

JYU DISSERTATIONS 53

Juho Hotanen

Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Descartes

From Cartesian Duality to the New Ontological Structure



UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND
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To my mother and my father

ABSTRACT

Hotanen, Juho

Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Descartes. From Cartesian Duality to the New Ontological Structure

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The duality between the mind and the body has been haunting a wide field of academic discussions since René Descartes' (1596–1650) philosophy. The problem not only concerns the inexplicable relation between immaterial and material substances, but also the relation between reflective thought and the unreflected experience: there are two fields of evidence which both have their own types of clarity, but which remain obscure for each other. The lived and practical experience is opposed to the objective knowledge of the sciences. Cartesian philosophy is established on the refusal of the non-philosophical life, which, nevertheless, it cannot refuse.

This work offers an investigation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908–1961) interpretation of Descartes' philosophy. Merleau-Ponty comments on Descartes' ideas throughout his work. The most central problem for him is the relation between mind and body: Descartes demonstrates both the distinction and the union between them. In his early work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty argues that Descartes' philosophy consists of a contradiction between the distinct pure mind and the lived experience of the union. He reformulates this contradiction as the paradox of reflection: reflection reflects on the unreflected experience which nevertheless withdraws from reflection. In his later and unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty continues to elaborate the paradoxical relation of connection and difference as the new ontological structure. He designates the new ontological structure as a solution to the problem of the duality of Cartesian ontology: it is the differentiation of the sensible texture, the thickness of time, and the depth of history.

The work consists of five chapters. Chapter One is a systematic study of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Descartes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and it explicates Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the contradiction in Descartes' philosophy. Chapter Two investigates the historical background of Merleau-Ponty's work by studying the Cartesian tradition after Descartes. Chapter Three shows how Merleau-Ponty approaches the duality of Cartesian ontology, and how he begins his discussion on the new ontology in relation to it. Chapter Four is a systematic investigation of Merleau-Ponty's ontology in *The Visible and the Invisible*, and it demonstrates how he answers the problem of Cartesian duality with his new ontological structure. Chapter Five adds perspectives from Merleau-Ponty's later lectures on Descartes, and, at the end, studies Merleau-Ponty's concept of freedom in relation to his idea of the ontological structure of connection and difference.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, Descartes, ontology

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TIIVISTELMÄ

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Merleau-Pontyn Descartes-tulkinta. Kartesiolaisesta duaalisuudesta uuteen ontologiseen rakenteeseen

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Siitä lähtien, kun René Descartes kehitti filosofiassaan ajatuksen duaalisuudesta mielen ja ruumiin välillä, tämä ajatus on kummitellut laajalla alueella akateemista keskustelua. Kysymys ei ole vain immateriaalisen ja materiaalisen substanssin välisestä selittämättömästä suhteesta vaan reflektiivisen ajattelun ja reflektioimattoman kokemuksen suhteesta: on olemassa kaksi evidenssin aluetta, joilla molemmilla on oma selvyyden tyyppinsä mutta jotka pysyvät hämärinä toisilleen. Eletty ja käytännöllinen kokemus asettuu vasten tieteiden objektiivista tietoa. Kartesiolainen filosofia perustuu ei-filosofisen elämän torjumiselle, jota se ei kuitenkaan kykene torjumaan.

Tässä työssä selvitetään Maurice Merleau-Pontyn tulkintaa Descartesin filosofiasta. Merleau-Ponty kommentoi Descartesin esittämiä ajatuksia läpi tuotantonsa. Hänelle keskeisin ongelma on mielen ja ruumiin välinen suhde: Descartes osoittaa sekä näiden välisen eron että liiton. *Phénoménologie de la perception* -teoksessa Merleau-Ponty väittää, että Descartesin filosofiassa on keskeistä ristiriita mielen ja ruumiin eron ja yhteyden välillä, puhtaan mielen ja eletyn kokemuksen välillä. Hän muotoilee uudelleen tämän ristiriidan reflektion paradoksina: reflektio reflektioi reflektioimattomasta kokemuksesta joka kuitenkin aina vetäytyy reflektiolta. Myöhäisessä ja keskenräiseksi jääneessä *Le visible et l'invisible* -teoksessa Merleau-Ponty jatkaa yhteyden ja eron paradoksaalisen suhteen kehittelyä esittämällä uuden ontologisen rakenteen. Hän hahmottaa uutta ontologista rakennetta vastauksena kartesiolaisen ontologian duaalisuuteen: kyse on aistittavan tekstuurin eriytymisestä, ajan tiheydestä ja historian syvyydestä.

Tämä teos koostuu viidestä luvusta. Ensimmäinen luku on systemaattinen tutkimus Merleau-Pontyn Descartes-tulkinnasta *Phénoménologie de la perception* -teoksessa, ja siinä eksplikoidaan Merleau-Pontyn ajatus Descartesin filosofian ristiriitaisuudesta. Toinen luku selvittää Merleau-Pontyn tulkinnan historiallista taustaa tutkimalla Descartesin jälkeistä kartesiolaista perinnettä. Kolmas luku näyttää miten Merleau-Ponty lähestyy kartesiolaisen ontologian duaalisuutta, josta hän lähtee liikkeelle uuden ontologian projektissaan. Neljäs luku on systemaattinen tutkimus Merleau-Pontyn ontologiasta *Le visible et l'invisible* -teoksessa ja siinä osoitetaan miten hän vastaa kartesiolaisen duaalisuuden ongelmaan uudella ontologisella rakenteella. Viides luku laajentaa näkökulmaa Merleau-Pontyn myöhäisiin luentoihin Descartesista ja selvittää lopuksi Merleau-Pontyn vapaus-käsitystä ja sen suhdetta yhteyden ja eron ontologiseen rakenteeseen.

Avainsanat: Merleau-Ponty, Descartes, ontologia

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If I have learned anything in the process of this study, it is how hard it can be to work on something that requires a lot of concentration and takes a long time, and how important are positive and supporting surroundings in that process. They are not only important, they are the watershed between flourishing and decay, freedom of mind and being stuck, strength and weakness. Working on philosophical research, as with any creative project, needs an understanding of the not yet realized possibilities, of something virtual that is still searching its way towards articulation. Fortunately, for some this counts among the greatest joys of life.

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Helsinki, January 2019
Juho Hotanen

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

TIIVISTELMÄ

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	11
CHAPTER ONE: DESCARTES' CONTRADICTION.....	37
1.1 Doubt and Pre-meditative Life	38
1.2 Thought and Existence.....	47
1.3 Natural Light and Natural Inclination	60
1.4 Finitude and Infinity	70
1.5 Objectivity and Experience.....	78
1.6 Distinction and Union.....	88
CHAPTER TWO: CARTESIAN TENSIONS.....	108
2.1 Gassendi's Argument Against Descartes' Concept of Mind.....	110
2.2 Malebranche and the Unreflected	117
2.3 Maine de Biran's Concept of Self-Relation.....	127
2.4 Bergson's Idea of Memory.....	136
CHAPTER THREE: THE DUALITY OF CARTESIAN ONTOLOGY.....	154
3.1 The Cartesian Situation.....	155
3.2 The Duality of Phenomenology.....	168
3.3 From Tacit <i>Cogito</i> to Vertical Being.....	179
3.4 The Paradox of Experience.....	189
3.5 Movement of the Dialectic.....	202
CHAPTER FOUR: THE NEW ONTOLOGICAL STRUCTURE	211
4.1 The Texture of Experience.....	214
4.2 Differentiation and Articulation.....	226
4.3 Institution and Expression	236
4.4 Double Reference	248
4.5 The Invisible of the Visible	267
4.6 Wild Being	278
CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS	292
5.1 Ego and <i>Cogito</i>	294
5.2 Action and Freedom.....	307
CONCLUSION.....	321
SUMMARY.....	323
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	327

INTRODUCTION

René Descartes' (1596–1650) philosophy has made an impact on three major revolutions of the modern era: philosophical subjectivism, scientific objectivism, and emancipation of the body. All of these movements are still evolving, extending the reach of their fields, and increasingly overlapping with each other. While Descartes, in order to avoid confusion, attempted to restrict the three “primitive notions” – thought, extension, and union – to their own specific fields, he nevertheless, did not succeed in avoiding a contradiction: the distinct idea of the pure mind cannot be established without the experience of the union of mind and body, and this union cannot be thought of without the reflective distance that is necessary for the distinct mind. One of Descartes' main objectives was to challenge Aristotelian logicians and, in a certain sense, he succeeded in this, specifically by introducing a contradictory structural relation into the core of his rationalist philosophy. The contradiction of Descartes' philosophy is that of two orders of evidence, both of which require and exclude each other, that cannot be understood at the same time by the human mind, and that are sustained by an incomprehensible God that is both necessary and contingent.

There is a fourth revolution to which Descartes contributed: a movement which does not begin from the logic of the established “order of reasons,” but from what is contradictory within this logic and incomprehensible to it. That does not mean that we return to mysticism. It means that we need a new formulation for the whole framework of thought, body, language, nature, philosophy, science, and also of artistic expression, political action, and freedom. Such a project necessarily involves an understanding of history and temporality that allows for the possibility of change: not a violent rejection of the past, but a differentiation and deformation that is not contrary to repetition and institution. There is, therefore, a circle of time, a presence of the past, which throws us back to our history, as if there was something repressed in the past in the psychoanalytical sense, something which radiates to the present, an abyss of knowledge, an invisible within the visible that we see, a silence within our philosophical language, something which we have not yet quite managed to deal with. And

yet, the past pushes us forward by the whole thickness of time: returning to history is reaching out to the future.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908–1961) new ontology is an attempt to articulate a structure which allows us to think about the metamorphoses and encroachments of different dimensions without evading the paradoxicality of our experience. My body, which touches, turns out also to be touched by what it touches: it is both touching and touched, and yet my body is not exactly the same as touching and touched. The connection between my touching body and my touched body is untouchable, a deepening of the dimension of touch, a thickness of the touchable. It is this relation of connection and divergence, proximity and distance, adhesion and differentiation that Merleau-Ponty aims at formulating through his new ontological structure. The paradox of connection and difference in every dimension – sensible, visible, history, language – is not a contradiction characteristic of the Cartesian duality, not a mutual exclusion and dependency of union and distinction, but is instead a texture that differentiates and forms an open relation to itself, which is never an immediate coincidence.¹

With the problematic duality of distinction and union, Descartes brings forth what is incomprehensible to the human mind but is at the same time necessary for all of our clarity and obscurity: the impenetrable abyss of God. In his later philosophy, Merleau-Ponty argues not only that we should not avoid the paradoxes of our experience, language and thought, but also that we can think about the withdrawing dimension of experience, not as divine veracity, but as a deepening of the visible, the invisible of the visible, that “is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things.”² The deepening of experience means that we are connected to a certain history, to a certain temporal institution, to a sense which radiates through the visible as an invisible that exceeds presence. This means that the solution to the Cartesian duality of distinction and union is not an entity, not a substance or mixture of substances, but an open dimensionality of being:

¹ What is crucial in Merleau-Ponty's account of paradox is that it is something that should not and cannot be avoided. In *Phenomenology of Perception* he states: “But if 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” (PP, 419/425). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty explicates that “it is indeed a paradox of Being, not a paradox of man” (VI, 180/136). Paradox is an expression of something fecund and productive, that deepens the philosophical problems, while formulation of a contradiction is an attempt to reject the described situation or argument simply as incoherent. In the context of the contradiction of Descartes' philosophy (PP, 52–53/49), Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that by the argument on the contradiction of distinction and union (AT III, 693/CED, 70), Descartes prevents the possibility to advance to “a metaphysics of depth,” as Descartes claims that our “very position [...] disqualifies us from looking into such things” (OE, 56/137). In this work, in order to separate Merleau-Ponty's position from that of Descartes, I will call Descartes' formulation of the structural duality a contradiction, following Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and Merleau-Ponty's own formulation of the ontological structure as paradox. In this sense, the paradox is the contradiction as affirmed, accepted, non-disabling, and non-limiting.

² VI, 175/133.

The unicity of the visible world, and, by encroachment, the invisible world, such as it presents itself in the rediscovery of the vertical Being, is the solution of the problem of the "relations between the soul and the body."¹

Descartes' philosophy forms an important background for Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, for the relation between reflection and the unreflected in his earlier work *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945),² and for the articulation of the new ontological structure in his later work *The Visible and the Invisible* (*Le visible et l'invisible*, 1964). Descartes' philosophy not only forms a historical background for, but also has systematic significance in the development of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. The key claim of this dissertation is that *Phenomenology of Perception* brings forth the problem of the contradictory structural relation of the Cartesian duality of distinction and union, while *The Visible and the Invisible* answers this problem by formulating a new ontological structure.

Duality in Descartes' Philosophy

For Merleau-Ponty, the most central question in Descartes' philosophy is that which concerns the relations between mind and body. In 1959, in an interview with Georges Charbonnier, Merleau-Ponty describes the starting point of his philosophical research, which culminated in his two first books, *The Structure of Behavior* (*La structure du comportement*, 1942) and *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The starting point of these researches has been rather traditional in its core. I remember very well that from the end of my studies I was attached to the relations of mind and body as the problem that especially interested me."³ The whole significance of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Descartes is related to this question: What does Merleau-Ponty mean by the *relations of mind and body*?

In the context of Gilbert Ryle's (1900–1976) work *Concept of Mind* (1949), for example, the question concerning the relation of mind and body is reduced to the absurd question of how an immaterial mind can move a material body.⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, the question of the relation of mind and body is, on the contrary, a question of an "ontological complex:" What is the relation between the

¹ VI, 286–287/233. By the "solution" Merleau-Ponty does not mean that we have a final answer to a philosophical problem that is now conclusively resolved. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty states: "Our discussion of the negative announces to us another paradox of philosophy, which distinguishes it from every problem of cognition and forbids us to speak in philosophy of a *solution*: as an approach to the far-off as far-off, it is also a question put to what does not speak" (VI, 139/102). The solution does not, therefore, cut our ties to Cartesian philosophy but, on the contrary, gives us the means to advance further in the texture which it provides to us.

² I will refer to the older English translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* by Colin Smith, first published in 1962, as I am more familiar with it than with the new translation by Donald Landes, published in 2012. I know very well that the old translation has problems but since no translation is unproblematic, I will always refer the original French text by Merleau-Ponty as well, and add some key terms in French to the quotations.

³ EGC, 421. Translation by JH.

⁴ Ryle 1949. Lilli Alanen points out: "Rylean version of Cartesian dualism has not much in common with the view Descartes actually held. It could be called the 'myth of the Cartesian myth'" (Alanen 2003, 45).

nature of “natural light” and the nature of “natural inclination.”¹ The essence of the mind is not “immateriality” but the appearance of thought and ideas, which Descartes calls “natural light.” “Natural light” is not contrasted with material nature, because all material and extended things appear to the mind as ideas. The contrast that Merleau-Ponty is concerned with is not between some form of spirituality and the realm of the natural sciences, since both these factors represent ideas of the pure intellect. Rather, the contrast is between the ideal knowledge of the intellect and the lived experience, between the distinction of mind and body and the union of mind and body. In order to understand Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Descartes’ philosophy, it is necessary to specify *the duality* that he discusses.

In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (*Meditationes de Prima Philosophia in qua Dei existentia et animae immortalitas demonstratur*, 1641), Descartes not only formulates the *cogito*-argument,² according to which we judge with our mind what we thought to experience with our body – which leads to the dualism between the thinking mind and the extensive body – but he also articulates a notion of the union of mind and body.³ Descartes explicates the idea of this union in his last philosophical work, *Passions of the Soul* (*Les passions de l’âme*, 1649), through the passions of the mind which are actions of the body, as he distinguishes their function in the mind and in the body.⁴ The inspiration for his work on passions came from Descartes’ correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680), who was not satisfied with the descriptions of the relations between mind and body that Descartes provided in *Meditations*, and who asked Descartes to “explicate the nature of an immaterial substance and the manner of its actions and passions in the body.”⁵ Yet, in his correspondence with Elizabeth, Descartes not only considers the union or relation between mind and body through their distinction, as he does in *Passions of the Soul* – i.e. through the clarity of the pure intellect, from the objectifying perspective – but also articulates a “primitive notion” of the union which, according to him, can only be understood through itself.⁶ Descartes separates the notion of the union of mind and body from the notion of the body as extension, and states that these are two different forms of knowledge and evidence. Therefore, he explains, it is crucial to conceive the notions “which belong to the union of the soul with the body, as distinct from those which belong to the body alone or to the soul alone.”⁷

Descartes explains that the mind is known only by the pure intellect. The extensive body is known by the intellect or by the intellect and imagination together. The union of mind and body “is known only obscurely by the intellect

¹ N, 370.

² Descartes writes in the *Second Meditation*: “I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (AT VII, 25/CSM II, 17).

³ In the *Sixth Meditation* Descartes writes: “Nature also teaches me [...] that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit” (AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56).

⁴ AT XI, 328/CSM I, 328.

⁵ AT III, 685/CED, 68.

⁶ AT III, 666/CSM-K, 218.

⁷ AT III, 666/CSM-K, 218.

alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses.”¹ Thus, there are two spheres of knowledge that are obscure for each other but clear to themselves: the purely intellectual, on the one hand, and the sensible, on the other hand. The extensive and material body is known by the intellect, and it is, therefore, an idea judged by the intellect. Descartes’ methodic doubt aims at removing all obscurity from our knowledge, and therefore it also needs to exclude sensory experience. The union of mind and body, for its part, is the notion of our embodied and sensible experience as we live it. In his letter to Elizabeth on 28th June 1643, Descartes explains his idea of the experience of the union:

[P]eople who never philosophize and use only their senses have no doubt that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. They regard both of them as a single thing, that is to say, they conceive their union; because to conceive the union between two things is to conceive them as one single thing. Metaphysical thoughts, which exercise the pure intellect, help to familiarize us with the notion of the soul; and the study of mathematics, which exercises mainly the imagination in the consideration of shapes and motions, accustoms us to form very distinct notions of body. But it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from the study of the things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body.²

Descartes’ explication implies two crucial things. First, there is another duality in Descartes’ philosophy, along with the dualism between the two substances, namely, the duality between two different manners of conceiving our experience: the intellectual manner and the sensual manner.³ The body involved in the union is not a merely material object or an obscure idea in front of the pure mind. It is a lived experience which has its own type of clarity and certainty. Second, Descartes excludes the evidence of the “primitive notion” of the mind-body union from metaphysics. Descartes formulates the non-philosophical character of the union of mind and body first by describing it as “abstention from meditation,” and then by stating that if we want to remain in the sphere of intellectual, that is, philosophical evidence of clear and distinct ideas, it is *contradictory* to try to also conceive the non-philosophical evidence of the union. Whereas Descartes attempts to solve the problem of the substantial mind-body-dualism by his theory of the pineal gland⁴ – even if it is a problematic solution

¹ AT III, 691–692/CSM-K, 227.

² AT III, 692/CSM-K, 227.

³ In order to separate these two distinctions, I will call “dualism” the distinction between the two substances, and “duality” the distinction between distinction and union.

⁴ In *Passions of the Soul* Descartes states: “[O]n carefully examining the matter I think I have clearly established that the part of the body in which the soul directly exercises its functions is not the heart at all, or the whole of the brain. It is rather the innermost part of the brain, which is a certain very small gland situated in the Middle of the brain’s substance and suspended above the passage through which the spirits in the brain’s anterior cavities communicate with those in its posterior cavities. The slightest movements on the part of this gland may alter very greatly the course of these spirits, and conversely any change, however slight, taking place in the course of the spirits may do much to change the movements of the gland.” (AT XI, 352/CSM I, 340.)

and theory – he regards the interconnection within the *other duality*, between the pure mind and the union of mind and body, as *unintelligible*:

[I]t does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, the distinction between the soul and the body and their union, since to do so it is necessary to conceive them as one single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two, which is contradictory.¹

One possible interpretation suggests that Descartes admits here that his theory is contradictory because he insists on both distinction and union. Margaret Wilson wonders in her work *Descartes* about this statement: “It is hard to see how to avoid interpreting this statement as an overt admission on Descartes’s part that his position on the mind-body relation is self-contradictory.”² Nevertheless, according to Descartes, mind and body are united in a single person, but they can also be conceived separately in metaphysical thinking. He does not claim that this would be contradictory, as long as one does not confuse these two “primitive notions.” Instead, he argues that it is contradictory to conceive both at the same time from the intellectual point of view; it would be contradictory to connect the evidence of the intellect, which must be distinguished from the embodied sensible experience in order to be clear and distinct, with the evidence of the embodied sensible experience, which has its own clarity for the union but is obscure and confused for the intellect. Such an attempt would make our evidence both clear and distinct *and* obscure and confused. In other words, mind and body cannot be thought of as distinct and united at the same time.

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes explicates the difference between these two types of evidences by separating the natural light of the intellect from natural impulses, blind impulses or natural inclinations of the union. As an example, he points out that he has two ideas of the sun: the idea which is acquired by the senses and which gives the appearance of the sun as very small, and the idea based on reasoning which shows that the sun must be many times larger than the earth.³ Even if this example does not do justice to the evidence of the lived and sensible experience,⁴ it helps us understand why it would be contradictory to conceive both the distinction and the union at once: they both have their own types of evidence for their own right, but they cannot be understood together since such a conception would devastate the whole project of establishing the foundations of a stable science.⁵ It would be contradictory, and against the “or-

¹ AT III, 693/CED, 70. “[N]e me semblant pas que l’esprit humain soit capable de concevoir bien distinctement, et en même temps, la distinction d’entre l’âme et le corps, et leur union; à cause qu’il faut, pour cela, les concevoir comme une seule chose, et ensemble tes concevoir comme deux, ce qui se contrarie.”

² Wilson 2005, 181. See also Hoffman 2009, 17n14.

³ AT VII, 38–39/CSM II, 27.

⁴ In the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes gives pain, hunger, and thirst as examples of thoughts in which the natural inclinations are “sufficiently clear and distinct” (AT VII, 83/CSM II, 57).

⁵ AT VII, 17–18/CSM II, 12.

der of the reasons,"¹ to affirm both intelligible and unintelligible evidence at once.

Descartes excludes the lived experience of the union from his philosophical science of clear and distinct ideas, but, nevertheless, he does not refuse its evidence altogether. Lilli Alanen argues that even if Descartes locates the experience of the union outside of philosophy, he does not deny it, but on the contrary, values it for practical ends; this experience involves, according to Alanen, experiential, pre-philosophical practical wisdom.² The union shows "the limits of the knowledge that can be acquired in terms of clear and distinct rational concepts."³ Through this conception, which, according to Alanen, is "not merely a negative one," Descartes underlines the importance of what cannot be understood in the dualistic framework of his epistemology and metaphysics.⁴ Alanen states: "The real 'scandal' of Cartesian mind-body dualism [...] is this problem of the conceivability of the union, and not [...] that of the interaction between the mind and the body."⁵

Descartes, thus, introduces a kind of principle of non-philosophy within his philosophy. This principle, as he explains in a letter to Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694), does not require any reasoning for its proof, as it is "shown to us [...] by the surest and plainest everyday experience."⁶ Moreover, it is not only unnecessary to demonstrate the union by reasoning but, in fact, it would be misleading: "It is one of those self-evident things which we only make obscure when we try to explain them in terms of other things."⁷

¹ AT VII, 9/CSM II, 8.

² Alanen 1996, 13.

³ Alanen 1996, 14.

⁴ Alanen 1996, 14. Descartes' description of the union to Elizabeth as "abstention from meditation" is not only a negation of philosophy but positive "advice" on how to learn from the union. In the correspondence, Descartes describes how the enjoyment of life is related to the passions which we live through the union (AT IV, 202/CED, 87), and how "abstention from meditation" is also necessary for a meditating philosopher, as one needs to rest after the exhausting exercise of intellect and imagination (AT III, 692–693/CSM-K, 227). See Alanen 2004.

⁵ Alanen 1996, 5n12.

⁶ AT V, 222/CSM-K, 358.

⁷ AT V, 222/CSM-K, 358. Descartes could refer implicitly to Aristotle, who claims in *Metaphysics*: "[F]or not to know of what things one may demand demonstration, and of what one may not, argues simply want of education. For it is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything; there would be an infinite regress, so that there would still be no demonstration." (*Metaphysics*, IV.4, 1006a5–10.) Yet, there is a twist here: the most certain principle is, according to Aristotle, "that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect" (*Metaphysics*, IV.3, 1005b15–20), whereas Descartes argues for *both* distinction *and* union as primitive notions or principles. Moreover, as we can read in *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes himself criticizes Aristotelian philosophers of obscure principles: "[T]his manner of philosophizing is very convenient for those with only mediocre minds, for the obscurity of the distinctions and principles they use makes it possible for them to speak about everything as confidently as if they knew it, and to defend all they say against the most subtle and clever thinkers without anyone having the means to convince them that they are wrong. In this they seem to resemble a blind man who, in order to fight without disadvantage against someone who can see, lures him into the depths of a very dark cellar. These philosophers, I may say, have an interest in my refraining from publishing the principles of the philosophy I use. For my principles are so very simple and evident that in publishing them I should, as it were, be opening windows and admitting daylight into that cellar where they have gone down to

It has long been a source of astonishment that Descartes inscribes such an unintelligible mode of experience within his philosophy of the intelligible. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) formulates this astonishment in his *Ethics* (*Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*, 1677) as follows:

Indeed, I am lost in wonder that a philosopher who had strictly resolved to deduce nothing except from self-evident bases and to affirm nothing that he did not clearly and distinctly perceive, who had so often censured the Scholastics for seeking to explain obscurities through occult qualities, should adopt a theory more occult than any occult quality. What, I ask, does he understand by the union of mind and body? What clear and distinct conception does he have of thought closely united to a certain particle of matter? I should have liked him, indeed, to explain this union through its proximate cause. But he had conceived mind as so distinct from body that he could assign no one cause either of this union or of mind itself, and found it necessary to have recourse to the cause of the entire universe, that is, God.¹

It is true, as Spinoza states, that in Descartes' philosophy, everything ultimately depends on God – not only the light of the reason but also the obscure experience of the union. And God is, according to Descartes, incomprehensible to us.² However, Descartes' aim is not to establish a theological theory, but to establish a universal science. According to Ferdinand Alquié, Descartes explicitly refuses to participate in theological discussions: a sovereign God is an absent God, and in this way, Descartes manages to elude the opposition between scientific knowledge and theology.³ It is because God is infinite that he remains incomprehensible to us, and therefore we can and must rely on our own finite knowledge and science. Even though Descartes' argumentation can be traced back to scholasticism,⁴ the revolutionary value of his modifications is in liberating scientific knowledge from the influence of theology and religion.⁵ Yet, scientific knowledge is objectifying and objective knowledge: it does not concern the lived experience of the mind-body union, but concerns the clear and distinct ideas that are perceived by the pure intellect. The human mind is not capable of conceiving the distinction and the union together at the same time, but this in-

fight. But even the best minds have no reason to wish to know my principles. For if they want to be able to speak about everything and acquire the reputation of being learned, they will achieve this more readily by resting content with plausibility, which can be found without difficulty in all kinds of subjects, than by seeking the truth; for the truth comes to light only gradually in certain subjects, and it obliges us frankly to confess our ignorance where other subjects are concerned." (AT VI, 70–71/CSM I, 147.)

¹ Spinoza 2002, 364.

² Descartes writes in the *Fourth Meditation*: "For since I now know that my own nature is very weak and limited, whereas the nature of God is immense, incomprehensible and infinite, I also know without more ado that he is capable of countless things whose causes are beyond my knowledge. And for this reason alone I consider the customary search for final causes to be totally useless in physics; there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the (impenetrable) purposes of God." (AT VII, 55/CSM II, 39.) See SC, 212–213/197. PP, 52/49. S, 233/143. OE, 55–56/137. N, 174/129. NC, 261.

³ Alquié 1950, 90–91.

⁴ See e.g. Gilson 2008.

⁵ Alquié 1950, 24–25.

capability does not mean that they could not exist at the same time as sustained by God – but we simply do not understand how.¹ There is, therefore, in Descartes' philosophy, an unintelligible within the framework of the intelligible, an "abyss" of understanding, as Merleau-Ponty states in *Eye and Mind* (*L'Œil et l'Esprit*, 1961).²

Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Descartes and the New Ontology

Merleau-Ponty's interest in Descartes' philosophy is not in the problems with the coherence of the supposedly rational "order of reasons," nor in Descartes' speculation about the connection of the mind and the body via the pineal gland – his aim is not to *correct* the rational "system" established by Descartes.³ His interest is, on the contrary, exactly in the lacunae that break the supposed coherence of rationality, in the "latent content" of Descartes' work.⁴ In his lecture *The Incarnate Subject* (*L'union de l'âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Biran et Bergson*, 1997), Merleau-Ponty formulates his reading of Descartes' *Meditations* in the following way:

A new question then arises: no longer "how to reconcile the experienced union and the distinction of essences" but "how does it happen that there exists a realm of experience which we cannot conceive"? The Sixth Meditation speaks of "natural inclinations" which have their validity since God is not a deceiver. However, if Descartes truly adopts this double attitude, toward God and toward the world, can he sustain it? If we take the methods of the First Meditation seriously, are we not led to consider the Sixth as an aberration? And conversely, if we take the Sixth Meditation seriously, how were the methods of the First possible? In Descartes, extreme theism (all truth depends on God) joins with practical atheism, since the divine truth, once acknowledged, exempts us from returning to God. If the union of the soul and the body is a confused thought, how was I able to discover the Cogito? And if I discovered the Cogito, how can I be the unreflective subject of the Sixth Meditation?

Even if the unreflected experience of the union of mind and body cannot be grasped by clear and distinct ideas of the pure intellect, it encroaches on the meditations and ideas of the pure intellect. Descartes writes in the *Sixth Meditation* that if I were in my body "as a sailor is present in a ship" I would have a clear and distinct understanding of my sensations; but as I am, instead, "very

¹ Merleau-Ponty writes in "Everywhere and Nowhere," an introduction to the anthology *Les Philosophes célèbres* and published in *Signes*: "Some have been astonished to see that Descartes, after having defined natural light so carefully, accepts a *different light* without difficulty, as if as soon as there are two, at least one must become relatively obscure. But the difficulty is no greater – and no differently met – than that of admitting the distinction which the understanding makes between soul and body, and, in another context, their substantial unity. There is the understanding and its sovereign distinctions, and there is the existing man (the understanding aided by imagination and joined to a body) whom we know through the practice of life because we are that man; and the two orders are a single one because the same God is both the sustainer of essences and the foundation of our existence. [...] We are not required to understand how." (S, 232–233/143.)

² OE, 56/137.

³ NC, 264.

⁴ NC, 264.

closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit," I only have "confused sensations" which "are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body."¹ The possibility of confused thinking in Descartes' philosophy is, according to Merleau-Ponty, an indirect attestation of Descartes' acknowledgment of the relation to being which is "under the order of reasons, before and after it."² Merleau-Ponty's idea is to "[s]tudy the pre-methodic Descartes [...] and the post-methodic Descartes:" on the one hand, Descartes "always knew that he thought" before the meditations and before the determination of thought as his essence, and on the other hand, he always "lives in the world" and never leaves the sensible experience even if the evidence of this experience is revealed only later in the *Sixth Meditation*.³ The unreflected experience, "[p]rior to all reflection, in conversation and the practices of life," which is "not even in principle translatable in terms of clear and distinct knowledge," remains the latent source for the meditations.⁴ Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a *contradiction* in Descartes' philosophy between the distinction and the union, despite Descartes' attempt to avoid it. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty refers explicitly to Descartes' letter to Elizabeth, 28th June 1643, and articulates the contradiction in the following way:⁵

The vital knowledge or "natural inclination" which shows us the union of body and soul, once the light of nature has taught us to distinguish them, is a thing which it seems contradictory to guarantee by divine truthfulness; for this is after all nothing but the intrinsic clarity of the idea, and can in any case validate only self-evident thoughts. But perhaps Descartes' philosophy consists in embracing this contradiction. When Descartes says that the understanding knows itself incapable of knowing the union of soul and body and leaves this knowledge for life to achieve, this means that the act of understanding presents itself as reflection on an unreflective experience which it does not absorb either in fact or in theory.⁶

Merleau-Ponty takes this contradiction seriously: it is what makes Descartes' philosophy problematic, but also what makes it profound.⁷ First, in *Phenomenol-*

¹ AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56.

² NC, 224. Translation by JH.

³ VI, 326/272-273.

⁴ S, 266/163.

⁵ PP, 52n3/49n35.

⁶ PP, 52-53/49.

⁷ OE, 55-56/137; NC, 264. Pascal Dupond quotes Merleau-Ponty's unpublished manuscript *La Nature ou le monde du silence* (Merleau-Ponty's manuscripts in Bibliothèque nationale de France, volume VI): "Nous sommes donc mis en présence d'un complexe ontologique judeo-chrétien qui pourrait se définir par la diplopie ontologique, l'infini et le fini dans un rapport circulaire, un renvoi de l'un à l'autre. La perpétuelle rectification chez Descartes (et chez St Thomas). Les commentateurs passent leur temps à rétablir le vrai sens, qui se perd toujours. Pourquoi? C'est que Descartes est pensée dialectique ou ambiguïté, qui ne veut pas se reconnaître telle et [...] qui appelle aussitôt rectification et suscite contresens. La pensée de Descartes ne vit que des oppositions [...] sans jamais les reconnaître comme oppositions. Il faut à Descartes son idée de l'être objet et son idée de l'être sujet, et leur dépassement dans une totalité incompréhensible. - À formuler les choses ainsi, on dépasse ce que Descartes dit, on n'est déjà plus cartésien, car pour lui il faut coller à chacune des vérités tour à tour et il ne consent pas à dire que l'ordre des raisons soit un *nexus*. C'est ce qui fait que Descartes est à la fois le plus profond et le moins satisfaisant des philosophes."

ogy of Perception Merleau-Ponty argues that Descartes' conception of clear and distinct evidence is conditioned by the lived experience of the union of mind and body: Descartes cannot conclude "I think that I see" without actually seeing.¹ There must be an unreflected *cogito* before the reflected *cogito*: "Reflection is truly reflection only if it is not carried outside itself, only if it knows itself as reflection-on-an-unreflective-experience, and consequently as a change in structure of our experience."² Second, Merleau-Ponty argues that the lived experience and the evidence of the union of mind and body can only be considered by explicit reflection: "The tacit *cogito* is a *cogito* only when it has found expression for itself."³ Reflection rests on the unreflected experience, which nevertheless can be expressed and explicated only through reflection. However, the unreflected experience cannot be translated into reflection without a remainder: the unreflected always withdraws as the thickness of experience. The unreflected experience resists the reflective attempt to objectify it, and it cannot be exhausted: "it is never to eliminate, but merely to push further back the opacity that thought presents to itself."⁴

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty takes critical distance from the Cartesian idea of the mind as distinct from the body, from the idea of pure intellect, and from the demand for an absolute certainty: the "I am" is not contained in the "I think," but on the contrary, our thought is made possible by our existence.⁵ In the Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections of *Meditations*, Descartes argues that we know what is thought and what is existence "by that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge."⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, there is an unreflected experience of thought and existence before reflective thought, but the unreflected experience withdraws to the transcendence. Thus, even if Merleau-Ponty rejects the distinction of mind and body, he nevertheless affirms the distance between the unreflected and reflection. In the article "The Philosopher and His Shadow," he explicates the "contradictory characteristics"⁷ of reflection and the unreflected:

To reflect [...] is to unveil an unreflected dimension which is at a distance because we are no longer it in a naive way, yet which we cannot doubt that reflection attains, since it is through reflection itself that we have an idea of it. So it is not the unreflected which challenges reflection; it is reflection which challenges itself. For by definition its attempt to revive, possess, internalize, or make immanent has meaning only with respect to an already given terminus which withdraws in-

(Dupond 2004, 192n2.) According to Saint Aubert, the manuscript of *La Nature ou le monde du silence* is probably dated to late 1957, and was later rearranged by Merleau-Ponty in his project *Être et Monde* which eventually became *Le visible et l'invisible* (Saint Aubert 2005, 187).

