## Chapter Five: Merleau-Ponty and Husserl on the Question of the Paradox of Subjectivity and Nature

### I. Introduction

Merleau-Ponty's embrace of "paradox" is radical, both in the sense that it goes to the heart of his philosophical project and in the sense that it is very thorough indeed. It could be argued that post-Kantian Continental philosophy, especially in the twentieth century, has come to take a more favorable view of paradox than did its predecessors; one may think here of Kierkegaard's famous embrace of the "absolute paradox" of Christ, Marcel's "Mystery of Being," Heidegger's "hermeneutic circle" and paradoxical "always already," even aspects of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of identity (as evidenced in the title of one of his major works, *Oneself as Another*). The difference is that Merleau-Ponty made of paradox a central thematic in its own right. That the human mind is led to express or elucidate its situation in paradoxical terms—something Merleau-Ponty steadfastly maintains—is a momentous fact for someone who argues, as Merleau-Ponty does, for the intimacy of subjectivity and Being itself. For it means that Being, and not only consciousness, is contradictory on the inside. Does this mean Merleau-Ponty rejects the law of non-contradiction? Merleau-Ponty's application of this law (which he rarely deals with in just those terms) goes as far as the intelligibility of Being to rational thought goes; but he is

willing to concede (and in fact insists) that Being in its primordially is ineffable and even necessarily so—and that, accordingly, rational thinking (“reflection,” “the transcendental attitude”) is less than ultimate.

If truth is unavailable to us through concepts, however, it is nevertheless *availably* unavailable. It does not merely elude us, it eludes us *because it surrounds us* and penetrates us to the core. Moreover, there is a way in which thought can understand itself and employ its concepts—through “dialectical” and “hyper-dialectical” thinking—that serves to bring the “contradictions” of unreflected Being into a fruitful relationship with reflectivity. The result of this exchange are the paradoxes of philosophy, whose rigorous expression is no less challenging than any manner of “problem-solving” that we could adopt.

By “Being” Merleau-Ponty does not mean to say anything different than “experience” as known in “perceptual faith.” Being, which can be equated to a large extent with what we have been calling “Nature” (“wild Being”), is experienced and “lived-through,” indeed it may be “life” itself (or again “time,” the *sine qua non* of lived-experience as such) whose primordial unity-in-difference conceals a truth, even a “logos” or language, that reveals itself, in the paradoxes of thought, precisely *as* concealed. The sayability and intelligibility of core experientiality and what it discloses is preserved, therefore, partially and as if in trace-like outline, in the form of the paradoxes of being, experience, time, mind, freedom, and so on—and these in turn give life to philosophical thought, which arise and must return to the depths they open up. Paradox is thus, in Merleau-Ponty, both “problem” *and*, as it were, “solution.” It is the question and the answer, the “mystery of being” as well as the

explanation of the mystery. In this way, paradox is not intentional—it does not “point beyond itself” to a telos, a purpose, a form, or a plan. Its finality is equally a function of its originality—there is only the Beginning, as it were, the birth that eludes time by creating it.

Philosophy is therefore misunderstood by those, *including Husserl*, who think of it as an essentially “problem-solving” enterprise. Merleau-Ponty’s conception is closer in this case to that of the later (circa *Philosophical Investigations*) Wittgenstein, in that he would agree that philosophy is better used for the purpose of “dissolving” philosophical puzzles than solving them. But Merleau-Ponty would not think of paradoxes as linguistic confusions, rather as moments of “contradiction” or “crisis” signifying the break down and limits of signification before the unsignifiable verity at the heart of the being of the world. Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein are perhaps equally insistent on the centrality of language to thought and even human experience. In the case of the former, of course, one must always keep in mind his famous thesis of the “primacy of perception,” a primacy that ultimately expresses a “faith” in Being that is its own meaning or meaning-fount, from which language and its “ideal” meanings arise and, over time, also dissolve. This is another way of saying that for Merleau-Ponty, there is still, after all, an “absolute,” a “real” that cannot be demarcated so much as lived, and it is promised in the simplest act of perception, which, through the “phenomenon,” promises disclosure of the world—the first contradiction (subjectivity and objectivity) that the perceptual faith harmonizes in its effortless way. Merleau-Ponty is to this extent

a “realist”—though the “real” can never be known purely as the real, but only that which escapes language linguistically, so to speak.

The later Wittgenstein is of course notoriously mute about metaphysical questions, but for Merleau-Ponty, the knowable unknowability of Being is the overriding theme of all reflection, while the struggles of philosophy itself are taken as symptomatic not of pathological habits of linguistic behavior but, at their best and most authentically approached, of the rigors of thinking through the dialectical structure of phenomena.

In this final, culminating chapter of the present dissertation, my focus is mostly on Merleau-Ponty, but I also briefly examine and compare Husserl’s approach to paradox to Merleau-Ponty’s through the former’s famous discussion in the *Crisis*<sup>370</sup> of the “paradox of subjectivity.” Fundamentally, I will show that while for Merleau-Ponty paradox itself plays a fundamental role in explicating the meaning of phenomenology, for Husserl, phenomenology is precisely a means to solve paradoxes—a method to end all philosophical disputes, in fact.<sup>371</sup> In this way Husserl represents the mainstream, one might say, of philosophy in the “Western” philosophical tradition—as well as, importantly for the themes of this dissertation, the implicit paradigm of “scientific thinking,” which sees itself in similarly “problem-solving” terms. There is, of course, an interesting way in which even Husserl

---

<sup>370</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Tr. David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970. Hereafter “*Crisis*.”

<sup>371</sup> See: Husserl, Edmund. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Article*. In: *Collected Works*, Vol. 6. Tr. Thomas Sheehan and Richard E. Palmer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997

embraces something like the centrality of “paradox”—but only in the sense of its being a “reversal of common sense”; this is a case of simple homonymy.

Merleau-Ponty’s increasingly sophisticated reliance on dialectic becomes entirely explicit in *The Visible and the Invisible*<sup>372</sup>, in which he endorses it wholeheartedly, while trying to distinguish it from its Hegelian (and even Sartrean) versions. Thus I briefly examine this philosophical appropriation and the ways in which Merleau-Ponty does and does not conceive of philosophy as a dialectic. Finally, and relatedly, I look at Merleau-Ponty’s use and analysis of the notion of “reflection,” along with “hyper-reflection,” his label for the philosophical attitude once philosophy has been transformed from a problem-solving to a self-problematizing (and thereby “self-recovering”) enterprise.<sup>373</sup>

## II. Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Paradox

### A. Overview of Merleau-Ponty’s References to Paradox

The seed of Merleau-Ponty’s approach to paradox, and Being as a paradoxical phenomenon that is (quasi-)intelligible in thought through a movement of

---

<sup>372</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Tr. Alphonso Lingis. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1969. Hereafter “VI.”

<sup>373</sup> Note: Merleau-Ponty achieves great lucidity when it comes to his mature epistemological views. In fact, he speaks more clearly for his own positions than any paraphrase could do. For this reason, I rely in this chapter more than I have to this point on lengthy direct quotations from the source himself. This is particularly the case for certain sections from the VI, especially chapter 1, “Reflection and Interrogation.”

controlled contradiction (dialectic), are to be found already in this dense and startling passage, which is worth quoting in full, from *The Primacy of Perception*<sup>374</sup>:

“It is true that we arrive at contradictions when we describe the perceived world. And it is also true that if there were such a thing as a non-contradictory thought, it would exclude the world of perception as a simple appearance. But the question is precisely to know whether there is such a thing as logically coherent thought or thought in the pure state. This is the question Kant asked himself... One of Kant’s discoveries, whose consequences we have not yet fully grasped, is that all our experience of the world is throughout a tissue of concepts which lead to irreducible contradictions<sup>375</sup> if we attempt to take them in an absolute sense or transfer them into pure being, and that they nevertheless found the structure of all phenomena, or everything which *is* for us. ... I wish only to point out that the accusation of contradiction is not decisive, *if the acknowledged contradiction appears as the very condition of consciousness*. [my emphasis] ... There is a vain form of contradiction which consists in affirming two theses which exclude one another at the same time and under the same aspect. ... There is the sterile non-contradiction of formal logic [versus] the justified contradictions of transcendental logic. The objection with which we are concerned would be admissible only if we could put a system of eternal truths in the place of the perceived world, freed from its contradictions.” (Primacy 18)

That we cannot put up such a system of “eternal truths” is less a criticism of Husserlian method, perhaps, which arguably already problematizes the question of “eternity” through its embrace of originary temporality, than of classical metaphysical thought, particularly its anti-paradoxical and anti-dialectical character. The above-quoted passage states all of the fundamental themes of paradoxical thinking that Merleau-Ponty would continue to deepen and that, finally, come to a startlingly fresh new expression in his later writings. Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that he is not interested in the sterile contradiction of “A and not A” for its own sake. It is only under certain conditions, forced upon us by the exigencies of lived experience, that there arise the “justified contradictions” of philosophy,

---

<sup>374</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences.” Tr. James M. Edie. In *The Primacy of Perception*. Ed. John Wild. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. Hereafter “Primacy.”

<sup>375</sup> Compare: “Every attempt at elucidation brings us back to the dilemmas.” (VI 11) It is interesting that one of the early words he uses for his method is in fact “elucidation.” (See, for example: VI 23)

beginning already with the awakening of reflection from the oblivion of our pure “perceptual faith,” Merleau-Ponty’s term of art for the condition of natural consciousness and, indeed, the natural attitude:

“We see the things themselves, the world is what we see: formulae of this kind express a faith common to the natural man and the philosopher—the moment he opens his eyes; they refer to a deep-seated set of mute ‘opinions’ implicated in our lives. But what is strange about this faith is that if we seek to articulate it into theses or statements, if we ask ourselves what is this *we*, what *seeing* is, and what *thing* or *world* is, we enter into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions... What Augustine said of time—that it is perfectly familiar to each, but that none of us can explain it to the others—must be said of the world.” (VI 3, my emphasis on latter)

Merleau-Ponty is widely known as a philosopher of “ambiguity,” as I have mentioned, but less so as one of “paradox.” Yet the contradictions of philosophy are organized, dialectical, and fit a pattern. Ambiguity, in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, appears to me as a more inchoate-sounding version of what he means by “paradox”; or alternately, it has a different discursive function. That is, to say (for example) that the human being is an “ambiguous” phenomenon is to deny, in essence, various strictly delineated and one-sided descriptions of him/her or his or her experience (“intellectualism,” “empiricism,” “naturalism”). But it does not clearly pose an alternative view. Since Merleau-Ponty has no monolithic alternative, the alternative is something like “paradox” or “justified contradiction”—that is, *a logos of ambiguity*. Merleau-Ponty’s repeated positive invocations of paradox, paradoxical thinking, dilemmas, contradiction, and dialecticity are constant throughout his writings—but initially only in the background, almost like an after-thought. This changes as Merleau-Ponty seeks to emphasize that honest reflection can no longer pretend to do philosophy in the manner that tradition has imagined it up to this point—that is,



with the tacit assumption that it can *in reflection* maintain a hold on the paradoxical truth, so effortlessly inhabited by everyday pre-reflective life.