¹ PP, 429/436. Heinämaa 2003, 39.

² PP, 76/72. And later: "Behind the spoken *cogito*, the one which is converted into discourse and into essential truth, there lies a tacit *cogito*, myself experienced by myself" (PP, 462/469).

³ PP, 463/470.

⁴ PP, 454/460–461.

⁵ PP, PP, 439/446; 446/453.

⁶ AT VII, 422/CSM II, 285.

⁷ S, 263/161.

to its transcendence beneath the very gaze which has set out in search of it in this attempt.¹

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty's account of the mind-body relations consists on the one hand of showing that the body is already a "knowing body"² and a "body which 'understands',"³ and on the other hand of showing that the expression which always operates on the basis of a bodily source never completely manages to take possession of the bodily life, never manages to translate the lived experience into the language of clear and distinct thought. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty formulates a "fundamental contradiction" of an "ambiguous life"⁴ that is related to the contradiction of Descartes' philosophy: on the one hand reflection is based on the unreflected life, and on the other hand the unreflected is thematized by reflection but withdraws from its grasp. He reformulates the contradiction as a paradoxical relation between adherence and distance which relates "to the paradox of time those of the body, the world, the thing, and others."⁵ Merleau-Ponty defines temporality as the paradoxical connection and difference between consciousness and lived body. The *cogito* has a relation to itself through the "temporal thickness" of experience.⁶

The "thickness of the pre-objective present"⁷ and the paradoxical relation of connection and difference with it are the points of departure for Merleau-Ponty's later work *The Visible and the Invisible*. Nevertheless, the working notes included in *The Visible and the Invisible* show that Merleau-Ponty was unsatisfied with some aspects of his earlier approach. The explication of the paradoxical relation and its ontological structure remains incomplete in *Phenomenology of Perception*.⁸ Thus, the structural problem of the *relation* between mind and body also remains partially unsolved.⁹ He criticizes *both* Cartesian "sides" of his ear-

¹ S, 263/161.

² PP, 327/329; 356n4/360n22; 375/379; 467/475.

³ PP, 169/167.

⁴ PP, 418/425.

⁵ PP, 419/425.

⁶ PP, 456/464.

⁷ PP, 495/503.

⁸ VI, 237/183.

⁹ Saint Aubert points out that in the discussion that followed after Merleau-Ponty's presentation of "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences" at the Société française de philosophie 1946, in which Merleau-Ponty defends the central thesis of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Jean Hyppolite made an objection, according to which Merleau-Ponty does not manage to explicate the connection between perception and expression, desire and being (Saint Aubert 2004, 22). Hyppolite states: "I do not see the necessary connection [...] between the description of perception, which presupposes no ontology, and the philosophical conclusions which which you draw, which do presuppose an ontology, namely, an ontology of meaning. [...] [I]t does not seem to me that you have made clear the drama which reflexion causes in the pre-reflexive life - that is to say, the new form of life which is created by the projection of an eternal norm by means of reflexion. The fact of reflexion, joining itself to the pre-reflexive life, leads to a going-beyond, to a transcendence - formal perhaps, illusory perhaps, but without which reflexion could not occur." (Prp, 97-99/39-40.) Saint Aubert argues that the discussion made an impact on Merleau-Ponty's philosophical development.

lier work: the idea of an unreflected experience of the “tacit *cogito*”¹ and the perspective of “consciousness philosophy” which, according to himself, he partially retained in his early work.² He states: “The problems posed in *Ph.P.* [*Phenomenology of Perception*] are insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction.”³ I argue that here we can see the motivation for Merleau-Ponty’s project on the new ontological structure.

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty brings forth that his answer to the problem of the self-relation remained ambiguous. In retrospect, Merleau-Ponty formulates the problem in the following way: “The Cogito of Descartes (reflection) is an operation on significations” which “therefore presupposes a prereflective contact of self with self [...] or a tacit cogito (being close by oneself) – this is how I reasoned in *Ph.P.*”⁴ Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty problematizes the idea of an immediate coincidence of the self-relation: “what I understand never quite tallies with my living experience, in short, I am never quite at one with myself.”⁵ Yet, in his early work the relation between the withdrawing unreflected experience and the reflective “operation on significations” of language remains unclear. Nevertheless, there is also a clear continuity between Merleau-Ponty’s early and his later work as he wishes to provide an “ontological explication” to the paradoxical relations he articulated in the former.⁶

In the lecture *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty’s readings of Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), François-Pierre-Gontier Maine de Biran (1766–1824) and Henri Bergson (1859–1941) bring forth the insight that the Cartesian tradition is haunted by a problem of the self-relation, a tension between the prereflective contact of self with self, on the one hand, and the differentiation of the self, on the other hand. Descartes’ idea of the “internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge”⁷ becomes a supposition of an immediate prereflective coincidence of the self with the self which, however, cannot be explicated by the reflective pure mind. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that the “unreflective subject” becomes associated with the union of mind and body in the Cartesian tradition: according to Malebranche, if we had a clear and distinct intellectual idea of ourselves, we would not be intermingled with the body.⁸ There is a continuous transition of the dual concepts within the Cartesian tradition, an institution, and a re-institution, that modifies the concepts but preserves the dual structure of the unreflected and reflection.

According to Merleau-Ponty, there is “an inevitable split”⁹ in Cartesian philosophy, which is due to Descartes’ affirmation of both the evidence of the distinction and the evidence of the union. Merleau-Ponty states in his lecture course *Nature* (*La nature. Notes. Cours du Collège de France*, 1995): “How, in the

¹ VI, 224/170; 229/175–176.

² VI, 237/183.

³ VI, 253/200.

⁴ VI, 224/170–171.

⁵ PP, 399/404.

⁶ VI, 237/183.

⁷ AT VII, 422/CSM II, 285.

⁸ UAC, 22/40. Cf. AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56.

⁹ UAC, 23/41.

name of evidence, does he [Descartes] assign value to what is obscure without entering into contradiction? If that is not possible, philosophy sees itself cut in two."¹ He then explicates the Cartesian ontology by the duality of distinction and union: an "ontology of the object" and an "ontology of the existent."² The first perspective is that of the pure intellect which objectifies and idealizes being. The second is the perspective of lived experience among beings. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is a "strabism" of Cartesian ontology.³ In *Eye and Mind*, he calls the "Cartesian equilibrium" the relation between the two positions characteristic of Cartesian ontology: both our clarity and our obscurity are guaranteed by God that is an incomprehensible abyss to us.⁴ Merleau-Ponty argues that in modern science and philosophy the Cartesian equilibrium has been lost: science determines the objective clarity and philosophy describes the obscure contact with being. Merleau-Ponty states: "Our science and our philosophy are two faithful and unfaithful offshoots of Cartesianism, two monsters born of its dismemberment."⁵ Merleau-Ponty's idea is not to return to the Cartesian equilibrium, but rather to elaborate a new kind of balance between ideality and experience.⁶ The motivation for the articulation of his new ontological structure comes from the dual situation of Cartesian ontology.

In the course *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a similar duality in Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) philosophy as in Cartesian philosophy, "a certain strabism of phenomenology," between "the rupture with the natural attitude" and rehabilitation of the natural attitude.⁷ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes the duality or "dilemma" of Husserl's phenomenology: "[E]ither the constitution makes the world transparent, in which case it is not obvious why reflection needs to pass through the world of experience, or else it retains something of that world, and never rids it of its opacity."⁸ In the article "The Philosopher and His Shadow" ("Le philosophe et son ombre," in *Signes*, 1960), Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a "dual direction of Husserl's reflection, which is both an analytics of essences and an analytics of existences."⁹ Merleau-Ponty's reading brings forth a parallel problem of duality in both Husserl's and Descartes' philosophy. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty shows that the relation between consciousness and the lived experience is formulated as an explicit problem in Husserl's philosophy.¹⁰ In Merleau-Ponty's view, Husserl pushes the classical Cartesian philosophy to its limit, and thus brings forth the problem of the duality.¹¹

¹ N, 35/16.

² N, 169/125.

³ N, 171/127.

⁴ OE, 55–56/137.

⁵ OE, 58/138.

⁶ OE, 56/137.

⁷ N, 103–104/72.

⁸ PP, 419n1/425n8.

⁹ S, 278/171.

¹⁰ S, 290/178. See Barbaras 2001, 108/85–86, 135/111.

¹¹ S, 293/180.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty criticizes the Cartesian philosophy of reflection from an ontological point of view: instead of establishing the contradictory duality, philosophy must begin from the articulation of an ontological structure that makes possible both connection and divergence, proximity and distance, adhesion and differentiation.¹ Merleau-Ponty articulates an ontological structure that consists neither of pure mind nor of mere mechanical matter, that is not a union of two impossible substances or evidences, but is being of different dimensions which both overlap and differentiate. The relation between mind and body is formed in the sensible texture; this sensible texture diverges and connects mind and body at the same time, as reversible sides of each other – there is an “overlapping and fission, identity and difference.”² Merleau-Ponty characterizes the ontological structure as that of “reversibility:” our body is both touching and touchable, seeing and visible.³ The connection between the reversible “sides” of the differentiating texture or flesh of the body is never actually present. Merleau-Ponty rejects the Cartesian supposition of immediate coincidence of the self-relation.⁴ He conceives every relation of experience through the difference-connection structure, which always involves both encroachment and thickness: every dimension is deepening, differentiating, and incomplete.⁵ This means that the connection between the body as vision, and the body as a visible, is not itself something visible, but precisely an invisible.⁶

The invisible “hinge” that connects the body as sentient and as sensible, that connects natural being and language, and connects ourselves and the world, is neither a positive being in-itself nor nothingness. According to Merleau-Ponty, the “carnal texture presents to us what is absent from all flesh; it is a furrow that traces itself out magically under our eyes without a tracer, a certain hollow, a certain interior, a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing.”⁷ The invisible is not the incomprehensible being of God, a positive infinity.⁸ Merleau-Ponty argues that ontology is necessarily indirect: we approach being only through the beings.⁹ The invisible is neither a hidden visible that could become visible, nor an absolutely invisible that has nothing to do with the visible, but is the invisible *of* the visible.¹⁰ It is a negative infinity that “exceeds us,” that opens up the contingency of our reason,¹¹ and deepens to the “impossible past.”¹² Being exceeds our hold of it. We do not possess the visible or ideas or language: they possess us, and it is being that has us.¹³

¹ VI, 22-24/7-9; 56-57/35.

² VI, 187/142.

³ VI, 189/144.

⁴ VI, 162-163/121-122.

⁵ VI, 272/219. See Saint Aubert 2005, 23-52.

⁶ VI, 308-309/254-255.

⁷ VI, 198/151.

⁸ VI, 223/169.

⁹ VI, 233/179.

¹⁰ VI, 198/151.

¹¹ VI, 223/169.

¹² VI, 163/123.

¹³ VI, 247/194.

Our access to being, our relation with the world, goes beyond the objective, visible surface of things: this relation is within the invisible, “inexhaustible,”¹ and “immemorial”² depth. This does not mean that our relation to being is subjective: we do not constitute being and the world. Merleau-Ponty describes our relation to being as “vertical.” Verticality means, on the one hand, “the past that adheres to the present,”³ and on the other hand “imperception in perception,”⁴ that being withdraws from our attempt to take hold of it. For Merleau-Ponty, the idea of verticality provides the solution to the problem of the relation of mind and body: “The positive and the negative are the two ‘sides’ of a Being; in the *vertical* world, every being has this structure.”⁵ Mind and body are two “sides” of the differentiation of the carnal texture, the invisible and the visible, connected and diverging:

The unicity of the visible world, and, by encroachment, the invisible world, such as it presents itself in the rediscovery of the vertical Being, is the solution of the problem of the “relations between the soul and the body.”⁶

The vertical being of the invisible “opens unlimited dimensions” of temporality and universality.⁷ Merleau-Ponty provides an interpretation of Husserl’s idea of institution in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, but he further elaborates his reading in the lectures *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* (*Notes de cours sur L’origine de la géométrie de Husserl*, 1998) and “Institution in Personal and Public History” (“L’institution dans l’histoire personnelle et publique,” in *L’institution – La passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954–1955)*, 2003). This interpretation is central to his discussion of the ontological structure as dimensionality, texture, or flesh which connects and differentiates:⁸ our relation to the world is temporal – there is a vertical presence of the past, the invisible “rays of the past”⁹ that possess our vision. Through the idea of institution, we can connect Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of artistic expression in *Eye and Mind*,¹⁰ and political activity and freedom in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (*Les Aventures de la dialectique*, 1955),¹¹ to his articulation of the ontological structure: through their passive connection to the past, our action and expression receive a sense as repetition which differentiates the past.

Merleau-Ponty argues strongly against two ideas concerning action and freedom: first, the idea that nothing can be changed, that there is an objective historical necessity; and second, the idea that everything can be changed, that

¹ VI, 188/143.

² OE, 86/147.

³ VI, 297/244.

⁴ VI, 278/225.

⁵ VI, 278/225.

⁶ VI, 286–287/233.

⁷ VI, 271/218.

⁸ VI, 227/173; 275/221; 277/224; 321/267–268. See Al-Saji 2007, 185–187; Morris & Maclaren 2015, 2.

⁹ VI, 293/240.

¹⁰ See Johnson 1993, 24–25.

¹¹ See Revault d’Allonnes 2001, 105–109.

we can completely decide on our lives and on our thoughts. According to him, our connection with the past is our means to change the world. Merleau-Ponty's account of the new ontological structure is crucial to his understanding of our connection with history and the differentiation of the world through our action and expression. It is necessary to "go back to the origins of Cartesianism in order to go beyond it."¹

Previous Literature

It is clear that Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Descartes has a critical side: he criticizes the idea of the pure intellect distinct from the body, the objectifying view on the sensible world, and the exclusion of lived experience from metaphysics. It is therefore not surprising that several early commentators, for example Remy Kwant and Martin Dillon, have understood and characterized Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as simply anti-Cartesian.

In his work *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (1963), Kwant explicates Merleau-Ponty's arguments by using the notion of "body-subject," which he contrasts with Cartesian substance dualism. According to Kwant, Merleau-Ponty "himself repeatedly presents his philosophy as a radical victory over Cartesianism, which is characterized by Descartes' sharp dichotomy between the thinking mind and the mechanical body."² The body-subject cannot be reduced to the opposition of material body and spirit, nor to their union, because the union is a compound of the opposites.³ Kwant is right in pointing out that for Merleau-Ponty neither the lived body in *Phenomenology of Perception* nor the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible* is a substance, or a composite of the substances.⁴ Yet, Kwant simplifies Descartes' philosophy drastically in stating that for him the subject cannot be embodied.⁵ Moreover, he does not take into account Merleau-Ponty's explicit references, both in *The Structure of Behavior* and in *Phenomenology of Perception*, to the correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth in which Descartes describes the notion of the lived experience of the body.⁶ Merleau-Ponty is not interested in Descartes' philosophy due to the substance dualism. In contrast to what Kwant argues, Descartes also introduces a kind of "body-subject" – and this embodied self is the starting point of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Descartes' philosophy.

In his commentary *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (1988), Dillon argues that the two philosophical approaches or standpoints that Merleau-Ponty criticizes in *Phenomenology of Perception* – empiricism and intellectualism – are both grounded in the Cartesian idea of immanent knowledge.⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, both of these views understand the world as a transparent object in front of a

¹ S, 245/151.

² Kwant 1963, 11.

³ Kwant 1963, 13.

⁴ VI, 184–185/139–140.

⁵ Kwant 1963, 15.

⁶ SC, 212/197. PP, 52/49; 231/231.

⁷ Dillon 1988, 33.

transparent subject, and without all the ambiguities that the lived experience of the body brings with it.¹ Nevertheless, in a similar manner as Kwant, Dillon completely neglects the fact that Merleau-Ponty also discusses Descartes' idea of "the body as it is conceived through use in living."² According to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes is the "most radically ambiguous" of all philosophers.³

The interpretations presented by Kwant and Dillon both focus on Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the substance dualism, and take note of only part of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Descartes. Another aspect is also missing from their work, one very central to the whole Cartesian project: the problem that Merleau-Ponty detects in Descartes' philosophy not only concerns substance dualism or the self-transparency of the intellect, but also explicitly concerns the duality of the mind-body distinction and the mind-body union, between the objectifying reflection and the unreflective experience. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's philosophical connection to Descartes' thought is more fundamental and much deeper than Kwant and Dillon suggest. The connection is not just thematic but also structural. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Kwant did not yet have *The Visible and the Invisible* at his disposal, and Dillon published his work in 1988, before the publications of Merleau-Ponty's lectures. For us, this underlines the importance of studying Merleau-Ponty's manuscripts and lecture notes for the purpose of understanding his philosophy and its development.

More recent studies by Renaud Barbaras, Sara Heinämaa, Pascal Dupond, and Emmanuel de Saint Aubert have demonstrated that Merleau-Ponty's relation with Descartes' philosophy is much more complex and sophisticated, and that his reading is more profound and original. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is not a simple rejection of Descartes' philosophy. Rather, with his critical appropriation of Descartes' philosophy, he discloses an underlying Cartesian tension of modern philosophy: the duality or tension between objective knowledge and lived experience. For Merleau-Ponty, the solution of the Cartesian problems of modern philosophy does not lie in a simple rejection of Descartes' philosophy but, rather, in a radical elaboration and re-institution of the whole Cartesian situation. In the Preface of *Signs*, he writes: "Are you or are you not a Cartesian? The question does not make much sense, since those who reject this or that in Descartes do so only in terms of reasons which owe a lot to Descartes."⁴

In his work *The Being of the Phenomenon* (*De l'être du phénomène. Sur l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty*, 1991), Barbaras explicates the Cartesian duality that Merleau-Ponty calls "ontological diplopia."⁵ Barbaras points out that "Cartesian philosophy is characterized by a fundamental duality of viewpoints."⁶ The substance dualism, the distinction between mind and body, is posited from the point of view of the pure understanding. The other point of view is the union

¹ PP, 231/230.

² PP, 231/231.

³ NC, 264. Translation by JH.

⁴ S, 22/11.

⁵ N, 179/134; 371/-.

⁶ Barbaras 2001, 103/81.

that opens onto the “existent world.”¹ According to Barbaras, these ontological points of views cannot be reduced to either of them, “since each calls for the other.”² They form two ontological positions which both exclude and call for the other. Barbaras also connects these two views to Merleau-Ponty’s description of the “Cartesian equilibrium” in *Eye and Mind*. Barbaras proposes that Merleau-Ponty’s idea here is to rediscover the equilibrium between the objectifying mind and the existent world.³ The duality of existence and essence is neither a simple opposition nor a unity, but a “to-and-fro” movement: existence contributes to the formation of the essence but nevertheless withdraws from it, and essence is grounded in existence but does not exhaust it.⁴ Barbaras formulates the task of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as follows: “It is a question of thinking *together* the dimensions of fact and essence, without either sacrificing essence to an ineffable depth or absorbing existence back into the knowledge provided by understanding.”⁵ According to Barbaras, on the one hand “the opposition must be overcome,” but on the other hand the “duality truly remains unsurpassable.”⁶ He states that we cannot avoid the duality, since it is the historical situation of philosophy: “History is the revelation of an ontological situation which it is only a matter of bringing to light [...].”⁷

Barbaras argues that, according to Merleau-Ponty, the Cartesian duality between pure intellect and lived experience can also be found in Husserl’s phenomenology, although explicated in a conscious manner. Moreover, he suggests that Merleau-Ponty regards the Cartesian duality as the constant problem to which Husserl had to return again and again as a “perpetual beginner.”⁸ Barbaras argues that in Husserl’s philosophy there is a dual tension or movement between the lived world and ideality: “it is incontestable in Merleau-Ponty’s eyes that Husserl attempts to overcome the duality of fact and essence, to overcome objectivism by going toward the originary soil in which its relative rights are grounded.”⁹

In the article “The Living Body and its Position in Metaphysics: Merleau-Ponty’s Dialogue with Descartes” (in *Metaphysics, Facticity, Interpretation*, 2003), Sara Heinämaa studies the significance that the correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth has for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. She provides an explication of the “three modes of knowledge” that Descartes presents as an answer to Elizabeth’s question of how the immaterial mind could move the material body.¹⁰ Heinämaa argues: “For Merleau-Ponty, Descartes’ main teaching

¹ RC, 100. Barbaras 2001, 104/82.

² Barbaras 2001, 105/82.

³ Barbaras 2001, 106/83.

⁴ Barbaras 2001, 106–107/84–85.

⁵ Barbaras 2001, 106/83.

⁶ Barbaras 2001, 107/84.

⁷ Barbaras 2001, 105/82.

⁸ Barbaras 2001, 108/85–86, 135/111.

⁹ Barbaras 2001, 108/86.

¹⁰ Heinämaa 2003, 29. See AT III, 684/CED, 68. Heinämaa refers to Martina Reuter’s dissertation *Questions of the Body, Sexual Difference and Equality in Cartesian Philosophy* in which Reuter also discusses Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Elizabeth’s and Descartes’ correspondence. According to Reuter, “Merleau-Ponty has connected his perhaps most explicit critical

is that we have two kinds of knowledge of bodies, which cannot be reduced one to other."¹ Nevertheless, she points out that Descartes limits the epistemic role of the lived knowledge of the union and posits it outside of metaphysics on the basis that, when purified from obscurities and unclarities, sensations become relationless and atomistic, and thus nothing can be derived from them.² According to Heinämaa, Descartes provides a rich conception of the union, independent from the substance-dualism, and the main problem for her is that the union falls outside metaphysics.³ She then argues that, according to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes' philosophical position as the meditating subject is conditioned by what is excluded, that is, sensation.⁴ This means that Descartes' *Sixth Meditation* is not merely a conclusion of the preceding meditations, but also grounds them: "What remains unthought in the meditations is the *fact* that Descartes – or anybody meditating with him – actually has sensations and sense-perceptions."⁵ The unthought of Descartes' philosophy is sensation as an enabling condition of thought.⁶ In her article, Heinämaa thus argues that Descartes' process of the pure intellect cannot be a simple rejection of embodied experience, that the perceptual life of the body necessarily sustains reflective consciousness, and therefore that the two modes of knowledge of minds and bodies cannot remain completely independent. This, according to her, does not mean that we would lose all clarity and distinctiveness of thought.⁷

In another article, "From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl's Reduction" (in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, 2002), Heinämaa proposes that Merleau-Ponty finds a solution to the Cartesian problem of properly explicating the union of mind and body from Husserl's analysis of the lived body,⁸ Heinämaa argues against earlier readers of Merleau-Ponty, for example Kwant and Dillon, who claim that Merleau-Ponty neglects or rejects Husserl's transcendental phenomenology.⁹ In reference to Merleau-Ponty's well-known statement in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, that the "most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction," these readers claim that Merleau-Ponty argues that Husserl's transcendental reduction is an impossibility.¹⁰ Heinämaa demonstrates that this interpretation is problematic, since Merleau-Ponty explicitly "asserts that the phenomenological-transcendental reduction and the eidetic reduction

comment on Descartes' philosophy to this passage on two different concepts of body. [...] Merleau-Ponty gives credit to Descartes' awareness of this conflict, but criticizes the way in which he subordinates the lived knowledge of the body to the knowledge acquired through the medium of objectifying ideas." (Reuter 2000, 145.)

¹ Heinämaa 2003, 26. See N, 34/16.

² Heinämaa 2003, 33–34.

³ Heinämaa 2003, 29.

⁴ Heinämaa 2003, 37.

⁵ Heinämaa 2003, 39.

⁶ Heinämaa 2003, 37.

⁷ Heinämaa 2003, 31. Dupond also argues that when Merleau-Ponty reformulates the idea of the *cogito* and inscribes it in the field of facticity, it does not mean a sacrifice of the natural light and truth (Dupond 2004, 11).

⁸ Heinämaa 2002, 138.

⁹ Heinämaa 2002, 127–131. See also Zahavi 2002, 4–7.

¹⁰ PP, VIII/xv. Heinämaa 2002, 127–128.

are necessarily connected.”¹ He claims that there must be a transformation of “the phenomenal field into a transcendental one.”² The analysis of lived body in *Phenomenology of Perception* is transcendental, according to Heinämaa: it illuminates the conditions of possibility of bodily experience and phenomenality.

In the work *La réflexion charnelle – La question de la subjectivité chez Merleau-Ponty* (2004), Dupond explicates the significance of Descartes’ concept of *cogito* for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and for the transition between his early phenomenology and his late ontology.³ Dupond studies the changes in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the *cogito*, starting from the early conception of tacit *cogito* and spoken *cogito*, and proceeding to the later concepts of vertical *cogito* and horizontal *cogito*. He argues that the former conception is phenomenological and the latter is ontological.⁴ According to Dupond, the ontological conception consists of “carnal reflection,” which is not a reflective activity of a subject but a reflection characteristic of being as such: “Being as reflection.”⁵

In the work *Le scénario cartésien: Recherches sur la formation et la cohérence de l’intention philosophique de Merleau-Ponty* (2005), Saint Aubert clarifies the radicality of Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Descartes. He emphasizes that Merleau-Ponty’s intention is not to provide an “objective” analysis of what Descartes explicitly wrote, but to study what in Descartes’ philosophy is essential to our contemporary thought.⁶ Saint Aubert demonstrates that Merleau-Ponty highlights the importance of the encroachment (*empiètement*), which for Descartes is the confusion essential to the union of mind and body, a confused mode of thinking.⁷ Saint Aubert then claims that in the same sense that for Descartes the union of mind and body can only be accessed by the union itself, for Merleau-Ponty too “only flesh can know the flesh.”⁸ Yet, Saint Aubert also argues that Merleau-Ponty attempts to overcome the duality, the “ontological diplopia,” the to-and-fro movement between the ontology of the object and the ontology of the existent.⁹ He states that even though Merleau-Ponty is less critical towards the latter type of ontology, it is the whole Cartesian situation that Merleau-Ponty wants to rethink in his ontology.

The interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Descartes’ philosophy in this work is indebted to these studies by Barbaras, Heinämaa, Dupond, and Saint Aubert. My intention is not to debate with these previous interpretations, but to elaborate upon the ideas they present, with the aim of presenting a more detailed and more specific account of Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Descartes and studying its consequences for his new conception of the ontological structure. Moreover, since Barbaras, Heinämaa, and Saint Aubert have recently published new articles concerning Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Descartes, underlining its

¹ Heinämaa 2002, 130. See PP, IX/xvi; 430n1/437n16; S, 292/179; VI, 70/45.

² PP, 77/74. Heinämaa 2002, 129.

³ Dupond 2004, 167–168. See also Dupond 2000.

⁴ Dupond 2004, 251.

⁵ Dupond 2004, 253. Translation by JH.

⁶ Saint Aubert 2005, 21.

⁷ Saint Aubert 2005, 23. AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56.

⁸ Saint Aubert 2005, 27. Translation by JH.

⁹ Saint Aubert 2005, 35.

topicality, I will aim at deepening our understanding of this relation and its implications to Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project.¹

The Objectives, Methods, and Structure of the Work

The goal of this work is to explicate Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Descartes' philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's interest in Descartes' philosophy is very visible in his oeuvre, since references to Descartes's works are many and spread amongst several different topical discussions. As these references are often fragmentary, indirect, and not explicated at length by the author himself, the significance of Descartes' philosophy for Merleau-Ponty's whole oeuvre remains unclear, and we are still lacking a study specifically focused on this relation. Yet, what makes the study of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Descartes particularly challenging is that he does not attempt to make an "objective" interpretation that would meticulously follow what Descartes explicitly wrote. According to Merleau-Ponty, ideas that are "too much possessed are no longer ideas" because we "no longer think anything" when we speak of them.² Merleau-Ponty does not so much attempt to explicate what Descartes explicitly wrote, but to bring forth the "latent content"³ of his works: "There is the truth of Descartes, but on condition that one reads it between the lines [...]."⁴ In other words, Merleau-Ponty is not interested in formulating a coherent theory of the acquired ideas of Descartes' philosophy, for example, in contrast to Martial Gueroult's (1891–1976) *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons* (*Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, 1953).⁵ In Merleau-Ponty's view, it is the problem that Descartes' philosophy leaves us to think, the "unthought" of Descartes' ideas, that must be explicated.⁶ In fact, according to Merleau-Ponty,

¹ Barbaras 2018; Heinämaa & Kaitaro 2018; Saint Aubert 2018.

² VI, 159/119.

³ NC, 264.

⁴ VI, 242/188. Saint Aubert quotes an unpublished manuscript, *La Nature ou le monde du silence*, where Merleau-Ponty states: "Si l'on ne se permet de poser à Descartes que des questions cartésiennes, on impliquerait qu'il est bien mort et qu'il n'y a plus rien de commun entre lui et nous. Mettons donc que nous ne parlons pas de Descartes, que nous rêvons autour de ses textes. C'est à cette condition qu'on peut savoir, non sans doute ce qu'il dit, mais ce qu'il nous dit." (Saint Aubert 2005, 21n1.) In the Introduction to *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty connects the understanding of history to his idea of philosophy: "The relationship between philosophy and history is less simple than was believed. It is in a strict sense an *action at a distance*, each from the depths of its difference requiring intermingling and promiscuity." (S, 26/13.) Jacques Taminiaux clarifies Merleau-Ponty's understanding of history of philosophy: "Impartiality in the history of philosophy would mean to reduce the work to what it said explicitly, to objectify it before us so as to obtain an adequate representation of it. Such an impartiality seems to result from an extreme respect for the work, but in fact it leads to draining the work of its inherent power to challenge. This power resides in the way it opens up to those who really listen to it, in what it asks be taken as an unresolved task, in the way it solicits other thoughts; it does not lie in a set of finished propositions that could be repeated as granted truths. The work speaks, Merleau-Ponty said, only when we set out to think anew, with the help it provides us." (Taminiaux 1985, 118.)

⁵ VI, 231n*/177n*; 241/187; 252/198.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty states: "If there is an ideality, a thought that has a future in me, that even breaks through my space of consciousness and has a future with the others, and finally,

there is no such thing as an “objective” or “total” meaning of Descartes’ philosophy without any “inner differences” and “discordancies,” because “Descartes himself did not at any moment coincide with Descartes.”¹

When studying Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Descartes, we have to take into account, first, what Merleau-Ponty says in and with his references to Descartes’ philosophy, and do this in the context of his own philosophy. Second, we have to ask: What is the context of Descartes studies for Merleau-Ponty, and who are the contemporary scholars that he addresses? Third, it is necessary to study what Descartes explicitly writes, and also to ask what meaning has been given to his ideas in contemporary Descartes studies in order to communicate our view to readers. It is, therefore, a complex research task, that involves both historical and systematic elements. We cannot understand what Merleau-Ponty means by the “unthought” of Descartes’ philosophy by simply juxtaposing Descartes’ text with Merleau-Ponty’s text. There is a whole history of conceptual transitions and lines of argumentation between the two thinkers, and this history has to be taken into account in our study. And yet this is still not enough, because we also have to follow Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development and his own “inner differences,” especially the continuity and divergence between the two principal works, *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. We also have to take into account Merleau-Ponty’s specific *style* of practicing philosophy, which places more emphasis on the movement of thought than on the specificity and exactness of the concepts utilized and produced. We have to interpret Merleau-Ponty’s late incomplete and fragmentary texts in order to be able to indicate the direction of his thinking. Likewise, we have to allow some transitions, analogies, intersections, and shifts between concepts in order to be able to explicate Merleau-Ponty’s movement of thought, and to bring forth what is vital in his philosophy.

That being said, these challenges do not imply any necessary lack of clarity in the research to be conducted. However, a multiple philosophical methodology is needed to undertake the task at hand. The methods chosen all aim at increasing the clarity of our understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and at illuminating his systematic arguments and the historical significance of his contribution. To this end, I will combine the methods of conceptual analysis and argument analysis with those of hermeneutic interpretation and textual critique. The analytical methods are used to clarify and explicate systematic relations between concepts and arguments, and the hermeneutical methods are used to clarify the historical relations between philosophical texts and debates.

This work is divided into five chapters. In **Chapter One** I will study and explicate Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Descartes in *Phenomenology of Perception*. My discussion will follow the order of Descartes’ six meditations for two rea-

having become a writing, has a future in every possible reader, this can be only that thought that leaves me with my hunger and leaves them with their hunger, that betokens a generalized buckling of my landscape and opens it to the universal, precisely because it is rather an *unthought*” (VI, 158–159/118–119).

¹ S, 212/131.

sons: first, I want to offer a brief and general reading of *Meditations* as a background for Merleau-Ponty's interpretations of Descartes, and second, I want to demonstrate which particular arguments and concepts of Descartes' philosophy are central to Merleau-Ponty. I will also clarify the philosophical-historical context of Merleau-Ponty's own work and explicate how Descartes' philosophy is related to the argumentation of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Moreover, in this part I will also study Merleau-Ponty's understanding of Husserl's phenomenology, which is closely related to his reading of Descartes: Husserl's idea of the lived body provides a new possibility for the analysis of Descartes' idea of the union of mind and body. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explicates the contradiction of Descartes' dual positions: God sustains both the clear and distinct perception characteristic of the pure intellect, and the obscure and confused union of mind and body. I will demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty reformulates the Cartesian contradiction as a paradoxical relation between adherence and distance: reflection is based on the unreflected experience which withdraws from its grasp. The problem of the duality forms the background for Merleau-Ponty's later ontology.

Chapter Two will study how the relations of mind and body are understood and conceptualized in the Cartesian tradition after Descartes. I will analyze Merleau-Ponty's lecture course *The Incarnate Subject*, which articulates the permanent tensions in the Cartesian tradition between the union and the distinction. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's reading of Malebranche, Maine de Biran, and Bergson shows that the Cartesian tradition involves a fundamental ambivalence between immediate self-relation and differentiation of the self. I will contextualize my discussion with an explication of Descartes' and Pierre Gassendi's (1592-1655) debate on the possibility of self-knowledge. This chapter shows how the problematic duality between distinction and union remains at the core of Cartesian philosophy throughout changing conceptual formations. The pre-reflective "internal awareness" that Descartes suggests as an answer to the problem of the self-relation becomes an "inner feeling" in Malebranche's philosophy, an "intimate sense" in Maine de Biran's work, and an "immediate intuition" in the philosophy of Bergson. Yet, these philosophers also introduce and formulate ideas that oppose the doctrine of immediacy: according to Malebranche we do not have an idea of our own mind; for Maine de Biran self-consciousness is only possible through a process of becoming; and Bergson introduces the idea of differentiation within repetition.

In **Chapter Three**, I will analyze the description of the duality of Cartesian ontology that Merleau-Ponty provides in his lecture course *Nature*. When proceeding by the guidance of the distinct pure intellect, we end up with an ontology of the object which is the basic attitude of Cartesian science. In contrast, the union of mind and body forms the ontology of the existent - an experiential relation to being. Both of these ontologies are put forward by Descartes, and have their own clarity and evidence which are, nevertheless, impossible. Thus, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a "strabism" of Cartesian ontology. I will explicate the formulations that Merleau-Ponty provides of this ontological

duality in *Eye and Mind*: the “Cartesian equilibrium” between the two points of views is sustained by God that is incomprehensible to the human mind. I will show that Merleau-Ponty’s solution to the contradictory situation of Cartesianism is not an affirmation of one of these two ontologies, nor the Cartesian equilibrium between them. Rather, he argues, the task is to conceive and articulate a new kind balance and a new ontological structure. Moreover, I will argue that in the lecture course *Nature* and in the article “The Philosopher and His Shadow” Merleau-Ponty identifies an analogous “strabism” in Husserl’s phenomenology; this is the “strabism” between the transcendental attitude and the natural attitude. Merleau-Ponty argues that Husserl’s phenomenology pushes traditional Cartesian philosophy to its limit, and thus makes clear that it is necessary to formulate the ontological situation in a new way. In this context, I will also analyze the critique that Merleau-Ponty’s directs at his own *Phenomenology of Perception* in the working notes included in *The Visible and the Invisible*: the earlier work partially retains the perspective of the philosophy of consciousness, and needs a further explication of the ontological structure. I will demonstrate how Merleau-Ponty begins his discussion with the dual situation of Cartesianism in *The Visible and the Invisible* and argues against the philosophy of reflection, which does not take account of the unreflected experience. Finally, this chapter will also show that Merleau-Ponty detects a form of the Cartesian duality in Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1905–1980) dialectical philosophy of being and nothingness.

Chapter Four will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the new ontological structure. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty articulates a transition that proceeds from the contradictory duality between the clarity of the distinct mind and the obscurity of the union of mind and body to the paradoxicality of experience. Merleau-Ponty introduces the structure of proximity and distance, connection and divergence, adhesion and differentiation, and argues that such a structure is within every dimension: sensible experience, language, thought, and temporality. What is crucial in Merleau-Ponty’s new ontology is the deepening of the sensible texture: essences, generalities, and universality are not distinct from sensible experience, but only attainable within it. I will demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty draws here from multiple philosophical sources: from Husserl’s idea of eidetic variation, Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) concept of screen memory, Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) idea of verbal essence, Bergson’s notion of the pure memory, Gaston Bachelard’s (1884–1962) conception of elements, Marcel Proust’s (1871–1922) description of sensible ideas, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling’s (1775–1854) concept of barbaric principle. Merleau-Ponty finds conceptual resources in all of these discussions for his description of the invisible hinge that connects the diverging sides of the sensible or carnal texture, the seer and the visible, the touching and the touched. I will argue that Husserl’s idea of the institution is particularly important to Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of the ontological structure: the invisible is our connection to the past, a ray of time which is given to us by the thickness and depth of sensibility, language, and thought. For this purpose, I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s idea

of institution in his lecture courses, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* and "Institution in Personal and Public History." I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's solution to the problematics of the Cartesian duality is in his idea of the ontological structure, and in his characterization of this structure as a vertical connection and divergence between two sides of the dimensional texture: the mind and the body are not two substances or two entirely different sources of evidences, but reversible sides of each other.

Chapter Five will add new ontological perspectives to Merleau-Ponty's reading of Descartes. In his last lecture course, "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui" (in *Notes de cours, 1959-1961*, 1996), Merleau-Ponty shows that we can already find a possibility for the new ontology in Descartes' work. He elaborates a concept of the vertical *cogito* and temporality of the *cogito*. Finally, I will discuss Merleau-Ponty's ideas of artistic expression, political action, and freedom in the context of his reading of Descartes. In the work *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty formulates his conception of freedom in contrast to Sartre's theory. I will argue that we can best understand Merleau-Ponty's discussion of freedom if we take into consideration his formulation of the ontological structure of connection and difference.

CHAPTER ONE: DESCARTES' CONTRADICTION

The vital knowledge or “natural inclination” which shows us the union of body and soul, once the light of nature has taught us to distinguish them, is a thing which it seems contradictory to guarantee by divine truthfulness; for this is after all nothing but the intrinsic clarity of the idea, and can in any case validate only self-evident thoughts. But perhaps Descartes’ philosophy consists in embracing this contradiction. When Descartes says that the understanding knows itself incapable of knowing the union of soul and body and leaves this knowledge for life to achieve, this means that the act of understanding presents itself as reflection on an unreflective experience which it does not absorb either in fact or in theory.¹

In this chapter, my intention is to explicate Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Descartes, especially in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Thematically the chapter follows the structure of Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* – the six meditations. I will transform *Phenomenology of Perception* into a kind of commentary on *Meditations*. The reason for this is not in finding from Merleau-Ponty an interpretation of every single idea Descartes presents, but in showing what problems Merleau-Ponty himself accentuates, what is central in Descartes’ philosophy for him. In doing this I will also provide the background for Merleau-Ponty’s later interpretations of Descartes, by showing the basic problem which he continues to articulate in his later philosophy from the ontological point of view.

Merleau-Ponty constantly shows that Descartes, on the one hand, argues for the clear and distinct knowledge of the pure mind, and on the other hand, explicates the lived experience of the embodied mind: Descartes establishes both the distinction and the union between mind and body. It is clear that for Merleau-Ponty the union of mind and body is crucial: already in the Preface of *Phenomenology of Perception* he describes how, firstly, perception is not a judgment of mind, and secondly, all our knowledge presupposes perception.² Objective knowledge is based on our embodied life – reflection is based on the unreflected experience.³ Therefore, Descartes’ idea of the mind presupposes the

¹ PP, 52-53/49.

² PP, V/xi.

³ PP, IX/xvi.

lived experience: we cannot think that we see if we do not see first. Merleau-Ponty thematizes the lived experience of the body through phenomenological analysis, and therefore, in this chapter I will relate his interpretation of Descartes to his approach to Husserl's phenomenology.

Yet, Merleau-Ponty also shows that even if the source of our reflection is in the unreflected experience, we do not coincide with our experience, and it withdraws from our grasp: "it is never to eliminate, but merely to push further back the opacity that thought presents to itself."¹ There is not only a union, but also a distinction from the unreflected life which forms the contradiction Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes' philosophy: on the one hand, there is a bodily understanding of experience as the source of reflection, and therefore, the *Sixth Meditation* is the condition for the *Second Meditation*, but on the other hand, the experience is thematized through reflection, which also forms a distance from the unreflected experience, and the *Sixth Meditation* can be understood only after the *Second Meditation*. Descartes' contradiction is between the reflected *cogito* and the unreflected *cogito*, between the natural light and the natural inclination, between the pure intellect and the lived experience, between the distinction and the union. I will show that Merleau-Ponty reformulates the contradiction as a paradoxical relation between adherence and distance.

1.1 Doubt and Pre-meditative Life

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty presents the problems of Cartesian philosophy in relation to those of phenomenology, and a critical explication of the Cartesian doubt opens up the discussion on the phenomenological reduction. In Descartes' *Meditations*, philosophy begins with the radical doubt which he carried out "once in his life."² In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl underlines the necessity for the radical beginning of philosophy: according to him, *Meditations* "draw the prototype for any beginning philosopher's necessary meditations, the meditations out of which alone a philosophy can grow originally."³ Nevertheless, the beginning of philosophy, which Merleau-Ponty sees in Husserl's phenomenology, is not a "once in a lifetime" occurrence, but a *perpetual beginning*.⁴ In the Preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty introduces his view on phenomenology side-by-side with the Cartesian beginning: the question of the radical beginning of philosophy opens up the problems of phenomenological reduction and transcendental philosophy.

In the *First Meditation*, Descartes – or rather, the narrator who meditates – begins by doubting the knowledge acquired by the senses, which he had previously "accepted as most true," because he had also noticed that sometimes the

¹ PP, 454/460–461.

² AT VII, 17/CSM II, 12. See also AT III, 695/CSM-K, 228.

³ Hua1, 44/2.

⁴ PP, IX/xv.

senses deceive, and he should not trust anything that can deceive.¹ He presents the argument that he can be dreaming – or mad, which he nevertheless neglects.² He then separates the mathematical sciences from the experiential disciplines, because even if we are asleep “two and three added together are five.”³ Yet, as he proceeds further in doubting, he notes that an omnipotent God can make him believe in mathematical truths even if they are not true. This seems contradictory, because God should be the supreme good, and it does not seem to be good to deceive. And yet, as there are perceptions which deceive, how can God allow us to be occasionally deceived? Descartes will give his answer to this problem in the *Fourth Meditation*, where he explains that our error is due to our being halfway between being and nothingness.⁴ Therefore, Descartes assumes that not God, but “some malicious demon” deceives him. It is not in his power to know the truth, but it is in his power to suspend his judgments of knowing, to doubt. The first mediation does not end in the light, but in “the inextricable darkness:” we fall “back to normal life,” we still have sense experience, ideas, and opinions, but we do not know if they contain any truth.⁵

What is crucial in Descartes’ method is that doubt does not deny that we perceive something in the sense that something appears to us. The doubt “suspends” belief in a realistic correspondence of our experience, that something really exists outside or beyond our perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes’ “methodical doubt does not deprive us of anything, since the whole world, at least in so far as we experience it, is reinstated in the *Cogito*, enjoying equal certainty, and simply labelled ‘thought of...’.”⁶ As we will see in the next part of this chapter, there is, according to Merleau-Ponty, no reflective *cogito* – a “thought of seeing” – without the unreflective experience upon which it “judges:” the appearing of something.

In the Preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty connects Husserl’s “question” of the phenomenological reduction, or “problematic of reduction,” to Cartesian doubt.⁷ From the “true meaning” Merleau-Ponty separates another meaning of reduction, which makes phenomenology transcendental idealism: “For a long time, and even in recent texts [by Husserl], the reduction is presented as the return to a transcendental consciousness before which the world is spread out and completely transparent [...]”⁸ In contrast, “the true” phenomenological reduction brings forth the appearing of the world as transcendent – not an *a priori* universalization of the meaning of the world. The phenomenological reduction – or Cartesian doubt – brings forth the experience of the world, not an introspective “inner man” or perfectly transparent consciousness in coincidence with itself. By reduction, we do not return to an im-

¹ AT VII, 18/CSM II, 12.

² Cf. Foucault 1965, 199; Derrida 1978, 31–63

³ AT VII, 20/CSM II, 14.

⁴ AT VII, 54/CSM II, 38.

⁵ AT VII, 23/CSM II, 15.

⁶ PP, III/x.

⁷ PP, V/xii.

⁸ PP, V/xii.

manent consciousness, but on the contrary we “watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire.”¹

Merleau-Ponty refers to Eugen Fink’s (1905–1975) formulation of the reduction as “wonder” (*étonnement*). Heinämaa has explicated this reference, and the meaning of wonder through Descartes’ explication of wonder as a passion which we feel when we encounter something unusual and unexpected.² Heinämaa shows that, for Fink, the reduction is a change in our habituality.³ We are normally so habitual in our experience that we do not recognize the habituality itself. Reduction, at the same time, interrupts and brings forth the habituality of our experience. According to Heinämaa, through reduction “the whole world seems new to us.”⁴

Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty argues that the reduction shows us the world not as familiar, but as “strange and paradoxical.”⁵ In order to see our relation with the world, we need to see our distance from it: the transcendence of our experience. Cartesian doubt – which Husserl interprets as a precursor of transcendental reduction in the first book of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*⁶ and in *Cartesian Meditations*⁷ – does not, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, show us a self-immanent subjective fundament, a transcendental constitutive consciousness, but instead the transcendence of the experience: that there is an absence of presence, a distance of proximity, a difference within connection. The status of transcendental philosophy in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is complicated: on the one hand, he argues against the “classical type” of transcendental philosophy which supposes an immanent constituting consciousness, but on the other hand, he suggests a “truly transcendental” which is the “fundamental contradiction” of transcendence and communication.⁸ Already, then, the phenomenological reduction brings forth the paradox between connection and difference, which Merleau-Ponty elaborates in his later philosophy as the new “ontological structure.”⁹

The phenomenological reduction, as presented by Husserl in the first book of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, should show the pure transcendental consciousness without correlation to the transcendent objects and the world, as absolute consciousness.¹⁰ According to Dan Zahavi, this is the kind of phenomenological reduction that Merleau-Ponty,

¹ PP, VIII/xv.

² Heinämaa 2002, 141.

³ Heinämaa 2002, 143.

⁴ Heinämaa 2002, 144.

⁵ PP, VIII/xv.

⁶ Hua3, 53/58, 55/59.

⁷ Hua1, 64/24–25. According to Husserl, Descartes “stands on the threshold of the greatest of all discoveries – in a certain manner, has already made it – yet he does not grasp its proper sense, the sense namely of transcendental subjectivity, and so he does not pass through the gateway that leads into genuine transcendental philosophy” (Hua1, 64/24–25).

⁸ PP, 418/425. See also VI, 225–226/171–172.

⁹ See Chapter Four.

¹⁰ Hua3, 94/113.

among others, including Husserl himself, criticizes.¹ Merleau-Ponty renounces the idea of reduction to an absolute constituting consciousness. The phenomenological reduction does not allow us to enter into a universal consciousness “without date or place:”²

The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction. This is why Husserl is constantly re-examining the possibility of the reduction. If we were absolute mind, the reduction would present no problem. But since, on the contrary, we are in the world, since indeed our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux on the which we are trying to seize (since they *sich einströmen*, as Husserl says), there is no thought which embraces all our thought.³

“The impossibility of a *complete* reduction” does not mean that the reduction is impossible. It means that we never leave the unreflective life, which will remain as the limit of and source for reflection; that all reflection is only partial and, therefore, incomplete; that transcendental consciousness is not an *a priori* condition of experience, but rather that the “true transcendental”⁴ is the field of experience as the condition for consciousness – “*vertical being*,” as Merleau-Ponty calls it in his later philosophy.⁵ In a working note from February 1959, published in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty repeats his statement: “the incompleteness of the reduction.”⁶ He explicates that this does not mean imperfection. Referring to Hegel, he writes that it is not “unhappy consciousness:”⁷ the impossibility of a complete reduction is not a failure to achieve an absolute

¹ Zahavi 2003, 43. Zahavi explicates “the Cartesian way” of reduction: “Whereas the world can only appear for a subject, subjectivity does not need the world in order to be. The world, and more generally, every type of *transcendence*, is relative insofar as the condition for its appearance lies outside itself, namely, in the subject. In contrast the subject, the *immanence*, is absolute and autonomous since its manifestation only depends upon itself.” (Zahavi 2003, 48.) Husserl writes in *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology*: “[T]he ‘Cartesian way’ [...], has a great shortcoming: while it leads to the transcendental ego in one leap, as it were, it brings this ego into view as apparently empty of content, since there can be no preparatory explication; so one is at loss, at first, to know what has been gained by it, much less how, starting with this, a completely new sort of fundamental science, decisive for philosophy, has been attained.” (Hua6, 157–158/155.)

² PP, 487–488/495.

³ PP, VIII–IX/xv.

⁴ PP, 530/-; 418/425. VI, 225–226/171–172.

⁵ I will explicate “verticality” in Chapter 3.3 and in Chapter Four.

⁶ VI, 232/178.

⁷ Hegel writes in *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “The duplication of self-consciousness within itself, which is essential in the Notion of Spirit, is thus here before us, but not yet in its unity: the *Unhappy Consciousness* is the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being” (Hegel 1977, 126). Although for Hegel the unity of spirit would be with universal consciousness that exceeds singular consciousness, there is a structural similarity in Hegel’s “unhappy consciousness” with the Cartesian situation of contradictory union and distinction. According to Hegel they form “*immediate unity*” and are “alien to one another” (Hegel 1977, 126–127). In Descartes’ philosophy, there is unity of a “single person” and the mutual exclusion of union and distinction (AT III, 693–694/227–228). Hegel explicates that “it is itself directly both of them, and the relation of the two is for it a relation of essential being to the unessential, so that this latter has to be set aside; but since for it both are equally essential and contradictory, it is merely the contradictory movement in which one opposite does not come to rest in *its* opposite, but in it only produces itself afresh as an opposite” (Hegel 1977, 127).

consciousness, a contradiction which remains between essentiality and factuality, but a dehiscence of the unreflective experience and phenomenality. The incompleteness is “not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself, the rediscovery of vertical being.”¹ In Merleau-Ponty’s view, we do not pass into a purely ideal field with the reduction, which would reduce existence to a pure awareness of existence – we pass to the phenomenal field which is already there.² According to him, “the reduction finally is not for Husserl a transcendental immanence, but the disclosing of the *Weltthesis* [...]”³ Merleau-Ponty explicates in his article on Husserl’s phenomenology, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” the “*Weltthesis*” as the thesis of the world before all theses:⁴ “the world is always ‘already there,’” as he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*.⁵

It is central for Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of phenomenology that the aim of reduction is not to suspend the existence of the world but to bring it forth.⁶ This, in contrast to idealism, is not a purification of the obscurity of our experience: it is, on the contrary, the obscurity and opacity which must be taken into account in the explication of experience.⁷ The reduction does not give us a pure and simple universal essence of our experience. Our experience withdraws, changes and differentiates, and therefore the philosophical explication is never completed – the reduction is never complete.

In order to make a complete reduction, to find the firm and immovable point of Archimedes to which Descartes refers,⁸ and to grasp the total completeness of everything, there would need to be a point of view without worldlines and corporeality, which therefore would be without a point of view. Absolute consciousness without any ties to the world would at the same time be completely distanced from the world and in immediate proximity to the world, as the world would be a pure object of the pure consciousness. Merleau-Ponty calls this point of view without a point of view a *survol* – a word difficult to translate – which Donald Landes explicates as “a thinking ‘from above’ that mistakenly assures the philosopher a God’s-eye view upon that which is to be explained.”⁹ According to Merleau-Ponty, “[a]nalytical reflection puts forward, instead of the absolute existence of the object, the thought of an absolute object, and, through trying to dominate [*survoler*] the object and think of it from no

¹ VI, 232/178.

² PP, VII/xiv.

³ VI, 233/179.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty states: “The natural attitude itself emerges unscathed from the complaints which can be made about naturalism, because it is ‘prior to any thesis,’ because it is the mystery of a *Weltthesis* prior to all theses. It is, Husserl says in another connection, the mystery of a primordial faith and a fundamental and original opinion (*Urglaube, Urdoxa*) which are thus not even in principle translatable in terms of clear and distinct knowledge, and which – more ancient than any ‘attitude’ or ‘point of view’ – give us not a representation of the world but the world itself” (S, 266–267/163).

⁵ PP, I/vii.

⁶ See VI, 225–226/171–172.

⁷ PP, 418/425.

⁸ AT VII, 24/CSM II, 16.

⁹ Landes 2013, xii. In his *The Merleau-Ponty Dictionary*, Landes leaves “*pensée de survol*” without translation. I will follow his example in my work.

point of view, it destroys the object's internal structure."¹ He refers to Leibnitz, according to whom a house *itself* is not the one seen from a perspective as an appearance, but from "all possible perspectives, that is, the perspectiveless position from which all can be derived, the house seen from nowhere."² The total view, which according to Merleau-Ponty is understood as a coincidence with being in Bergsonian intuitionism, and as an immediate universal constituting consciousness in classical transcendental philosophy, is either too close or too far from its object: in both cases, it is a *survol* of the actual proximity and distance.³ Already, in the beginning, we can see that philosophy is faced with the difficulty of understanding the relation to the world not as absolute distance or immediate proximity, but as proximity and distance at the same time.

"[T]here is no thought which embraces all our thought" – there is no pure consciousness in immediate contact with itself. With the phenomenological reduction, we do not find a total view or immediate grounding of the experience within the constituting consciousness. According to Theodore Geraets, for Merleau-Ponty "[t]he true transcendental is therefore not the subject but the experience itself."⁴ The phenomenological reduction reveals the phenomenal field as the transcendental field.⁵ The transcendental, then, is "a field of transcendencies."⁶ Transcendental is not, for Merleau-Ponty, a level of pure constituting subjectivity.⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, the culmination of Husserl's phenomenology is not in the conception of intentionality but in the difficulty which the intentional analysis brings forth: not the relation between an act of the intentional subject and its object, but the opacity, the transcendence, the withdrawing character of experience.⁸

Merleau-Ponty renounces "transcendental philosophies of the classical type" which, according to him, characterized also most of Husserl's works – "to all appearances at least."⁹ Merleau-Ponty explicitly separates the Kantian transcendental, which "makes the world immanent in the subject," from Husserl's transcendental, which instead conceives "the subject as a process of transcendence towards the world."¹⁰ Yet, he also separates the "true transcendental" from most of Husserl's explicit formulations.

¹ PP, 236/237.

² PP, 81/77.

³ PP, 76/72.

⁴ Geraets 1971, 186. Translation by JH.

⁵ PP, 73-77/69-74.

⁶ VI, 226/172. PP, 418/425.

⁷ PP, 487-488/495.

⁸ PP, 141n4/140n54.

⁹ PP, 74/70.

¹⁰ PP, VIII/xv. However, Samantha Matherne argues in her article "Kantian Themes in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Perception" that Merleau-Ponty's concept of bodily schema is deeply influenced by the Kantian idea of schematism (Matherne 2016, 226). Although Merleau-Ponty criticizes Kant's intellectualist point of view on transcendental philosophy, he also finds in Kant "a new definition of the *a priori*" according to which "the *a priori* is not knowable in advance of experience, that is, outside our horizon of facticity" (PP, 229/256; Matherne 2016, 217). Matherne states: "In the end, for Merleau-Ponty, as was true for Kant, we can only understand how the body schema makes experience possible if we take into account both its transcendental and empirical features" (Matherne 2016, 219). In this work I

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty argues against a “classical” or “ordinary” type of transcendental philosophy, which he identifies in the Preface as “transcendental idealism.” According to him, “[a] logically consistent transcendental idealism rids the world of its opacity and its transcendence.”¹ Transcendental idealism reduces the world to a “thought or consciousness of the world” and to a “mere correlative of our knowledge;”² “the world becomes the correlative of thought about the world and henceforth exists only for a constituting agent.”³ Transcendental analysis is not dependent of the constituted, of the appearing phenomenal field, but only of the pure constituting consciousness as an immediately given immanence of thought: “It would enable me to take complete possession of my experience, thus equating thinking (*réfléchissant*) and thought (*réfléchi*).”⁴ The problem of transcendental idealism is twofold: firstly, if there is an absolute constituting consciousness, then how is it possible that there is something or someone other, a transcendent being,⁵ and secondly, how can the constituting subject be a part of the world which is constituted.⁶

Merleau-Ponty also problematizes the Husserlian transcendental. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that he does not accept all of Husserl’s formulations of transcendental phenomenology – at least not in the sense they explicitly “appear” in Husserl’s works: according to Merleau-Ponty, in most of Husserl’s works “the program of a transcendental phenomenology” appears in a classical or ordinary sense of the transcendental.⁷ According to Theodore Geraets, when discussing the transcendental attitude Merleau-Ponty debates more with Husserl’s ideas than with Kant’s or Brunschvicg’s.⁸

In a footnote after expressing the “truly transcendental” of transcendencies, in contrast to total constituting consciousness before a fully transparent world, Merleau-Ponty explicates his reading of Husserl. He separates two reductions determined by Husserl: the reduction as a “return to the description of the world of living experience (*Lebenswelt*), and “a second ‘reduction’” by which “the structures of the world of experience must be reinstated in the transcendental flow of universal constitution in which all the world’s obscurities are elucidated.”⁹ Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl’s late work *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, where, after the explication of the reduction to the lived world, Husserl argues:¹⁰

will not study Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Kant’s philosophy. However, I want to suggest that the question of body schema and bodily habits as “know-how” or bodily “understanding” (Matherne 2016, 219–221) is already raised by Descartes’s description of the union of mind and body.

¹ PP, VI/xiii.

² PP, X/xvii.

³ PP, 241/241.

⁴ PP, 73/70.

⁵ PP, 404/410.

⁶ PP, 51/48.

⁷ PP, 73/70, 73n1/70n12.

⁸ Geraets 1971, 87. Geraets refers to Merleau-Ponty’s professor Léon Brunschvicg (see Chapter Two).

⁹ PP, 419n1/425n8.

¹⁰ Geraets 1971, 180.

Accordingly, as against the first application of the epochē, a second is required, or rather a conscious reshaping of the epochē through a reduction to the absolute ego as the ultimate unique center of function in all constitution. This determines henceforth the whole method of transcendental phenomenology.¹

Merleau-Ponty rejects the second reduction to the “absolute ego;” he refuses the idea of a “universal constitution in which all the world’s obscurities are elucidated.”² Yet, crucially, he also argues that there is a “dilemma” within Husserl’s phenomenology: “[E]ither the constitution makes the world transparent, in which case it is not obvious why reflection needs to pass through the world of experience, or else it retains something of that world, and never rids it of its opacity.”³ Merleau-Ponty asks: if phenomenology was pure and simple transcendental idealism of immanent constituting consciousness, then why it would need phenomenology of the lived experience? Let me point out here that this is a question which is very close to what Merleau-Ponty asks about Descartes’ *Meditations*: if there is a pure and simple *cogito*, a pure intellect according to which everything must be judged, then why is the elaboration of the notion of the union of mind and body necessary?⁴ I will return to the Cartesian aspect of Husserl’s phenomenology in Chapter Three.

According to Merleau-Ponty, reduction remained a problem for Husserl.⁵ Reduction is not something already accomplished but an “inquiry, since inquiry is, as he [Husserl] said, a continuous beginning,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it in his article “The Philosopher and His Shadow.”⁶ In his working notes for *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty indicates that it is Husserl’s “*Arbeitsprobleme*,” which is “that impossible enterprise of grasping the transcendental consciousness in the act.”⁷ There is no immediate coincidence with the transcendental “constitution,” even if it is not atemporal and absolute – it is the openness of the field of experience as temporal which involves the “thickness of the pre-objective present.”⁸ Therefore, the “true transcendental” is not a return into a neutral appearance or phenomenon of the world through the suspension of the existence of the world: the transcendental “*goes beyond the subjectivity*,” to the transcendence.⁹ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he writes: “The core of philosophy is no longer an autonomous transcendental subjectivity, to be found everywhere and nowhere: it lies in the perpetual beginning of reflection, at the point where an individual life begins to reflect on itself.”¹⁰

The perpetual beginning is the principle of phenomenology for Merleau-Ponty. Heinämaa explicates that by his statement on the impossibility of complete reduction Merleau-Ponty does not mean we should give up on phenome-

¹ Hua6, 190/186.

² PP, 419n1/425n8.

³ PP, 419n1/425n8.

⁴ UAC, 16/35.

⁵ PP, V/xii.

⁶ S, 262/161.

⁷ VI, 293/239.

⁸ PP, 495/503.

⁹ VI, 225–226/171–172.

¹⁰ PP, 75–76/72.

nology, but that “we must accept the unfinished nature of the enterprise – the transitory, temporal nature of philosophical clarity.”¹ As I will explicate in this chapter, for Merleau-Ponty philosophical articulation, which seeks for clarity, cannot leave the unreflective and obscure experience, and therefore, its essences are also within the same temporal and transitive phenomenal field which is the transcendental field. Philosophy is never complete, never finished. Whereas for Descartes, “it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations,”² for Merleau-Ponty it is, rather, “not ‘once in a lifetime’ but all through life” that we have to start from the beginning.³

The philosopher, as the unpublished works [of Husserl] declare, is a perpetual beginner, which means that he takes for granted nothing that men, learned or otherwise, believe they know. It means also that philosophy itself must not take itself for granted, in so far as it may have managed to say something true; that it is an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning; that it consists wholly in the description of this beginning, and finally, that radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all.⁴

The beginning of Descartes’ *Meditations* is not in the *cogito*, in the certainty of the thinking “I” which he finds in the *Second Meditation* to be “the most certain and evident” truth.⁵ Nor is it in the methodic doubt, as that presupposes something which calls for the doubt.⁶ The beginning is in the pre-meditative experience, in the “unreflective life” which, before the doubt, Descartes held as “most true” and which he had “acquired either from the senses or through the senses.”⁷ It is a heterogeneous field which consists of the body “regarded as part of myself, or perhaps even as my whole self,”⁸ “the body which by some special right I called ‘mine,’”⁹ “intermingling of the mind with the body.”¹⁰ It is not known by the innate natural light of the intellect but by “natural impulses,”¹¹ “blind impulses,”¹² which are “taught by nature,”¹³ and “nature” not in the sense of a simple “label which depends on my thought” but “‘nature’ in the other sense I understand something which is really to be found in the things themselves.”¹⁴ It is not the life of the solitary meditating mind but “normal life,”¹ where there are “other men like myself.”²

¹ Heinämaa 1999, 59.

² AT VII, 17/CSM II, 12. See also AT III, 695/CSM-K, 228.

³ OE, 64/140.

⁴ PP, IX/xv-xvi.

⁵ AT VII, 25/CSM II, 17.

⁶ Ted Toadvine states: “[M]ore primordial than doubt *per se* is the ambiguous faith in contact with being that every doubt implicitly takes for granted” (Toadvine 2002, 78).

⁷ AT VII, 18/CSM II, 12.

⁸ AT VII, 74/CSM II, 52.

⁹ AT VII, 76/CSM II, 52.

¹⁰ AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56.

¹¹ AT VII, 39/CSM II, 27.

¹² AT VII, 40/CSM II, 27.

¹³ AT VII, 82/CSM II, 56.

¹⁴ AT VII, 85/CSM II, 59.

1.2 Thought and Existence

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Descartes' concept of the *cogito* relates the *Second Meditation* to the Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections.³ The *ego cogito*, "I think," is the first truth or certainty which Descartes finds in *Meditations*, formulated earlier in *Discourse on the Method*: "I am thinking, therefore I exist."⁴ Descartes sometimes uses "*cogito*" or "thought" in a narrow sense to mean "mind, intelligence, intellect or reason,"⁵ and sometimes in a wider sense to mean "a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perception."⁶ In the *Second Meditation*, Descartes shows how everything that appears to us is a mode of thinking: I cannot be certain that I perceive, but I can be certain that *I think that I perceive*. Yet, Merleau-Ponty shows that there is, in Descartes' idea of the *cogito*, a certainty of existence and thought before this reflective judgment. In the beginning of the Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections, Descartes answers the problem of how we can be certain that we exist when we think, if we do not know what thought and existence are:⁷ we know what thought and existence are before reflective knowledge, and therefore before the reflective knowledge of the *cogito* there is an "internal awareness" of it.⁸ The question is about the self-relation which Gassendi problematizes in the Fifth Set of Objections, and which remains a central problem in the Cartesian tradition, as I will show in Chapter Two. My intention, in the following, is to explicate what Merleau-Ponty means by "the Cogito before the Cogito" in *Phenomenology of Perception*.⁹

Merleau-Ponty contests the Cartesian idea of the intellectual possession of the *cogito*, and emphasizes the unreflective and pre-intellectual condition of the *cogito*. He brings forth the contradictory nature of Descartes' argumentation: the clear and distinct certainty of the *cogito* must rest on the unreflected experience of the *cogito*. The *cogito* presents a central problem for Merleau-Ponty: in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty dedicates an entire chapter to the *cogito*,

¹ AT VII, 23/CSM II, 15.

² AT VII, 43/CSM II, 29. In one of the last working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty explains: "Study the pre-methodic Descartes, the *spontaneae fruges*, the natural thought "that always precedes the acquired thought" - and the post-methodic Descartes, that of after the VIth Meditations, who lives in the world after having methodically explored it - the "vertical" Descartes soul and body, and not that of the *intuitus mentis* [...] the Descartes of before and after the order of reasons, the Descartes of the Cogito before the Cogito, who always knew that he thought, with a knowing that is ultimate and has no need of elucidation [...] this knowing more clear than all constitution[.]" (VI, 326/272-273.) With "*spontaneae fruges*" Merleau-Ponty refers to Descartes' *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, "spontaneous fruits" (AT X, 373/17). With his quotation of the thought "that always precedes the acquired thought," he refers to Descartes' Replies to Sixth Set of Objections, "that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge" (AT VII, 423/CSM II, 285).

³ AT VII, 423/CSM II, 285.

⁴ AT VI, 32/CSM I, 127.

⁵ AT VII, 27/CSM II, 18.

⁶ AT VII, 28/CSM II, 19. Cottingham 1993, 163-164.

⁷ AT VII, 413/CSM II, 278.

⁸ AT VII, 423/CSM II, 285.

⁹ VI, 326/273.

and he never stopped reflecting on it, as we can see in his last course “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui” and in the working notes published in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Before concentrating on Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the *cogito* in *Phenomenology of Perception*, I will first summarize Descartes’ *Second Meditation*, and again, I do this knowing that I am not able to explicate here all the details and problems it contains.