It is impossible to mention all the ways in which Merleau-Ponty embraces paradox or all of the countless paradoxes he mentions, but it is worth noting that his main preoccupation—perception—was explained by him as fundamentally paradoxical already in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, in this case with respect to immanence and transcendence, the paradox mentioned as central to phenomenology.<sup>376</sup> He repeats the same idea of the paradoxicality of perception in *Primacy* and refers to the “internal paradox of my perception” in VI<sup>377</sup>, where he also speaks of the “paradoxes of vision” and the “figured enigmas, the thing and the world.”<sup>378</sup> The essay “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” devoted to Husserl, also stresses enigmas of perception as well as the hidden/revealed duality of things.<sup>379</sup> In another place we can find a reference to the “fertile contradiction of human consciousness.”<sup>380</sup> In the “Metaphysical in Man,” Merleau-Ponty characterizes the task of metaphysics as one of inquiring into paradoxes, which, he explains in a footnote, he even outright calls contradictions:

---

<sup>376</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Tr. Colin Smith. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962. Hereafter “PP.” (p. 425) Note also the wording he uses in the same passage, further down: “At the level of being it should never be intelligible that the subject should be both *naturans* and *naturatus*, infinite and finite. But we rediscover time beneath the subject, and if we relate to *the paradox of time, those of the body, the world, the thing, and others*, we shall understand that *beyond these there is nothing to understand*.” (my emphasis)

<sup>377</sup> VI, 11

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>379</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “The Philosopher and His Shadow.” Tr. Richard M. McCleary. In *Signs*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (pp. 167-8)

<sup>380</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Sense and Non-Sense*. Tr. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Northwestern University Press, 1964. p. 96 Hereafter “SNS”

"I have the right to consider the contradictions of my life as a thinking and incarnate subject, finite and capable of truth, *as ultimate and true* [my emphasis] because I have experienced them and because they are interconnected in the unquestionable perception of a thing or in the experience of a truth. I can no longer introduce a 'transcendence in immanence' behind me as Husserl did (even transcendence qualified as hypothetical), for I am not God, and I cannot verify the co-existence of these two attributes in any indubitable experience."<sup>381</sup>

And in one of Merleau-Ponty's lesser known essays on Montaigne<sup>382</sup>, in the beginning of the essay, he chides Descartes for trying to "solve" paradox instead of accepting it, a very telling sentiment. (Montaigne, 201)

Due to the limited focus of this dissertation I have had mostly to bracket the question of intersubjectivity, but here, too, Merleau-Ponty thinks in terms of paradox. In Sorbonne lectures, it seems that Merleau-Ponty accepts that there is a "contradiction" in the fact that I cannot experience other people, yet naturally do experience them, in the course of life.<sup>383</sup> There is also a "contradiction" of self/other at the heart of intersubjectivity as well. (Toadvine, 248). Interesting here is the methodology of simply accepting a contradictory situation and proceeding from there. In the "Preface" of *PP* he discusses the "paradox and dialectic" of the "Ego and the Alter." (*PP* xiii) Among other things, "the other" is paradoxical as an "I" that is "not I" (not me), as well as an "other" that is "not other" (for I cannot be myself without the other). All human solidarity, and all human violence, one might say, stem essentially from the same source, the *paradox* of the other (or intersubjectivity).

---

<sup>381</sup> "The Metaphysical In Man." In: SNS (p. 96)

<sup>382</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Reading Montaigne." Tr. Richard C. McCleary. In *Signs*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (pp. 198-210). Hereafter "Montaigne."

<sup>383</sup> Reference found in: Toadvine, Ted. "Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 227-286). Hereafter "Toadvine."

Merleau-Ponty's acceptance of paradox—even contradiction, in the sense we have seen—can be gleaned indirectly as well, for example through his commentary on other philosophers. We have already seen this with Kant and Montaigne. But in his already-examined critique of Bergson from the *Nature* lectures, for example, he comments, “We cannot reproach Bergson for this contradiction, but he does not give it the place that it merits.”<sup>384</sup> In Bergson's voice Merleau-Ponty in one place remarks favorably that: “Here, perception is contradiction realized.”<sup>385</sup> Or again, on Coghill's experiment, also discussed in Chapter Four:

“Coghill goes further. He shows that the maturation of the organism and the emergence of behavior are one and the same thing. For the axolotl, to exist from head to tail and to swim are the same thing. This double phenomenon, *which amounts to a paradox, develops at the same time in two contradictory directions. ...*” (N 144, my emphasis)

Merleau-Ponty even calls the axolotl lizard itself a paradox! (N 144-5). Finally, in his critical commentary on Guérout's conciliating approach to Descartes, also in the *Nature* lectures, he comments that “The contradiction [of the two orders, subjective and objective] is constitutive of the human. The domain of the human is always equivocal...” (N 129)

---

<sup>384</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Compiled and with notes from Dominique Séglaard. Tr. Robert Vallier. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2003. Hereafter the “*Nature* lectures” in the body of text or “N” in citations.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57

*B. Paradox and the “Perceptual Faith”*

If the basic paradox of perception is the question of transcendence-and-immanence, as we have seen described above, the fact is that in perceptual faith, this is not a problem as such:

“The ‘natural’ man holds onto both ends of the chain, thinks *at the same time* that his perception enters into the things and that it is formed this side of his body. Yet coexist as the two convictions do without difficulty in the exercise of life, once reduced to theses and to propositions they destroy one another and leave us in confusion.” (VI 8)

Merleau-Ponty interestingly calls our natural certitude “unjustifiable”: an “unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us.”<sup>386</sup> It is “unjustifiable” of course because it is primordial—presupposed in any justification (especially the justification of the “skeptic,” which we will see pointed out below).

Merleau-Ponty also calls perceptual faith “openness upon being.” (VI 88) But openness entails not only access but occlusion: access to world exists side by side with occultation (inaccess): “...these two possibilities, which the perceptual faith keeps side by side within itself, do not nullify one another.” (VI 28) We have already of course visited this notion of a side by side “contradiction” in which the sides nevertheless do not nullify each other—Merleau-Ponty has called this “complementarity,” after the same notion in quantum mechanics (with whose lessons he continues to be preoccupied). Thus “complementarity” and “paradox”

---

<sup>386</sup> See also: VI 14 “insoluble antinomies” in perceptual faith.

(“contradiction”) are closely intertwined, and together they begin to reveal new folds in Merleau-Ponty’s updated conception of “dialectic.”

As we saw in the *Nature* lectures, Merleau-Ponty continues to regard the phenomenon of wholeness or totality as a clue to not only the structure of being but also the inability of thought to think Being otherwise than paradoxically. Totality is of “another order” he states in one place, in this case in terms of binocular perception. (VI 7) Just as one eye sees and so does the other, even as neither by itself sees the “miracle of totality” and depth presented in perception (VI 8), so philosophers are trapped in one-sided ways to grasp Being: “...‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ [should be] recognized as two orders hastily constructed within a total experience, whose context must be restored in all clarity.” (VI 20) Note that it is the *context* whose clarity is to be restored, not the total experience *itself*. The experience is already clarified, ironically, through the contradictions to which it gives rise in philosophy, for these are “complementary” descriptions of the whole itself—we have already seen how Merleau-Ponty disposes of the “problem of the one and the many” in this way.

As a totality, “the perceived world is beneath or beyond this antinomy [of being-object and being-subject].” (VI 22) It is this fact which calls for a “...re-examination of the notions of ‘subject’ and ‘object.’” Says Merleau-Ponty, “Every question, even that of simple cognition, is part of the central question that is ourselves, of that appeal for *totality* [my emphasis] to which no objective being answers...” (VI 104) Against Husserl’s framing of phenomenology as a “rigorous science,” Merleau-Ponty offers, “Philosophy is not a science, because science

believes it can soar over its object and holds the correlation of knowledge with being as established, whereas philosophy is the set of questions wherein he who questions is himself implicated in the question.” (VI 27) But even if philosophy is not able to grasp its “object” in self-coincident reflection (not least because the reflection must take account of itself as a factor), it can and must—as we will see, in regards to “hyper-reflection”—take stock of its situation and find expression for the inexpressible “totality” in which it finds itself always already. “Such is the total situation that a philosophy must account for. It will do so only by admitting the double polarity of reflection [reflection and perception/reflected and unreflected] and by admitting that, as Hegel said, to retire into oneself is also to leave oneself.” (VI 49)

The winding manner in which philosophy does and does not have a way to address the contradictorily self-unified “subjective-objective” reality of the pre-reflective perceptual situation leads Merleau-Ponty to offer a twist on the Sartrean notion, derided by that author as a morbid imaginal construct identical to the “God” notion of Christianity, of the “In-Itself-For-Itself.” Of course it is Hegel who announced his system as one in which “substance” becomes “subject” (tying the latter to the historical advent of Christianity). Merleau-Ponty finds a way to steer between Sartre and Hegel on this point, while also trying to maintain a distance from Kant’s negativist/idealist interpretation of the Transcendental Dialectic:

“The truth of the Sartrean In-Itself-for-itself is the intuition of pure Being and the negintuition of Nothingness. It seems to us on the contrary that it is necessary to recognize in it the solidity of myth, that is, of an operative imaginary, which is part of our institution, and which is *indispensable for the*

*definition of Being itself.* With this difference, we are indeed speaking of the same thing..." (VI 85, my emphasis; check)

### *C. Paradox and Philosophy*

Merleau-Ponty's notion of paradox or contradiction can easily be misunderstood and caricatured. One could always argue with a "pro-paradox position" that it "permits everything"<sup>387</sup> or is too schematic and abstract, allowing all binaries to be swallowed up within it, but that is precisely why Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method, which at least strives to be true to experience, is so important. Dialectical logic is a logic of the things themselves.<sup>388</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's prioritization of paradox shapes the way he understands the nature of the philosophical enterprise. He approvingly states that "philosophy [at its best] becomes the enterprise of describing living paradoxes."<sup>389</sup> Philosophy simply "interrogates" the perceptual faith. Or, even more precisely, "philosophy is the perceptual faith questioning itself about itself." (VI 103) In another place Merleau-Ponty comments: "Philosophy believed it could overcome the contradictions of the perceptual faith by suspending it in order to disclose the motives that support it." (VI 50) Merleau-Ponty thus also speaks of the "reflective vice of transforming the

---

<sup>387</sup> For discussion of such a critique from a contemporary philosopher, see: Sainsbury, R. M. *Paradoxes*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995 (pp. 136-7)

<sup>388</sup> In support of this idea, see for example on N 94-5, where Merleau-Ponty expressly rejects the notion of refuting determinism with a "dogmatic indeterminism" which, as it were, "logically disproves" determinism, showing something "contradictory" in it. See also first full paragraph on 92. Also note the following remarks: "We want therefore to open logic without considering it simply as a simply formal way of defining physical reality." (VI 166)

<sup>389</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960*. Tr. John O'Neill. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1970 (p. 108) Here he also cites Heraclitus and calls for an "open Being"—one of many such auspicious references to the master philosopher of paradox himself.

openness of the world into an assent of self with self, the institution of the world into an ideality of the world, the perceptual faith into acts or attitudes of a subject that does not participate in the world.” (VI 51) The implicit critique of Husserl in these words is evident; notice also the appeal once again to the “opacity” of the self to self which must accompany the reflective flight from perceptual faith.

We will revisit the issue of Merleau-Ponty’s reconception of the task of philosophy in the future section on reflection.

### III. Husserl and Paradox

Husserl recognizes plenty of “paradoxical enigmas” in his own presentation of phenomenology.<sup>390</sup> His approach to them is typical of philosophical tradition, however, stemming all the way back to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Book III), in seeking to remove these enigmas in the name of truth and clarity.<sup>391</sup> Husserl never questions the notion that the paradoxes, which appear only “at first [as] insoluble” (*Crisis*, 175) need to be “resolved” once and for all, lest his own project of transcendental phenomenology fail. Husserl could not, for example, be more explicit about how he feels about paradoxes when he criticizes the sciences in the “Epilogue” to *Ideas II* (*Ideas II*, 427-8), where he claims that their resulting “paradoxes” are precisely the

---

<sup>390</sup> *Crisis* 174

<sup>391</sup> Aristotle, *Complete Works of Aristotle*. Tr. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton University Press, 1971. (pp. 1572-1584)



deleterious result of being “unphilosophical” in the required sense. When proper procedures are taken, “In such a case there cannot be any unclear, problematic concepts or any paradoxes.”<sup>392</sup> (*Ideas II*, 428, my emphasis)

All of this becomes pertinent in the *Crisis* when Husserl confronts his own philosophy and its *apparent* paradoxes, those which critics had on seemingly good grounds pointed out. In this text, the paradox Husserl pays the greatest attention to is termed memorably by him the “paradox of subjectivity.” How is it, the paradox goes, that the entire world is constituted by only one *part* of the world, namely the part that consists of human subjects—that is, “real” human beings, the “community” of monads as they are elsewhere described? Of course, very much the same paradox was on Husserl’s mind even in *Ideas I*:

“Thus, on the one hand consciousness is said to be absolute in which everything transcendent and, therefore, ultimately the whole psychophysical world, becomes constituted; and, on the other hand, consciousness is said to be a subordinate real event within that world. How can these statements be reconciled?” (*Ideas I* 124)

The “solution” to the paradox (a “paradox which can be *sensibly resolved*”—*Crisis* 180) takes a familiar form in the *Crisis*. Husserl merely reaffirms the distinction he has by now made long ago and many times since, namely between empirical-real human subjects, each of whom *also* transcendently co-constitutes the world (along with other human subjects), and *the* transcendental subjectivity/intersubjectivity for whom individual, particular egos are merely “phenomena,” ego-poles of noematic-noematic a priori correlativity of constitution.

---

<sup>392</sup> Husserl follows this by announcing that he sees spread out before him the “promised” land. (*Ideas II*, 429)

“Concretely, each ‘I’ is not merely an ego-pole but an ‘I’ with all its accomplishments and accomplished acquisitions, including the world as existing and being-such. But in the epoché and in the pure focus upon the functioning of the ego-pole, and thence upon the concrete whole of life and of its intentional intermediary and final structures, it follows *eo ipso* that nothing human is to be found, neither soul nor psychic life nor real psychophysical human beings; all this belongs to the ‘phenomenon,’ to the world as constituted pole.” (*Crisis* 183)

Husserl’s solution, in other words, comes down to a distinction between “real” and “phenomenal” senses in which we can understand the “I” of the human subject.

There is here a truly irresolvable paradox of subjectivity only if we are forced to understand the transcendental “I” as identical, without qualification, with the real “I.” This issue truly is central to Husserl’s enterprise. “If the paradox...were insoluble,” Husserl explains, “it would mean that an actually universal and radical *epoché* could not be carried out at all, that is, for the purposes of a science rigorously bound to it.” (*Crisis* 180). For phenomenology would reduce to psychology. It is interesting to remember that Merleau-Ponty denied *precisely* the possibility of a “radical” or universal *epoché*, which shows from a certain angle why he did not have to worry about Husserl’s version of the “paradox of subjectivity.”

The distinction as philosophers between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty can be illustrated through contrasting statements they make on their ultimate task.

Husserl’s relentless goal is to understand, and to him this means, to a large extent, framing things eidetically—that is, seeing them in their conceptual form:

“From the beginning the phenomenologist lives in the paradox of having to look upon the obvious as questionable, as enigmatic, and of henceforth being unable to have any other scientific theme than that of *transforming the universal obviousness of the being of the world—for him the greatest of enigmas—into something intelligible.*” (*Crisis* 180)

Of course Merleau-Ponty, in accepting the reduction, parallels Husserl when he says that philosophy “dispossesses humanity...by inviting it to think of itself as an enigma.” (VI 3) But he follows this up with the distinctly un-Husserlian sentiment: “This is the way things are and nobody can do anything about it.” (VI 4)

In contrast to Husserl, that is, for Merleau-Ponty the obviousness of the world, or rather the “perceptual faith” with which we take the world and our relation with it, in their essential oneness, for granted, is, strictly speaking, beyond intelligibility. It is interesting in this regard that Husserl can tacitly concede this point, at least in a certain limited respect, yet without accepting its consequences.

Thus he writes,

“Not even the single philosopher by himself, within the epoché, can hold fast to anything in this elusively flowing life, repeat it always with the same content, and become so certain of its this-ness and its being-such that he could describe it, document it, so to speak (even for his own person alone), in definitive statements.” (*Crisis* 178)

It is more than apparent that Husserl thrives on the self-image of being a “paradoxical” philosopher in the sense of militating against common opinion and the “naturalistic” and “realistic” biases of the common man and the scientist. But for his part, Merleau-Ponty shows little patience for resting content with this sort of strict reversality. Consider for example his remarks on the ways people interpret the new physics: “Thus the ‘strange’ notions of the new physics are strange... only in the sense that a paradoxical opinion surprises common sense, that is, *without*

*instructing it in depth and without changing anything of its categories.*"<sup>393</sup> (VI 17, my emphasis) This, in essence, is exactly what I have argued goes on in *Ideas II* with respect to that text's hybrid mixture of anti-naturalism and tacit naturalism, which conspire to occlude asking the meaningful questions of nature left to Merleau-Ponty (and others) to raise. With a critical tone, Merleau-Ponty summarizes Husserl's attitude towards philosophy and paradox alike in the following manner:

"Thus, with the correlation between thought and the object of thought set up as a principle, there is established a philosophy that knows neither difficulties nor problems nor paradoxes nor reversals: once and for all, I have grasped within myself, with the pure correlation...the truth of my life, which is also the truth of the world and of the other lives." (VI 48)

#### **IV. The Paradox of Reflection**

##### *A. The Reflective Attitude*

The complex, ambiguous relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, which we have examined at length in Chapter 3 and elsewhere, becomes once again strongly apparent in Merleau-Ponty's remarks on reflection. Consider the following quote:

---

<sup>393</sup> Merleau-Ponty makes similarly derogatory remarks on the superficial version of "paradoxical" thinking in the *Nature* lectures. See: N 108, 114 . The references here are to the "paradoxes" generated by relativity theory.

“Thought cannot ignore its apparent history, if it is not to install itself beneath the whole of our experience, in a pre-empirical order where it would no longer merit its name; it must put to itself the problem of the genesis of its own meaning.” (VI 12)

On the one hand, this is the very task of Husserl’s genetic phenomenology in its more mature phases, a “questioning-back” of thought *by* thought. But Merleau-Ponty places a certain emphasis on “experience,” which, in its pure pre-reflective form, thought cannot—without incurring certain pregnant contradictions that must stay with it as reminders of its distance-in-proximity from the origin—truly access:

“Through the conversion to reflection, which leaves nothing but ideates, *cogitata*, or noemata subsisting before the pure subject, we finally leave the equivocations of the perceptual faith, which paradoxically assured us that we have access to the things themselves and that we gain access to them through the intermediary of the body, which therefore opened us up to the world only by sealing us up in the succession of our private events.” (VI 30)

The “solution” to the antinomy, notes Merleau-Ponty, is “ideality,” for which “the world is numerically one with my *cogitatum* and with that of the others insofar as it is ideal (ideal identity, beneath the several and the one).” But this is not a genuine solution, inasmuch as it is actually deployed as a *dodge* of the actual problem:

“This movement of reflection will always at first sight be convincing: in a sense it is imperative, it is truth itself, and one does not see how philosophy could dispense with it. The question is whether it has brought philosophy to the harbor, whether the universe of thought to which it leads is really an order that suffices to itself and puts an end to every question. *Since the perceptual faith is a paradox* [my emphasis], how could I remain with it?” (VI 31-2)

It is clear by now that the “perceptual faith” is another name for the “natural attitude,” conceived now in its fullest, and not fully elucidatable, depths. And reflection, as I have maintained all along, is what Merleau-Ponty means by the

“transcendental” attitude<sup>394</sup>, and clearly, it cannot for him pull effectively consciousness out of its immersion in the world, its pre-reflective home: “And if I do not remain with [perceptual faith], what else can I do except re-enter into myself and seek there *the abode of truth?*” (VI 31) The problem with “philosophies of reflection” is that they try to “comprehend” the self-world bond by “undoing” it first, then falsely trying to re-fabricate it: “...the reflection recuperates everything except itself as an effort of recuperation, it clarifies everything except its own role. The mind’s eye too has its blind spot...” (VI 33) Furthermore, “reflective thought...performs all its operations under the guarantee of the totality that it claims to engender” (VI 33), whereas clearly the totality exceeds it.

It is clear that the “reflective attitude” applies to Descartes, Kant, Husserl, and even Hegel in different ways. The moment of recovery or recuperation represented by reflection, and ultimately the self-interrogation of thought in the natural attitude that Husserl identifies as the phenomenological reduction, is problematic, indeed paradoxical<sup>395</sup>, insofar as it contains a moment of disruption or “non-coincidence”<sup>396</sup> which we have seen before: “What is given is not a massive and opaque world, or a

---

<sup>394</sup> If there still is any doubt about this, Merleau-Ponty’s own words should put it to rest: “With one stroke the philosophy of reflection metamorphoses the effective world into a transcendental field; in doing so, it only puts me back at the origin of a spectacle that I could never have had unless, unbeknown to myself, I organized it.” (VI 44)

<sup>395</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960*. Tr. John O’Neill. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1970 (p. 106): Reduction “involves a paradox.”

<sup>396</sup> Merleau-Ponty makes the point that philosophy is more or less a translation. One might go so far as to say that the problems of translation are coextensive, for Merleau-Ponty, with those of his style of philosophy, which effects a “translation” of the “mute” sense of nature/being into the language of concepts (i.e., language in its propositional-cognitive role). For a powerful and relevant examination of the issue of translation from within the phenomenological-hermeneutical tradition see: Vandavelde, Pol. *The Task of the Interpreter: Text, Meaning, and Negotiation*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005

universe of adequate thought; it is a reflection which turns back over the density of the world in order to clarify it, *but which, coming second, reflects back to it only its own light.*" (VI 35, my emphasis) Merleau-Ponty's verdict:

"This whole reflective analysis is not false, but still naïve, as long as it dissimulates from itself its own mainspring, and as long as, in order to constitute the world, it is necessary to have a notion of the world as pre-constituted—as long as the procedure is in principle delayed behind itself." (VI 34)

Merleau-Ponty does consider challenges to this point of view. For example, he addresses the key challenge that says that *how* reflection gets to its perch is irrelevant, as the process is like a ladder that can be kicked away; but he notes on the contrary that in that case, "there [would be] no longer the originating and the derived" and hence no "philosophy of reflection," strictly speaking, at all. (VI 35) In other words, the "ladder" is built into the definition of reflectivity in relation to something like "first-order (unreflected) experience."

Yet he does not endorse quietism, either. "It is a question not of putting that perceptual faith in place of reflection, but on the contrary of taking into account the *total situation*, which involves reference from the one to the other." (VI 35, my emphasis) (Recall that we have seen this reference to the "total" situation above.) This is of course exactly what sets up the problematic of *nature*—namely, the problem of a totality that cannot, in terms of spirit, fully envelop itself, but which knows itself to be bonded, rooted, and even ensconced therein. That bond is of course exactly what makes possible the "truth"—even as the "truth" in this deeper ontological sense (deeper than linguistic-conceptual truth) devolves into contradictory concepts when we attempt to express it linguistically-logically. The

unity of this bond, a pre-reflective unity that transcends, finally, the distinction between “identity” and “non-identity” that preoccupies the German Idealists, is irrecoverable: “...the relation between a thought and its object...contains neither the whole nor even the essential of our commerce with the world...which we shall here call the openness upon the world (*ouverture au monde*)...”<sup>397</sup> (VI 35)

### B. “Hyper-Reflection”

So what does Merleau-Ponty oppose to reflection, pure and simple, without “replacing” reflection (the transcendental attitude) with “perceptual faith” (the natural attitude)? His answer is “Hyper-reflection.” Hyper-reflection is thus, I would propose, a kind of “third attitude” to match the “third way” Merleau-Ponty mentions elsewhere: a “natural-transcendental” attitude if you will, which comes to being an awareness of what Heidegger calls “radical finitude.”<sup>398</sup> In Merleau-Ponty’s parlance, what needs to be grasped is, as usual, the primacy of perception.