In the *Second Meditation*, Descartes – or the meditator – begins from the radical doubt and attempts to find an Archimedean point of certainty. He adds one aspect to the reasons for doubt: memory can lie, and the things it recollects may have never happened.¹ He goes further into doubt, and meditates on the possibility that perhaps nothing exists, not even himself. This cannot be true, because when he thinks about something – even if it is nothing – he must exist: “*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.”² Descartes then attempts to also find a certainty of the body, but concludes quickly that he does not have a body and that sense-perceptions may not be real. It is, nevertheless, certain that he is thinking as long as he is thinking. He is “a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason [...] – a thinking thing.”³ According to him, a thinking thing – *res cogitans* – is a thing that “doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.”⁴ Even if the meditator is asleep, he has the same sensory perceptions, the same thoughts: “I certainly *seem* to see [...]” – *videre videor*.⁵ Therefore, perception is thinking.

Descartes states that, in fact, it appears that the images formed in thought about perceptions are better known than “this puzzling ‘I’ which cannot be pictured in the imagination.”⁶ This is surprising for the meditator, as he seems to have a more distinct understanding of things that are “unknown and foreign” to him than of himself. In order to disclaim this, he takes up an example of a piece of wax: when the piece of wax is heated it changes its form and sensible qualities, but, nevertheless, the wax must be the same. He concludes that the nature or essence of the wax is not revealed by sensations or imagination, but is “perceived by the mind alone.”⁷ It is the *judgment* of the mind which decides what he *thinks that he sees*: “something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind.”⁸ Descartes then proceeds to conclude that when he sees, or thinks that he sees – which he does not distinguish – he is more certain of his own existence than of

¹ AT VII, 24/CSM II, 16. This is the first occasion in *Meditations* where Descartes mentions a temporal aspect. It is an underlying discourse in *Meditations* which separates the universality of our finite knowledge from that of the infinity of God.

² AT VII, 25/CSM II, 17.

³ AT VII, 27/CSM II, 18. In the *Fourth Meditation* Descartes writes: “the thinking nature which is in me, or rather which I am [...]” (AT VII, 59/CSM II, 41).

⁴ AT VII, 28/CSM II, 19.

⁵ AT VII, 29/CSM II, 19.

⁶ AT VII, 29/CSM II, 20.

⁷ AT VII, 31/CSM II, 21.

⁸ AT VII, 32/CSM II, 21.

the perceived object. He argues that he has proved what he claims in the title of the *Second Meditation*, that the mind is known better than the body.¹

With respect to Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, the most significant aspects of the *Second Meditation* are, firstly, the apparition of thought in connection with the status of perception, and secondly, the problem of self-relation. In his own words, it is exactly the idea according to which we judge with our mind what we think we see with our eyes that Merleau-Ponty wants to discuss in *Phenomenology of Perception*.² Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty the problem of self-relation of the mind, the question "how can we know ourselves" – "this puzzling 'I'" – concerns not only knowledge of the self or self-awareness, but existence, and therefore the epistemic and ontological aspects are not divided.

According to Descartes, even if we can doubt our perception, it is certain that it *seems that we see, videre videor*. We judge with our mind that we see, after Descartes' own example, men walking down the street, even if what we really see could be automata covered by clothes.³ Thus, it is certain that something appears, but what is not certain is the reality of this perception, the existence of the object of perception. Through the methodic doubt, we are suspending the opinion on the existence of what we perceive, which is, in fact, the actual pre-reflective perception. We retire into a reflection upon this pre-reflective experience.

In this Cartesian train of thought, Merleau-Ponty opposes to the intellectualization of perception: according to him, our reflective thought on perception rests entirely on the evidence presented by unreflected perception, and thus it is philosophical hypocrisy to claim that "it seems that we see" is more certain than our actual vision. To be clear, he does not argue against philosophical reflection *as such*; he does not claim that philosophical analysis is impossible, but he claims that it depends on the pre-philosophical experience. According to Merleau-Ponty, "radical reflection" is a paradoxical task⁴ which recognizes its beginning in the unreflective experience "which constitutes to it a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present."⁵ I will return to the temporality of reflection in many stages of my work.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the thought about seeing is not more evident than the actual perception, because it is impossible to separate the thing seen and the act of perception.⁶ In this manner, Cartesian doubt of the vision is misleading: if we have a doubt about what we see, we do not say that we see it. For example, if I doubt that I see a red color, I do not say that I have seen it. Accord-

¹ I will continue to discuss on this claim and its problems in Chapter Two.

² Merleau-Ponty states in the interview with Georges Charbonnier: "Le texte de Descartes est extrêmement connu, et vous vous le rappelez certainement, il se termine à peu près par les mots que voici: 'Je m'aperçois que je saisis par une inspection de l'esprit ce que je croyais voir de mes yeux.' On ne voit pas avec ses yeux, pour Descartes, ce n'est pas l'œil qui voit, c'est l'âme, disait-il encore. Eh bien c'est cette analyse cartésienne, relayée dans l'histoire de la philosophie par toutes espèces d'autres travaux, d'autres analyses, que j'ai pris pour thème de discussion et que je me suis proposé de mettre en discussion." (ÉGC, 425.)

³ AT VII, 32/CSM II, 21.

⁴ PP, 278-279/280.

⁵ PP, 280/282.

⁶ PP, 429/435.

ing to Merleau-Ponty “[i]t is of the essence of my vision to refer not only to an alleged visible entity, but also to a being actually seen.”¹ Merleau-Ponty denies that the position of “*videre videor*” is indubitable, and rather takes it as untenable: either we say that “it seems that we see,” and then the certainty is only probable, or we say that we “think that we see,” and then we refer to a previously attained real vision that we now claim to see mentally. In both cases, our certainty rests on the actual and pre-reflective vision, and not on the reflective thought about it.

Merleau-Ponty’s point is not to claim naively that everything we see is true, but that “there is no sphere of immanence, no realm in which my consciousness is fully at home and secure against all risk of error.”² The essence of perceptive consciousness is transcendence; it opens up to something external and distant. Through the perception, the consciousness has a self-relation, but this relation is not possession, it is not a pure self-presence, a coincidence with the self. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty argues that the *cogito* is neither psychological nor transcendental immanence, but a contact between my being and world’s being.³ The *cogito*, in Merleau-Ponty’s reading, is not a substance or an idea, but actual thinking. He emphasizes the performative character of the *cogito*, following Descartes closely, when he writes: “this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.”⁴

Merleau-Ponty shows that the consciousness does not allow us to gain a more evident certainty of ourselves than perception. As an example, he considers the affection of love: how can somebody know if his or her love is real? The answer seems to be always ambiguous: he or she does know and does not know. The pre-reflective affection evades reflection.⁵ Merleau-Ponty writes: “If we are in a situation, we are surrounded and cannot be transparent to ourselves, so that our contact with ourselves is necessarily achieved only in the sphere of ambiguity.”⁶ We seem to be in a dilemma, since if we cannot accept the absolute certainty of the consciousness, it seems to lead us to an unhappy conclusion, to an endless doubt and absolute uncertainty. According to Merleau-Ponty, this is a crucial point: “It is true neither that my existence is in full possession of itself,

¹ PP, 429/436.

² PP, 431/438.

³ PP, 432/438–439.

⁴ AT VII, 25/CSM II, 17.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty makes a remark concerning psychoanalysis: according to him the notion of the unconsciousness is not far from the idea of a consciousness transparent to itself because they share the illusion that I can retrospectively find everything that there is in me (PP, 436/443). This remark does not do much justice to psychoanalysis, if we understand the unconscious not as a mere “hidden side” of pure consciousness but as a structural element of the consciousness. It is not the case that a psychoanalyst would have the illusion of knowing everything there is in an analysand, but rather that the analysis re-constructs the scene which is missing. There is no full coincidence with the past when the unconscious is deciphered. It should also be noted that Merleau-Ponty in his late work has a much deeper understanding of psychoanalysis and the unconscious (see Chapter 4.1). In contrast to what Merleau-Ponty claims here, the psychoanalytical notion of the unconscious is perhaps not so far from what he is himself describing.

⁶ PP, 437/444.

nor that it is entirely estranged from itself [...]."¹ The dilemma is met exactly from the point of view of a demand for absolute certainty: it is through the search after absolute certainty that we enter into a truly hyperbolic doubt, in which "an ineradicable doubt would spread over the world, and equally over my own thoughts."²

The way out of this degradation of the world is action: it is only the act of thought which can silence the doubt. It is, according to Merleau-Ponty, "a blind plunge into 'doing'" which can remove the doubt.³ There is no thought without the world, and our certainty rests on our actual relation with the world. We may be mistaken in our perception of something, but this does not mean that we are mistaken in everything: we would not know that we are mistaken if we did not have a "true," or rather a new, perception which replaces it. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty calls this "dés-illusion:" "The dis-illusion is the loss of one evidence only because it is the acquisition of *another evidence*."⁴ It is from this incessant perceptual life that we gain our certainty:

Hence it is not *because* I think I am that I am certain of my existence: on the contrary the certainty I enjoy concerning my thoughts stems from their genuine existence. My love, hatred and will are not certain as mere thoughts about loving, hating and willing: on the contrary the whole certainty of these thoughts is owed to that of the acts of love, hatred or will of which I am quite sure because I *perform* them.⁵

We can be certain of doubting because we doubt something, and we can be certain of perceiving because we perceive something. The certainty of ourselves for ourselves, of our self-relation, comes from our relation to this something which we doubt and perceive: "It is through my relation to 'things' that I know myself; inner perception follows afterwards, and would not be possible had I not already made contact with my doubt in its very object."⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, the perceptive evidence is the source of all our evidence. There is not an immanent sphere of pure thought which would be absolutely certain, and thus we should not pretend that our thought about seeing is more evident than what we see.⁷ Furthermore, it is a question about the characterization of perception: the intellectual perception or intuition is a problematic model of perception which has philosophical consequences. The reflective analysis gives an illusion that our relation with the world is merely objective: the world as an object in front of a pure consciousness. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

¹ PP, 438/444.

² PP, 438/445.

³ PP, 438/445.

⁴ VI, 62/40.

⁵ PP, 438/445.

⁶ PP, 439/445.

⁷ As Gassendi argues against Descartes, the existence of thought is certain but it is hard to understand how we can think that we see if we do not have corporeal eyes which see (AT VII, 274/CSM II, 191).

[It is] sure that the relation between a thought and its object, between the *cogito* and the *cogitatum*, contains neither the whole nor even the essential of our commerce with the world and that we have to situate that relation back within a more muted relationship with the world, within an initiation into the world upon which it rests and which is always already accomplished when the reflective return intervenes.¹

Without the appearance of something there would be no *cogito* – we perceive before we think that we perceive. Accordingly, we think before we reflect our thought: there is thought before our reflective awareness of it. What Merleau-Ponty sees as problematic in Cartesian philosophy is the idea of the pure mind understood as a full self-possession of the intellectual intuition. The intellectual certitude of the vision is also extended to the concept of the consciousness: as I am a pure view on the things, I cannot be ignorant of myself, and I must have an *immediate contact* with my own existence. As Descartes famously claims in the second *Meditation*, “I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else.”² In Cartesian tradition it is often argued, or rather supposed, that this “perception of my own mind” is an *immediate coincidence of the self with the self*. Merleau-Ponty formulates this approach in the following way:

At the root of all our experiences and all our reflections, we find, then, a being which immediately recognizes itself, because it is its knowledge both of itself and of all things, and which knows its own existence, not by observation and as a given fact, nor by inference from any idea of itself, but through direct contact with that existence.³

Merleau-Ponty refers here to Neo-Kantian Pierre Lachièze-Rey (1885–1957) who was a major Kant scholar in the 30’s and 40’s in France, and who represented Kantian idealism.⁴ According to Lachièze-Rey’s interpretation of Kant, in perception there is both activity and passivity, but the “primitive consciousness” as an immediate coincidence of the self with the self is neither passive nor constructive in the sense of categorical determination: the act of perception must be accompanied by an immediate self-consciousness which is *causa sui*.⁵ Therefore,

¹ VI, 57/35.

² AT VII, 34/CMS II, 22–23.

³ PP, 426/432. Zahavi attempts to support his analysis of immediate self-awareness by reference to Merleau-Ponty’s works, and refers to this passage. He makes exactly the same reference in the article “Is the Self a Social Construct?” and in the monograph *Self and Other*: “This is why Merleau-Ponty could write that, at the root of all our experiences and all our reflections, we find a being who immediately knows itself, not by observation, not by inference, but through direct contact with its own existence [...]” (Zahavi 2009, 563; Zahavi 2014, 96). This, however, is a misunderstanding because in the passage in *Phenomenology of Perception* to which Zahavi refers Merleau-Ponty is describing Lachièze-Rey’s Kantian philosophy, and distances himself from this stance (PP, 426/432). According to Merleau-Ponty, the idea of immediate coincidence between existence and the existent, between being and self, would make experience similar to the position of an absolute subject, that is, God.

⁴ See Rockmore 2011, 195; Matherne 2016, 203–207. Matherne argues that despite the criticism of intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty is also influenced by Lachièze-Rey concerning Kant’s theory of the schematism (Matherne 2016, 221).

⁵ Lachièze-Rey 1931, 55–59.

the “primitive consciousness” is neither temporal nor spatial – it is, according to Merleau-Ponty, out of time, timeless and eternal. Merleau-Ponty argues that such a concept of immediacy would be merely an attempt to thematize experience as God’s experience, as something that constitutes itself immediately, completely, and transparently.¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, this reasoning leads to the conception of “I” as an absolute subject, in which case it is impossible to understand how other subjects are possible: “The plurality of consciousness is impossible if I have an absolute consciousness of myself.”² A total self-possession makes an opening towards others impossible.

Moreover, according to Merleau-Ponty, the idea of immediate self-possession makes “self-positing” (*autoposition*) an illusion, “as it is the mind which places itself in the world.”³ Merleau-Ponty refers to the philosophy of Lachièze-Rey in order to show how the idea of immediate possession of the ego by itself leads to the idea of absolute objectivism. The subject as an absolutely certain ground and possession of the ground becomes an absolute subject which is, in a word, God. Absolute subjectivism leads to absolute objectivism. This type of philosophy has lost sight of the otherness in our experience, and in a certain sense the otherness *of* our experience: we have not created and invented the world, and we do not have the key to other minds, we do not even fully possess our own language and expression, and even our own mind and body hold secrets to us. For Merleau-Ponty, there must be something wrong in a philosophy of absolute transparency. The problem is not only in the conclusions, but must be already in the premises: in the supposition of immediate coincidence of the self with the self.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the *cogito* does not lead to an absolute consciousness and possession of the self by the self, if it is understood as “the blind act by which I take up my destiny as a thinking nature.”⁴ The *cogito* can lead to a philosophy which, according to Merleau-Ponty, “does not take us *out of* time.”⁵ The task is to understand how the subject is related to the world and how the subject relates to itself, and, as Merleau-Ponty argues, these relations must be understood as temporal. Consciousness, he claims, is action; it is an event which is not closed in its own immanence, but is always transcending towards its object. It is not something that could be held out of time, in “eternity,” and in possession of itself. According to Merleau-Ponty, not only thought but already seeing has a relation to itself “in a kind of ambiguous and obscure way, since it is not in possession of itself and indeed escapes from itself into the thing seen.”⁶ It is through transcendence that Merleau-Ponty characterizes the *cogito*. It is not possession, but “simultaneous contact with my own being and

¹ PP, 427–428/433–434.

² PP, 428/434.

³ PP, 427/433. See also PP, 487/494. I will return to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of self-positing in the last part of this chapter.

⁴ PP, 428/435.

⁵ PP, 428/435.

⁶ PP, 432/438.

with the world's being."¹ Merleau-Ponty argues that the *cogito* must be identified "with involvement in the world."²

In the "Temporality" chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty shows that the self-relation of the *cogito* must be understood through time: the *cogito* is not an immediate coincidence with itself, but in relation to itself through its temporal thickness. Merleau-Ponty describes time as a paradoxical relation of contact and distance. I will explicate Merleau-Ponty's idea of temporality in the last part of this chapter, in relation to his idea of the Cartesian contradiction.

Merleau-Ponty argues in *Phenomenology of Perception* that we are not in possession of the world and our existence: our openness to something is not coincidence or possession. The difference between the outside world and the inner world is not that the outside is unknown and the inner is known; it is not even that the outside is fully other and the inner totally our own.³ According to Merleau-Ponty, "[w]hat has been said of external can equally be said of internal perception: that it involves infinity, that it is a never-ending synthesis which, though always incomplete, is nevertheless self-affirming."⁴ As it is impossible to completely verify a perception of something, it is impossible to verify what doubt is, because it would also be necessary to verify the thought about doubting, and the thought about the thought about doubting, and so on. The "inner reality" escapes our attention in a similar way as the external world. And in a similar fashion, the certainty of doubt is based on the act itself, as in the case of perception.⁵

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly refer to Descartes' Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections in *Meditations*, where Descartes takes up the problem of the infinite regress of reflection and presents an idea of the pre-reflective awareness of the *cogito*.⁶ Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty certainly comes close to Descartes with his idea of the "pre-conscious possession of the world" of the "pre-reflective *cogito*."⁷ Descartes describes the conditions for

¹ PP, 432/439.

² PP, 495/503.

³ In fact, as we will see in Chapter Two, Malebranche argues that the outside world is better known than the inside.

⁴ PP, 439/445.

⁵ PP, 439/446. In his late work Merleau-Ponty calls this "perceptual faith:" we trust in our thought or perception even if we are not able to verify it, because the perceptual evidence always precedes the reflective effort of verifying (see Chapter 3.4).

⁶ In Chapter Two, I will explain that the problem was presented to Descartes by Gassendi. Merleau-Ponty refers to Descartes' Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections explicitly in his lectures "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui" (NC, 248), see Chapter 5.1.

⁷ PP, 344/347. Merleau-Ponty uses the notion "pre-reflective" (*préréflexif*) only once in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Instead, he repeatedly uses the notion "unreflected" (*irréfléchi*). The pre-reflective *cogito* is the pre-conscious self-awareness that is only through our relation to the world: "The true *cogito* is not the intimate communing of thought with the thought of that thought: they meet only on passing through the world. The consciousness of the world is not based on self-consciousness: they are strictly contemporary. There is a world for me because I am not unaware of myself; and I am not concealed from myself because I have a world." (PP, 344/347.) The unreflected refers to the field of "unreflective experience" (PP, 279/280) or "unreflective life" (PP, IX/xvi) as the source of all reflection, that the reflection cannot exhaust: "Hence reflection does not itself grasp its full signifi-

thought and existence. He starts from an essentialist position: in order to be sure that one thinks and exists, one must know what thought and existence are. Yet, Descartes notices that this knowledge is impossible to verify by reflection:

[T]his does not require reflective knowledge, or the kind of knowledge that is acquired by means of demonstrations; still less does it require knowledge of reflective knowledge, i.e. knowing that we know, and knowing that we know that we know, and so on *ad infinitum*. This kind of knowledge cannot possibly be obtained about anything. It is quite sufficient that we should know it by that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge [*cognition illa interna, quae reflexam semper antecedit*]. This inner awareness of one's thought and existence is so innate in all men that, although we may pretend that we do not have it if we are overwhelmed by preconceived opinions and pay more attention to words than to their meanings, we cannot in fact fail to have it. Thus when anyone notices that he is thinking and that it follows from this that he exists, even though he may never before have asked what thought is or what existence is, he still cannot fail to have sufficient knowledge of them both to satisfy himself in this regard.¹

The reflective return to existence and thought leads to an infinite regress.² As Descartes points out, such knowledge is impossible. There must be some kind of "internal awareness," a pre-reflective awareness of existence which we have before we reflect on it. According to Descartes, this awareness is "innate in all men," and thus it is impossible not to have it.

In Chapter Two, I will continue to examine the influence of this passage on the Cartesian tradition, and in particular the notion of internal awareness. Here I want to simply point out that Descartes denies that there would be a total intellectual or reflective possession of the *cogito*. Our thought relies on the act of thinking which cannot be reflected on. When we are thinking, we cannot fail to be certain that we are thinking. Yet, we are not able to grasp the existence of our thought in our consciousness, because it always precedes the attempt to grasp it – and therefore also withdraws from our attempt. It is not by "words" that we understand existence and thought, but with our actual thinking and existing which everyone experiences before thinking about what they mean.

Merleau-Ponty, who pays attention to the facticity of the *cogito*, shows that there must be thought before it becomes conscious of itself. There is a life of thought which we cannot fully possess by reflection:

I can never coincide with my life which is for ever fleeing from itself, in spite of which there *are* inner perceptions. For the same reason I am open to both illusion and truth about myself: that is, there are acts in which I collect myself together in order to surpass myself. The *cogito* is the recognition of this fundamental fact. In the proposition: "I think, I am", the two assertions are to be equated with each other, otherwise there would be no *cogito*. Nevertheless we must be clear about the meaning of this equivalence: it is not the "I am" which is pre-eminently con-

cance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experience which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been present" (PP, 280/282).

¹ AT VII, 422. CSM II, 285.

² See PP, 439/446.

tained in the "I think," not my existence which is brought down to the consciousness which I have of it, but conversely the "I think," which is re-integrated into the transcending process of the "I am", and consciousness into existence.¹

Our existence is not *dependent* on our thought about it: neither our own existence nor that of the world is *constituted* by an intentional act of our consciousness. If there was an absolute coincidence of me with myself, there would be a pure thought which would form a totality of the thought.² Yet, our relation to our thought is neither self-possession nor coincidence. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, these formulations are illusions which only rest on the expression of "the fundamentally obscure operation which has enabled us to immortalize within ourselves a moment of fleeting life."³ The clarity of our self-relation is based on obscure experience. It is only through expression and solidification in language that it reaches its purification and idealization.

Rather than the world being synthesized and constituted by our thought, it is "a totality of things, open to us, toward which we project ourselves."⁴ Merleau-Ponty rejects both idealism and realism, because it is not only that we do not construct the world as an ideal object, but also that we do not have it as a pure reality in which we would not have an effect: both idealism and realism suppose objectivism. Rather, we see the world through our expression and language, which we do not possess, but which possess us. Thus, what interests Merleau-Ponty is how expression happens:

Language outruns us, not merely because the use of speech always presupposes a great number of thoughts which are not present in the mind and which are covered by each word, but also for another reason, and a more profound one: namely, that these thoughts themselves, when present, were not at any time "pure" thoughts either, for already in them there was a surplus of the signified over the signifying, the same effort of thought already thought to equal thinking thought, the same provisional amalgam of both which gives rise to the whole mystery of expression. That which is called an idea is necessarily linked to an act of expression, and owes to it its appearance of autonomy.⁵

The already expressed and acquired ideas seem to be non-temporal, but they nevertheless are *instituted* and *sedimented* through expression.⁶ Events do not happen in eternity, but on the contrary, every moment is an eternity: once an event becomes articulated or something is expressed, it may vanish into oblivion or become a cultural monument, but nevertheless it is always something that has taken place, and nothing can undo it. Our past is not limited to what we know and remember of it.⁷ Descartes states this in the *Third Meditation*:

¹ PP, 439/446.

² PP, 439/446.

³ PP, 446/453.

⁴ PP, 444/450.

⁵ PP, 447/453.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl's term *Stiftung*. In *Phenomenology of Perception* he translates it as "*premier établissement*" and "*foundation*" but later, in the 50's he uses the term "*institution*." I will explicate "*institution*" in Chapter Four.

⁷ PP, 450/457.

[L]et whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist [...].¹

Merleau-Ponty already refers to Husserl's concept of *Stiftung*, institution, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, but does not yet elaborate on it.² I will explicate "institution" in Chapter Four, as it is an important element of Merleau-Ponty's later ontology. He also refers to Husserl's term *Fundierung*, founding, and distinguishes between originating and originated. There is the originating or founding time, the unreflective, facticity, language, and perception as the source of our expression.³ It is an experience which is not yet determined and sedimented in our intersubjective world. Yet, this originating can be perceived and expressed only through the already originated and acquired.

[T]he founding term, or originator [...] is primary in the sense that the originated is presented as a determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from reabsorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.⁴

The originating thought cannot be objectified because when thought becomes an object it is no longer originating. Yet, it is only through originated things, which have their significance in language and in the intersubjective world, that the originating can be approached, thus only indirectly.

Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl, who states in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*: "Only in eidetic intuition can the essence of eidetic intuition become clarified."⁵ We need to think of something in order to think of the thought. This means that it is by principle impossible to fully clarify thinking thought: "it is never to eliminate, but merely to push further back the opacity that thought presents to itself."⁶ Thought cannot be observed as such, and nevertheless it is given for itself, at least in the minimal sense that it cannot deny itself.⁷

According to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes' doubt is not a form of skepticism - "I know nothing" - but, on the contrary, doubting implies that "I think" or that "something appears to me." The continuation of appearing also makes the self present as "a retreat of not-being" (*un réduit de non-être*) and "a perpetual absentee" (*un perpetual absent*).⁸ The *cogito*, which is originating thought, is present as absence, as retreating or withdrawing. Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty, when we think about what Descartes means by the concept "*cogito*" in his *Meditations*, we are not thinking about the originating *cogito*:

¹ AT VII, 36/CSM II, 25.

² PP, 148/146. Nevertheless, in the chapter on freedom, Merleau-Ponty elaborates an idea of freedom which relates activity and passivity, and thus can be understood in relation to institution (see Chapter 5.2).

³ PP, 451/458.

⁴ PP, 451/458.

⁵ Hua17, 256/249. PP, 453/460.

⁶ PP, 454/460-461.

⁷ PP, 458/464.

⁸ PP, 458/465.

The *cogito* at which we arrive by reading Descartes (and even the one which Descartes effects in relation to expression and when, looking back on his past life, he fastens it down, objectifies it and “characterizes” it as indubitable) is, then, a spoken *cogito*, put into words and understood in words, and for this very reason not attaining its objective, since that part of our existence which is engaged in fixing our life in conceptual forms, and thinking of it as indubitable, is escaping focus and thought.¹

The objectified idea, thought formulated as a theory of thought, the historically sedimented cultural object, does not achieve the opening of thought. It is a spoken or verbal *cogito* in acquired language. Yet, there must be an opening of thought – thinking thought – because otherwise we would not understand the acquired idea. In a word, there must be thinking:

I should be unable even to read Descartes’ book, were I not, before any speech can begin, in contact with my own life and thought, and if the spoken *cogito* did not encounter within me a tacit *cogito*. This silent *cogito* was the one Descartes sought when writing his *Meditations*. He gave life and direction to all those expressive operations which, by definition, always miss their target since, between Descartes’ existence and the knowledge of it which he acquires, they interpose the full thickness of cultural acquisitions. And yet Descartes would not even have tried to put these expressive operations into operation had he not in the first place caught a glimpse of his existence. The whole question amounts to gaining a clear understanding of the unspoken *cogito* [...].²

Merleau-Ponty establishes two orders: the culturally acquired objects and the not yet objectified existence. It is a formulation of the contradiction which he finds in Descartes’ philosophy, between the distinction and the union of mind and body, as he states that “perhaps Descartes’ philosophy consists in embracing this contradiction.”³

Behind the discourse, on the tacit level, there is already an experience of myself by myself: “Behind the spoken *cogito*, the one which is converted into discourse and into essential truth, there lies a tacit *cogito*, myself experienced by myself.”⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, this hold on itself is precarious: it is an embodied existence which does not express itself in language but which is the condition for language.⁵ Yet, as we already saw, the tacit level can be attained only through language and thus *indirectly*: “The tacit *cogito* is a *cogito* only when it has found expression for itself.”⁶

Merleau-Ponty is explicating the paradoxical and ambiguous situation of thinking thought: it has a connection with itself through the distance. He explains that this means, on the one hand, that my vision is already “thinking that I see” in the sense that it is exposed as something visible, and on the other hand, that we do not fully possess ourselves in this reversible process.⁷ It is also that

¹ PP, 460/467.

² PP, 461/468.

³ PP, 52/49.

⁴ PP, 462/469.

⁵ PP, 462/470.

⁶ PP, 463/470.

⁷ PP, 463/471.

our gaze on the world does not completely objectify it either. Merleau-Ponty reads Descartes' *cogito* strictly as an opening of thought, opening towards the world, and which is a condition for explication, objectification, and theory.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty insists on what Descartes called "internal awareness," but as we will see in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, he refuses the interpretation of it as an immediate self-coincidence. Rather, it is the unreflected experience which cannot be fully objectified. It resists objectification even as "constituting subject:" "A world which, as Malebranche puts it, never gets beyond being an 'unfinished work', or which, as Husserl says of the body, is 'never completely constituted', does not require, and even rules out, a constituting subject."¹ Merleau-Ponty's idea is that the tacit *cogito* is not the condition for the possibility of experience in the sense of constituting consciousness, but a dehiscence of the open field of experience. The "true transcendental," according to Merleau-Ponty, is not a constituting subject, but the transcendence of the world: that is, experience.²

According to Merleau-Ponty, there is thought, feeling, sensation, and movement which one day started and which, as long as it is alive, cannot cease to think, feel, sense, and move. It is not even a perspective, one specific perspective, because we can change our perspective: it is the necessity to have a perspective, and only one at the time. It is a "possibility of situations."³ The experience which I am has its unity. It has, according to Merleau-Ponty, a "living cohesion."⁴ The "I think" means that "I belong to myself," which is my belonging to the world: "The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself."⁵ My experience of the world is always transcending itself. Merleau-Ponty gives two examples. In a perception of a table I see it as a table, despite the fact that when I see the top of the table, I do not see its feet. And when I hear a melody, I hear notes, not separately but connected to their successors. In a similar manner, I am connected to myself, and yet I do not fully perceive myself: "The act which draws together at the same time takes away and holds at a distance, so that I touch myself only by escaping from myself."⁶ It is because I am a body that I can be in the world, that is, my body is of the world:

In so far as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world.⁷

¹ PP, 465/472.

² PP, 418/425.

³ PP, 466/473.

⁴ PP, 466/474.

⁵ PP, 467/474.

⁶ PP, 467/474. Merleau-Ponty refers to the non-coincidence of touching oneself in *Phenomenology of Perception* (PP, 108–109/105–107; 397/402), but nevertheless he does not explicate this "untouchable" of touching which is central to his later thought. I will concentrate on this subject properly in Chapter Four.

⁷ PP, 467/475.

It is not only that the body is already the *cogito* – a thinking body – it is also the world that is the *cogito*: I am in the world and the world is in me, I think of the world and the world thinks in me. In the end, Merleau-Ponty seems to be very close to idealism, except modified as belonging to the concrete world and the body. Yet, the important difference with idealism is that for Merleau-Ponty there is no coincidence, which means that there is no absolute mind. My body does not merge into absolute thought and my thought does not comprehend the world in itself. But we have, in our experience a possibility of rationalization, or over-rationalization, a *survol* of the experience, which rests on the basis of the primordial faith which gives us the belief in the unity of ourselves and our experience.¹

1.3 Natural Light and Natural Inclination

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty characterizes the unreflected *cogito* before the reflective *cogito*, not as a constituting consciousness but as a perceptual consciousness.² Merleau-Ponty contrasts his analysis of perception to intellectualism and empiricism: perception is conceived neither as an intellectual judgment, a thought of seeing, nor as a mere empirical reception of sense data. On the contrary, for Merleau-Ponty perception is lived and embodied experience of the world. Both intellectualism and empiricism represent the Cartesian philosophy of distinction: they are theorization by the intellect (aided by imagination). The lived experience, in contrast, is connected to the Cartesian idea of the union of mind and body, which Merleau-Ponty analyses with the help of the Husserlian phenomenology of the lived body (*Leib*).³ Thus, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception can be read as a critique of the domination in philosophy and psychology of the Cartesian concept of perception, defined by Descartes as the clear and distinct perception by the natural light, and *instead* as an elaboration of Descartes' idea of the union of mind and body and *natural inclination*.

In *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty concludes with a statement that the idea of perceptual consciousness needs further clarification. He formulates the problem concerning the relation between perceptual consciousness and intellectual consciousness: "Can one conceptualize perceptual consciousness without eliminating it as an original mode; can one maintain its specificity without rendering inconceivable its relation to intellectual consciousness?"⁴ As

¹ PP, 468/475.

² PP, 404/409.

³ According to Merleau-Ponty, the "relation of soul to body has nothing to do with the objective body, which exists only conceptually, but with the phenomenal body" (PP, 493/502). See Heinämaa 2002, 138. I will examine the union of mind and body and the phenomenal body, *Leib*, in the last part of this chapter, in the context of Descartes' *Sixth Meditation*.

⁴ SC, 241/224. Already in *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty provides his basic reading of Cartesian philosophy. Descartes begins by situating perception in the *cogito*: when I have a perception of seeing or touching, it is not necessary that I see or touch anything with

we can see in these crossing questions, Merleau-Ponty brings forth the problem of the Cartesian duality between the union and the distinction of mind and body: the union is obscure for the pure intellect and cannot be conceived without contradiction.¹ One should not reduce it to the intellect, which would eliminate its originality. And yet, Merleau-Ponty does not want to see the relation between intellect and perceptual consciousness or union of mind and body as merely “inconceivable.” According to Merleau-Ponty, this means a “necessity to define transcendental philosophy anew” as the “intentional life which constitutes” the perceptual consciousness “is not yet a representation.”² There is, according to the final words of *The Structure of Behavior*, “comprehension” which is “not yet intellection.”³

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, one of Merleau-Ponty’s central ideas is that there is already comprehension and understanding at the perceptual and bodily level. For example, when acquiring a habit, he states, “it is the body which ‘understands’.”⁴ Merleau-Ponty also finds the idea of comprehension which is not yet intellectual, the bodily understanding, in Husserl’s works, as he refers to Husserl’s idea of operative or functioning intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*), as distinguished from the intentionality of the act of the consciousness.⁵ Before I explicate the phenomenology of bodily intentionality, let me follow through Descartes’ *Third Meditation*, where he distinguishes the natural light from the natural inclination – a distinction which forms the Cartesian background of the question of bodily understanding.