“To found the latter [perception] on the former [reflection], and the *de facto* perception on the essence of perception such as it appears to reflection, is to forget the reflection itself as a distinct act of recovery. In other words, we are catching sight of another operation besides the conversion to reflection, *more fundamental than it*, of a sort of *hyper-reflection* (*sur-réflexion*) that would also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account. It accordingly would not lose sight of the brute thing and the brute perception and would not finally efface them, would not cut the

---

<sup>397</sup> It seems that for Merleau-Ponty, quantum mechanics shows that there is no “representation of reality” through measurement, exactly in the same way (perhaps) that thought itself (as reflection) cannot “retrieve” nature. (N 94-5) But it is not simply a matter of its being “unable” to retrieve it, in the way “God” (an intellectus archetypus) for example, could. It is very important that even God could not retrieve it, because Nature itself is in virtue of itself irrecoverable, a “permanent past.”

<sup>398</sup> In some senses, it could also be conceived as an answer to Foucault’s critique of the “transcendental-empirical doublet” from *The Order of Things*. See: Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994 (p. 318)



organic bonds between the perception and the thing perceived with a hypothesis of inexistence.”<sup>399</sup> (VI 38)

The task for philosophy, by implication, is to think the world of transcendence in its transcendence, difficultly and even impossibly, using “the significations of words to express, beyond themselves, our mute contact with the things, when they are not yet things said.” We might call this the “paradox of reflection”: “The reflection finds itself therefore in the strange situation of simultaneously requiring and excluding an inverse movement of constitution.” (VI 45)<sup>400</sup>

Merleau-Ponty finds in his notion of “hyper-reflection” a way to critique Husserl’s idealistic interpretation of phenomenological method.<sup>401</sup> What the notion that every transcendental reduction is also an eidetic reduction means (a Husserlian principle we have quoted elsewhere), for him, is that we cannot capture the “concrete flux” of existence. To reflect in Husserl’s stark, transcendental sense is to

“...disengage from the things, perceptions, world, and perception of the world, by submitting them to a systematic variation, the intelligible nuclei that resist... It therefore by principle leaves untouched the twofold problem of the genesis of the existent world and of the genesis of the idealization performed by reflection and finally evokes and requires as its foundation a *hyper-reflection* where the ultimate problems would be taken seriously.” (VI 45-6)

---

<sup>399</sup> Compare: 45 reflection: “[as] reflection, re-turn, re-conquest, or re-recovery, it cannot flatter itself that it would simply coincide with a constitutive principle already at work in the spectacle of the world...”

<sup>400</sup> Compare to Merleau-Ponty’s description of philosophy as concerning the “far-off as far-off.” (VI 102)

<sup>401</sup> Seebohm mentions that there are hints of “paradox” and “contradiction” in Merleau-Ponty’s methodology, but claims (I think correctly) that it has more to do with the “what” than the “how.” See: Seebohm, Thomas M. “The Phenomenological Movement: A Tradition without Method? Merleau-Ponty and Husserl.” In *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (p. 66)

Note that even here Merleau-Ponty does not strictly speaking oppose either the eidetic or phenomenological reductions; he simply wants to push further and deeper, in an effort to be *truly* true to the “things themselves” and their paradoxical (because accomplished through difference) unity with *us*. As Langer points out helpfully, Merleau-Ponty’s later procedure of thinking the origin, using reflection to go beyond it, is radically paradoxical only in a way that matches our own (i.e., humanity’s own) paradoxical being-in-the-world in the first place.<sup>402</sup> (Langer 165-6) Indeed, once again, as we have come to expect, Merleau-Ponty finds the reversal of the Husserlian impulse in Husserl’s own phenomenological imperative: “In recognizing that every reflection is eidetic and, as such, leaves untouched the problem of our unreflected being and that of the world, Husserl simply agrees to take up the problem which the reflective attitude ordinarily avoids—the discordance between its initial situation and its ends.” (VI 46) Even in an earlier essay, Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point, saying, with what Merleau-Ponty interprets as the mature Husserl: “We must, rather, become aware of this paradox—that we never free ourselves from the particular except by taking over a situation that is all at once, and inseparably, both limitation and access to the universal.”<sup>403</sup>

“Hyper-reflection” becomes another name of philosophy itself. It takes account of dimensions of facticity, spatiality and temporality, and ideality alike, sparing no dimension of existence in its ray of regard. (VI 46) Here is the “third dimension” where the antinomies of reflective analysis are, in a sense, lifted. But

---

<sup>402</sup> Langer, Monika M. *Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary*. Tallahassee: The Florida University Press, 1989. (164-5)

<sup>403</sup> Merleau-Ponty. “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man.” Tr. John Wild. In *The Primacy of Perception*. Ed. John Wild. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. (p. 82)

hyper-reflection takes place through, and not outside of, reflection itself; in order to see that which “delivers [the thinker] over to perception and to phantasms...he must *reflect*. But as soon as he does so, beyond the world itself and beyond what is only ‘in us,’ beyond being in itself and being for us, a third dimension seems to open up, wherein their discordance is effaced.” (VI 29)

How does all of this square with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of a silent Logos of the world? That is, he declares in many places variations of this thought: “There is a Logos of the natural aesthetic world, on which the Logos of language relies.” (N 212)<sup>404</sup> What is key to see is that Merleau-Ponty does not want to deny intelligibility to the ground or “mainspring,” he simply wants to deny that it is completely isomorphic, as it were, with human understanding. In this way it is akin to the being-in-itself-and-for-itself Merleau-Ponty spoke of before. Already in “In Praise of Philosophy,” Merleau-Ponty observes that “man contains in silence all the paradoxes of philosophy.”<sup>405</sup> That is, humanity’s own being has a dialectical logic that can be expressed in words, but only obliquely. Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the tightly wound unity of contraries in Being actually, in his eyes, serves to preserve as opposed to wound the intelligibility of Being. Thus he remarks (VI 268) that *Ideas II* tries wrongly to *disentangle* knots, since disentanglement destroys intelligibility! Cartesian dualism, for instance, has increased “intelligibility” of parts at the expense of making entirely unintelligible the whole—that is, the whole being that is alive, embodied, thinking, and sensing. Hyper-reflection restores the “sense” of this whole,

---

<sup>404</sup> See also VI, 145: “mind or thought” is “sublimation of the flesh.”

<sup>405</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988 (pp. 63-4)

even though, at the same time, this is a “sense” that eludes the logic of non-contradiction.

Merleau-Ponty’s thought on reflection and the paradoxical perceptual faith precedent to it has matured since *PP*, though subtly. Notice what he says in the earlier text about the issue:

“It will perhaps be maintained that a philosophy cannot be centered around a contradiction, and that all our descriptions, since they ultimately defy thought, are quite meaningless. The objection would be valid if we were content to lay bare... a layer of prelogical or magical experiences. For in that case we would have to choose between believing the descriptions and abandoning thought, or knowing what we are talking about and abandoning our descriptions. ... [Thus] we must return to the *cogito*, in search of a more fundamental *Logos* than that of objective thought...” (PP 425)

In a slight but important contrast to these statements, the Merleau-Ponty of the *VI* is more comfortable living in the absence of another, deeper, non-objective “Logos.” This is not to say there is no such logos, or that “wild Being” lacks meaning in its wildness (we have already seen that Nature for Merleau-Ponty autoproduces its own meaning), only that the distance between *its* meaning and the “meanings” of the ideal, reflective order is in a certain sense unbridgeable, and that herein lies the ultimate paradox of reflection: that while there is a meaning without thought, just as there is transcendence without immanence—these truths can only be appreciated through thought, immanently. Consciousness is bonded to its unconscious origin; we are privileged to know the depths of our ignorance.

## V. Merleau-Ponty's Paradoxical Thinking In Relation to Other Styles of Thinking: Dialectic, Skepticism/Quietism, and Mysticism

### A. Merleau-Ponty and Hegelian Dialectic

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of "paradox" and "philosophy" alike is deeply informed by his reading and response to the "dialectical" philosophy of Hegel. Hugh Silverman explains the precise sense in which Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a "dialectic":

"[Merleau-Ponty] very much sees himself as part of a historical succession in which the discovery of subjectivity and the discovery of history turn into a dialectic of existence and dialectic. But...his dialectic is not of a Hegelian sort. His dialectic is such that he finds the philosopher encountering what is already there; his dialectic is one of experience and philosophy becoming that experience, philosophy interrogating what is and finding itself there in what is interrogated. His dialectic is more of a tension between existence and dialectic, an ambiguity between the two."<sup>406</sup>

The notion of a dialectic which includes *dialectic* as one of the terms of the dialectic itself is characteristic of the sort of reflexively self-critical endeavor Merleau-Ponty launches in especially his later period. Unlike Hegelian dialectic, Merleau-Pontian dialectic has no "goal" other than its own movement, which is not haphazard but purposefully self-inverting—but one cannot even say this much, it turns out, without affixing an essence to what eludes essential description:

---

<sup>406</sup> Silverman, Hugh. "Is Merleau-Ponty Inside or Outside the History of Philosophy?" In *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*. Eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor. State University of New York Press. Albany: 2000 (p. 138)

"[The dialectic is] *Self-manifestation*, disclosure, in the process of forming itself. ... The dialectic is indeed all this, and it is, in this sense, what we are looking for. If nonetheless we have not hitherto said so, it is because, in [the] history of philosophy, it has never been all that unadulteratedly; it is because the dialectic is unstable (in the sense that the chemists give to the word), it is even essentially and by definition unstable, so that it has never been able to formulate itself into theses without denaturing itself, and because if one wishes to maintain its spirit it is perhaps necessary to not even name it." (VI 92)

Merleau-Ponty formally endorses the method of dialectic in chapter 2 of *VI*, entitled, "Reflection and Interrogation." (VI 89) (The chapter itself is a sustained response to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.) Merleau-Ponty goes on to give a detailed account of what he means by the "instability" (quoted above) of dialectic, its nature of subverting, mediating, and transforming, not for the sake of resting in one finalized thesis, but for the sake of expressing the inner nature of Being itself. Here more than anywhere else, Merleau-Ponty's adoption of a certain radical Heracliteanism, one that breaks away from both Platonic and Husserlian containers (which oppose an existential Heraclitean flux to an ideal Parmenidean order, so to speak) becomes clear. Indeed, he all but says so himself by approvingly pointing out that Heraclitus already showed the way, "opposite directions coinciding in the circular movement." (VI 92)

As we examined before, Merleau-Ponty's thought embraces a paradigm of opposition that he calls "complementarity"; it is a dialectic that refuses, we might now say, to remain "static" by cresting into any form of synthesis of horizons. It is in this spirit that I read Merleau-Ponty's remarkable intertwining of his critique of Sartrean ontology and his own burgeoning dialectical method:

"Has not our discussion consisted in showing that the relationship between the two terms [Being and Nothingness] (whether one takes them in a relative sense, within the world, or in an absolute sense,

of the index of the thinker and what he thinks) covers a swarm of relations with double meaning, *incompatible and yet necessary to one another (complementarity, as the physicists say today), and that this complex totality is the truth of the abstract dichotomy from which we started?*" (VI 92, my emphasis)

We already saw in the previous chapter examples of Merleau-Ponty's suspicion of the Hegelian form of dialectic, albeit indirectly, with regard specifically to his approval of Schelling's effort to break away from Hegelianism. In this respect Merleau-Ponty revealingly ruminates:

"Position, negation, negation of the negation: this side, the other, the other than the other. What do I bring to the problem of the same and the other? This: that the same be the other than the other, and identity difference of difference---this 1) does not realize a surpassing, a dialectic in the Hegelian sense; 2) is realized on the spot, by encroachment, thickness, *spatiality*---"<sup>407</sup> (VI 264)

What is most of note for us here in his self-comparison with Hegelian dialectic and his rejection of an ultimate teleology, a "surpassing."<sup>408</sup> Merleau-Ponty is careful to identify what he calls a "trap in the dialectic" and the "bad dialectic" (VI 94) that ensues, ironically echoing Hegel's own terminological style ("bad infinity," etc.). As against these, Merleau-Ponty, characteristically advances a new form of thinking called "hyperdialectic":

"What we call hyperdialectic is a thought...that is capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationships and what has been called ambiguity. The bad

---

<sup>407</sup> Compare, also in an obvious reference to Hegel: "Against the doctrine of contradiction, absolute negation, the *either/or*--Transcendence is identity within difference." (VI 225)

<sup>408</sup> In other respects, of course, many of Merleau-Ponty's dialectical observations mirror Hegel's method strongly, including the Hegelian principle of the convergence of opposites at their extremes (most famously, the convergence of "Being" and "Non-Being" in "Becoming"). Thus in the *Nature* lectures, for example, we can see the way he shows how the effort to preserve determinism in physics ends up going ironically towards the occult (N 92), or again how science moves towards idealism in the name of realism (N 91). In another place he observes that possibility and necessity are closely aligned, since necessity is just one of many possibilities. (N 88) Similarly, rigorous theism threatens to become pantheism (since God is the same as Being itself), and so on and so forth.

dialectic is that which thinks it recomposes being by a thetic thought, by an assemblage of statements, by thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; the good dialectic is that which is conscious of the fact that every *thesis* is an idealization, that Being is not made up of idealizations or of things said, as the old logic believed, but of bound wholes where signification never is except in tendency..." (VI 94)

Merleau-Ponty's critique of Hegel thus lies in the latter's not being thorough enough or authentic in thinking dialectically. Thus "the only good dialectic is hyperdialectic." (VI 94) Hyperdialectic, the "good" dialectic, is called this because it criticizes and sees beyond itself. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes "process" and processuality again and again. Merleau-Ponty's "good" dialecticity is thus a movement of thought and the manner in which thought must pursue the whole without pretending to have a grasp of it unilaterally:

"The point to be noticed is this: that the dialectic without synthesis of which we speak is not therefore scepticism, vulgar relativism, or the reign of the ineffable. What we reject or deny is not the idea of a surpassing that reassembles, it is the idea that it results in a new positive, a new position. ... What we seek is a dialectical definition of being that can be neither the being for itself nor the being in itself—rapid, fragile, labile definitions..." (VI 95)

### *B. Merleau-Ponty and Skepticism/Quietism*

Merleau-Ponty's views on philosophy, reflection, and dialectic raise important questions about the extent to which Merleau-Ponty has effectively "given up" on philosophy as normally understood, at least as a knowledge-acquiring enterprise for example, and whether his interpretation of phenomenology, which begins in perceptual faith and ends in the recognition of its own futile attempts to reproduce this faith in linguistic-conceptual terms, is quietistic. This is not the case if by "quietism" we mean the position that nothing can be accurately said of being or the truth. It is true that Merleau-Ponty believes that "...the 'object' of philosophy will



never come to fill in the philosophical question, since this obturation would take from it the depth and the distance that are essential to it." (VI 101) But we can and do speak about this situation—perhaps a clue as to the mystery of the “intelligibility” of a Nature that makes itself unknown to the programs of intelligibility imposed upon it eidetically by “grasping” thought.

Related to the “quietism” charge is that of “skepticism.” Merleau-Ponty himself has to worry about skepticism, of course, because he has opened himself to the criticism of his position that argues that it (Merleau-Ponty’s stance on philosophy) effectively amounts to a version of skepticism. The kind of skepticism, namely, that throws its hands up and declaring that philosophy resolves merely to “unresolvable paradoxes.” One might call this “Carneadean skepticism,” after the famous Academic who would lecture one day for a position, the next day against it, demonstrating the futility of philosophizing (under one standard interpretation) in the first place. This kind of skepticism eventually developed into the canonical Pyrrhonian view of the unresolvability of “equipollent” views in philosophical disputes, a view that resembles Merleau-Ponty’s up until one realizes that Merleau-Ponty goes further than the skeptic by *affirming* a certain equipollence *in the truth itself*. In other words, Merleau-Ponty makes a metaphysical claim—supporting himself on the wings of a pre-reflective faith—about Nature, though admittedly without the “dogmatic” support of, say, an “infallible” first premise. Merleau-Ponty’s “metaphysics” is still, in this regard, “post-metaphysical.”

Strict Pyrrhonism aside, the fact is that while Merleau-Ponty is vigorously anti-dogmatical, even to the point of embracing an infinite dialectics, he is certainly

not skeptical insofar as “skepticism” is a negativistic approach to philosophical problems that denies only what it can first identify as meaningful in the first place. The skeptic in this sense is, in Sartre’s terms, in “bad faith,” playing (now in Wittgenstein’s language) the language-game of philosophy in order to undermine philosophy. Thus Merleau-Ponty explicitly opposes skepticism for negating or calling into the question the existence of the world (and of truth) to perceptual faith as the effortless pre-reflective confidence in the world *that even the skeptic presupposes*. (VI 95) Indeed, Merleau-Ponty concerns himself with refuting (or defusing) skepticism from the beginning of the VI.<sup>409</sup> Later he questions at least Cartesian skepticism for tacitly presupposing the “positivity of the psychic.” (VI 95) One might call this a classically “phenomenological” critique of the “psychologistic” assumptions of the skeptic, who must implicitly advance a metaphysics of solipsistic idealism to ground his/her points.

Merleau-Ponty’s attitude towards philosophy is not dismissive but rather, one might say, both celebratory and ironic. He understands philosophy to be *at first* a kind of effort to replace perceptual faith with a web of statements and concepts, with an ideal order, whereas there is never really any question of replacing the world—and *philosophy itself can determine this, too*. The world is something experienced, while philosophy is to capture moments of this experientiality, this primordial contact with truth, in part but not in whole. That which unites us to the world—intentionality is one name for it—is that which separates us from it as well.

---

<sup>409</sup> See VI 4, 6; 95

And language, which we ask to dispel the mystery of being, is just as much part of this mystery, an expression thereof:

“Far from harboring the secret of the being of the world, language is itself a world, itself a being—a world and a being to the second power, since it does not speak in a vacuum, since it speaks *of* being and *of* the world and therefore redoubles their enigma instead of dissipating it.” (VI 95)

In the end, however, it cannot be denied that there is a certain kinship between radical Pyrrhonian skepticism and Merleau-Ponty’s procedure—especially in the spirit of openness preached famously by the original Pyrrhonists, from whom the term “skepticism” (literally “searching”) derives. The link, as explained by Merleau-Ponty himself, is summed up thusly: “If [skepticism] multiplies contrasts *and contradictions*, it is because *truth demands it*.” And thus Montaigne, a skeptic who Merleau-Ponty admires, as we have already seen, “begins by teaching that all truth contradicts itself; perhaps he ends up recognizing that *contradiction is truth*.” (Montaigne 198, my emphasis)

### *C. Merleau-Ponty and Mysticism*

Is Merleau-Ponty a mystic? Is there a religious dimension to this thought? There is certainly a meditative, almost prayer-like quality of Merleau-Ponty’s later discourse, not to mention respect for the ineffable unity of being, a staple idea of mysticism across cultures, from Taoism to the Neoplatonically-tinged mysticism of the “Abrahamic” religions. Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of contraries (neither intellectualism nor empiricism, neither realism nor idealism, etc.) resembles the method of “negative theology” and the “*neti, neti*” (“not this, not that”) methodology

of the *Upanishads*, while his embrace of an identity-of-opposites crosses the final barrier of classical logic (in Neoplatonism, *logismos* as opposed to *Nous*) that stands in the way of a philosophical expression (which must also occlude or “obturate”) what one might call the “One.”

Merleau-Ponty’s lack of spiritualistic references, however—at least compared to his interest in art, literature, politics, psychology, and the sciences—betray a deeply secular mind. At the same time, even here there lies a paradox. For Merleau-Ponty states in one place: “For me, philosophy consists in giving another name to what has long been crystallized under the name of God.”<sup>410</sup> The ambiguity of the statement speaks eloquently for itself: Merleau-Ponty’s “philosophy” is pure religion—in a manner religion itself does not think. In this spirit, I am tempted to call Merleau-Ponty a “methodological mystic,” or a thinker with tendencies towards, but no real ties to, a philosophical mysticism, perhaps like Heidegger and Wittgenstein in the last century, but unlike, say, Simone Weil, Emmanuel Levinas, or Muhammad Iqbal.

Of course, there is no shortage of religious imagery, intended as such or not, in Merleau-Ponty’s writings. We have already seen his reference to “miracles,” for example the “miracle of the sense organ,” “the miracle of totality,” etc. There are other such references as well, almost to the point of invoking a “celebratory” attitude towards existence akin to Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius the

---

<sup>410</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*. Lawlor, Leonard and Ted Toadvine, eds. Northwestern University Press, 2007 (p. 240)

Areopagite.<sup>411</sup> It also cannot be ignored that his metaphysics of “flesh” has a clear symbolic connection to the “flesh” of Christ, the man (visible) who, moreover, was/is God (invisible). Or again, there are the invocation of perceptual *faith*, the ultimate *mystery* of the world and being (PP xxiii), “pre-established harmony,” grace and the “gift” of vision, and finally, to more indirect and esoteric references, such as the repeated use of “depth” to describe the absolute—a classically gnostic (Valentinian) description of the divine, according to Elaine Pagels.<sup>412</sup>

But I think that Gary Madison goes too far when he claims we can only appreciate Merleau-Ponty in a Christian context.<sup>413</sup> It is true that his attitude seems ultimately to be one of gratitude, humility, and wonder before Being. But this is also true of plenty of secular philosophers, not to mention mystics from other religions. Also, there is a way in which Madison’s claim might also be too weak, in addition to being too strong. For virtually any philosopher writing in the Christian West—even an atheist like Sartre—can be said to be indelibly marked by the dialectics of Christianity. By itself this illumines very little.