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes deduces from the first certainty – that he exists when he thinks that he exists (or e.g. exists when he touches, because sensations are thoughts about sensations) – “a general rule that whatever I perceive

my body – it is only necessary that I have a “thought of seeing and touching” (AT VII, 360/CSM II, 249. SC, 210/195). According to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes’ concept of the *cogito* helped Kant to formulate the “the modern notion of consciousness understood as the center” through which the body became a signification, a thought, indubitable and clear (SC, 211/196). Nevertheless, as Merleau-Ponty notes, Descartes does not follow this path to the end. We can hear an echo of Husserl here, as he states in *Cartesian Meditations* that Descartes, in a certain sense, made the discovery of transcendental subjectivity but did not grasp its proper sense (Hua1, 64/24–25). In opposition to the transcendental constituting consciousness, Merleau-Ponty highlights the way Descartes opens a philosophy of the body, and that with the *cogito* there is also “a real presence” of the sensible experience: “The experience of my body as ‘mine’ [...] is explained in turn by a real ‘mixture’ of ‘the mind with the body’” (SC, 212/197). Merleau-Ponty refers to the correspondence of Elizabeth and Descartes already in *The Structure of Behavior*: Descartes maintains a duality between the “universe of thought” and the “experience of existence” (SC, 212/197). Merleau-Ponty also notices that Descartes did not regard it as possible for the human mind to integrate these two, intellection and sensation, and “it is in God that they are linked with each other” (SC, 212–213/197). For Descartes, God is incomprehensible to us, and we cannot understand the infinite with our finite mind. According to Merleau-Ponty, this limitation was ignored in “philosophical realism” after Descartes, “by associating, following Kant’s terms, a transcendental idealism and an empirical realism” (SC, 213/197).

¹ AT III, 691–693/CSM-K, 227.

² SC, 241/224.

³ SC, 241/224.

⁴ PP, 169/167.

⁵ PP, XIII/xx; 478/486; 490/498.

clearly and distinctly is true.”¹ He then comes back to the beginning of his meditations and to the ideas which seemed clear and distinct, but were open to doubt because a God could deceive him. Yet, even God could not deceive him in the certainty that he exists when he thinks, and bringing forth a temporal dimension, to “make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist.”² He can be certain of his ideas or thoughts, but with the limitation of not judging anything outside of his thoughts.

Yet, it is so that he cannot always control which ideas he notices, and some ideas seem to come from “something other” than himself.³ These ideas are not revealed by the *natural light* of the reason, that is, intuition, and they are therefore not self-evident. There are ideas which are caused by *natural impulses* or *inclinations* (*impetus naturales*),⁴ and these ideas can lead us in the wrong direction.⁵ Descartes gives an example of the sun, of which he has two different ideas: one idea is a belief in the senses according to which the sun is very small, and another idea which he finds innate in himself states that the sun is much larger than the earth.⁶ Descartes calls the belief in the first kind of ideas “blind impulse” (*cæco impulsu*).⁷ Nevertheless, an idea is “not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing.”⁸ Moreover, if ideas can originate from other ideas, there must be, according to Descartes, a primary idea, the cause of all ideas, or we would end in an infinite regress.⁹ For example, an idea of “other men” could be caused by the idea he has of himself.

Descartes then distinguishes between clear and distinct ideas and obscure and confused ideas of corporeal things. Clear and distinct ideas can be of extension in length, breadth and depth, shape, position, motion, substance, duration, and number. Ideas of light, colors, sounds, smells, tastes, warmth, and tactile qualities are obscure and confused. The latter kind of ideas do not require anything real outside of me, and the former kind of ideas can be contained in me eminently. Only the idea of God, which is infinite, cannot be caused by the meditator, because he is finite, and therefore God must exist. According to Descartes, he could not doubt – which is awareness of the lack of perfection – if he did not have an idea of a perfect being. He can know the infinite with his finite mind, but nevertheless he cannot grasp it.¹⁰ Descartes also considers the possi-

¹ AT VII, 35/CSM II, 24.

² AT VII, 36/CSM II, 25. Merleau-Ponty states: “If we are in fact destined to make contact with a sort of eternity, it will be at the core of our experience of time, and not in some non-temporal subject whose function it is to conceive and posit it” (PP, 475/482).

³ AT VII, 38/CSM II, 26.

⁴ “*Impetus naturales*” is translated in French as “*inclinations naturelles*,” and therefore I will use the translation “natural inclinations.”

⁵ Natural inclinations are “taught by nature,” and therefore not intellectual. See AT VII, 80–81/CSM II, 56.

⁶ AT VII, 39/CSM II, 27.

⁷ AT VII, 40/CSM II, 27.

⁸ AT VII, 41/CSM II, 29.

⁹ AT VII, 42/CSM II, 29.

¹⁰ Descartes writes to Mersenne in 27 May 1630: “[I]t is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him. In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it as we could but them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To grasp something

bility of understanding the infinity as an infinite potentiality of his finite knowledge, but refuses this, as God must be actual and real infinity.¹

Then, Descartes concentrates on the possibility of creating himself, which he connects to the idea of preservation in time, as “the nature of time” teaches that “the distinction between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one [...]”² He continues with the temporal problem: he is certain that he exists now, but then the question follows of whether he also has the power to exist in the future. As he does not find such power in himself, he concludes: “I depend on some being distinct from myself.”³ Therefore, there must be God, and its idea is not created by the meditator or received by senses – the idea of God must be innate.

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes determines from the point of view of the pure intellect that what we perceive as clear and distinct by our natural light is self-evidently true. “Perception” means here the “inner act of direct apprehension by which the mind is aware of simple truths.”⁴ Perception of the mind is guided by an inner light, which Descartes calls “natural light.” Therefore, a clear and distinct perception by the natural light means intuition in a sense that originates from Plato’s *Republic*.⁵ The natural light is the intuition of the mind, an intellectual perception that illuminates the things that are conceived.⁶ For Descartes “‘a light in the intellect’ means transparent clarity of cognition.”⁷ In order to maintain this mental perception, Descartes needed to separate the pure mind, the thinking substance, from the extensive substance of the body: the intellectual intuition (*intuitus mentis*) perceives without any corporeal medium.⁸ Mental perception is a *thought*, which, according to Descartes’ definition in the Replies for the Second Set of Objections, includes “everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it.”⁹

Clarity of perception means, according to Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*, that “it is present and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility.”¹⁰ Clarity is, therefore, about presence.¹¹ Distinctness means thoughts which can be conceptualized and analysed.¹² Distinctness is a more rigorous notion than clarity: a perception can be clear without being distinct, but the opposite is impossible, because if something is distinct it must also be clear, that is, present and manifest. According to

is to embrace it in one’s thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one’s thought.” (AT I, 152/CSM-K, 25.)

¹ AT VII, 46–47/CSM II, 32.

² AT VII, 48–49/CSM II, 33.

³ AT VII, 49/CSM II, 34.

⁴ Cottingham 1993, 32.

⁵ *Republic*, 514–518. Cottingham 1993, 94.

⁶ “Intuition” comes from latin “*intueor*” which means seeing and looking.

⁷ AT VII, 192/CSM II, 135.

⁸ AT X, 419/CSM I, 44.

⁹ AT VII, 160/CSM II, 113.

¹⁰ AT VIIIA, 22/CSM I, 207.

¹¹ Alanen 1996, 11.

¹² Alanen 1996, 11.

Descartes, “a perception is ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.”¹ Descartes gives an example: if someone feels pain, the sensation of pain is clear but not necessarily distinct, as the cause of pain can be mistaken.² The opposites of “clear” and “distinct” are “obscure” and “confused.” In Descartes’ example of pain, the idea is clear and confused – it is clear because the idea of pain is present for the intellect, but it is confused because the idea cannot be fully analyzed and conceptualized. An idea which is contradictory to what the intellect perceives clearly and distinctly is obscure and confused (for the intellect): as mentioned above, in the *Third Meditation* Descartes gives the example of the sensible idea of the sun as very small which contradicts to the intellectual idea of the sun as huge.³ As already explained, an idea which would be obscure and distinct is impossible.

What, then, seems contradictory in Descartes’ approach is that instead of completely neglecting obscure and confused sensible experience as misleading, he gives it value, as it is “taught by nature:” Descartes states in the *Sixth Meditation* that “in many cases the grasp of the senses is very obscure and confused” but since God is not a deceiver the sensations that are “taught by nature” contain “some truth.”⁴ Moreover, what is crucial is that Descartes writes to Elizabeth that “what belongs to the union of the soul and the body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses.”⁵ Natural inclinations are our way of relating to the union of mind and body, and natural light is gained by the pure intellect as distinct from the body.⁶

As I have argued above, Merleau-Ponty claims that our intellectual judgment of perception rests on actual perception: our thought that “it seems that we see” is based on our actual vision. Therefore, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, our natural inclination to trust in perception is not *only* misleading but *also* necessary and inevitable – in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty characterizes our natural inclination to believe in our perception as *perceptual faith*.⁷ In this sense, natural light is based on natural inclinations. In his last reading of Descartes in the lecture notes “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui,” Merleau-Ponty explicates that it is not through natural light and suspension of natural inclinations that we find the jurisdiction for the latter, but on the contrary, that through natural inclinations we find the necessary guarantee for natural light as a limited mode of knowledge.⁸

Descartes describes natural inclinations in an ambiguous way: they contain “some truth” but as they can mislead us, they should not be trusted. Natu-

¹ AT VIII A, 22/CSM I, 207–208.

² AT VIII A, 22/CSM I, 208.

³ See Smith 2015, 63–64.

⁴ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 55–56.

⁵ AT III, 691–692/CSM-K, 227.

⁶ Saint Aubert 2005, 26.

⁷ See Saint Aubert 2005, 44.

⁸ NC, 225. Saint Aubert 2005, 47. I will concentrate on Merleau-Ponty’s lecture “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui” in Chapter 5.1.

ral inclinations are included in the sphere of the union of mind and body, passions, and ordinary life. They can, for example, make a person fall in love with somebody without any good reason: in a letter to Chanut, Descartes gives an example from his own experience, as he had an inclination to fall in love with persons who had squinting eyes. He reasons that this is because of his childhood experience: as a child, he had loved a girl whose eyes were squinting. Thus, according to Descartes, these natural or secret inclinations are not always caused by perfection but by defect, and therefore they should not be followed.¹ Natural light, on the other hand, is always led by perfection and good causes. Yet, Descartes does not limit divine veracity to clear and distinct perceptions, but extends it to natural inclinations.² Merleau-Ponty finds this *contradiction* as essential to Descartes' philosophy.³ I will explicate Merleau-Ponty's idea of Descartes' contradiction in the last part of this chapter.

Natural inclinations are not merely illusionary, as they are formed by our experience, which we can see in the example Descartes explicates to Chanut. They are our bodily way of relating to the world and the bodily understanding of our experience. Bodily understanding precedes the intellectual and reflective grip on experience and things. There is, therefore, before the conscious act of understanding a relation to the world which is not a mere reception of sense data, but already full of meaning. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty refers to bodily understanding with the Husserlian concept of *operative* or *original intentionality*:

Husserl distinguishes between intentionality of act, which is that of our judgements and of those occasions when we voluntarily take up a position – the only intentionality discussed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* [by Kant] – and operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*), or that which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, and furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language.⁴

Merleau-Ponty argues that philosophy and sciences, as the objectification of actual perception, need to be set back in relation to the perceptual life: perception is neither the judgment of the mind nor a mere reception of sense data. Our perception transcends the actual, and we do not merely perceive *signs* of something of which we read the signification by our mind, but our *perception is a perception of something*.⁵ Before the conscious act of intentionality, there is unreflec-

¹ AT V, 57–58/CSM-K, 322–323. In his letter to Chanut, Descartes describes “secret inclinations” almost in a proto-psychoanalytical way. Nevertheless, for Descartes there remains an illusion of the possibility to grasp the “original” experience from which the inclination results, and thus to eliminate the inclination as a mere defect. What is central in relation to my work is that even if his conception is problematic, Descartes touches here on the problematic nature of experiential “originality,” which could be related to Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of institution. On Merleau-Ponty’s idea of institution see Chapter Four.

² See Gueroult 1953b, 59/44, 82/63, 93/72.

³ PP, 52/49.

⁴ PP, XIII/xx.

⁵ PP, 85/81.

tive intentionality. Merleau-Ponty thus finds, in Husserl, a similar distinction and duality as in Descartes between conscious acts of judgment and functioning passivity. There is active and passive intentionality, active and passive understanding.

In the first book of *Ideas*, Husserl formulates “the pregnant sense of the expression ‘*cogito*’” as “‘I have *consciousness* of something’.”¹ “*Cogito*” is an expression of the consciousness of the “world as *immediately* present.”² In Husserl’s view, with the idea of presentation of thoughts (*cogitationes*) Descartes invented a proto-conception of the intentionality of consciousness as the correlation between the act and its object.³ Nevertheless, Husserl states in *Cartesian Meditations* that Descartes did not realize his discovery of transcendental ego, as he introduces the ego as “*substantia cogitans*, a separate human ‘*mens sive animus*’.”⁴ In his late work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl explicates the *cogito* through three aspects:

[W]e have, in the Cartesian manner of speaking, three headings, *ego-cogitatio-cogitata*: the ego-pole (and what is peculiar to its identity), the subjective, as appearance tied together synthetically, and the object-poles. These are different directions our analyses can take, and to them correspond different aspects of the general notion of intentionality: direction toward something, appearance of something, and something, an objective something, as the unity in its appearances toward which the intention of the ego-pole, through these appearances, is directed.⁵

Husserl understands Descartes’ concept of the *cogito* as an intentional act of constituting consciousness which constitutes its object. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty insists, Husserl also thematizes the passive mode of intentionality, and even though, as far as I know, Husserl does not relate “operative intentionality” to “natural inclination,” it is noticeable that he uses the concept when describing an idea of evidence which could be well ascribed to Descartes. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty refers to this passage in Husserl’s *Formal and Transcendental Logic* where Husserl uses the concept “*fungierende Intentionalität*” once.⁶ Husserl criticizes the Cartesian idea of evidence as “*absolute apodicticity*, an absolute security against deceptions – an apodicticity quite incomprehensible ascribed to a single mental process torn from the concrete, essentially unitary, context of subjective mental living.”⁷ In contrast, Husserl states that we must “explicate evidence as a functioning intentionality.”⁸ According to him, this means a “*primitive mode of the giving of something-itself*” as *perception*.⁹ As Merleau-Ponty notes, Husserl expresses this primordial level as “the logos of

¹ Hua3, 63/72.

² Hua3, 50/54.

³ MacDonald 2000, 124.

⁴ Hua1, 63/24.

⁵ Hua6, 174–175/171.

⁶ PP, 478/486. Hua17, 165/157.

⁷ Hua17, 165/157.

⁸ Hua17, 165/157.

⁹ Hua17, 166/158. Husserl states: “*Der Urmodus der Selbstgebung ist die Wahrnehmung.*”

the aesthetic world” from which “the logos of Objective worldly *being*, and of *science*” rises.¹ Merleau-Ponty writes:

We found beneath the intentionality of acts, or thetic intentionality, another kind which is the condition of the former’s possibility: namely an operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgement, a “Logos of the aesthetic world”, an “art hidden in the depths of the human soul”, one which, like any art, is known only in its results.²

Merleau-Ponty also refers to Fink’s article “The Problem of the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl,” published in 1939, where Fink elaborates on Husserl’s concept of the operative intentionality.³ According to Fink, functioning intentionality remains latent but can be brought to an intentional analysis by reflection.⁴ The intentional analysis “raises functioning intentionality, which conceals itself in its own results, from unconsciousness and establishes it by making it an object.”⁵ Functioning intentionality is understood by Fink as an *implication* which must be *explicated* through the intentional analysis.⁶ Nevertheless, the intentional analysis is itself intentional, in the sense of functioning intentionality.⁷ Therefore, the problem of phenomenology, according to Fink, is about the conceptualization of the intentional: “Is that *by which* we have things and objects conceptually determinable by the concepts which apply to things and objects?”⁸ At the end of his article, Fink presents the question of “the two moments of the phenomenological problem:” intentional analysis articulated as eidetic universalities on the one hand, and “the question concerning the *being* of intentionality” on the other hand.⁹

This problem remains central for Merleau-Ponty throughout his career.¹⁰ As I will explicate in Chapter Three, Merleau-Ponty explicates this problem as not only concerning phenomenology but also Cartesian philosophy: according to him it is, in fact, the Cartesian duality between ideality and existence which also haunts Husserl’s philosophy.¹¹ The problem of this duality is visible in Merleau-Ponty’s use of the concepts of bodily intentionality and conscious intentionality.

According to Natalie Depraz, Merleau-Ponty is, especially in *Phenomenology of Perception*, stuck in the opposition between corporeal and conscious.¹² The problem is in that bodily understanding cannot be translated into

¹ Hua17, 297/292.

² PP, 490–491/498. See also PP, 478/486.

³ Merleau-Ponty and Fink met in Husserl archives at Louvain in 1939 (Van Breda 1992, 152).

⁴ Fink 1981, 52.

⁵ Fink 1981, 53.

⁶ Fink 1981, 53.

⁷ Fink 1981, 54.

⁸ Fink 1981, 54.

⁹ Fink 1981, 54.

¹⁰ See Saint Aubert 2005, 142.

¹¹ N, 103–104/72.

¹² Depraz 1995, 275. According to Depraz, Merleau-Ponty gets stuck in this opposition because he disqualifies the active intentionality of the consciousness and gives all his attention to the corporeal operative intentionality, and thus is not able to think the passage from

conscious understanding. The operative intentionality functions as *unreflected* experience, and when it is reflected it is modified into concepts and ideas, and thus it is not the unreflected experience but the reflected experience. Depraz argues: “*Fungierende Intentionalität* is then another name for a passive, latent, kinesthetic, and driven intentionality that operates in us unnoticed and necessarily so.”¹ In my view, this movement between reflection and the unreflected does not change its meaning in the later philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. As he explicates in the article “The Philosopher and His Shadow:”

To reflect (Husserl said in *Ideen I*) is to unveil an unreflected dimension which is at a distance because we are no longer it in a naïve way, yet which we cannot doubt that reflection attains, since it is through reflection itself that we have an idea of it. So it is not the unreflected which challenges reflection; it is reflection which challenges itself. For by definition its attempt to revive, possess, internalize, or make immanent has meaning only with respect to an already given terminus which withdraws into its transcendence beneath the very gaze which has set out in search of it in this attempt.²

The “original intentionality,” which operates unnoticed, withdraws from our conscious attempts to thematize it, and therefore the “primary order” is constructed by our reflective effort. Merleau-Ponty repeats his quote of Husserl’s *Formal and Transcendental Logic* in his article:

The pre-objective order is not primary, since it is established (and to tell the truth fully begins to exist) only by being fulfilled in the founding of logical objectivity. Yet logical objectivity is not self-sufficient; it is limited to consecrating the labors of the pre-objective layer, existing only as the outcome of the “Logos of the esthetic world” and having value only under its supervision.³

Already in the Preface of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty paraphrases one of his favorite remarks by Husserl: “Every reduction, says Husserl, as well as being transcendental is necessarily eidetic.”⁴ It means, for Merleau-Ponty, that the unreflective experience, the operative intentionality as the condition of possibility for the intentionality of conscious acts, which is revealed by transcendental reduction, is transformed by the reduction and intentional analysis into concepts and ideas. We think before we think that we think, and we see before we think that we see, but this *cogito* before the *cogito*, this unreflected experience, is only thematized through reflection. I described in the previous part of this chapter how Merleau-Ponty explicates the “tacit *cogito*” as the condition for the “spoken *cogito*,” but also how the previous is attained only through the latter.

the bodily sensible to the consciously lived sense, which for Husserl is the movement of incarnation. She writes: “Le problème husserlien de la passivité permet au contraire de saisir l’incarnation comme située en-deçà de toute opposition naïve de l’actif et du passif, de la conscience et du corps, mais forçant sans casse le passage de l’un à l’autre” (Depraz 1995, 275).

¹ Depraz 2002, 119.

² S, 263/161.

³ S, 281/173.

⁴ PP, IX/xvi. See also PP, 430n1/437n16; S, 292/179; VI, 70/45.

Merleau-Ponty approaches the unreflective life of the operative intentionality in a way which, in a certain sense, is reminiscent of the restriction Descartes expresses to Elizabeth: that even though the lived experience might be clear for itself, and necessarily so in practical life, it is obscure and confused for the intellect. Merleau-Ponty, for his part, describes the withdrawing of the “original intentionality” which the consciousness cannot outrun. The unreflected experience evades the conscious effort to scrutinize it: “it is never to eliminate, but merely to push further back the opacity that thought presents to itself.”¹ Merleau-Ponty describes the unreflected level of perception as passive and pre-personal, anonymous experience:

If, as we have said, every perception has something anonymous in it, this is because it makes use of something which it takes for granted. The *person who* perceives is not spread out before himself as a consciousness must be; he has historical density, he takes up a perceptual tradition and is faced with a present.²

The lateral unity of the sense of the perceptual experience does not come from a constitutive effort of the subject as a coincidence of the subject with the experience.³ According to Merleau-Ponty, the perceptual synthesis must be distinguished from the synthesis as an act of constitution: it is a “passive synthesis” – another concept which Merleau-Ponty borrows from Husserl’s *Formal and Transcendental Logic*⁴ – which, for Merleau-Ponty, means our passive and anonymous adherence to the density or thickness of time.⁵

Referring to Husserl’s formulation in *Cartesian Meditations*, and repeating it in many of his works, Merleau-Ponty quotes: “Its beginning is the [...] still dumb [...] experience, which now must be made to utter its own sense [...]”⁶ Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the unreflected experience is never possessed, and the expression “does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it.”⁷ We do not possess an original immediate pre-reflective experience which we then express by using acquired ideas and language. The unreflected – or the invisible in later Merleau-Ponty – is not simply a positivity first experienced as pre-reflective and then reflected, but “a negativity that is not nothing.”⁸ Expression is a paradoxical effort which explicates the “obscure and confused” experience, which already has a meaning but which at the same time exists only after expression, which, in turn, does not exhaust the unreflected experience. In the unfinished *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty formulates the question as the “paradox of expression.”⁹ In his revised version of this text, the article published as “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty writes:

¹ PP, 454/460–461.

² PP, 275/277.

³ See Hua17, 151/145.

⁴ Hua17, 297/292.

⁵ PP, 479/486.

⁶ Hua1, 77/38. PP, X/xvii; 253–254/254–255; 338/340. OE, 87/147. VI, 18/4; 171/129.

⁷ PP, 207/207.

⁸ VI, 198/151. See Chapter Four.

⁹ PM, 160/113. See VI, 189/144.

All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already *primordial expression*. Not that derivative labor which substitutes for what is expressed signs which are given elsewhere with their meaning and rule of usage, but the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs, makes that which is expressed dwell in them through the eloquence of their arrangement and configuration alone, implants a meaning in that which did not have one, and thus – far from exhausting itself in the instant at which it occurs – inaugurates an order and founds an institution or a tradition.¹

In his later philosophy, Merleau-Ponty approaches the question through his ideas of verticality and institution, which add a temporal dimension to the whole ontological framework of the problem. Yet already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty defines subjectivity as essentially temporal. In the last part of this chapter I will analyse Merleau-Ponty's concept of temporality in his early work as the move from the Cartesian contradiction to the "paradox of time."²

As Descartes expresses in the *Third Meditation*, once I think that I am, nothing can undo it. Eternal and infinite truths of God, perfectly immutable universal ideas, are incomprehensible to us. But we can understand our "finite eternity" and a kind of "negative infinity:" when something is instituted, it cannot be undone – it remains in the thickness of time. Yet it can be forgotten and changed, that is, re-instituted.³ In order to understand the dual Cartesian situation which Merleau-Ponty expresses, we need to take a look at how he evades the Cartesian ideas of completely negative nothingness and absolutely positive being – as we are, according to Descartes' *Fourth Meditation*, between being and nothingness, and therefore our finite ideas are not immutable universals, but rather *changing universals*, institutions.

1.4 Finitude and Infinity

In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, the reaction to Cartesian philosophy means both a change of meaning of perceptual experience and a change of meaning of ideality.⁴ There is no ideality which we would not approach on the basis of our perceptual experience, and therefore ideality is not the purely immutable universe of eternal truths. Perception is not a mere illusion and deception, but the source from which our expression gets its meaning and shape. Therefore, there is no pure ideality according to which all our understanding is arranged before all experience, and there is no pure perception, a mere sensible data without meaning. In contrast to Cartesian tradition, Merleau-Ponty attempts to bring ideality and perception to the same field of experience. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he expresses the intertwining of ideality within perception as the invis-

¹ S, 108/67.

² PP, 419/425.

³ See Chapter 4.3.

⁴ See Chapter 5.1.

ible of the visible – which is his formulation of the ontological structure: our distance from the sensible is because we are *of* the sensible.¹ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty formulates the paradoxical relation between reflection and the unreflected experience: on the one hand, the unreflected is the condition of reflection, and on the other hand, the unreflected is attained only through reflection.

Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, there can be found an explicit conception of the adherence to the world and the density, opacity, or thickness of the experience, which is central to *The Visible and the Invisible*.² Our adherence to the thickness of the world means that there can neither be pure ideality nor coincidence with the perceptive experience: the experiential field is a kind of “grey area” between ideality and facticity.³ The sensible is not nothing, not false – even if it may be sometimes misleading. In the terms of Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy, within the sensible, there is “a negativity that is not nothing.”⁴ In *Phenomenology of Perception* this “grey area” is thematized specifically as the *ambiguity* of perception: there is no perfectly explicit world in-itself from which our truth would be derived, but there is a field of perceptive experience in which truth and falsity are side by side, and which is therefore an “ambiguous domain.”⁵

Once again, this train of thought is not too far away from Descartes’ *Meditations*: in the *Fourth Meditation* Descartes provides a characterization of our being “between God and nothingness.”⁶ I will explicate this exactly as a kind of “grey area” of finite human knowledge and experience – between the infinite being of God and nothingness. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty refers to this passage when describing perception as not merely negative: “To make perception into an original knowledge, we should have had to endow finitude with a positive significance and take seriously the strange phrase in the *4th Meditation* which makes me ‘a middle term between God and nothingness’.”⁷ I will first give a short reading of the *Fourth Meditation*, and then return to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.

In the *Fourth Meditation*, Descartes continues from the idea of God, according to which “every single moment of my entire existence depends on him.”⁸ Since deceiving is imperfection and weakness, God does not deceive, and all errors must be caused by something else. Descartes explicates that he not only has an idea of a supreme being but also an idea of nothingness: “I realize that I am, as it were, something intermediate between God and nothingness [...]”⁹ It

¹ See Chapter Four.

² See e.g. PP, 344/347.

³ “Grey area” is not Merleau-Ponty’s or Descartes’ term. I use it here only to indicate the ambiguous sphere of perception where something perceived is neither absolutely certain, evident and true nor absolutely uncertain, disputable, and false, but falls between these two withdrawing or absent figures, as it is *something* and *not nothing*.

⁴ VI, 198/151. See Chapter Four.

⁵ PP, 77/73.

⁶ AT VII, 54/CSM II, 38.

⁷ PP, 54/51.

⁸ AT VII, 53/CSM II, 37.

⁹ AT VII, 54/CSM II, 38.

is our participation in nothingness that is the cause of our mistakes. For the question of why this is so, the meditator does not find an answer: the impenetrable purposes of God are incomprehensible and beyond our knowledge.

Descartes begins again with a reflection on the faculty of knowledge and the faculty of freedom of will. Our knowledge is imperfect and finite in contrast to the infinite knowledge of God but our will is, at least in a strict sense, equal with that of God: "the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something [...]."¹ According to Descartes, the more someone is inclined in one direction rather than the other, the freer is his or her choice. It is, on the contrary, the indifference caused by a defect or lack in our knowledge which limits the freedom. The will itself cannot cause errors, and as "understanding comes from God, everything that I understand I undoubtedly understand correctly, and any error here is impossible."² The source for our mistakes is that our will has a wider scope than our understanding, and we try to extend it to matters which we do not understand. This is why the meditator, in order to avoid going wrong, must "refrain from making a judgement in case where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness [...]."³

The whole passage of the *Fourth Meditation* defines the human situation as a finite "grey area" between two extremes which are incomprehensible to us. As Gueroult shows, this definition has significant implications. Firstly, we are not one with the absolute being, but we are "of the being."⁴ Secondly, since we are not nothing, our sensations are not nothing, and our body is not nothing, and therefore they must contain "some truth," as Descartes writes later in the *Sixth Meditation*.⁵ God is the absolute truth of being, and although he "could have created other truths, for in this way he would have created other beings, and not nothingness."⁶ God cannot create nothingness, because nothingness is an absolute falsehood, and God as the absolute perfection of being, by definition, cannot have any defects. From this, nevertheless, it follows that sensations are not simply false, because they are not nothing: they must contain at least a minimum of truth. According to Gueroult:

As small as their quantity of objective reality is, in this case, a quantity that is at the limit of being and nothingness, it is not a "pure nothing." It must therefore have a truth, meaning an objective validity that matches its infinite smallness. Divine veracity necessarily guarantees this validity even up to the point at which God is the author of this objective reality as he is the author of all reality.⁷

Thus, for Descartes, sensations, natural inclinations, and the lived experience of the union of mind and body are negative, but not nothing: they are negative in the sense that they are not absolutely true – they are *not God* – but they are posi-

¹ AT VII, 57/CSM II, 40.

² AT VII, 58/CSM II, 40.

³ AT VII, 59/CSM II, 41.

⁴ Gueroult 1953b, 32/24.

⁵ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 55–56. See Gueroult 1953b, 146/116.

⁶ Gueroult 1953b, 32/24.

⁷ Gueroult 1953b, 95/73.

tive in the sense that they are not completely bad and false – they are *of God*. Natural inclination as obscure and confused knowledge is not completely false, because it is introduced into us by God.¹ What is “taught by nature” is taught by God, because the “voice of nature is the very voice of God.”²

Defined in this way, we can now understand that Descartes’ point is not to claim that there is some kind of duality of being and nothingness within us. This is strictly excluded, as we are not nothing, not purely negative. We are on the side of *something* altogether. The distinction between God and nothingness, or being and nothing, is not the same as between mind and body, or between pure intellect and the union of mind and body.³ Yet, since we are not God and we do not possess his ultimate truth, we are not purely positive; we are somewhat negative and somewhat positive, in between purely positive and purely negative. It means that we are *finite*, in between the *infinite* truth and being of God and the complete falsity and “zero point of Being” of nothingness.⁴ Descartes directs his meditations towards the finite by showing that both God and nothingness are incomprehensible to us. Our free will may be infinite, but if we do not limit our “judgments” to what we know by our finite capability of understanding, then we are exposing ourselves to errors. Descartes strictly distin-

¹ Gueroult 1953b, 128/101.

² Gueroult 1953b, 146/116.

³ Gueroult 1953b, 275/217.

⁴ VI, 152/112. I refer here to Merleau-Ponty’s later expression “zero point of Being” in order to emphasize that the idea of *immediacy* of being turns it into immediate nothingness: “It is therefore necessary that the difference (*écart*), without which the experience of the thing or the past would fall to zero, be also an openness upon the thing itself, to the past itself, that it enter into their definition” (VI, 166/124, translation modified by JH). The logic of immediate being as immediate nothingness is expressed by Hegel in the following way: “Being, the indeterminate immediate, is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than nothing” (Hegel 2010, 59). The idea of immediate being as immediate nothingness is central in modern philosophy for Heidegger and Sartre, and therefore, Merleau-Ponty must have been familiar with this logic as well. In *Being and Time* Heidegger defines nothingness as the possible impossibility of *Da-sein*’s being, which *Da-sein* anticipates through angst about its own death (Heidegger 1996, 245; 283). Sartre, for his part, begins his *Being and Nothingness* from the point of view of immediate nothingness, as he argues that the consciousness is not a thing, and therefore not being (EN, 47/13). In a certain sense, in contrast to Heidegger and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty takes more seriously the restrictions formulated by Descartes: even though, concerning Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, “God” must be replaced by the ideal being and “nothingness” has to be understood through the logic of immediate being, Merleau-Ponty follows Descartes in that these are incomprehensible to us in the sense that we can never coincide with them. Yet, when Merleau-Ponty, in the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*, refuses the attempt to do “direct ontology,” he does not only mean that we cannot positively coincide with being but also that we cannot do “negative philosophy” in the sense of “negative theology” as it would lead to mysticism of nothingness (VI, 233/179). Merleau-Ponty, instead, determines his ontology as “indirect:” it is about being within the texture of beings, distance which is also connection. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty criticizes attempts to define philosophy through “extremes” which we cannot reach: God and nothingness, approached either through coincidence or non-coincidence. There cannot be either immediate coincidence or pure non-coincidence with being as in both cases our existence would be effaced. This is why, in the Preface for *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty writes: “It would be better to speak of ‘the visible and the invisible,’ pointing out that they are not contradictory, than to speak of ‘being and nothingness’” (S, 38–39/21). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes in contrast to Hegelian nothingness: “I am not, therefore, in Hegel’s phrase, ‘a hole in being,’ but a hollow, a fold, which has been made and which can be unmade” (PP, 249/249–250; SC, 136–137/126; see Kojève 1980, 135).

guishes between the finite freedom of men and the omnipotence of God. We perceive clearly and distinctly that one added to three is four, but if God wanted, he could change this. Yet, since we do not possess infinite freedom and God is incomprehensible to us, we can and must limit ourselves to our finite knowledge. As I continue to explicate in the next part of this chapter, there is an underlying strategy in Descartes' *Meditations* meant to turn the attention towards the experimental sciences from divine eternal truths, of which we know nothing.¹

The union of mind and body is observed negatively from the perspective of the pure intellect, especially in the *First*, *Second*, and *Third Meditation*, but from now on, from the *Fourth Meditation*, it has positivity, as it is not nothing. In the first three meditations, Descartes excluded all that can be doubted, that is, all that is not perceived clearly and distinctively. Yet, the problem was that there also appears notions and ideas which seem to be taught by nature – natural inclinations. These ideas are not clear and distinct, but obscure and confused for the intellect. Now, in the *Fourth Meditation*, we see that we cannot get rid of these ideas because they are not nothing and, therefore, they are *of God*. Divine veracity sustains both the clear and distinct and the obscure and confused perceptions and ideas. The union of mind and body is defined only in the *Sixth Meditation*, but a kind of underlying preparation for it is already on its way. We can already anticipate the contradiction between the intellectual distinction and the lived union. Let me remind that my intention is to show the contradiction which Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*² finds in Descartes' *Meditations*, and which leads him, in *Eye and Mind* and other later works,³ to determine the dual structure as the “Cartesian situation.”