There are certainly those besides the present author who have identified a distinct affinity between Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and certain mystical schools; a case in point is New York University Hebrew Studies professor Elliot R. Wolfson, who uses Merleau-Ponty’s thought to illumine the Kabbalah. Comments Wolfson in the “Prologue” to his monumental work *Language, Eros, Being*:

---

<sup>411</sup> For example, the “miracle” of the many-and-the-one—in reference to painting and biology. (N 154) The most relevant Pseudo-Dionysian text is probably *The Celestial Hierarchy*. (General Books LLC, 2009)

<sup>412</sup> Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1979 (p. 32)

<sup>413</sup> Madison, Gary. *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: The Search for the Limits of Consciousness*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981 (p. 222-5)

"I shall labor...more on the pathways of Merleau-Ponty's thinking, as in his thought I find an affinity with the understanding I have derived from the study of kabbalistic literature and consequently feel it is legitimate to use his jargon to formulate hermeneutical and phenomenological suppositions in reading these sources."<sup>414</sup>

In another place he notes, "Sensible beings, or what we perceive to be such, are [for Merleau-Ponty] 'radiations of verbal essences'—a notion that resonates with a central imaginal modality of Jewish esotericism..." (xxiii) Wolfson astutely observes, moreover, that for Merleau-Ponty's ontological phenomenology, as for Jewish mysticism, there is a central dialectic of revealing and concealing, which in the latter stems from the essential nature of the "effably ineffable" godhead, *Ein Sof*, and in the former expresses itself in terms of the attempt of philosophy to grasp the paradox of perceptual faith/the lifeworld:

"In the reconquest of the lifeworld, we thus discern a mutuality of ostensibly conflicting impulses: the urge to uncover, on the one hand, and the discovery that every uncovering is a covering over, on the other. As it happens, in English, the word 'recover' uncovers the paradox, for it means both 'to expose' and 'to conceal.'"<sup>415</sup> (xxiii)

The question of Merleau-Ponty and his "methodological mysticism" has much to do with a question of attitude and affect. Merleau-Ponty is as enthralled by a kind of numinosity of nature, the hidden-and-revealed source of being and the miracles of creativity and totality, just as surely as the Sufi mystic is fixated on the majesty and mystery of the one ineffable God. There is in Merleau-Ponty a wonder at the

---

<sup>414</sup> Wolfson, Elliott R. *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005 (p. xxi) Wolfson's massive volume was the winner of the National Jewish Book Award by the Jewish Book Council.

<sup>415</sup> See also: Wolfson elsewhere comments on Merleau-Ponty's "mystical tone" in various cited passages. (xxvi)

“miracle” of experience, as if it were a wonderfully (though imperfectly) coordinated dance, involving great success and even “knowledge” of a kind that nevertheless cannot be explained in terms of reflection alone. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the way in which human beings (and subjectivity) are essentially “of” the same stuff (the “flesh”) as the world, or “Nature,” and that therein lies a clue to the fundamental compatibility and even oneness of self and world. But there is also a radical break, a ‘dehiscence,’ or separation, which somehow, in a paradoxical manner, makes this relationship possible. That is, there is not merely oneness, but a multiplicity constituting oneness—thus there is wholeness, the ultimate theme of all philosophy.

## VI. Conclusion

In his article, “Phenomenology and Hyper-Reflection,” Ted Toadvine nicely summarizes his own (and to a large extent mine as well) approach to Merleau-Ponty’s later writings:

“Despite his ongoing critical examinations, Merleau-Ponty presents phenomenology in a positive light throughout his later writings... This is not to deny that Merleau-Ponty recognizes, and increasingly accentuates, certain paradoxical tensions of the phenomenological method. But these tensions inevitably point us back to the contradictory intertwining of immanence and transcendence that is the perceived world.”<sup>416</sup>

---

<sup>416</sup> Toadvine, Ted. “Phenomenology and Hyper-Reflection.” In *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*. Eds. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008 (pp. 28-9)

For Merleau-Ponty, philosophy is not a matter of “solving” a problem, but of understanding the problem as its own truth. (This is different, of course, than understanding *truth* as a problem, perhaps a more characteristic posture for radical “postmodernism” than the “perceptually pious” Merleau-Ponty.) When Merleau-Ponty states a problem, it is stated very much as something to be further deepened, to be explored (the “absolute is depth”), etc. Towards addressing an issue in biology, for example, he says approvingly, as if hungering to learn from the lesson of another discipline: “Let’s say first that the expressions employed by the new school of biology are *not solutions*: the notions of field and gradient are *the index of a problem*, not responses.” (N 151, my emphasis) Contrary to Behnke, I don’t believe Merleau-Ponty abandoned “description” for “explanation”<sup>417</sup>; on the contrary, he shows why a proper description, attentive to the paradoxical nuances of the truth made available to us, *makes (ultimate) explanations moot*. Explanation is the goal, one might say, of reflection; hyper-reflection, by contrast, comes back to description by way of self-description or a radical, uncompromising embrace of the finitude of reflection itself.

It also may seem that Merleau-Ponty is more radical and subversive than Husserl (for example, by “throwing out” the universalistic or trans-historical pretensions of philosophy once and for all), but this, as we have seen, can be turned around. Husserl’s intentions are, in the end, revolutionary and “subversive” in a way that Merleau-Ponty’s are not. For Husserl seeks a “radical reshaping of our whole

---

<sup>417</sup> Behnke, Elizabeth. “Merleau-Ponty’s Ontological Reading of Constitution in *Phénoménologie de la perception*.” In *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (p. 49)



way of looking at the world" (*Crisis* 175), while Merleau-Ponty instructs us simply to "relearn to look at the world."<sup>418</sup> Perhaps Merleau-Ponty is the more conversative of the two thinkers after all.

---

<sup>418</sup> More precisely: "True philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world." (PP xxiii)

## Conclusion

We have now reached the end of our investigations. In this concluding section I will offer some wider reflections on both some of the systematic philosophical lessons to be learned from the Husserl-Merleau-Ponty encounter.

### I. Merleau-Ponty vis-à-vis Husserl

In this dissertation we have seen how Husserl and Merleau-Ponty understand and apply the phenomenological method and how they interpret its results. In particular, we have seen how Merleau-Ponty reconsiders and modifies the basic Husserlian program—while somehow, I have argued, remaining true to fundamental aspects of it. He remains “true” to Husserl at least in the sense of embracing the Husserlian centralization of living consciousness and the phenomenological reduction that brings this consciousness and its world-relation to active awareness (reflection).

Although we did not examine Husserl’s so-called “later period” in much detail, we did review *Ideas II*, which, through the notions of the “personalistic attitude” and the *Umwelt*, already contains much of the core of the life-world philosophy that was to later emerge. Throughout his writings Husserl displays an ambivalence, as Merleau-Ponty points out, regarding the natural attitude in particular: is it left behind, somehow, in the transcendental reduction, or is it merely illumined therein? Do we come through the reduction to know ourselves as “natural” consciousnesses more fully, or do we realize ourselves as self-split

between higher and lower levels, the latter of which is subsumed in the more comprehensive (because intersubjective and oriented towards the universal) former? I have argued that we would be remiss to understand Husserl as an entirely consistent thinker with a predetermined agenda; on the other hand, one cannot ignore his persistently rationalistic orientation and preference, if you will, for the realm of “ideas.”

It is too easy, however, to assign Merleau-Ponty the labels of “anti-essentialist,” “anti-rationalist,” etc. Rather, Merleau-Ponty sees the same thing, as it were, that Husserl does; he knows the world to be a phenomenal field or milieu, not an impermeable Object separable from its manners of “givenness,” and he knows consciousness to be intertwined with the world through its body and its intuitive grasp of the world’s (inexactly) eidetic structure. But Merleau-Ponty also, critically, sees the matrix of being-and-consciousness (or, simply, “Being,” the ontological “totality”) to be, in a certain sense, ineffable. As a whole, Being cannot be properly thought—a Kantian point from the latter’s “Transcendental Dialectic”—but neither does “reason” have “autonomy” such that it may tame the forms of experience into an idealistic template of determinacy. And the “whole” is not a regulative idea, such that a divorce between theory and practice becomes the only way to accommodate it. Rather, thought is *part* of the whole, it is *part* of “nature,” even if it is that part that has the meaning of what is *a-part* and “contrary” to nature—a contrariness endemic to nature itself.

This kind of territory obviously lends itself to comparisons with Hegelian dialectic, with which it is not unrelated even for Merleau-Ponty. Hegel, famously,

understands the spirit to know itself through its identification with a “higher form” of nature, namely the cultural world and the domains of art, religion, and philosophy. As I read him, Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, understands what Hegel means by “self-knowing spirit” to be itself a form of alienation from its own nature, though at the same time a necessary one that holds nature and spirit alike in a tension that stems from an originary “unity of opposites,” which can no longer be thought *except paradoxically*, and which leaves its legacy of lasting ambiguity in the human experience.

Thus for Merleau-Ponty, Nature is neither the object of thought nor a subject, nor even their coincidence in a higher synthesis, but rather the paradoxical “depth” (“the absolute”) and “otherness” (which is nonetheless paradoxically inclusive) of the human spirit. By itself this is not a Husserlian view, but it is the culmination of a systematic meditation Merleau-Ponty refers to from very early on as the “phenomenology of phenomenology”—a reaching of the limits of what is thinkable in subjective or constitutional terms, limits which reveal the dependence of spirit on a pre-reflective nature which is also, at the same time, precisely not amenable to theoreticization along the lines of a scientific “naturalism.” In this way, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy preserves the sense of consciousness revealed in the “transcendental” attitude and through the transcendental epoché and reduction, but without going so far as to allowing thought to “take possession of the world.” The transcendental attitude becomes subsumed in the *paradox of nature*—in a wholeness or totality, that is, which can only be thought as an “unthinkable.”

All of this exposes a significant fault line between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. For Husserl seems to broadly accept the scientific-physicalistic definition of nature, adding only that its sense as “physical nature” is derived from transcendental subjectivity. But this will not do for Merleau-Ponty. Nature cannot be limited to such a sense, because it cannot be fully grasped in the first place. As the condition for the possibility of consciousness, it is necessarily beyond it. At the same time, the transcendental attitude—taken to the extreme of hyper-reflection, which then problematizes the scope of the transcendental attitude itself—is able to understand this “beyond” as the hidden depths of its own self, the “soil of subjectivity.” Due to this intertwining between the two—this is Merleau-Ponty’s “speculative” move, if you will—subject and nature (note: not “object”) are not simply mutually alienated “substances,” but rather members of an identity relation that is nevertheless, at its core, self-splitting (dehiscence, the paradox of the “other,” etc.). Comparisons to what Heidegger comes to call “sameness without difference” or “belonging-together” are probably apt here.

It is clear that Merleau-Ponty is in a kind of struggle only or primarily with the “transcendental idealist” Husserl of the middle period (and of the later period, to the extent that this “Husserl” remains). We can only properly assess Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy once we accept the premise of there being certain “self-contradictions” within Husserl’s thought itself. Phenomenology becomes in Merleau-Ponty’s hands a meditation on the paradoxes of human existence and incarnation left bare by Husserl’s analysis. Colloquially speaking, one might say in this sense that Merleau-Ponty “pitches his tent” in Husserl’s “backyard.”

Thus this dissertation is about a critique, but it is a strangely “internal” one. Merleau-Ponty operates within a framework largely (though not wholly) defined by phenomenology. He should be seen, I think, as someone who quietly but decisively *reforms* phenomenology and brings it into a sphere of interactive relevance with the sciences and with other realms of culture—history, politics, art, religion—by softening the dichotomies that Husserl rigidly puts into place.

## II. Merleau-Ponty and Some Other Philosophers

For Merleau-Ponty, philosophy—as phenomenology—is an exercise in dialectics. Not positive or negative dialectics, so to speak, but the dialectics of self-meditation. Like Montaigne, Merleau-Ponty finds an infinity in himself. He is fascinated by “experience” and its open-endedness. He finds this same wondrousness in Husserl’s writings, but he also identifies rationalist, Cartesian presuppositions there that dictate a certain result. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty’s dialectic is not a movement “towards” anything. Experience neither begins nor ends in thought, but outside of it. Thus philosophy is a matter simply of overcoming its need, as it were, to overcome experience—it is a matter of finding its home not in itself (this is the Hegelian solution, the “satisfaction” of consciousness) but in the quest for itself, which necessarily does not end in itself (as a consciousness).

This is not Kant: for while Kant, too, places a limit on reason, he limits experience itself to an artificially controlled domain, a discursive fiction. In Merleau-Ponty, humanity is plunged into a sea of unknowing, so to speak, on the raft of

perceptual faith. There are no epistemic guarantees, not even of a “transcendental” kind.