According to Merleau-Ponty, “there is something and not nothing.”⁴ As I have explained in the first part of this chapter, for Merleau-Ponty the phenomenological reduction does not suspend the existence of the world, but brings it forth. The phenomenological method does not mean, for Merleau-Ponty, a purification of experience from all obscurity, as the obscurity must be taken into account in the description of the experience. Merleau-Ponty changes the Cartesian situation: the experience is not obscure and confused in front of the clear and distinct thought. Merleau-Ponty does not redirect the aim of philosophy towards the obscure and confused instead of the clear and distinct – his idea is not a simple reversion of the Cartesian situation. Instead, he attempts to think of the whole situation in a new way: there is an obscurity of the clarity and a clarity of the obscurity. Descartes defines our actual finite evidence through the infinite divine veracity; he explains our incompleteness through the incomprehensible completeness of God. Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, does not begin from the absolute truth which we do not have, or from complete obscurity: he begins

¹ I will continue to explicate Descartes concept of freedom by discussing it through Sartre's interpretation and Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre in Chapter 5.2.

² PP, 52/49.

³ OE, 52/136. See Chapter Three.

⁴ PP, 281/385.

from our incomplete and finite experience, upon which all our evidence is based.¹

It is not my intention to discuss the validity or invalidity of Descartes' arguments for God's existence in this work. Here I only want to mention that his argumentation on divine veracity was disputed already by Antoine Arnauld in his *Objections to the Meditations*. Arnauld's objection is known as the "Cartesian circle," as it shows that Descartes reasons in a circle: our clear and distinct ideas are true because God guarantees their truth, and we can be sure of God's existence because we have a clear and distinct idea of him.² I do not wish to claim that this is not a major problem in Descartes' philosophy, but in my view it does not lessen my suggestion that Descartes' philosophy turns the focus away from scholastic disputations on theology and towards finite human knowledge in new scientific discoveries. Even if the divine guarantee of truth does not hold, we still find ourselves in the midst of our finite knowledge, which for Descartes, too, is the only knowledge we have at our disposal. Yet, as I will explicate in the next part of this chapter, Merleau-Ponty's critique of the Cartesian idea of space shows that the point of view of God (*survol*) persists in Descartes' philosophy.³ According to Merleau-Ponty:

[T]he system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception.⁴

In Merleau-Ponty's view, truth does not pre-exist in a completely ideal and universal manner *a priori* - neither in God nor in constituting consciousness, as "if I were God."⁵ In the previous part of this chapter, I mentioned how Merleau-Ponty borrows from Husserl the idea that the transcendental reduction is also always an eidetic reduction. According to Merleau-Ponty, the "eidetic reduction is [...] the determination to bring the world to light as it is before any falling back on ourselves has occurred, it is the ambition to make reflection emulate the

¹ In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, "incomplete" should not be understood in opposition to "complete" but as "openness," "dehiscence." Merleau-Ponty does not refute all conceptions of infinity; he rejects all ideas of atemporal infinity (PP, 475/482). Atemporal infinity is positive infinity that is formulated as a clear and distinct idea, and therefore possessed by thought "at least enough to be able to prove it" (VI, 223/169). Instead, Merleau-Ponty insists on the "infinite openness" (PP, 484/492) and "infinite number of possibilities" of time (PP, 517/527): "If we are in fact destined to make contact with a sort of eternity, it will be at the core of our experience of time, and not in some non-temporal subject whose function it is to conceive and posit it" (PP, 475/482). Negative infinity is openness of "what exceeds us" (VI, 223/169). Here, I will not discuss the ideas presented by Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude*, and his criticism of phenomenology (Meillassoux 2008). For a Merleau-Pontyan answer to Meillassoux, see Toadvine 2014a; Toadvine 2018.

² AT VII, 214/CSM II, 150.

³ I will relate my interpretation to the tradition of Cartesian rationalism and universalism in Chapter Two.

⁴ PP, 350/354.

⁵ PP, 254/255.

unreflective life of consciousness."¹ The eidetic character of transcendentalism does not mean that philosophy would be an inquiry of unchangeable universal *a priori* essences, but that in beginning from the unreflective experience philosophy needs to articulate the meaning of the experience.² Philosophical truth or essence is therefore not before the experience, and *a priori* should not be distinguished from the *a posteriori*. Merleau-Ponty gives "a new definition of the *a priori*:"

The unity of the senses, which was regarded as an *a priori* truth, is no longer anything but the formal expression of a fundamental contingency: the fact that we are in the world – the diversity of the senses, which was regarded as given *a posteriori*, including the concrete form that it assumes in a human subject, appears as necessary to this world, to the only world which we can think of consequentially; it therefore becomes an *a priori* truth.³

The return to the transcendental field does not give us the universal unity of the experience, but the divergence and withdrawing of the unreflected: "it is never to eliminate, but merely to push further back the opacity that thought presents to itself."⁴ We can never completely verify our ideas, and we can never completely deny our faith in perceptual experience. In our finite and ambiguous field of experience, ideality and perceptive experience are not completely different dimensions of evidence – they both share the same contingency: "I discover evident truths; but these are not unchallengeable, since perhaps" they "are not the only ones possible."⁵ Our ideas are not self-evident without reservations, but there is "significance, something and not nothing."⁶ Accordingly, "'there is something' [...] is an amalgam of being and nothingness."⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, it means that our world is not a mere consequence of necessary being. We should not define our contingent and *changing universality* in relation to absolutely immutable universality, in "reference to an absolute knowledge and an absolute being in relation to which our factual self-evidences, or synthetic truths, are considered inadequate."⁸ Merleau-Ponty calls this "ontological contingency, the contingency of the world itself."⁹

Merleau-Ponty explicates the experience of "the unity of the world" as a recognition of "a *style*."¹⁰ The essential feature, the universal characteristic of something varies and changes and is temporal. Yet, according to Merleau-Ponty, "it is only the *knowledge of things* which varies."¹¹ The unity of the world itself remains the same. The "world" is taken here in the largest possible sense, al-

¹ PP, X-XI/xvii.

² On the "eidetic variation" see Chapter Four.

³ PP, X-XI/256.

⁴ PP, 454/460-461.

⁵ PP, 454/461.

⁶ PP, 454/461.

⁷ PP, 455/462.

⁸ PP, 455/462.

⁹ PP, 456/463.

¹⁰ PP, 378/382. Emphasis by JH.

¹¹ PP, 378/382.

most equivalent to being:¹ the “world is the *field* of our experience.”² The world is the open field where a *style* can emerge: there is both consistency and change.³

Our *cogito* has its “temporal thickness,”⁴ which makes our thought “both dependent yet indeclinable.”⁵ As I have explained above, Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between the “verbal *cogito*” and the “tacit *cogito*”: our thoughts and our ideas are not only expressions without any ties, but happen in “a universe of discourse.”⁶ Yet, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, “the full thickness of cultural acquisitions” does not completely determine our expression, and “[i]n every successful work, the significance carried into the reader’s mind exceeds language and thought as already constituted.”⁷

Therefore, the relation between ideality and facticity is not between absolutely universal truth and merely subjective “psychology,” but between historically and linguistically acquired or instituted and *intersubjectively* lived experience. In the first part of this chapter, I explained that for Merleau-Ponty the transcendental field is a field of transcendencies. As such, the transcendence of the transcendental indicates that it is not merely subjective, not immanent as for a consciousness, but necessarily transcending the subjective first-person point of view. The transcendental is, therefore, intersubjective, intercorporeal, and also “interanimal,” as Merleau-Ponty mentions in his working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*.⁸ Merleau-Ponty repeats a reference to Husserl’s idea in many of his works: “transcendental subjectivity is [...] intersubjectivity.”⁹ For Husserl, constituting consciousness is not a solipsistic subject. Husserl writes in the *Cartesian Meditations*:

[W]ithin myself, within the limits of my transcendently reduced pure conscious life, I *experience* the world (including others) – and, according to its experiential sense, *not* as (so to speak) my *private* synthetic formation but as other than mine alone, as an *intersubjective* world, actually there for everyone, accessible in respect of its Objects to everyone.¹⁰

The intersubjectivity of the lifeworld is constitutive for all subjects. For transcendental idealism, there is no problem of other minds and intersubjectivity, because there is only one universal unity of truth in which we participate.¹¹ In

¹ In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty connects his conception of essences to the “style”: essences are not being, “they are only its manner or its style” (VI, 147–148/109). See Chapter 4.1.

² PP, 465/472.

³ PP, 465/473.

⁴ PP, 456/464.

⁵ PP, 459/466.

⁶ PP, 459/466.

⁷ PP, 460/467.

⁸ VI, 226/172.

⁹ PP, 415/421. See also PP, VII/xiv; S, 173/107; VI, 226/172. Husserl states in *Crisis*: “Subjectivity is what it is – an ego functioning constitutively – only within intersubjectivity” (Hua6, 175/172).

¹⁰ Hua1, 123/91.

¹¹ PP, VI/xiii.

Husserlian phenomenology, in contrast, an intersubjective social and cultural life is a necessary part of the constitution of the subject. In this sense, there is a link to the Cartesian concept of the union of mind and body, which Descartes defines in his correspondence with Elizabeth as a kind of “social” way of existing.¹

Thus the field of our experience is historical and intersubjective. Already in the Preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states that our existence should not be reduced to our awareness of existing, as we are in a historical situation and among others.² According to him, universality and the world cannot be understood as objects in front of a constituting subject, but only as a field of experience in which we participate as a project:³ “The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself.”⁴ As we will see in the next part of this chapter, the idea is not to deny objectivity, but to ground it on our adherence in the world.

1.5 Objectivity and Experience

Scientific knowledge, as a search for universal and objective truths, is one of the most obvious examples of the changing and temporal character of universality. This changeability does not diminish the value of knowledge; on the contrary, it is the guarantee of its scientificity, as it is undogmatic and based on the newest and furthest-reaching research possible at the time. An obligation to bond scientific research to any dogmatic doctrine determined beforehand would obstruct sciences in their exploration, while they are already internally limited by their own discourse. Even if there is no external limit – for example, political or religious – there are always internal limitations for scientific research, that is, its own discourse as historical and conceptual, including, for example, its methods and concepts. Therefore, either relating science to an idea of God or elevating science to a position of an absolute truth and, thus, replacing the position of God with science, both lead to a problematic understanding of science. Science is not an absolute truth: it is a tradition, a historical and cultural formation, an institution, which means “forgetting its origins.”⁵

Explications of Descartes’ and Merleau-Ponty’s notions of science and their relations would require another study. Here, I do not wish to clarify all that is included in this subject. My intention is merely to explicate the outlines of this juxtaposition. Firstly, Descartes liberates the scientific knowledge from theology, on the one hand, and his idea of science remains stuck, at least partially, to the idea of absolute knowledge of God, on the other hand. Secondly, Mer-

¹ AT III, 692/CSM-K, 227.

² PP, VII/xiv.

³ PP, 465/472–473.

⁴ PP, 467/474.

⁵ S, 259/159. Science is *institution*, which means “forgetting its origins,” and continuous re-institution which both repeats and renews itself (see Chapter 4.3).

leau-Ponty criticizes the Cartesian notion of science of its idea of a perfectly explicit objective world, on the one hand, while he does not criticize all modern science but, instead, describes it in an optimistic light, on the other hand.¹ I will first shortly read through Descartes' *Fifth Meditation*, in which he defines the extensive material things as a truthful object of mathematical science. Then, I will explicate Merleau-Ponty's critique of Cartesian objectivism through his analysis of space.

In the beginning of the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes considers material things: that is, the ideas of these things, in order to determine which of them are distinct and which are confused. He finds the extension or the purely mathematical ideas of material things to be true, and accordingly "whatever is true is something."² Descartes returns to the existence of God, and notices that it must be at least as certain as mathematics. He adds that the existence of God cannot be separated from his essence, as the methodic doubt required in the case of everything else: "existence is inseparable from God" and "it is the necessity of the thing itself" because "existence is one of the perfections."³ According to Descartes, the true ideas which we perceive clearly and distinctly are innate. Moreover, the truth of these ideas depends on the idea of God, "so that without it nothing can ever be perfectly known."⁴ Without the awareness of God's existence, even the most certain-looking ideas can be doubtful. After the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes states that the doubt is evaded as God guarantees the truth.

The aim of Descartes' methodic doubt is to establish an indubitable and certain metaphysical grounding for science. The aim is, thus, not to retire into *my* ideas and disconnect them from physical nature.⁵ The aim is not subjectivity but objectivity. Yet, Descartes' philosophy has become famous for its founding of the modern concept of subjectivity: the first-person consciousness as the condition for all objective knowledge. Beginning by doubting everything, Descartes finds the first truth of *my cogito* as existing, which *I* cannot doubt since when *I* doubt, *I* think, and *I* exist. Even God, or the malicious demon, cannot deceive me in this certainty.⁶ Yet, for the rest of the clear and distinct perceptions, God is necessarily the guarantee of truth. This, nevertheless, does not mean that Descartes' idea of science simply leans on the infinite knowledge of God: for our finite knowledge, God's infinite knowledge is incomprehensible, and therefore we must rely on our finite knowledge.

Descartes' philosophy leans on medieval Scholasticism,⁷ but his influence as a pioneer of modern thought is nevertheless indisputable: Descartes liberates

¹ See Chapter 3.1.

² AT VII, 65/CSM II, 45.

³ AT VII, 67/CSM II, 46.

⁴ AT VII, 69/CSM II, 48.

⁵ Gueroult 1953a, 32/15; 63/35.

⁶ AT VII, 36/CSM II, 25.

⁷ See e.g. Gilson 2008. In his commentary on Descartes' *Discours on the Method*, Étienne Gilson also shows Descartes' indebtedness to Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), Pierre Charon (1541–1603) and Francisco Sanchez (1550–1623) (Descartes 1962). It is interesting how, for example, Sanchez presents in his work *That Nothing is Known (Quod nihil scitur, 1581)*,

mathematical and experimental science from the influence of theologically oriented philosophy.¹ In a sense, he liberates modern science and philosophy from God through God. Thus, I will not discuss Descartes' own faith or his philosophy from a theological perspective.² Alquié states that Descartes himself did not want to discuss theological matters: an omnipotent God is an absent God, and therefore in Descartes' philosophy there is no opposition between theology and scientific knowledge.³

Descartes' argumentation forms the subject-object-structure of modern philosophy: on the one hand, there is the subject, which is thought, intellect, and mind, and on the other hand, there is the object, which is matter, extension, and mechanical nature. The former is the background for the philosophies of the consciousness and intellectualism, for example, transcendental idealism, and the latter is the background for empiricism and scientific realism.⁴ Therefore, these modern philosophical positions, seemingly opposites, have a common origin in Descartes' philosophy:⁵ they are both based on the idea of clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty opposes both intellectualism and empiricism. For intellectualism, the certainty is in the absolutely indubitable intellectual intuition of the constituting mind. Intellectualism is not occupied with any relation of the mind to the concrete world, because perception is only an illusion and the real is in conception. Our bodies are only objects amongst other objects, and they have no relation to the ideal being.⁶ Even though empiricism is the antithesis of intellectualism, they are not so far from each other: for empiricism, too, our bodies are mere objects affected by mechanical causal relations. According to Merleau-Ponty, "they are a dual expression

an argument similar to Descartes': "I withdraw into myself; I began to question everything, and to examine the facts themselves as though no one had ever said anything about them, which is the proper method of acquiring knowledge. I broke everything down into its ultimate first principles. Beginning, as I did, my reflection at this point, the more I reflected the more I doubted." (Sanchez 1988, 167.) Descartes also shared Sanchez's hostility towards Aristotelian philosophy, which Sanchez called "the citadel of falsehood" (Sanchez 1988, 166). In a similar manner as for Descartes, the attack on previous philosophical dogmatism by doubt and skepticism was for Sanchez not the goal in itself: Sanchez points out that even if perfect knowledge is impossible, we should still search for imperfect knowledge. He writes: "For my purpose is to establish, as far as I am able, a kind of scientific knowledge that is both sound and as easy as possible to attain; but *not* a science that is full of those chimeras and fictions, unconnected with factual truth, which are put together, not to teach facts, but solely to show off the writer's intellectual subtlety" (Sanchez 1988, 290).

¹ Alquié 1950, 24–25.

² Étienne Gilson writes to Henri Gouhier who was interested in the question of Descartes' faith: "I do not doubt Descartes's faith, but I really do not know what particular nuance it presents. If I had to characterize it, to save my life, for example, I would say it was a kind of a *loyalism*; I would say it and believe it, but I know nothing about it." (Fafara 2007, 20.)

³ Alquié 1950, 90–91.

⁴ See Hua6, 74–75/73–74, 85–86/83–84.

⁵ See Dillon 1988, 20–34. He writes: "[T]he two major standpoints in modern Western philosophy, empiricism and intellectualism, can be traced to a common proximate origin in Descartes [...] both standpoints depend, at a fundamental level, upon the Cartesian pre-supposition that certainty is to be obtained by grounding knowledge in elements whose transparency provides an absolute ground for knowledge" (Dillon 1988, 33).

⁶ PP, 51/47–48.

of a universe perfectly [explicit] in itself,"¹ and "[i]n the world taken in itself everything is determined."² In the objective world, nothing can be obscure or ambiguous; everything is either true or false. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls "objective thought," and to be clear, by his critique of "objective thought" in this Cartesian sense he does not mean that all objectivity is impossible: rather, in his view, the idea of an absolutely determined world obstructs "true" objectivity, which must be based on intersubjectivity and, especially according to his later philosophy, on institution.

Perception may turn out to be an illusion, it can be misleading, but for objective thought it is then a case of an illusion of illusion, because perception itself is already an illusion.³ For objective thought, illusions are errors only in our perceptive apparatus – they have nothing to do with the world itself, because the world in-itself is absolutely unambiguous and true. For Cartesian objectivism, therefore, the ambiguous perceptual phenomena are not certain, and it is in the pure thought that we can realize the world in itself. Objectivism sees the world as if it was perfectly transparent and intelligible. It does not perceive the world from any point of view or perspective, as it would have to do if it would take account – within the intellectual framework and not only outside of it – the embodied world in which it also belongs. It does not conceive the actual world, but the world as it should be, as an abstraction, idealization and *a priori* universalization.

Merleau-Ponty's characterizations of empiricism and intellectualism are one side of the duality which he finds in Descartes: the distinction between mind and body *without* the union. They are, therefore, caricatures of naïve Cartesianism, which does not see the central problem of Descartes' *contradiction* between the distinction and the union, but simply rejects the union as non-philosophical. Intellectualism and empiricism remain blind to the problem of Descartes' *Sixth Meditation*. Heinämaa has argued that Merleau-Ponty's entire argumentation on Cartesian philosophy in *Phenomenology of Perception* is directed at showing that the union of mind and body is crucial for Descartes' idea of the clear and distinct certainty of the intellect – and therefore, intellectualism and empiricism must also be false.⁴ As Merleau-Ponty explicates, "experience of one's own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality."⁵ According to him, the "problem of the relation of soul to body has nothing to do with the objective body, which exists only conceptually, but with the phenomenal body," that is, the union of mind and body, the lived body.⁶

For Descartes, the body conceived from the perspective of the intellect, or intellect aided by imagination, is a mere object, that is, an idea of the extension

¹ PP, 51/48.

² PP, 12/7.

³ PP, 51/47.

⁴ Heinämaa 2003.

⁵ PP, 231/231.

⁶ PP, 493/502.

of the body. The body is, therefore, considered *spatially* as a material thing, it is of the extensive substance, *res extensa*. The body in this sense is not a conscious subject, but a material thing amongst others material things. In the Synopsis of the *Meditations*, Descartes separates the human body from the body-substance, the body in general:

[B]ody, taken in the general sense, is a substance, so that it too never perishes [in the same sense as the soul is immortal]. But the human body, in so far as it differs from other bodies, is simply made up of a certain configuration of limbs and other accidents of this sort [...]. And it follows from this that while the body can very easily perish, the mind is immortal by its very nature.¹

A human body is just one accidental body among other bodies in the *body in general*, which is the extensive material substance. The human body dies, but the body in general does not. Accordingly, the examination of the extensive substance is not an examination of the experience which we have of material things and space as we live among them, but a general investigation of the homogenous and mathematical structure of the body in general. A singular body is understood in purely geometrical terms: "there is no difference between the extension of a space, or internal place, and the extension of a body."² Materiality is, in the Cartesian sense, three-dimensional spatiality.³

According to Merleau-Ponty, the Cartesian understanding of space is a theoretical conception, and not a description of space in its "original" mode: "even in analysing this abstract function, which is far from covering the whole of our experience of space, we have been led to bring out, as the condition of spatiality, the establishment of the subject in a setting, and finally his inherence in a world."⁴ The two different modes of spatiality which Merleau-Ponty analyses differ in their relation with the world: objective space is conceived without actual relation to space, and the lived space, on the contrary, is conceived as in the midst of space. To be clear, Merleau-Ponty does not claim that geometry is wrong in its way of measuring space, but that this is only a conception of space, and not the only one possible: the problem is in how this model of space is set by the objective thought – equally so in intellectualist transcendental philosophy and in empiricist scientific realism – as the condition for all spatiality.⁵ As we have already seen, for Merleau-Ponty the transcendental field is the field of experience, and therefore the condition of spatiality is not homogenous objective space but the heterogenic and diverse spatiality of our experience.⁶

¹ AT VII, 14/CSM II, 10.

² AT VIII A, 49/CSM I, 229–230.

³ Cottingham points out that this definition is problematic, as all material qualities, for example motion, do not seem to follow from length, breadth, and depth (Cottingham 1993, 61).

⁴ PP, 324–325/327.

⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty: "If reflection consists in seeking the originary, or that by which the rest can exist and be thought about, it cannot confine itself within objective thought, but must think about those thematizing acts which post objective thought, and must restore their context" (PP, 334/337, translation modified by JH).

⁶ Dupond 2004, 20.

In Cartesian objective space, all three dimensions are interchangeable: “depth is tacitly equated with *breadth seen from the side*.”¹ Depth is abstracted from actual experience as breadth that we could see from another point of space. From our point of view depth is invisible but from another position it is visible.² Merleau-Ponty analyses this conception:

In order to treat depth as breadth viewed in profile, in order to arrive at a uniform space, the subject must leave his place, abandon his point of view on the world, and think himself into a sort of ubiquity. For God, who is everywhere, breadth is immediately equivalent to depth. Intellectualism and empiricism do not give us any account of the human experience of the world; they tell us what God might think about it.³

Even if Descartes opens up the possibility for a finite science, for which the absolute truth is only God’s business, there remains the idea that the world in itself must be perfectly clear and distinct, and as God sustains our clear and distinct perceptions, our intelligence must be truthful. Moreover, even if modern science “does not need the hypothesis of God to explain the universe,” as according to an anecdote Pierre-Simon de Laplace (1749–1827) told Napoleon, there remains the idea of absolute truth, as if the idea of science had only taken the place of the idea of God.⁴

Merleau-Ponty states that in order to elucidate our relation with space we must restrain from the conception of space by objective thought as “the self-evidence of an intersubjective world,” and rediscover “the *phenomenon* of the world” and “the primordial experience” on which objective thought also builds its theory.⁵ Merleau-Ponty opposes the objective depth understood as geometric to “lived’ depth” understood “independently of any kind of geometry.”⁶ The main reason why there cannot be a question of geometry in our experience of depth is that our perception is not a geometric “thing” or “mental image”

¹ PP, 295/297. Merleau-Ponty writes in *Eye and Mind*: “Depth is a *third dimension* derived from the other two” (OE, 45/133). Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of depth in *Eye and Mind* shows how central it is for his later philosophy and his ontology. Cartesian space is “absolutely in itself, everywhere equal to itself, homogenous; its dimensions, for example, are by definition interchangeable” (OE, 47/134). Descartes makes space purely ideal, transparent, and “positive being;” Merleau-Ponty’s own idea of depth and space contains, in contrast, the “real thickness” (OE, 48/135). Depth is not a third dimension but, rather, “reversibility of dimensions” (OE, 65/140). It means that depth is not a measurable distance between one point and another, but thickness of our experience, “the immemorial depth of the visible” (OE, 86/147). I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology in Chapter Four.

² Let me point out that this is a good example of what Merleau-Ponty *does not mean* by his conception of the visible and the invisible in his later philosophy: the invisible is not something that could be visible from another point in space, but the invisible of the visible which cannot become visible. See e.g. VI, 281/227–228.

³ PP, 295–296/298.

⁴ N, 123/88. “We could believe that the universe of facticity appeared at the moment theology was excluded from science. Yet this is not at all the case. There are theological perspectives that include facticity, and there are non-theological thought that do not have the feeling for it: ‘I do not need the hypothesis of God to explain the universe,’ Laplace will say, but this is in no way decisive. The very concept of Nature, such as it is often allowed by scientists, belongs to a conception that is entirely theological in its infrastructure.”

⁵ PP, 296/298.

⁶ PP, 298/300.

which could be measured: “The apparent size of the perceived ash-tray is not a measurable size.”¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, the apparent size of a perceived object does not suggest a distance, but is synonymous with distance.² We do not perceive things in a measurable way, but as distant or proximate, far away or at hand. Depth, then, is not a measurable quantity. Depth is not a construction of understanding: it is not judged by the intellect from signs presented by sensible things.

Depth is not *something*, it is not an object or an objective relation between objects: “A primordial depth” is “the thickness of a medium without a thing.”³ Accordingly, it is “a depth which does not yet operate between objects, [...] does not yet assess the distance between them [...]”⁴ Depth in this sense is openness of a perception “upon some ghost thing” which is not yet objectified and measurable.⁵ Importantly, and I will explicate why in the following, Merleau-Ponty does not separate this “ghostly” spatiality from “normal” spatiality: “Even in normal perception depth is not initially applicable to things.”⁶ The thickness of depth is not a dimension of the objective positions of things, but a temporal medium in which the “lived present holds a past and a future within its thickness.”⁷ Depth is an intersection between space and time – but not objective geometric spatiality and the objective time of successive moments.⁸

The pre-objective experience as the source of the objectivity is, therefore, not completely objectifiable: it is not a question of, say, contesting Euclidian geometry in the name of a more “original” geometry, but instead of showing that all geometries are based on the lived experience, through which they can have a significance but which they do not translate into a theory. The “originating” experience is, thus, not *a certain kind of experience* which we could not have – for example, a visible space which we would lack if we were blind – but it is *the possibility of having experience*, the opening of experience. Depth is the possibility of experience. Everything we encounter in our life is already in depth, in a field of experience, of meaning, of history and time. And when we give time for something, it gains depth, it deepens.

The thickness of experience – depth and time – shows that experience is not immediate: there is experience only within a certain opening texture of experience, and it cannot be immediate.⁹ There is, therefore, no “original presence” in which something is given, but always already the presence of the past – the presence of distancing, of depth. Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of*

¹ PP, 301/303.

² PP, 302/304.

³ PP, 308/310. Translation modified by JH.

⁴ PP, 308/310.

⁵ PP, 308/310.

⁶ PP, 308/310.

⁷ PP, 318/321.

⁸ Judith Wambacq explains that for Merleau-Ponty depth as a temporal dimension grounds spatiality (Wambacq 2011, 327).

⁹ In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty calls this “texture of experience” *flesh*. He writes in his working notes: “It is hence because of depth that the things have a flesh: that is, oppose to my inspection obstacles, a resistance which is precisely their reality, their ‘openness,’ their *totum simul*” (VI, 272–273/219). See my Chapter Four.

Perception: “[R]eflection does not itself grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experience which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present.”¹ Depth gathers together space and time, the embodied world and the institution: depth opens a pre-objective material time – not an intellectual idea or calculable empirical measure of time, but “the thickness of the pre-objective present.”² The past encroaches on the thickness of the present. A moment is not a point in an eternal flow of successive moments of time; a moment is, on the contrary, itself eternal in the sense that once it has been nothing can undo it. We find Descartes’ idea of the *cogito* here.³ Yet, what is crucial is that this indestructible presence of the past is present only *as past*, and therefore through the distancing, depth, and thickness of time. There is no “original” coincidence with the presence which would be retained as an “original” past, but the depth of the presence and forgetting of the past:

The temporal perspective with its confusion of what is far removed in time, and that sort of ‘shrinkage’ of the past with oblivion as its ultimate limit, are not accidents of memory, and do not express the debasement into empirical existence of a consciousness of time theoretically all-embracing, but its initial ambiguity: to retain is to hold, but at a distance.⁴

When we live in the pre-objective world and do not yet theorize it, depth is not only a spatial but also a temporal dimension. The reason for this is our “inherence in a world,” inherence in space and time.⁵ Our experience of space is related to our *former* experience of space – which includes intersubjective spatiality, the openness to others – and to *future* possibilities as an open situation and project. The perception of space is “always an expression of the total life of the subject, the energy with which he tends towards a future through his body and his world.”⁶

The energy of the subject and her openness towards the future can, nevertheless, be diminished. The lived experience as an open project can be disturbed by physical injuries or mental illnesses. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty analyses various clinical cases in order to clarify the meaning of the lived experience, on the one hand, and to show the “misfit” of objective thought in understanding them, on the other hand.⁷ I am not able to go through all of these cases here, and I will limit myself to few remarks concerning spatiality, as I think they suffice to show what Merleau-Ponty means by “normal subject” and diminished experience, and by their relation to objectivity. Merleau-Ponty asks:

¹ PP, 280/281–282.

² PP, 495/503.

³ Descartes writes in the *Third Meditation*: “[L]et whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist [...]” (AT VII, 36/CSM II, 25). See PP, 54/51.

⁴ PP, 483/491.

⁵ PP, 325/327.

⁶ PP, 327/330.

⁷ See Weiss 2015.

Are the spaces belonging to dreams, myths and schizophrenia genuine spaces; can they exist and be thought of by themselves, or do they not rather presuppose, as the condition of their possibility, geometrical space and with it the pure constituting consciousness which deploys it?¹

Merleau-Ponty analyses in what manner the experience of space is changed, for example in the pitch black of night, under the influence of mescaline, and in schizophrenic experience. The nocturnal space is without outlines, it is “pure depth” without foreground or background. It disqualifies the objective space completely as there are no unambiguous relations between the parts of the space. Yet, if we are in a familiar place, we can ground our orientation on the setting of the daytime.² Under mescaline, a psychedelic hallucinogen, the size of the objects around us changes, so that some things appear enormous and others tiny. The familiar objects are there but in dissonance: the disturbance is experienced in contrast to our knowledge of the world.³ In the cases of schizophrenic experiences which Merleau-Ponty analyses, the strange experiences of space intrude within the ordinary experiences. The world loses its consistency, and the body ceases to be a “knowing body;” time collapses and “no longer rises towards a future but falls back on itself.”⁴ All of these experiences describe a kind of “shrinkage of lived space.”⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, our senses form the spatial surroundings in which we are living, but these surroundings can radically change if, for example, we hear bad news from afar: “I can ‘be somewhere else’ while staying here, and if I am kept far away from what I love, I feel out of touch with real life.”⁶ Likewise, it can also be that there is not enough distance in our spatial experience, and we become obsessed by the present, possessed by it, and robbed of our freedom.⁷

Merleau-Ponty shows that in these descriptions space is “deformed” in contrast to the “normal” form of space, which he calls “clear space.”⁸ This “clear space” is the space of clear and distinct thought, the objective thought: the factual experience is explicated as deformed in contrast to the objectified “self-evident” form or ideal, be it geometric space or other “normalized” spatiality.⁹

¹ PP, 333/335.

² PP, 328/330–331.

³ PP, 326–327/328–329.

⁴ PP, 327/329.

⁵ PP, 331/334.

⁶ PP, 330/333.

⁷ It is thus not only the distant past that can deprive our present freedom – dementia is a disability to forget the distant past, which therefore weakens the ability to act in the present – but the present can also be compelling. Here Merleau-Ponty comes close to Bergson’s description in *Matter and Memory*. Bergson states: “the past has no longer any interest for us; it has exhausted its possible action, or will only recover an influence by borrowing the vitality of the present perception” (MM, 159/185). And again: “Our past [...] is that which acts no longer but which might act, and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation of which it borrows the vitality” (MM, 270/320). Merleau-Ponty discusses the passage in Bergson in his lecture *The Incarnate Subject*: sometimes memory becomes a phantom of the past which steals the vitality of the living perception, and sometimes perception becomes already a recollection and occupies the present (UAC, 87/90). See Chapter 2.4.

⁸ PP, 334/336–337.

⁹ PP, 335/337.

According to Merleau-Ponty, this “self-evidence” relies on the experience too. Therefore, either the experience knows what it experiences, even if it may be “madness,” or we cannot trust our experience, in which case the “self-evidence” may be an illusion.¹ Instead of contrasting the “abnormal” experiences to a dictating “normal” self-evidence, these experiences uncover something essential of experience in general: the “shrinkage” of the experience of space brings forth “the overwhelming proximity of the object, the oneness of man and the world, which is not indeed abolished, but repressed by everyday perception or by objective thought, and which philosophical consciousness rediscovers.”²

Merleau-Ponty points out that the idea is not to say that experience leads to subjectivism and psychologism. The point is that the “abnormal” experiences cannot be isolated, as if they were experiences of another, irrational world, separated from our rational world. And, in turn, if they are of the same world where our “normal” experience happens, we cannot simply constitute a perfectly clear ideal world in which there is no variety. Merleau-Ponty, of course, does not deny that, for example, schizophrenia is an illness, that the schizophrenic experience is not “normal” and is, in a certain sense, precisely experienced as “abnormal” and strange: it is a disability which diminishes or shrinks the abilities, the openness, and the freedom of the ill person. But the schizophrenic experience reveals neither a completely incomprehensible world, in contrast to our purely understandable world, nor a different “normality” alien to our world. Rather, it reveals something of our experience of which we are “normally” in our everyday experience *ignorant*.³ It is not the case that in our “normal” experience we know everything and the schizophrenic experience knows nothing, but that the schizophrenic experience reveals the incompleteness of our knowledge.⁴ We can distinguish between illusion and true perception because we experience them exactly *as* illusion and *as* true perception.⁵ The choice is not between absolute truth and complete absurdity:

The experience of absurdity and that of absolute self-evidence are mutually implicative, and even indistinguishable. The world appears absurd, only if a demand for absolute consciousness ceaselessly dissociates from each other the meanings with which it swarms, and conversely this demand is motivated by the conflict between those meanings. Absolute self-evidence and the absurd are equivalent, not merely as philosophical affirmations, but also as experiences. Rationalism and scepticism draw their sustenance from an actual life of consciousness which they both hypocritically take for granted, without which they can be neither conceived nor even experienced, and in which it is impossible to say that *everything has a significance*, or that *everything is nonsense*, but only that *there is significance*.⁶

¹ PP, 335/337–338.