Merleau-Ponty’s embrace of the Heideggerian “being-in-the-world” in the “Preface” of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is well-known, but Merleau-Ponty’s conception of nature and spirit departs from Heidegger’s in a significant way. For whereas Heidegger privileges “Being” over “beings,” suggesting a radical break between them that is constantly covered over by “metaphysics,” Merleau-Ponty does not understand “Being” to be anything other than the interplay of nature and spirit, or exteriority and interiority, in a carnal field he famously terms the “flesh,” and which he also identifies with “nature” in an expanded, holistic sense. In this way, Merleau-Ponty is closer to Hegel, but again with a critical difference. For Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that nature (and hence the self, since we are “of” nature) can be fully known, since it is necessarily unknown to itself. In this regard Merleau-Ponty calls on Schelling’s notion of the *Abgrund* or “abyss within God” that is the “savage principle” of nature. Merleau-Ponty is less interested in the theological or moral implications of this than the epistemological and ontological ones: nature is a “wild being” that cannot be known by spirit even though spirit is of *it*.

In this way, Merleau-Ponty becomes interested in the Freudian concept of an “unconscious,” in that he saw a structural parallel between nature (or the body) as the “unconscious” of spirit and the internal structure of the psyche, an interplay of conscious and unconscious dimensions.

### III. The “Personalistic Attitude” and the Limits of Reflection

We have spent a good deal of time examining Merleau-Ponty’s reformulation of phenomenology in terms of the interplay of perception, reflection, and what I have called a third and new type of attitude, “hyper-reflection.” Hyper-reflection is a kind of “meta-attitude,” an attitude in which the natural and reflective attitudes take their respective positions.

Husserl’s recognition of the untenability of the sharpness of the natural/transcendental divide is reflected in his notion of the “personalistic attitude.” Of course, here, the “natural attitude” comes perilously close to merging with the “transcendental”; some of Husserl’s descriptions of “spirit” smack of a similar or identical “absolutism” and “ontological privilege.” Merleau-Ponty is fundamentally right to identify a central tension in Husserl’s philosophy between an understanding of the “natural attitude” as one that is opposed and superseded in the phenomenological reduction, on the one hand, and a “natural attitude” that is subdivided, *in itself*, between lower and higher poles (as I have mentioned above). But Husserl’s “poles”—the naturalistic and the personalistic—are not what Merleau-Ponty would have in mind. After all, the “naturalistic” attitude is not truly *natural* at all. It is precisely *unnatural*, the purely theoretical lens of the scientist. Unlike the transcendental or phenomenological or reflective stand-point, it does not seek to understand the world as existentially known, much less to understand *the natural attitude* itself. It does not thematize natural experience or being, it simply restricts the field of experience to a certain set of *eidē* that frame the results of experiments performed in the world. Another way to put it is that there is no true, separable



“scientific attitude.” This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he suggests in the *Nature* lectures that science (by which he refers to scientific praxis and not theory) is continuous simply with “experience.” Clearly, it is the “personalistic attitude” that is the truer, deeper form of the everyday natural life of living subjects—of human subjects, though of course even animals possess *Umwelten*.

But we saw that with his description of it, Husserl makes of the personalistic attitude a kind of basis for a subjective idealism. How can Merleau-Ponty avoid this result? He can do so precisely by limiting the scope of reflection, by assigning reflectivity or the “thinking attitude” to an eidetic matrix, itself historically conditioned, an attitude which at its outer limits of reflexivity opens up into an interrogation into its origins. Nature, as the ultimate source of meaning and being (as opposed to “transcendental subjectivity,” either individual or intersubjective), is not coincident with the *ego cogito*. It appears in various guises as the hidden “other” that is also the hidden “self,” the unknowable depth that is simultaneously inescapably transcendent, and other such paradoxes that result from the attempt of reflection to think the unthinkable. It is known through acts of creativity, through the pulse of life and willed motion, and through the principle of “totality” which eludes ratiocinative analysis and yet must be understood as being at the basis of the significance of language, behavior, art, politics, and even sexuality.

#### **IV. Phenomenology as Paradox**

With bodily subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty supplements the first paradox of phenomenology, that of “immanent transcendency” (or, the principle of the world’s

having to be within us just in order to be without us) with its flip-side, namely the principle that for there to be a “within” at all, this “within” must first be “without,” spread out in the world, so to speak.

Of course both formulations are incomplete and even, technically, misleadingly dualistic in their own right. But this is why Merleau-Ponty’s later reflections concentrate precisely on the mystery of the unsayability of this union—which, as Heraclitus had maintained of all contraries, is “one” *because* of difference rather than in spite of it—and its relation to thought, which must contradict itself, finally, to recreate a sense of the unity, so to speak, “after the fact.”

## **V. Naturalism**

Merleau-Ponty, unlike Husserl or Kant, does not oppose a timeless realm (or sphere of consciousness) to a temporal one. So there is also a move in him towards naturalization and immanentism, though not in the “naturalistic” sense of those who would circumscribe consciousness within an unconscious “reality.” Merleau-Ponty’s “naturalism” defies both realist and idealist interpretations of the term. Merleau-Ponty’s naturalism is phenomenological; he cannot be safely appropriated by modern “cognitive scientists” and the like. This is a question of starting-point; modern naturalism starts later than it thinks it does. It obscures the origin by theorizing it, indeed by privileging theory over experience. For what does experience tell us about a “nature” or “world” that has no share in the “mind” or “soul,” which is after all *doing* the experiencing?

Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, while having very different approaches, are both respectful of the complexity facing any theory of nature in which human subjectivity is taken seriously as non-reducible to scientific-naturalistic causality, while at the same time involved in the thick of perceptual experience (as opposed to being directed to an ethereal Platonic realm of Ideas). Husserl, however, believed that the way to overcome scientific naturalism was to swallow it whole, as it were, in the gulp of transcendental subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty's approach is rather to question both naturalism and transcendental philosophy at once as victims of false absolutization and avoidance of the fundamental paradoxes of human existence.

## Bibliography

### I. Primary Literature (Husserl and Merleau-Ponty):

#### *A. Husserl*

Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations*. Tr. Dorion Cairns. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999

Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Tr. David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970

Husserl, Edmund. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Article*. In: *Collected Works*, Vol. 6. Tr. Thomas Sheehan and Richard E. Palmer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997

Husserl, Edmund. *Husserl: Shorter Works*. Eds. McCormack and Elliston. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981 (pp. 21-35, the "Encyclopaedia Britannica" article)

Husserl, Edmund. *Husserliana XIV, Gesammelte Werke: Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Zweiter Teil. 1921-28*. Ed. Iso Kern. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973

Husserl, Edmund. *Husserliana XXXII, Gesammelte Werke: Natur und Geist: Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1927*. Ed. Michael Weiler. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001

Husserl, Edmund. *Husserliana XXXIV, Gesammelte Werke: Zur phänomenologischen Reduktion. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1926-1935)*. Ed. Sebastian Luft. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002

Husserl, Edmund. *Husserliana Materialienbände, Band IV. Natur und Geist: Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1919*. Ed. Michael Weiler. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002

Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Tr. F. Kersten. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983

Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Trs. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989

Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Third Book: Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences*. Tr. Ted Klein and William E. Pohl. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1980

Husserl, Edmund. *Logical Investigations*. Tr. J. N. Findlay. London: Routledge, 1900/01 (2nd, revised edition 1913)

### B. Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Bergson in the Making." Tr. Richard C. McCleary. In *Signs*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964. (pp. 182-191)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Eye and Mind." Tr. Carleton Dallery. In *The Primacy of Perception*. Ed. John Wild. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (pp. 159-192)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. Ed. Leonard Lawlor with Bettina Bergo. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2002

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*. Lawlor, Leonard and Ted Toadvine, eds. Northwestern University Press, 2007

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Metaphysical In Man." In *Sense and Non-Sense*. Tr. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Northwestern University Press, 1964

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *La Nature ou le monde du silence (pages d'introduction)*. In *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*. Ed. Emmanuel de Saint Aubert. Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2008 (pp. 44-53)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Compiled and with notes from Dominique Séglaard. Tr. Robert Vallier. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2003

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Note de cours, 1959-1961*. Ed. Stéphanie Ménasé. Paris: Gallimard, 1996

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man." Tr. John Wild. In *The Primacy of Perception*. Ed. John Wild. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Tr. Colin Smith. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Philosopher and His Shadow." Tr. Richard M. McCleary. In *Signs*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (pp. 159-181)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences." Tr. James M. Edie. In *The Primacy of Perception*. Ed. John Wild. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Reading Montaigne." Tr. Richard C. McCleary. In *Signs*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (pp. 198-210)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Resumé of the Course: Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology." Tr. John O'Neill with revisions by Leonard Lawlor. In *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Ed. Leonard Lawlor with Bettina Bergo. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2002

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Structure of Behavior*. Tr. A.L. Fisher. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Texts and Dialogues*. Ed. Hugh Silverman and James Barry, Jr. Tr. Michael Smith et al. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960*. Tr. John O'Neill. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1970

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Tr. Alphonso Lingis. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1969

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The World of Perception*. Tr. Oliver Davis. New York: Routledge, 2008

## II. Secondary Literature and Other Works:

### A. Books and Monographs:

Barbaras, Renaud. *The Being of the Phenomenon*. Trs. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004

Bell, David. *Husserl*. New York: Routledge, 1990

Bernet, Rudolf; Iso Kern; and Eduard Marbach. *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993

Carbone, Mauro. *The Thinking of the Sensible*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2004

Carman, Taylor. *Merleau-Ponty*. New York: Routledge, 2008

DeBoer, Theodore. *The Development of Husserl's Thought*. Tr. Theodore Plantinga. The Hague, the Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978

Dillon, M.C. *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988

Dodd, James. *Idealism and Corporeity: An Essay on the Problem of the Body in Husserl's Phenomenology*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997

Drummond, John J. *Historical Dictionary of Husserl's Philosophy*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2008

Dupond, Pascal. *Dictionnaire Merleau-Ponty*. Paris: Ellipses, 2008

Findlay, J. N. *The Discipline of the Cave*. New York: George Allen and Unwin, 1966

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994

Franck, Robert. *Phénoménologie et Ontologie: Merleau-Ponty lecteur de Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005

Hass, Lawrence. *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Tr. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996

Kockelmanns, Joseph J. *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*. Indianapolis: Purdue University Press, 1994

Langan, Thomas. *Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Reason*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966

Landgrebe, Ludwig. *The Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl*. Ed. Donn Welton. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981

Langer, Monika M. *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary*. Tallahassee: The Florida University Press, 1989

- Madison, Gary. *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: The Search for the Limits of Consciousness*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981
- Marcel, Gabriel. *The Mystery of Being*. Chicago: St. Augustine's Press, 2001
- McDowell, John. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1994
- Mohanty, J. N. *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl: A Historical Development*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008
- Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. New York: Routledge, 2000
- Overgaard, Søren. *Husserl and Heidegger on Being in the World*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2004
- Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1979
- Patocka, Jan. *An Introduction to Husserl's Phenomenology*. Tr. Erazim Kohák. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1996
- Priest, Stephen. *Merleau-Ponty*. New York: Routledge, 1998
- Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. *The Celestial Hierarchy*. (General Books LLC, 2009)
- Ricoeur, Paul. *A Key to Edmund Husserl's Ideas I*. Tr. Bond Harris and Jacqueline Bouchard Spurlock. (Tr. revised by Pol Vandavelde, ed.) Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*. Trs. Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. University of Chicago Press, 1995
- Russell, Matheson. *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum Books. New York: 2006
- Sainsbury, R. M. *Paradoxes*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995
- Toadvine, Ted. *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009
- Vandavelde, Pol. *The Task of the Interpreter: Text, Meaning, and Negotiation*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005



Welton, Donn. *The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *On Certainty*. Harper Perennial, 1972

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001

Wolfson, Elliott R. *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005

*B. Articles, Book Chapters, and Volume Introductions*

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, Book III. In *Complete Works of Aristotle*. Tr. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton University Press, 1971 (pp. 1572-1584)

Barbaras, Renaud. "A Phenomenology of Life." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Taylor Carman and Mark Hansen, eds. Cambridge University Press, 2005. (pp. 206-230)

Barral, Mary-Rose. "Body—Soul—Consciousness Integration." In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 119-128)

Behnke, Elizabeth. "From Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Nature to an Interspecies Practice of Peace." In *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology, and Animal Life*. Albany: State University Press, 1999 (pp. 93-116)

Behnke, Elizabeth. "Merleau-Ponty's Ontological Reading of Constitution in *Phénoménologie de la perception*." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 51-70)

Bello, Angela Ales. "Seele und Leib in der kategorialen und in der originären Perspektive." In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 37-48)

Bernet, Rudolf. "The Subject in Nature: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*." Printed in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*. Eds. Patrick Burke and Jan Van Der Veken. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993 (pp. 53-68)

Bergo, Bettina. "Philosophy as *Perspectiva Artificialis*: Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Husserlian Constructivism." Printed as the "Afterword" of: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice.

- Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. Ed. Leonard Lawlor with Bettina Bergo. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 2002 (pp. 155-182)
- Burke, Patrick. "Creativity and the Unconscious in Merleau-Ponty and Schelling." In *Schelling Now: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Jason M. Wirth. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005
- Carman, Taylor. "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty." *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 1999. (pp. 205-225)
- Carr, David. "Findlay, Husserl, and the Epoché." In: *Studies in the Philosophy of J. N. Findlay*. Eds. Cohen, Martin, and Westphal. Albany: SUNY Press, 1985
- Churchill, Scott. "Nature and Animality." In *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*. Eds. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008 (174-183)
- Cobb-Stevens, Richard. "Body, Spirit, and Ego in Husserl's *Ideas II*." *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 243-258)
- Crowell, Steven Galt. "The Mythical and the Meaningless: Husserl and the Two Faces of Nature." In *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*. Eds. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996 (pp. 81-106)
- Dastur, Françoise. "Husserl and the Problem of Dualism." *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 65-77)
- Dastur, Françoise. "Merleau-Ponty and Thinking from Within" (tr. Paul B. Milan). Printed in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*. Eds. Patrick Burke and Jan Van Der Veken. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993 (pp. 25-36)
- Dastur, Françoise. "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy According to Merleau-Ponty." In *Reading Merleau-Ponty: On Phenomenology of Perception*. Ed. Thomas Baldwin. New York: Routledge, 2007 (pp. 152-163)
- Dastur, Françoise. "World, Flesh, Vision." In *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*. Eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor. State University of New York Press. Albany: 2000 (pp. 23-50)
- Dauenhauer, Bernard. "Teleology of Consciousness: Husserl and Merleau-Ponty." In *Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. IX. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979 (pp. 149-168)

Depraz, Natalie. "What about the *praxis* of Reduction? Between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 115-126)

Dreyfus, Hubert. "Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Husserl's (and Searle's) Concept of Intentionality." In *Rereading Merleau-Ponty*. Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2000 (pp. 33-52)

Evans, Fred. "Chiasm and Flesh." In: *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*. Eds. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008 (184-193)

Evans, J. Claude. "Where is the Life-World?" Printed in *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*, eds. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996 (pp. 57-66)

Fink, Eugen. "Die phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der Gegenwärtigen Kritik." In: Fink, Eugen. *Studien zur Phanomenologie 1930-1939*. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966

Froman, Wayne. "Alterity and the Paradox of Being." In *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Eds. Galen Johnson and Michael Smith. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991

Geraets, Théodore F. "Merleau-Ponty's Conception of Nature." *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 301-312)

Grene, Marjorie. "Merleau-Ponty and the Renewal of Ontology." *Review of Metaphysics*, 29, June 1976 (pp. 605-625)

Gutting, Gary. "What Have We Been Missing? Science and Philosophy in Twentieth-Century French Thought." In *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, eds. Brian Leiter and Michael Rosen, Oxford University Press, 2008 (pp. 180-209)

Heinämaa, Sara. "From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl's Reduction." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 127-148)

Heelan, Patrick. "Natural Science and Being-in-the-World." *Man and World*, 16, 1983 (pp. 207-220)

Köchler, Hans. "The Relativity of the Soul and the Absolute State of the Pure Ego." In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 95-109)

Kojima, Hiroshi. "From Dialectic to Reversibility: A Critical Change of Subject-Object Relation in Merleau-Ponty's Thought." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 95-114)

Low, Douglas. "Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy: Method and Ground, A Comprehensive Overview." In *Phenomenological Inquiry*, Volume 31. Hanover, New Hampshire: October 2007 (pp. 51-89)

Luft, Sebastian. "From Being to Givenness and Back: Some Remarks on the Meaning of Transcendental Idealism in Kant and Husserl." In *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 15/3, 2007 (pp. 367-394)

Luft, Sebastian. "Husserl's Concept of the 'Transcendental Person'. Another Look at the Husserl-Heidegger Relationship." In *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13/2, 2005 (pp. 141-177)

Luft, Sebastian. "Husserl's Notion of the Natural Attitude and the Shift to Transcendental Phenomenology." In *Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. LXXX, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002 (pp. 114-119)

Luft, Sebastian. "Husserl's Theory of the Phenomenological Reduction: Between Life-World and Cartesianism." In *Research in Phenomenology* 34, 2004 (pp. 198-234)

Marcelle, Daniel. "The Ontological Priority of Spirit Over Nature: Husserl's Refutation of Psychophysical Parallelism in *Ideas II*." In *Philosophy Today*, vol. 50 (suppl.), 2006. (pp. 75-82)

Melle, Ullrich. *Das Wahrnehmungsproblem und seine Verwandlung in phänomenologischer Einstellung*. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983 (Ch. 13, "Der Leib als Subjekt der Wahrnehmung," pp. 120-130)

Melle, Ullrich. "Nature and Spirit." In *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*, eds. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996 (pp. 15-36)

Moyle, Tristan. "Re-Enchanting Nature: Human and Animal Life in Later Merleau-Ponty." *British Journal of Phenomenology*. Vol. 38, No. 2, May 2007

O'Dywer, Luciana. "The Significance of the Transcendental Ego for the Problem of the Body and Soul in Husserlian Phenomenology." In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 109-117)

- Park, Ynhui. "Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of the Wild Being." *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. (pp. 313-326)
- Philips, Stephen H. "Indian Philosophies." In *From Africa to Zen*, eds. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins. Lanham Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publications, Inc., 1993 (pp. 221-266)
- Priest, Stephen. "Husserl's Concept of Being: From Phenomenology to Metaphysics." In *German Philosophy Since Kant*. Ed. Anthony O'Hear. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. (pp. 209-222)
- Rabanaque, Luis. "The Body as Noematic Bridge Between Nature and Culture?" In: *Epistemology, Archaeology, Ethics: Current Investigations of Husserl's Corpus* (Eds. Pol Vandavelde and Sebastian Luft). New York: Continuum, 2010
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*. Tr. Edward G. Ballard and Lester Embree. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967 (Third chapter: "Husserl's *Ideas II*: Analyses and Problems," pp. 35-81)
- Rokstad, Konrad. "The Historicity of Body and Soul." In *Phenomenology of Life -- From the Animal Soul to the Human Mind: Book I: In Search of Experience*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2007 (pp. 127-159)
- Rokstad, Konrad. "Nature, Subjectivity and the Life-World." In *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research Vol LXXVII*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 2002 (pp. 41-59)
- Schirmacher, Wolfgang. "Monism in Spinoza's and Husserl's Thought." In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 345-352)
- Schuhmann, Karl and Smith, Barry. "Against Idealism: Johannes Daubert vs. Husserl's *Ideas I*." *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (1985), pp. 763-793.
- Schütz, Alfred. "Edmund Husserl's *Ideas, Volume II*." In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 13: 394-413
- Seebohm, Thomas M. "The Phenomenological Movement: A Tradition without Method? Merleau-Ponty and Husserl." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 51-70)

Silverman, Hugh. "Is Merleau-Ponty Inside or Outside the History of Philosophy?" In *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*. Eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor. State University of New York Press. Albany: 2000 (pp. 131-143)

Solomon, Robert C. "Husserl's Concept of the Noema." In *Husserl: Expositions and Appraisals*, Frederick A. Elliston and Peter McCormack, eds. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977 (pp. 54-69)

Smith, A. D. "The Flesh of Perception: Merleau-Ponty and Husserl." In *Reading Merleau-Ponty: On Phenomenology of Perception*. Ed. Thomas Baldwin. New York: Routledge, 2007 (pp. 1-22)

Steinbock, Anthony. "Saturated Intentionality." In *The Body*. Ed. Donn Welton, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999 (pp. 178-199)

Theodorou, Panos. "Perceptual and Scientific Thing: On Husserl's Analysis of "Nature-Thing" in Ideas II." In *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, Volume 5, eds. Burt Hopkins and Steven Crowell. Seattle: Noesis Press, 2005 (pp. 165-187)

Toadvine, Ted. "Leaving Husserl's Cave? The Philosopher's Shadow Revisited." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 71-94)

Toadvine, Ted. "Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002 (pp. 227-286)

Toadvine, Ted. "Phenomenology and Hyper-Reflection." In *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*. Eds. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008 (pp. 17-29)

Trotignon, Pierre. "L'oeil de la chair." In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 49-64)

Tymieniecka, Anna-Teresa. "From Husserl's Formulation of the Soul-Body Issue to a New Differentiation of Human Faculties." In *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature (Analecta Husserliana, Vol. XVI)*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1983. Ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (pp. 3-12)

Vandavelde, Pol. "Introduction" of: Ricoeur, Paul. *A Key to Edmund Husserl's Ideas I*. Tr. Bond Harris and Jacqueline Bouchard Spurlock. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996 (pp. 16-20)

Waldenfels, Bernhard. "Interrogative Thinking: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Later Philosophy." In *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*. Eds. Patrick Burke and Jan Van Der Veken. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993 (pp. 3-12)

Watson, Stephen H. "Cancelations: Notes on Merleau-Ponty's Standing Between Hegel and Husserl." *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. XVIII, 1987.

Watson, Stephen H. "Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Itinerary From Body Schema to Situated Knowledge: On How We Are and How We Are Not to 'Sing the World.'" *Janus Head*, Winter/Spring Issue, 9.2, 2007. Amherst, NY: Trivium Publications. (pp. 535-549)

Zahavi, Dan. "Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: A Reappraisal." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*. Eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002. (pp. 3-29)

### *C. Miscellaneous*

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice and Chapsal, Madelaine: "Merleau-Ponty In Person: An Interview with Madeleine Chapsal, 1960." In Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Texts and Dialogues*. Ed. Hugh Silverman and James Barry, Jr. Tr. Michael Smith et al. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992

Mohanty, J. N. "My Philosophical Position/Response." In *The Transcendental and the Empirical*. Ed. Bina Gupta. Oxford, England: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000 (pp. 253-280)

Priest, Stephen. "Taking Merleau-Ponty Literally: Reply to Dermot Moran." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Volume 8, Issue 2, July 2000 (pp. 247-251)

Tilliette, Xavier. "Husserl's Concept of Nature (Merleau-Ponty's 1957-58 Lectures)." Appendix 3 of: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Texts and Dialogues*. Eds. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry Jr. Tr. Michael B. Smith. London: Humanities Press, 1992 (pp. 162-3)