² PP, 337/339.

³ PP, 337–338/340–341.

⁴ PP, 340/343.

⁵ PP, 340/343.

⁶ PP, 342/345.

With respect to Cartesian philosophy, Merleau-Ponty's aim is, therefore, not to deny objectivity, but to show that we need to take seriously the finiteness of our knowledge: the finite knowledge which we have relies on the appearance of something, on the openness to something – which, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the “true *cogito*” – and not on the supposition of an infinite absolute knowledge by God, or on the supposition of our immediate coincidence with ourselves as the basis for an “original” truth.¹ We have neither a transcendent absolute truth nor an absolute immanence of truth. According to Merleau-Ponty, we are not ignorant of our experiences, and yet we are not in complete possession of them either: “I can experience more things than I represent to myself, and my being is not reducible to what expressly appears to me concerning myself.”² What is central here is that our *experiences change* – the experience of space varies, and it cannot be related to an immutable idea of space beyond all variation. Merleau-Ponty gives an example: if I mistakenly conceive a patch of sunlight as a flat stone and realize my mistake when I get nearer, “there is no sense-datum which remains unchanged when I pass from the illusory stone to the real patch of sunlight.”³ In a similar manner we may have changes in our ideas which open to objective knowledge: “My adherence to the world enables me to allow for the variations in the *cogito*, to favour one *cogito* at the expense of another and to catch up with the truth of my thinking beyond its appearances.”⁴

To be sure, Merleau-Ponty's idea in *Phenomenology of Perception* is not to base objectivity on subjectivity in the sense of psychologism. In a working note included in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty argues that “what one might consider to be ‘psychology’ (*Phenomenology of Perception*) is in fact ontology.”⁵ Merleau-Ponty does not attempt to show that objectivity must be relativized by the variety of experience, but that the Cartesian idea of the object, of the world perfectly explicit in-itself, the ontology of the “objective thought,” must be replaced by a different ontology which begins from our “adherence to the world.”⁶ This “new ontology” is, indeed, already implicitly present in *Meditations*, as Descartes shows in the *Sixth Meditation* how through our body we are in a *deeper* relation with the world than as an objectifying consciousness.

1.6 Distinction and Union

Much of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* consists of showing in contrast to the objectified notion of the body by Cartesian intellectualism and empiricism, the lived experience of the body which resists the perfectly explicit character of the objective thought: it is an ambiguous phenomenon, an experi-

¹ PP, 342/345.

² PP, 343/345–346.

³ PP, 343/346.

⁴ PP, 344/347.

⁵ VI, 230/176.

⁶ PP, 344/347.

ence of the body which can contain, for example, a feeling of an amputated arm as a “phantom limb,” and thus does not follow the rules of clear and distinct ideas.¹ The body can be approached in two different ways: as an object, from the third person perspective, or as the subject, from the first person perspective, as “one’s own body,” “*le corps propre*.” As an object, the body is *in* space, understood for example as geometric space, as we saw in the previous part of this chapter, and considered as the subject, the body “inhabits space.”² The first is considered as “I think that” – as a judgment of the intellect, “I think that I see” – and the second as “I can.”³ The lived experience of the body is practical openness towards a situation, “the project towards the world that we are.”⁴ The body is a field of experience.⁵

In the *Sixth Meditation* Descartes argues for both of these two ways of understanding the body: from the point of view of the pure mind the body is an object, and from the perspective of the union of mind and body it is lived, sensible experience. He explains further, in a letter to Elizabeth on 28th of June 1643, that for the intellect distinct from the body, the lived experience of the union is obscure and confused, but for the lived experience itself, it is clear (and yet confused).⁶ The intellect perceives clearly and distinctly the extensive body, the objective body, but not the lived body of the union: the union is something we experience in our “ordinary course of life and conversation”⁷ on the one hand, and something that is “taught by nature”⁸ on the other hand. In Descartes view, science must be based on clear and distinct perceptions, and can only study the objective body, and therefore the lived experience of the union falls outside of science altogether.⁹ Moreover, as Descartes states to Elizabeth, it is *contradictory* to conceive the distinction of mind and body and their union at the same time.¹⁰

As we have already seen in this chapter, Merleau-Ponty does not accept that the lived experience is outside of the reach of science and philosophy.¹¹ He finds methodological help for his research of the lived body especially in Husserl’s second book of *Ideas*: the lived body (*Leib*) is, in a certain sense, a phenomenological thematization and reformation of the union of mind and body.¹² Moreover, from the case studies of experimental psychology, Merleau-Ponty finds concepts and arguments for his philosophical ideas concerning the lived body.¹³ Embodied subjectivity has become a major theme in more recent phenomenological research, both in theoretical and in applied studies. Therefore, I

¹ PP, 174/172.

² PP, 119/117.

³ PP, 160/159. Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl’s second book of *Ideas* (Hua4, 11/13).

⁴ PP, 464/471.

⁵ PP, 465/473.

⁶ AT III, 691–692/CSM-K, 227.

⁷ AT III, 692/CSM-K, 227.

⁸ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56. See Alanen 2003, 58.

⁹ Alanen 1996, 13. Alanen 2003, 53.

¹⁰ AT III, 693/CSM-K, 227.

¹¹ See Heinämaa 2003, 29.

¹² See Heinämaa 2002, 138.

¹³ In this work I will not study the psychological cases that Merleau-Ponty analyses in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

find it necessary to study the Cartesian background of the notion of the lived body as the union of mind and body. Merleau-Ponty not only neglects Descartes' restriction to study philosophically the lived experience but *also* affirms the contradictory character of this attempt, as according to him the reflection of the unreflected experience never exhausts it. I will concentrate especially on this contradiction, which Merleau-Ponty finds essential to Descartes' philosophy.¹ Let me first read through Descartes' texts, the *Sixth Meditation* and the correspondence with Elizabeth, concerning the relations of mind and body.

Descartes' *Sixth Meditation* concerns the existence of material things. At first, he explicates the difference between pure understanding and imagination: we can imagine and understand a simple figure, but in complex matters, we cannot imagine (visualize) the figure even if we can understand it. In pure understanding the mind "turns towards itself and inspects one of the ideas which are within it," but in imagination the mind "turns towards the body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses."² Therefore, imagination provides an idea of the body, but does not suffice to prove that the body necessarily exists.

Then, Descartes goes through what he previously, before the meditations, regarded as true. In his pre-meditational awareness, he regarded his body as "mine" and "even as my whole self," "[f]or I could never be separated from it, as I could from other bodies" among which his own body was situated.³ He was convinced that everything in his intellect had come from sensations. However, Descartes claims he could not figure out any connection between, for example, the sensation of hunger and the decision to take food, but simply followed what nature had taught.

Next, Descartes considers the cases when the senses had led him astray. For example, what was perceived from afar changed its form when seen closer, and persons with an arm amputated could feel pain in the missing body part. The meditation circles back to the beginning, and to the reasons for doubting. However, after the meditations, Descartes notices that not everything should be called into doubt. God guarantees the clear and distinct perceptions as true: we can perceive the distinction of two things without needing to know what kind of power is required in the separation, as the *Fourth Meditation* showed that "final causes" are incomprehensible to us.⁴ Descartes then articulates the distinction between mind and body: "on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing."⁵

After the distinction between mind and body, Descartes adds that imagination and sensory perception are "special modes of thinking" which, therefore, cannot be understood without the intellect, as they contain an intellectual act.

¹ PP, 52/49.

² AT VII, 73/CSM II, 51.

³ AT VII, 74–76/CSM II, 52.

⁴ AT VII, 55/39.

⁵ AT VII, 78/CSM II, 54.

Extensive things, in contrast, do not include intellectual acts but only extension. These extensive sensible things are received by a “passive faculty of sensory perception” which, nevertheless, requires the active intellectual faculty in order to produce the ideas.¹ But since these passive sensations are not made by the intellectual act, they must be produced by “another substance distinct from me [...]”² As God is not a deceiver, these ideas have as their source the corporeal things – which, therefore, exist. Even if the ideas provided by the senses can be obscure and confused, as they are “taught by nature,” it is clear that they are true, because “if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God.”³

Thus, Descartes identifies two concepts of nature: one as the essences of pure understanding, concerning the extensive things of nature, for example in geometry, and another as the “general aspect” of nature, God which is existence.⁴ The second concept is, nevertheless, incomprehensible to the intellect, and therefore the intellect limits itself to what it can know clearly and distinctly.⁵

Nature teaches the meditator that he has a body, and moreover that he is not in his body “as a sailor in a ship” but “intermingled with it” in a way that he and his body form a unit.⁶ When the body is hurt, the meditator, who is a thinking thing, does not only intellectually notice the damage but feels pain. When the body needs food, he does not have a clear and distinct idea of it, but has a confused sensation of hunger: “For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body.”⁷ Nature also teaches that there are other bodies surrounding the meditator’s body, and “my body, or rather my whole self, in so far as I am combination of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it.”⁸

After these things, in order to separate what nature teaches from mere habits of thinking, Descartes seeks to define what it means to be “taught by nature.” It does not refer to the intellectual ideas which are known by the natural light, or the matters which concern the extensive body alone – but it relates to the “combination of mind and body.”⁹ In this sense nature teaches, for example,

¹ AT VII, 79/CSM II, 55.

² AT VII, 79/CSM II, 55.

³ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56.

⁴ See N, 169/125.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty writes in *Eye and Mind*: “We have to go to these lengths to find in Descartes something like a metaphysics of depth. For we are not present at the birth of this Truth; God’s being is for us an abyss. An anxious trembling quickly mastered; for Descartes it is just as futile to plumb that abyss as it is to think the space of the soul and the depth of the visible. Our very position, he would say, disqualifies us from looking into such things. That is the secret of Cartesian equilibrium: a metaphysics which gives us definitive reasons to leave off doing metaphysics, which validates our self-evidence while limiting it, which opens up our thinking without rending it.” (OE, 55–56/137.)

⁶ AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56.

⁷ AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56.

⁸ AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56.

⁹ AT VII, 82/CSM II, 57.

to avoid pain but not to draw any conclusions from it. The perceptions of the composite are “sufficiently clear and distinct” in informing what is beneficial and what is harmful but not as a ground for judgments on extensive bodies – as for example that the sun is much larger than we actually see.¹ The nature of the union of mind and body is nevertheless not omniscient, and it is not uncommon that it leads to mistakes. Nevertheless, the “nature” in this sense “contains something of the truth” as it is “really to be found in the things themselves.”²

According to Descartes, the problem is why God does not prevent nature from deceiving us. He begins the inquiry by noting the difference between the mind and the body: the body has parts which are divisible, but the mind is single and indivisible. Secondly, the mind is affected not by the whole body, but only by the brain, or more specifically by the pineal gland. Therefore, the mind also feels only what comes from the brain, which is connected to the body by the intermediation of nerves. The problem occurs when a nerve causes us to feel, for example, pain in a foot when the cause is not in the foot, but somewhere in between the foot and the brain, or in the brain itself. It is, thus, “reasonable that this motion should always indicate to the mind a pain in the foot rather than in any other part of the body.”³ Descartes then claims that we can “correct or avoid” these errors without difficulty by the use of our multiple senses, memory, and intellect because, as he states once more, God does not deceive.⁴

In the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes not only concludes the *Meditations* by proving the existence of material things and their distinction from the mind, but also by proving the relevance of the experience that we have *despite* the *Meditations*: even if the sensory experience can sometimes be misleading, it is “sufficiently clear and distinct” for guiding us in the practices of bodily life. We are constantly living as the union of mind and body through our senses.⁵ Only metaphysical meditations show us the distinction of mind and body. Descartes explains his intentions in his correspondence with Elizabeth:

There are two facts about the human soul on which depend all the knowledge we can have of its nature. The first is that it thinks, the second is that, being united to the body, it can act and be acted upon along with it. About the second I have said hardly anything; I have tried only to make the first well understood. For my principal aim was to prove the distinction between the soul and the body, and to this end only the first was useful, and the second might have been harmful.⁶

Descartes answers Elizabeth’s question about how the immaterial mind can move the material body.⁷ He explains his answer through “primitive notions:” there are general notions which apply to everything such as “being, number, duration, etc.,” the notion of extension applies to the body, the notion of thought to the mind, and finally, “as regards the soul and the body together, we

¹ AT VII, 83/CSM II, 57–58.

² AT VII, 85/CSM II, 59.

³ AT VII, 89/CSM II, 61.

⁴ AT VII, 89/CSM II, 61.

⁵ See Cunning 2010, 173.

⁶ AT III, 664–665/CSM-K, 217–218.

⁷ AT III, 661/CED, 62.

have only the notion of their union, on which depends our notion of the soul's power to move the body, and the body's power to act on the soul and cause its sensations and passions."¹ The reason for this separation is, according to Descartes, that if we use a notion which does not pertain to a certain thing we will inevitably go wrong. Moreover, these notions cannot be explained through other primitive notions, because "each of them can be understood only through itself."² We go wrong, for instance, if "we try to use our imagination to conceive the nature of the soul, or we try to conceive the way in which the soul moves the body by conceiving the way in which one body is moved by another."³ Descartes' answer to Elizabeth's question is, thus, that she mixes the primitive notions of thought and extension, whereas the relation between mind and body pertains to the union. According to Descartes, we all have these notions "by nature" and we can find them in our mind, even though "it does not always sufficiently distinguish them from each other, or assign them to the objects to which they ought to be assigned."⁴

Elizabeth is not satisfied with this answer, as it still does not explain how the immaterial thing can be applied to the material thing. According to her, "it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede the capacity to move a body and to be moved by it to an immaterial thing."⁵ Descartes answers that to conceive the mind as material is to conceive the union of mind and body.⁶ He explains that the difference between the primitive notions can be understood through how they can be conceived. The mind is known by the pure intellect, the extensive body is known by the mind alone or by the mind and imagination, and "what belongs to the union of the soul and the body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses."⁷ According to Descartes, then, this suffices to explain how we know the union of mind and body and other primitive notions:

This is why people who never philosophize and use only their senses have no doubt that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. They regard both of them as a single thing, that is to say, they conceive their union; because to conceive the union between two things is to conceive them as one single thing. Metaphysical thoughts, which exercise the pure intellect, help to familiarize us with the notion of the soul; and the study of mathematics, which exercises mainly the imagination in the consideration of shapes and motions, accustoms us to form very distinct notions of body. But it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from study of the things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body.⁸

¹ AT III, 665/CSM-K, 218.

² AT III, 666/CSM-K, 218.

³ AT III, 666/CSM-K, 218.

⁴ AT III, 666–667/CSM-K, 219.

⁵ AT III, 685/CED, 68.

⁶ AT III, 691/CSM-K, 226.

⁷ AT III, 691–692/CSM-K, 227.

⁸ AT III, 692/CSM-K, 227.

Accordingly, the union is not, in a strict sense, a philosophical notion, but rather opens up the sphere of non-philosophical experience of everyday practices. Alanen argues that one way to understand the coherence of Descartes' claims on the distinction and the union is by separating them as fields of philosophical theory and practical life: "the domain of the third primitive notion is that of the awareness and know-how exercised in daily experience and action (know-how as opposed to know-that)."¹ Moreover, it is not only that the body is conceived differently through the union and through the distinction, but also that the mind must be conceived differently: according to Alanen, there is a difference between the pure mind of the *Second Meditation* and the embodied mind of the *Sixth Meditation*.² It is exactly because the mind is, in the union, "intermingled" with the body that it does not perceive clearly and distinctly the bodily sensations, but has only "confused thoughts" about these sensations: if the mind was in the body "as a sailor is present in a ship," it would perceive the sensations clearly and distinctly but without being struck by, for example, hunger, thirst, and pain.³ According to Descartes, an angel in a human body would not be affected by the sensations, but would only notice them intellectually.⁴ The mode of embodied thinking is, therefore, confused, but it constitutes the human nature.

Descartes explains further to Elizabeth that the notion of the union is experienced by everyone in themselves without philosophizing: "Everyone feels that he is a single person with both body and thought so related by nature that the thought can move the body and feel the things which happen to it."⁵ Again, he expresses that Elizabeth can feel free to conceive the mind as material, because this is to conceive the union of mind and body. And yet:

[O]nce she has formed a proper conception of this and experienced it in herself, it will be easy for her to consider that the matter she has attributed to the thought is not thought itself, and that the extension of this matter is of a different nature from the extension of the thought, because the former has a determinate location, such that it thereby excludes all other bodily extension, which is not the case with the latter.⁶

According to Descartes, in this way one can easily proceed from conceiving the union to the philosophical knowledge of the distinction. Nevertheless, what is crucial is that one cannot conceive them at the same time, as this would lead to a contradiction:

[I]t does not seem to me that the human mind is capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, the distinction between the soul and the body and

¹ Alanen 1996, 13.

² Alanen 2003, 48.

³ AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56. Alanen 2003, 58.

⁴ AT III, 493/CSM-K, 206. Alanen 2003, 58–59.

⁵ AT III, 694/CSM-K, 228.

⁶ AT III, 694–695/CSM-K, 228.

their union, since to do so it is necessary to conceive them as one single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two, which is contradictory.¹

Difficult questions arise from Descartes' explications to Elizabeth. The problem of Descartes' ideas of distinction and union is in how he himself evades the contradiction which he expresses to Elizabeth. Inspired by the correspondence with Elizabeth, Descartes made an inquiry of the passions which the body causes in the mind in his work *Passions of the Soul* – but how is such a work possible without contradiction? How is the intellectual research of the passions possible, is it not an intellectual perception of the union of mind and body? Yet, even if in *Passions of the Soul* Descartes mentions the union as the reason for the studies of the passions, he nevertheless studies the passions from an intellectual point of view, from the perspective of the distinction: “there is no better way of coming to know about our passions than by examining the difference between the soul and the body, in order to learn to which of the two we should attribute each of the functions present in us.”² The aim of *Passions of the Soul* is not to study the lived experience of the union of mind and body as such, but to find an intellectual mastery of the passions – which already was a central topic in Descartes' and Elizabeth's correspondence – and this mastery requires distance from the union of mind and body, or the distinction of the mind from the body.³

What about the *Meditations*, then? How is it possible to maintain in one work both point of views, the pure mind of the *Second Meditation* and the embodied mind of the *Sixth Meditation*, as they are mutually exclusive and not reducible to each other, without a contradiction? Alanen states that *ontologically* the notion of the “union between two different natures, which can be clearly and distinctly understood only when considered as distinct from each other,” is incoherent.⁴ According to Alanen, they can be coherently understood as different kinds of “self-knowledge,” as I already mentioned, as theoretical and practical self-understanding.⁵

However, I think it is evident that Merleau-Ponty does not distinguish between “self-knowledge” and the ontological aspect of the contradiction: the attempt to conduct a philosophy of the embodied self already prevents this separation.⁶ For Merleau-Ponty the duality in Descartes' philosophy is not only about two ways of knowing, but is also an ontological differentiation, a “split” in the being of the self as consciousness and living body which, as I will show in Chapter Four, Merleau-Ponty reformulates in his later philosophy on the basis of the “ontological structure” of connection and difference. Instead of trying to

¹ AT III, 693/CED, 70.

² AT XI, 328/CSM I, 328.

³ See Alanen 1996, 12; Alanen 2003, 47; Alanen 2004, 207.

⁴ Alanen 2003, 48.

⁵ Alanen 2003, 48. See Alanen 1996, 13.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty states in *Phenomenology of Perception*: “The ontological world and body which we find at the core of the subject are not the world or body as idea, but on the one hand the world itself contracted into a comprehensive grasp, and on the other the body itself as a knowing-body” (PP, 467/475). He reaffirms in the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*: “what one might consider to be ‘psychology’ (*Phenomenology of Perception*) is in fact ontology” (VI, 230/176).

avoid the contradiction, Merleau-Ponty regards it as the central feature of Descartes' philosophy. In his last lecture, "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui," which concerns Cartesian ontology, he states that one should avoid *correcting* the ambiguity of Descartes' philosophy, as many philosophers after Descartes have attempted, as the ambiguity tells something essential about his philosophy.¹ In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states the contradiction of Descartes' philosophy in the following way:

The vital knowledge or "natural inclination" which shows us the union of body and soul, once the light of nature has taught us to distinguish them, is a thing which it seems contradictory to guarantee by divine truthfulness; for this is after all nothing but the intrinsic clarity of the idea, and can in any case validate only self-evident thoughts. But perhaps Descartes' philosophy consists in embracing this contradiction. When Descartes says that the understanding knows itself incapable of knowing the union of soul and body and leaves this knowledge for life to achieve, this means that the act of understanding presents itself as reflection on an unreflective experience which it does not absorb either in fact or in theory.²

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes states that God guarantees as true what the intellect perceives as clear and distinct, and yet in the *Sixth Meditation* God not only guarantees the nature which teaches us the union of mind and body – obscure and confused for the intellect – but this nature in the general sense is "God himself."³ In the lecture *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the two notions of nature described by Descartes in the *Meditations* from the ontological perspective, as "the ontology of the object" and "the ontology of the existent being."⁴ In these lectures, he calls the dual Cartesian situation an "ontological diplopia."⁵ The duality between the natural light and the natural inclination is, for Merleau-Ponty, a duality between two Cartesian ontologies. In *Eye and Mind*, he calls the contradictory duality a "Cartesian situation" and a "Cartesian equilibrium."⁶ The two Cartesian possibilities, then, are the "two monsters" which try to rectify Descartes' contradictory philosophy by excluding the other possi-

¹ NC, 264. See Chapter Two on the Cartesian tradition.

² PP, 52–53/49.

³ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56. Gueroult formulates the contradiction in a similar fashion in the second book of *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*: "This conclusion is that sensation, which is capable of certifying the existence of bodies, and the varieties of existing bodies because of their qualitative variations, deceives us with respect to their nature because of its intrinsic obscurity and confusion. And in some respects, this conclusion contradicts God's own veracity. How could a veracious God have put into sensation, in addition to the constraint and natural inclination that are indispensable for allowing us to know the truth relative to the existence of material things, the quality of obscurity and confusion, meaning the quality that would be valuable only for deceiving us about the nature of these things?" (Gueroult 1953b, 59/44.) Gueroult continues to show how this contradiction is, however, overcome in the "order of reasons." Merleau-Ponty criticizes Gueroult's approach in the lecture "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui" (see Chapter 5.1).

⁴ N, 169/125.

⁵ N, 179/134; 371/-.

⁶ OE, 52–56/136–137.

bility, either the pure mind or the union of mind and body.¹ I will concentrate on this duality in Chapter Three.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty refers twice to Descartes' letter to Elizabeth on 28th of June 1643, and highlights the contradiction.² He formulates it as a question: "[I]f our union with the body is substantial, how is it possible for us to experience in ourselves a pure soul from which to accede to an absolute Spirit?"³ How can we leave behind the constant union of mind and body and become a pure mind? In the lecture *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty presents the same question, but from the other angle: "how does it happen that there exists a realm of experience which we cannot conceive?"⁴ If our mind perceives the clear and distinct essence of our experience, how is it possible that it cannot, nevertheless, conceive the sensible experience of the union? And once again: "If the union of the soul and the body is a confused thought, how was I able to discover the Cogito? And if I discover the Cogito, how can I be the unreflective subject of the Sixth Meditation?"⁵

Merleau-Ponty shows that under the intellectual judgment of the pure mind, it is already in the *Second Meditation*, where Descartes explains how we perceive the clear and distinct idea of the piece of wax by the mind, that there lies "knowledge of our body"⁶ and "the perceived object presents itself as a totality and a unity before we have apprehended the intelligible law governing it, and that the wax is not originally a pliable and alterable bit of extension."⁷ The body knows the sensible qualities of the piece of wax, "the taste of the honey," "the scent of the flowers," "its colour, shape and size," its hardness, coldness, handleability, and sound.⁸ The body conceived as extensive by the intellect is an object, but in the lived experience of the union of mind and body, the body is not only a sensible thing but also, as Heinämaa puts it, a "sensing thing."⁹

As I mentioned above, in his elaboration of the sensing body Merleau-Ponty is influenced by Husserl's phenomenological analysis of the lived body, especially in the second book of *Ideas*, which Merleau-Ponty was able to consult in the Husserl archive of Leuven.¹⁰ In this work, Husserl specifies the separation between the objective body (*Körper*) and phenomenal or lived body (*Leib*) and the separation between naturalistic and personalistic attitude.¹¹ According

¹ OE, 58/138.

² PP, 52/49; 231/231. In contrast, he does not refer to Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* at all.

³ PP, 232/231-232.

⁴ UAC, 15/35.

⁵ UAC, 16/35.

⁶ PP, 231/231.

⁷ PP, 52/48.

⁸ AT VII, 30/CSM II, 20.

⁹ Heinämaa 2003, 26.

¹⁰ See Van Breda 1992.

¹¹ In the English translation of the second book of *Ideas*, "*Leib*" is translated as "Body," using the capital letter in order to distinguish it from "body" as a translation for "*Körper*." In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty uses the expressions "*corps propre*" and "*corps vivant*." Merleau-Ponty's term "*corps propre*" points in the direction of the Cartesian tradition as it is used by Maine de Biran (see Chapter 2.3). I will, nevertheless, use "lived body" in my work. According to Natalie Depraz, "this translation has the disadvantage of placing corporeality in a reflexive framework (my body, lived by myself), when phenomenology

to Husserl, the scientific-naturalistic attitude is an objectifying and theoretical attitude. For this attitude, as Husserl writes, "'nature' is a sphere of 'mere things.'"¹ In the naturalistic attitude, the body of an animal or a man is an object, even though it can contain not only physical properties but also psychic properties.² On this level, the psychic properties can be said to be dependent on the body. But, as Husserl writes, this cannot be the full description of the lived body, since the real person is an individual who is not only a psychophysical unity.

In the personalistic attitude, on the other hand, "I do not *therein* apprehend myself as dependent on my Body or on my history."³ The person is the body. He or she is involved in the intersubjective and cultural world, the surrounding world.⁴ According to Husserl, we are always in the personalistic attitude "when we live with one another, talk to one another, shake hands with one another in greeting, or are related to one another in love and aversion, in disposition and action, in discourse and discussion."⁵ The personalistic attitude is also a practical attitude, in which the objects are for use and "on hand."⁶

Thus, in the second book of *Ideas*, Husserl distinguishes between three meanings of the body: 1) the body as a material object, 2) the body as a psychophysical unity and 3) the lived body of a person. In these distinctions, Husserl gets close to Descartes' philosophy, as we can also find three ways to conceive the body in Descartes' works: 1) the material, mechanistic, and extensive body, 2) the psychophysical activity of the passions studied in *Passions of the Soul*, and 3) the experience of the lived union of mind and body as the personal unity. The central similarity between Husserl's personalistic attitude and Descartes' lived union of mind and body is in that they both express the practicality, intersubjectivity, and pre-scientificity of the lived everyday experience. For both, the lived experience is not primarily attained through reflective thought. And, moreover, they both describe the embodiment on this level as the practical orientation towards the world, and as a relation with others in conversation.

As far as I know, Husserl nevertheless does not explicitly connect his analysis of the lived body to Descartes' concept of the union, although in the second book of *Ideas*, he once uses the expression "the union of Body and soul."⁷ In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl emphasizes the idea of the pure *ego cogito* in Descartes' philosophy which, according to him, leads "from naïve Objectivism to transcendental subjectivism."⁸ Also, in the second book of *Ideas*, it is finally "the absolute consciousness" which must be found in the

aimed to short-circuit the distinction between inside and outside" (Depraz 2014, 562). In my work, however, this "disadvantage" is, in a certain sense, fortunate, as my intention is to make a parallel between Descartes' concept of the union of mind and body and the phenomenological lived body.

¹ Hua4, 25/27.

² Hua4, 121/129.

³ Hua4, 141/148.

⁴ Hua4, 141/148–149.

⁵ Hua4, 183/192.

⁶ Hua4, 186–190/196–199.

⁷ Hua4, 281/294.

⁸ Hua1, 46/4.

phenomenological analysis.¹ And yet, according to Husserl, “the soul is dependent on the Body.”² Let me follow Husserl’s analysis of the constitution of one’s own lived body, as it forms an important point of departure not only for Merleau-Ponty’s early work but also for the later ontology.³

According to Husserl, the body itself is perceived as a sensible thing within certain limits: we can only touch certain parts of our body which we cannot see. He gives an example of touching our own body: when I touch my left hand with my right hand, the left hand is objectified as a sensation belonging to my right hand. Yet, at the same time, when I touch my left hand, I also find touch-sensations in it: it is also touching and not only a touchable object. My left hand is, therefore, not a merely physical thing, but a sensing body. But this is not all, since when I have touch-sensations in my left hand, my right hand becomes objectified by it, and the roles of touching and being touched *reverse* between my hands: now I am touching my right hand with my left hand. According to Husserl, “the sensation is *doubled* in the two parts of the Body” and “the Body is originally constituted in a double way.”⁴ When we touch one hand with the other the sensations are doubled, as “each is apprehendable or experienceable in a double way.”⁵ Husserl calls this “double sensation.”⁶

Now, according to Husserl, there is a significant difference between tactual and visual experience. We can touch our hand which touches but we do not see our eye which sees: “the seen Body is not something seeing which is seen, the way my Body as touched Body is something touching which is touched.”⁷ Therefore, Husserl states that the role of visual sensations must be different from tactual sensations in the constitution of the lived body. This difference is significant, because only in tactual sensations can the body be constituted as *me*: my vision is not seen, and therefore not localized, in the same way as my touching is touched by everything I touch. Thus, according to Husserl, the lived body “can be constituted originally only in tactuality and in everything that is localized with the sensations of touch.”⁸

Husserl describes how on this basis we can understand the “I can” of the lived body as the immediate and spontaneous freedom to move,⁹ and moreover how all sensings are localized in the lived body, and thus how “*intentional functions [...] are bound to this stratum.*”¹⁰ Accordingly, “*a human being’s total consciousness is [...] bound to the Body.*”¹¹ Husserl states:

¹ Hua4, 281/294.

² Hua4, 281/294. I will continue to explicate the duality which Merleau-Ponty finds in Husserl in the Chapter Three.

³ See Chapter Four.

⁴ Hua4, 145/153.

⁵ Hua4, 147/154.

⁶ Hua4, 147/155.

⁷ Hua4, 148/155.

⁸ Hua4, 150/158.

⁹ Hua4, 152/159-160.

¹⁰ Hua4, 153/160.

¹¹ Hua4, 153/160.

Soul and psychic Ego “have” a Body; there exists a material thing, or a certain nature, which is not merely a material thing but is a Body, i.e., a material thing which, as localization field for sensations and for stirring of feelings, as complex of sense organs, and as phenomenal partner and counter-part of all perceptions of things [...], makes up a fundamental component of the real givenness of the soul and the Ego.¹

The lived body is, thus, our means to constitute the sensible world. Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl in that, according to him, there is a synthesis of meaning and a unity before our conscious action. The body is the “transcendental condition” of meaning and consciousness in general *as* the phenomenal field.² The “transcendental condition” of the experience is, therefore, not outside of the experience of the world, or before it, as a “constitutive consciousness:” the transcendental is conceivable only *within* the experience itself, through the ambiguous – confused³ – field of experience.

¹ Hua4, 157/165.

² PP, 77/73–74. Merleau-Ponty does not use the concept “transcendental body” in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Instead, “transcendental body” is thematized by Michel Henry (1922–2002), who elaborates the concept not only on Husserl’s ideas but also on Maine de Biran’s conceptions. In his work *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, Henry argues that Maine de Biran’s idea of reflection does not mean a duplication of the experience, but on the contrary, an immediate self-awareness of experience and thus it opens up the “transcendental horizon” (Henry 1975, 12). On this basis Henry claims that the transcendental body can be conceptualized as this kind of immediate self-relation. According to him, “[t]o the extent that it is an internal transcendental experience, our body is an immediate knowledge of self” (Henry 1975, 92). Henry states that Maine de Biran defines the body “*as a subjective and transcendental being*” (Henry 1975, 57). Henry writes: “It is because the ego presents itself to itself in an internal transcendental experience, or rather, it is because it is the very fact of thus presenting itself, because its structure is the structure of this experience, its substance and peculiar phenomenality – which we have elsewhere [*The Essence of Manifestation*] called the fundamental ontological event of auto-affection – that it realizes in itself the first condition of the experience of the world and the effectiveness of our access to things. This is why, shortly after he has posited the identity of the being of the ego with that of ontological knowledge, we see that Maine de Biran determines this being by the way in which it presents itself to us, and we likewise see that he is preoccupied with defining the *sui generis* mode whereby this original auto-presentation to self, which is the very phenomenon of the ego and of subjectivity, takes place. This being, he says, ‘is in no way a phenomenon nor an object which represents itself... it is an interior fact *sui generis*, rather obvious without doubt for any reflective being, but *which requires being apperceived by means of its own peculiar and special sense.*’ Hence, the being of the ego becomes one with original truth itself which is, if you wish, the auto-knowledge of ontological knowledge, i.e. its foundation, its true and subjective being. Consequently, ‘There is no question here whatever of proving this fact which itself serves as the foundation for all proofs, for all truths of fact.’” (Henry 1975, 41–42.) Henry’s idea of the “transcendental body” places a strong emphasis on the *immediacy* of the self-relation which, as I argue in my work, is the conception Merleau-Ponty wants to avoid. Let me remind here that I showed in Chapter 1.1 that for Merleau-Ponty “transcendental” is the “field of transcendencies.” Therefore, as we will see, especially highlighted in Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy, for him the lived body is not an *immediate* field of experience, but the self-relation already necessitates differentiation and distance (see Chapter Four).

³ Merleau-Ponty’s expression “ambiguity” and Descartes’ term “confusion” both mean something quite similar: an oscillation between two things, even between two opposites like “true” and “false,” the inability to distinguish. For both of them these expressions mean that sense experience is not intellectually defined and unchangeable, without “confusion” or “ambiguity.” According to the report on his early works and his future projects for the candidacy of Collège de France, addressed to Martial Gueroult and published posthumously 1962 as “Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” “bad ambiguity” must be separat-

Bodily experience forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness, a meaning which clings to certain contents. My body is that meaningful core which behaves like a general function, and which nevertheless, exists, and is susceptible to disease. In it we learn to know that union of essence and existence [...].¹

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is not only a “person,” voluntarily active and conscious of its gestures and of their meanings. For example, when we see an object with our two eyes, we are not aware of seeing it with two eyes, but we are aware of seeing the object.² The body is already active on a pre-personal and anonymous level: “my organism, as a prepersonal cleaving to the general form of the world, as an anonymous and general existence, plays, beneath my personal life, the part of an *inborn complex*.”³ Meaning arises already at the organic level of the body.⁴ There is “essentiality” already on the bodily level which, at the same time, is the source of our existence. According to Merleau-Ponty, the meaningfulness of the bodily life comes from the relation of the world and our *body schema*: the body schema helps us to unify the experience of the world as a meaningful whole.⁵ The body schema does not come from the consciousness, it is not an explicit judgment of the mind but a “prelogical unity.”⁶

Yet, how should we describe our relation to our knowing, pre-personal bodies? In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes the Cartesian duality as a contradictory relation between reflection and the unreflected. The problem is about the self-relation: How can we reflect on the unreflected self?

But if the description of the unreflective experience remains valid after reflection and the *Sixth Meditation* after the *Second*, conversely this unreflective experience is known to us only through reflection and cannot be posited outside itself as an unknowable final stage. Between the self which analyses perception and the self which perceives, there is always a distance.⁷

As we will see in the next chapter, the immediate self-relation is a supposition which is central in the Cartesian tradition: in order to avoid the infinite regress of the reflection, the self must be immediate for itself. Merleau-Ponty argues against this solution. In his later philosophy, Merleau-Ponty explicates the self-

ed from “good ambiguity:” “The study of perception could only teach us a ‘bad ambiguity,’ a mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority. But there is a ‘good ambiguity’ in the phenomenon of expression, a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements, a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture, into a single whole. To establish this wonder would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics.” (Inedit, 409/290.)

¹ PP, 172/170.

² PP, 270/271.

³ PP, 99/97.

⁴ See Morris 2014, 114.

⁵ The idea of the “body schema” has its origin in Kant’s schematism and was popularized in early 20th century by Henry Head (1861–1940) and Paul Schilder (1886–1940) in psychology (Matherne 2016, 211–212). See also Morris 2000.

⁶ PP, 269/270.

⁷ PP, 53/49.

relation in terms of divergence (*écart*), non-coincidence, and differentiation.¹ Already in *Phenomenology of Perception* he gives “hints” of such ideas, which nevertheless becomes more clear if one reads the early work alongside the later work and its “ontological explication:”²

There can be no question of describing perception itself as one of the facts thrown up in the world, since we can never fill up, in the picture of the world, the gap which we ourselves are, and by which it comes into existence for someone, since perception is the “flaw” in this “great diamond”.³

Merleau-Ponty agrees with Husserl, who states that the body through which we have objects is never itself completely constituted as an object:⁴ “The same Body which serves me as means for all my perception obstructs me in the perception of it itself and is a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing.”⁵ Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty highlights the “imperfection” of the bodily constitution, but it is in his later philosophy that he thematizes it as the *untouchable* and the *invisible*.⁶ In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl’s analysis of “double sensation” and leaves open the relation between the hand as touching and the hand as touched:

[T]he two hands *are never simultaneously* in the relationship of touched and touching each other. When I press my two hands together, it is *not a matter of two sensations felt together* [...] but of an *ambiguous set-up* in which both hands can *alternate* the rôles of “touching” and being “touched”.⁷

The role between the two hands can reverse, but cannot be *immediately* both touching and touched; the roles do not coincide. Referring to Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*, Merleau-Ponty states: when the body tries to touch itself touching (*se toucher touchant*) it “initiates ‘a kind of reflection’.”⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, this suffices to distinguish the body from objects:⁹ what suffices is, indeed, not being immediately itself, but being at a distance with itself, open to itself, diverging and differentiating from itself. We do not coincide with ourselves because not only the experience of ourselves, but already the experience of a sensible thing, is *diverging*, which is the condition for the unity of the experience: the experience of the present is already in the field of the thickness of time, and therefore transcendent.

The transcendence of the instants of time is both the ground of, and the impediment to, the rationality of my personal history: the ground because it opens a to-

¹ See Chapter Four.

² VI, 237/183.

³ PP, 240/241. Translator Colin Smith notes that Merleau-Ponty quotes Paul Valéry’s poem *Le Cimetière marin*: “Mes repentirs, mes doutes, mes contraintes / Sont le défaut de ton grand diamant.”

⁴ PP, 108/105.

⁵ Hua4, 159/167.

⁶ See Chapter Four.

⁷ PP, 109/106. Emphasis by JH.

⁸ PP, 109/107. Cf. Hua1, 128/97.

⁹ PP, 109/107.

tally new future to me in which I shall be able to reflect upon the element of opacity in my present, a source of danger in so far as I shall never manage to seize the present through which I live with apodeictic certainty, and since the lived is thus never entirely comprehensible, what I understand never quite tallies with my living experience, in short, I am never quite at one with myself.¹

Throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty indicates that time is central to understanding subjectivity. According to him, “if 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.”² According to Merleau-Ponty, his project is to restore “to the *cogito* a temporal thickness.”³ In the “Temporality” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explicates self-relation through the conception of the subjectivity as time: “We must understand time as the subject and the subject as time.”⁴ Through time we gain access to the “concrete structure” of subjectivity.⁵ He states that the “self-positing ceases to be a contradiction” when “the subject is identified with temporality.”⁶

The self-relation is a contradiction between distinction and union, distance and connection, activity and passivity, if one does not take into account temporality. For Descartes, it is a contradiction to understand something as one and two, union and distinction, “at the same time.”⁷ He does not take into account the temporal aspect: something can remain itself and differentiate from itself “at the same time,” within time. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, there is a “fundamental contradiction,” and philosophy is “centered round a contradiction;”⁸ but if, instead, one takes account of the co-existence, of the synthesis as a “temporal process,” “the contradiction disappears, or rather is generalized, being linked up with the ultimate conditions of our experience and becoming one with the possibility of living and thinking, if we operate in time, and if we manage to understand time as the measure of being.”⁹

In the “Temporality” chapter, Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl’s work *The Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, where Husserl explains that there is no need to resort to a “second flow” in order to grasp the temporal flow of the consciousness, because it “constitutes itself as a phenomenon in itself”

¹ PP, 399/404.

² PP, 419/425.

³ PP, 456/464.

⁴ PP, 483/490. According to Barbaras, the “Temporality” chapter is central as “the entire structure of *Phenomenology of Perception* rests on a chapter devoted to temporality, in which the identity of ultimate subjectivity and time is demonstrated” (Barbaras 2001, 251/218). Yet, as Barbaras also notes, this chapter is ambiguous. In my opinion, rather than providing the key to understand the whole position of *Phenomenology of Perception*, this chapter can be understood only through the whole discussion on experience in *Phenomenology of Perception*: self-relation, self-positing, or auto-affection must be understood through the “thickness of the pre-objective present” (PP, 495/503) as the withdrawing of the unreflected experience – not as an immediate coincidence of the self with the self.

⁵ PP, 469/477.

⁶ PP, 487/494.

⁷ AT III, 693/CED, 70.

⁸ PP, 418–419/425.

⁹ PP, 381/385.

and is thus self-aware.¹ Husserl argues that time does not consist of “points,” and it is not only given as a now-point: “Each perceptual phase has intentional reference to an extended section of the temporal object and not merely to a now-point necessarily given in it and simultaneously with it.”² Merleau-Ponty argues that time, with its retentional and protentional framework, is not an object of consciousness that we constitute: “Time as the immanent object of a consciousness is time brought down to one uniform level, in other words it is no longer time at all.”³ Time is not constituted by an intentional act of transcendental consciousness, or by intellectual synthesis, but by “passive synthesis” – Merleau-Ponty refers to a term in Husserl’s *Formal and Transcendental Logic*.⁴ Passivity means, according to Merleau-Ponty, that “I am not the creator of time any more than of my heart-beats.”⁵ Merleau-Ponty refers to another concept in Husserl’s work when he states that temporality is not formed through conscious intentional acts but through the “operative intentionality” beneath them.⁶

According to Merleau-Ponty, time functions within us without a conscious effort, and this, in Heidegger’s terms, is called transcendence, that is, the ecstatic temporality.⁷ There is the “cohesion of a life” or “connection of life” between birth and death which is “given with its *ek-stase*,” Merleau-Ponty states, referring to *Being and Time*.⁸ Merleau-Ponty also refers to Heidegger’s interpretation of Kant in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. According to Heidegger, “time as pure self-affection forms the essential structure of subjectivity.”⁹ And again: “As pure self-affection, it [time] originally forms finite selfhood in such a way that the self can become self-consciousness.”¹⁰ According to Merleau-Ponty,

¹ Hua10, 83/88. Cf. PP, 487/495.

² Hua10, 232/239.

³ PP, 474/481–482.

⁴ PP, 479/486. Hua17, 297/292.

⁵ PP, 488/496.

⁶ PP, 478/486. Hua17, 165/157. In the working notes included in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty presents a more direct criticism of Husserl’s conception of the consciousness and its intentional acts, referring once again to Husserl’s own terms: “The description of retention in Husserl (and that of subjectivity as time, of the absolute flux, of the pre-intentional retention) is a start, but leaves open the question: whence comes the ‘shrinking’ of the temporal perspective, the passage of the remote retentions into the horizon, the forgetting” (VI, 248/194)? And again: “The whole Husserlian analysis is blocked by the framework of *acts* which imposes upon it the philosophy of *consciousness*. It is necessary to take up again and develop the *fungierende or latent* intentionality which is the intentionality within being. That is not compatible with ‘phenomenology,’ that is, with an ontology that obliges whatever is not nothing to *present* itself to the *consciousness* across *Abschattungen* and as deriving from an originating donation which is an *act* [...] It is necessary to take as primary, not the consciousness [...], but the [...] spatializing-temporalizing vortex (which is flesh and not consciousness facing a noema).” (VI, 297–298/244.)

⁷ PP, 478/486; 480/487. Heidegger 1996, 34n*; 332n22.

⁸ PP, 481/489. Heidegger 1996, 342–343.

⁹ Heidegger 1965, 194. Cf. PP, 487/494. Kant explicates the “inner sense” as self-affection (Kant 1998, 189–190; 257–258). I will not study Kant or Heidegger’s interpretation of Kant here. Let me, nevertheless, note that Kant’s idea of the “inner sense” could be related to Descartes’ concept of “internal awareness,” Malebranche’s idea of “inner sensation,” and Maine de Biran’s notion of “intimate sensation,” which I will explicate in Chapter Two.

¹⁰ Heidegger 1965, 195. Cf. PP, 487/495.

time provides the “*relationship of self to self*,” and it is “through temporality that there can be, without contradiction, ipseity, significance and reason.”¹

Yet, it also seems that Merleau-Ponty takes up Heidegger in order to show the difference between their approaches, and to present a critique of Heidegger’s understanding of temporality. According to Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger’s idea of authentic historicity is “impossible within the context of Heidegger’s thought itself.”² Heidegger defines inauthentic temporality as self-forgetfulness towards the past and the future.³ Authentic temporality is, in contrast, resolution toward the future as one’s own death, and realization of one’s fate.⁴ According to Heidegger, “the present arises from the future in the primordial, ecstatic unity of the temporalizing of temporality.”⁵ In Merleau-Ponty’s view the ecstatic relation to time is possible only through the thickness of the present, and there is no decision which would leave it. He states: “if time is an *ek-stase*, if present and past are two results of this *ek-stase*, how could we ever cease completely to see time from the point of view of the present, and how could we completely escape from the inauthentic?”⁶ On the one hand, we have only an indirect relation to our death, and on the other hand, we do not grasp history as a “fate:” we do not ever leave the “inauthentic” obscurity of our present, which is also our means of freedom and decision. This critique is in accordance with Merleau-Ponty’s later criticism of Heidegger: according to Merleau-Ponty, being must be approached through beings, and a direct ontology is impossible.⁷ Moreover, Merleau-Ponty rejects Heidegger’s concept of *nothingness*: “There is no *nichtiges Nichts* [the nothing that nothings].”⁸ I will return briefly to Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Heidegger in Chapter Three and Chapter Five.

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, our relation to ourselves through time is paradoxical: we do not coincide with time because we are time itself. There is a “paradox of time:”⁹ time flees from us and it persists. According to Merleau-Ponty, on the one hand, “by becoming past, the event does not cease to be,”¹⁰ and, on the other hand, there is forgetting, the “shrinkage’ of the past with oblivion.”¹¹ The paradox is not an accident, because “to retain is to hold, but at a distance.”¹² The unreflected life is transitional, a transitional synthesis of

¹ PP, 487/495.

² PP, 489/497.

³ Heidegger 1996, 389.

⁴ Heidegger 1996, 352.

⁵ Heidegger 1996, 391.

⁶ PP, 489/497.

⁷ VI, 233/179. N, 370/-.

⁸ VI, 249/196. See also NC, 251. HLP, 60/49; 64/52. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty states: “The principle of principles here is that one cannot judge the powers of life by those of death, nor define without arbitrariness life as the sum of the forces that resist death, as if it were the necessary and sufficient definition of Being to be the suppression of non-being” (VI, 117/84–85).

⁹ PP, 419/425.

¹⁰ PP, 480/488.

¹¹ PP, 483/491.

¹² PP, 484/491.

time.¹ The present, in which our decisions act, is not an immediate coincidence of the self with the self, but is a dehiscence, an opening, a differentiation of time, a cyclic structure that refers back to a past that remains not closed and dead, but remains open to new possibilities through distance.² The present entails the depth and the thickness of time. The self-relation is not an immediate coincidence of the self with the self, but “grasping myself at a distance.”³ Merleau-Ponty states:

The solution of all problems of transcendence is to be sought in the thickness of the pre-objective present, in which we find our bodily being, our social being, and the preexistence of the world, that is, the starting point of “explanations”, in so far as they are legitimate – and at the same time the basis of our freedom.⁴

Thus, Merleau-Ponty finds the answer to the contradiction of Cartesian duality in the paradoxical structure of time. He formulates the self-relation as a paradox of connection and difference. Yet, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, both the structure and its ontological significance remain quite unclarified. As we will see in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, in Merleau-Ponty’s later work the thickness of time and our paradoxical relation with it is central. Moreover, in his later work, Merleau-Ponty not only comes back to the ideas of Husserl and Heidegger, but is also influenced by Bergson, Freud, and Schelling. One of the central concepts in Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy is institution, which he elaborates on the basis of Husserl’s concept of *Stiftung*. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he merely mentions the concept, and yet, it is in the last chapter on freedom that he already develops the idea of the institution: through institution and freedom we can understand the “concrete structure” of the “paradox of time.” In order to demonstrate the relation between Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy and his concept of freedom, I will leave the explication of freedom to the very end of this work.

There is continuity from Merleau-Ponty’s early work to his later work: in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explicates the contradiction of Descartes’ philosophy and reformulates it already as a paradoxical relation, but nevertheless he does not completely succeed in explicating the ontological structure of this relation, which he sets as his task in *The Visible and the Invisible*.⁵ Moreover, as I will show in Chapter Three, Merleau-Ponty is unsatisfied with some aspects of his early work. In his working notes included in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he states: “The problems that remain after this first description: they are due to the fact that in part I retained the philosophy of ‘consciousness’.”⁶ For example, in the “Temporality” chapter Merleau-Ponty states that

¹ PP, 484/491.

² PP, 489/497. Scott Marratto argues: “The present is not an a priori form, but an event, an enactment. ‘Transition’ here implies a movement of differentiation [...]” (Marratto 2012, 126).

³ PP, 488/496.

⁴ PP, 495/503.

⁵ See VI, 237/183.

⁶ VI, 237/183.

“the present [...] is the zone in which being and consciousness coincide.”¹ In his early work, Merleau-Ponty already articulates relations which are central to his later elaboration of the ontological structure or texture but he *also* retains some problematic formulations.

The analysis of the “knowing body,” although groundbreaking in its own manner, is still partially from the perspective of the “consciousness” and reflection: the reflection is based on the unreflected experience, which has its own “clarity,” which is already the “knowing body,” and yet this unreflected experience is thematized and objectified by the reflection. For the reflection, the unreflected experience remains “obscure” and “confused:” the unreflected experience withdraws from the reflection. Once again, let me quote the phrase which says this most clearly: “it is never to eliminate, but merely to push further back the opacity that thought presents to itself.”² The temporal structure is introduced to connect these two poles, in order to show that rather than contradiction, the relation between the reflecting consciousness and the unreflected life is a “paradox of time.”

In his later working notes, Merleau-Ponty states that his formulation of the *cogito* in *Phenomenology of Perception* does not solve the problem of the relation between the mind and the lived body, but merely poses the problem.³ In Chapter Four I will explicate how Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology can be understood as a “new kind of balance,” as he writes in *Eye and Mind*, to Cartesian contradictory duality:⁴ the “mind” and the “lived body” must be conceived through a connecting texture which differentiates – the “distinction” and the “union” are not mutually exclusive, but on the contrary, they *imply* each other.⁵

My aim in this chapter has been to show that Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes a contradiction between the distinction and the union. This contradiction is, in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, not only incoherence, but due to the fact that there must be a distance between reflection and unreflected experience. I have also opened up the question of the self-relation within Cartesian philosophy: in the next chapter, I will turn to Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of this problem in philosophers who, after Descartes, sought the answer from the *immediacy* of the self, but also formulated ideas of the *differentiation* of the self.

¹ PP, 484–485/492.

² PP, 454/460–461.

³ VI, 229/175–176.

⁴ OE, 56/137.

⁵ See VI, 252/199.

CHAPTER TWO: CARTESIAN TENSIONS

It is no longer a matter of an individual struggle but of a tension in the Cartesian world between essence and existence.¹

In the previous chapter I argued that Merleau-Ponty finds a central contradiction in Descartes' philosophy: the union of mind and body is the condition for the pure mind, and there is a connection between them, yet, as the lived experience is objectified by the pure mind, the experience itself withdraws from its grasp. This contradiction between the distinction and the union seems to divide Descartes' philosophy into two mutually exclusive parts. In a certain sense, the Cartesian tradition can be regarded as a continuous attempt to rectify Descartes' philosophy.² The common solutions to the contradiction in Descartes' philosophy are *either-or*: either the union is rejected as irrational and incoherent or the impurity of the *cogito* is admitted. Merleau-Ponty states the following about these two Cartesian possibilities in his lecture *The Incarnate Subject*:

Spinoza will treat the mode of experience in the Sixth Meditation as "privative." Conversely, Malebranche will obscure the Cogito - which, henceforth, will no longer "detach" - so that neither the "I think" nor the proof of the existence of God will allow us to transcend our inherent nature as unreflective subjects. Thus are defined two opposing ways of restoring a balance to Cartesianism.³

The contradiction of Descartes' philosophy forms a *tension* within the philosophers after him: either the union is rejected in the name of logic and coherence, or it is retained and has consequences for the conception of mind. I argued in the previous chapter that Merleau-Ponty takes Descartes' contradiction seriously: we should not ignore the union of mind and body as a confused idea that dims the clear and distinct perception by the natural light. On the contrary, he wants to think about the ambiguity of our lived experience and its relation to ideality. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty tends more towards those Cartesians who

¹ PM, 133/94.

² NC, 264.

³ UAC, 16/35.

do not reject the union of mind and body than those – for example, Spinoza and Merleau-Ponty’s own professor Léon Brunschvicg (1869–1944) – who want to purify Descartes’ philosophy.

In the lecture *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty reads three Cartesian philosophers who take seriously the union of mind and body: Malebranche, Maine de Biran, and Bergson. The lecture was given in 1947–1948 according to the program of “l’agrégation de philosophie,” and thus these three philosophers were not chosen by Merleau-Ponty himself. Nevertheless, they all have a visible place in Merleau-Ponty’s works in their own ways: Bergson’s idea of memory is frequently commented on by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* and in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Malebranche’s concept of the mind as shadows to itself has its place beside Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Descartes, and Maine de Biran is the founder of the concept which Merleau-Ponty elaborates on in his early work, “*le corps propre*.”¹

In this lecture, Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Cartesian philosophers also brings forth the question of *self-relation*: if there is no pure and immediate coincidence of the *cogito* with itself, and the impurity of consciousness is admitted, it will lead to the question of how the “unreflective subject,” the union, is conceived. As we saw in the previous chapter, Descartes explains in his Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections of the *Meditations* that existence and thought are known by “that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge.”² In his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth, Descartes explicated the embodied mind, the union of mind and body, as a “primitive notion” that “can be understood only through itself.”³ The embodied mind cannot be perceived by the pure intellect in a clear and distinct manner, but it can be experienced and lived. I will argue in this chapter that Malebranche, Maine de Biran, and Bergson all address the problem of self-relation in their philosophies. The pre-reflective self-relation becomes an *immediate* coincidence with the self. In a certain sense, the immediate coincidence of the *cogito* with itself is thus replaced by the immediacy of the unreflective self. Yet, there is another tension concerning the self-relation: Malebranche, Maine de Biran, and Bergson *also* bring forth a differentiation of the self, an impossibility of the immediate coincidence. This implicit tension, a kind of further Cartesian contradiction, is what Merleau-Ponty manages to bring forth in his lecture.

¹ Jacques Taminiaux describes the “tension” which Merleau-Ponty sets between the Cartesian philosophers in his Preface to the English translation of *The Incarnate Subject*: “If this relationship [between the soul and the body] is intrinsically paradoxical, we can generally state, Merleau-Ponty seems to say, that the philosophers who wrote these texts could not avoid stumbling on this paradox and recognizing it, at least obliquely, perhaps even in opposition to their stated theses. It is not a question, then, in these lectures to reduce each corpus of texts to be considered to the consistency of a logical common denominator supposed to define the fundamental thesis of the philosopher in question. But rather quite the opposite, the purpose is to play these texts off one against the other, to uncover the underlying tensions they conceal, and in so doing, to contrast the implicit with the explicit.” (UAC, –/12.)

² AT VII, 422/CSM II, 285. See Chapter 1.2.

³ AT III, 666/CSM-K, 218. See Chapter 1.6.

Before I explicate Merleau-Ponty's reading of these Cartesian philosophers, I will explicate one important source for the problem of self-relation in Cartesian philosophy: The Fifth Set of Objections to the *Meditations* by Gassendi. Merleau-Ponty hardly ever mentions Gassendi,¹ and therefore my reading is not based on his comments, but I think it is important to take up Gassendi's arguments as a background for the three Cartesian philosophers in *The Incarnate Subject*. Gassendi, in his objections to Descartes' *Meditations*, formulates the question of self-relation concerning Cartesian philosophy: how can anything act on itself? What is the relation of the self to the self?

2.1 Gassendi's Argument Against Descartes' Concept of Mind

The Fifth Set of Objections of Descartes' *Meditations* by Gassendi are crucial in the context of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Descartes, because they provide a simple formula for the problem concerning the Cartesian concept of mind: how can anything act on itself? In a certain sense, the question of the "blind spot" of the mind – the unreflected of the reflection – was presented to Descartes by Gassendi, and the question remains in the Cartesian tradition through Malebranche and Maine de Biran. The "unreflected" which Merleau-Ponty finds in Malebranche can be, at least partially, traced back to Gassendi.² It is also against Gassendi that Maine de Biran reacts when he forms his concept of the immediate "reflection."³

Gassendi's objections to Descartes are particularly interesting because they imply an alternative possibility for the immediate self-possession of the mind: even if Gassendi's purpose was to support his own Epicurean materialism, he manages, in his criticism of the philosophical conception of the immateriality of the mind, to show a kind of unattainability of the mind for itself. Merleau-Ponty does not himself consider Gassendi's philosophy, and my purpose here is not to show that he is an inheritor of Gassendi's philosophy, but nevertheless there is a certain similarity in his idea of the non-coincidence of thought, vision, and touching with Gassendi's idea, according to which nothing can act on itself.

My concern here is not Gassendi's philosophy itself, but the possible influence of his critique of Descartes' concept of the mind on the Cartesian tradition. Gassendi is not a "Cartesian philosopher." He was the philosopher who could have been as influential as Descartes, or perhaps he actually was in the 17th century, but since then his influence has faded. He was four years older than Descartes, and for example also met Isaac Beeckman (1588–1637), who was

¹ See SC, 225n1/208n46; NC, 234.

² Saint Augustine's (354–430) work is also a central background for the idea of the unreflected of the reflection, and I will briefly describe his influence on Malebranche in the next part of this chapter. Nevertheless, I am not able here to conceive all the philosophers who have had influence on the question, for example Duns Scotus (1266–1308), who is in the background of Gassendi's argumentation (Romeyer-Dherbey 1974, 56–57).

³ O III, 267note1. See Romeyer-Dherbey 1974, 59–60.

very important to Descartes' early progress. Like Descartes, Gassendi also tried to form the philosophical foundation for a new science. Yet, unlike in modern philosophy, Gassendi does not separate philosophy from mathematics and physics. This has led later philosophers to see his philosophy as half-way between the classical era and the modern era. For example, Alexandre Koyré claims that Gassendi could not make the significant move from qualitative to quantitative physics, and Bernard Rochot argues that Gassendi remained undecided between the ancient philosophy of Epicurus and new physical investigations.¹

Gassendi's critique of Descartes in the Fifth Set of Objections to *Meditations* is surprisingly interesting in the context of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Descartes. I will not go through all of Gassendi's objections to Descartes, but will limit myself only to the points that are particularly interesting with respect to my work. Gassendi's critique of Descartes' idea of the "thought about seeing" and the immanence of the pure mind are indeed quite similar to what Merleau-Ponty writes three hundred years later. But let me state once again: my intention here is not to claim that Merleau-Ponty is influenced by Gassendi – this would need a more complete study – but only to open up the question of the self-relation in Cartesian tradition.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Gassendi does not see Descartes' "radical doubt" as an unproblematic beginning of philosophy, because instead of abandoning all the prejudices it begins with a new prejudice, holding that everything can be false.² According to Gassendi, the methodic doubt is unconvincing. He does not agree with Descartes that we can leave materiality out of the concept of mind. For Gassendi, Descartes succeeds in proving that he thinks, but he does not quite manage to show that thought is not in the body, and that thought and matter are separate entities: if the mind can move the material body, then how can it be immaterial?³ Rather than immaterial, should not the mind be understood as a very subtle body that is extended in the complete matter of the body?⁴ Gassendi states that Descartes fails to show that the mind is not material.

In fact, according to Gassendi, Descartes fails to show anything else about the mind but that it exists. The subject of the *Second Meditation* is to prove that the mind is better known than the body, but according to Gassendi, Descartes does not succeed in this. Gassendi takes up Descartes' argument on the piece of wax. According to Descartes, the wax that we see and touch changes so much when we heat it that we must conclude that we do not grasp it with our senses, but with the judgment of our mind. The perception of the senses can be misleading, and the piece of wax may be an illusion, but the thought of the perception must be true. And, Descartes writes, "if I judge that the wax exists from the fact that I touch it, the same result follows, namely that I exist."⁵ Gassendi states

¹ See Joy 2002, 13.

² AT VII, 257–258/CSM II, 180.

³ What is striking here is that this is quite the same question that Elizabeth later poses to Descartes (see Alexandrescu 2012).

⁴ AT VII, 260–262/CSM II, 181–183.

⁵ AT VII, 33/CSM II, 22.

that here Descartes perceives clearly and distinctly that he exists, but does not succeed in perceiving clearly, or even obscurely, *what he is*. Moreover, Gassendi rejects the interpretation that Descartes only means that we know the existence of the mind better than the existence of the body. The problem in this interpretation is that Descartes excludes from his concept of the mind that it could have bodily organs through which it can have corporeal sensations, but still he writes about the sensible qualities of the wax, which cannot be given without these organs. As Gassendi notices, we could not think about seeing if we had not first seen.¹ Descartes states in the *Meditations*:

I now know that even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen; and hence I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else.²

However, according to Gassendi, Descartes offers only negative definitions of the mind: the mind is not embodied, it is not air, it is not fire, and it is not a moving thing. Gassendi argues that Descartes' definition of the mind as the "thinking thing" is tautological: a "thing" is too general of an idea, and it does not mean anything else than not nothing, and "thinking" does not add to the "mind" anything we did not already know about it.³ Descartes shows the existence of the mind but not what it is.

Descartes' reply to Gassendi's objections is not satisfactory.⁴ He attempts to answer to Gassendi's question on how the mind is better known than the body by arguing that for every attribute that we can perceive there must be an equivalent attribute in the mind, because the mind must have the ability to perceive the attribute.⁵ We cannot know an attribute of something if the mind does not have the power of knowing this attribute. Thus, there are more attributes that we know of the mind than of any material body, as all the attributes that we know of the material bodies must have an equivalent attribute in the mind. As Alanen states, Descartes' argument "is not only vague, it is also confusing."⁶ Descartes seems to miss the point of Gassendi's objection. Counting or identifying these kind of attributes of the mind, derived from perceptive experiences, do not lead to knowledge of the mind, as it is in itself without external perceptions of extensive nature.

For Gassendi, the best description which Descartes offers for the mind is "this puzzling 'I,'"⁷ which is in the French translation "je ne sais quelle partie de moi-même,"⁸ and in the Latin original "istud nescio quid mei."¹ Gassendi rea-

¹ AT VII, 274/CSM II, 191.

² AT VII, 34/CSM II, 23.

³ AT VII, 275-276/CSM II, 192.

⁴ Alanen 1982, 56-57. Jolley 1998, 116.

⁵ AT VII, 360/CSM II, 249.

⁶ Alanen 1982, 61. According to Alanen, it is surprising that instead of this "quantitative" approach, Descartes does not appeal here to the "greater evidence and certainty" that he insists we have of our thoughts in comparison to our knowledge of the body.

⁷ CSM II, 20; 191.

⁸ Descartes 1950, 94.

sons in the following way: I think, I am – but how can I know what is this “I”? What is my relation to “this I don’t know what I?” How can I conclude that it is immaterial if I am not able to separate it from the matter? And if I would be able to know at least something about it, why could it not be some kind of chemical processes which I can research and classify? Gassendi explains that Descartes should be able to examine “this I don’t know what ‘I’” scientifically:

You should carefully scrutinize yourself and conduct a kind of chemical investigation of yourself, if you are to succeed in uncovering and explaining to us your internal substance. If you provide such an explanation, we shall ourselves doubtless be able to investigate whether or not you are better known than the body whose nature we know so much about through anatomy, chemistry, so many other sciences, so many senses and so many experiments.²

Yet, this is not the whole of Gassendi’s objection to Descartes conception of the mind. Gassendi not only adopts the empiricist or materialist attitude, but questions the whole idea of the relation to the self – and this is a point which Descartes seems to pass unnoticed. “This I don’t know what I” is not only a mere lack of proper investigation, a lack of scientific knowledge – rather, it is a lack of knowledge *by principle*. According to Gassendi, we know better what is foreign to us than we know ourselves. We perceive the material things that are outside of us and which we can objectify, but we cannot perceive our own mind as an object, in the same way as it “happens in the case of the eye, which sees other things but does not see itself.”³ This, in the context of my work, is crucial.

Gassendi wonders how carelessly Descartes supposes that he has an idea of himself, and even an idea so fecund that he is able to derive other ideas from it.⁴ For Gassendi, it is rather the case that Descartes does not have any idea of himself, or he has a confused and imperfect one – “this I don’t know what I.” In contrast to Descartes, Gassendi claims that we can perceive anything else more easily and more evidently than ourselves: it is, by principle, impossible to have an idea of ourselves. Gassendi explains:

When I think about why it is that sight does not see itself and the intellect does not understand itself, it occurs to me that *nothing acts on itself*. Thus the hand (or the tip of the finger) does not strike itself and the foot does not kick itself.⁵

According to Gassendi, it is not possible for the mind to understand itself. To be able to know something, this something must transmit its semblance to the knowing faculty, but because the knowing faculty cannot be outside of itself, it cannot reach its own semblance, and thus it cannot know itself. Gassendi shows that the only possibility to know oneself is necessarily indirect, as in the case of

¹ AT VII, 29. Gassendi changes “I” to “you”: “illud nescio quid tui” – “this puzzling ‘you’” (AT VII, 267/186).

² AT VII, 277/CSM II, 193.

³ AT VII, 268/CSM II, 187.

⁴ AT VII, 291/CSM II, 203.

⁵ AT VII, 292/CSM II, 203. Emphasis by JH.

the eye, which can see itself through the mirror.¹ We can know ourselves indirectly, but not directly and immediately. There is always difference and distance in the perception of ourselves.

In his objections to *Meditations*, to which I limit myself here, Gassendi does not explain his idea any further. However, the question of the self-relation or “does anything act on itself,” is already put forth in ancient Greek. Plato and Aristotle both address the problem, and face the difficulty of how to define such knowledge of knowledge. Let me briefly describe how they formulate the problem of the self-relation.

In Plato’s dialogue *Charmides*, where Socrates, Charmides, and Critias discuss temperance, Critias suggests that temperance is “to know oneself” and refers to the Delphic maxim “Know thyself.”² Socrates then states his own ignorance, and tries to consider Critias’ claim. If knowing is science, then knowing oneself must be some kind of science too. But then, Critias points out, it must be a different kind of science: it “is the only science which is both of other sciences and of itself.”³ Then, if temperance is this science, it is knowing what one knows and does not know. Socrates investigates whether this is possible, and shows that it is not: for example, there cannot be a vision that would not be a vision of something, but would be a vision of itself and of the lack of a vision, or, in a similar manner, there is no hearing which is not the hearing of a sound, but hears itself and the non-hearing. Socrates then asks if there is a sense that “is a sense of the senses and of itself.”⁴ He also denies the possibility of a desire of desire, a wish for itself, love that loves itself, fear of fear and an opinion that is of itself. Then Socrates shows how it is contradictory if something is greater than itself, because it would also have to be less than itself. And in a similar manner, if something is double of itself it needs to be half of itself, if something is more than itself it has to be less than itself, and the same goes for heavier, older, and other cases. Socrates then returns to the basic problem: hearing is of sound and seeing is of color, and in order to hear itself, the hearing should have a sound, and in the same way, in order to see itself, the seeing should have a color.⁵ Socrates leaves it open whether such self-sensation is possible:

Again, that hearing or vision or, in fact, any sort of motion should move itself, or heat burn itself – all cases like this also produce disbelief in some, though perhaps there are some in whom it does not. What we need, my friend, is some great man to give an adequate interpretation of this point in every detail, whether no existing thing can by nature apply its own faculty to itself but only towards something else, or whether some can, but others cannot. We also need him to determine whether, if there are things that apply to themselves, the science which we call temperance is among them. I do not regard myself as competent to deal

¹ AT VII, 292/CSM II, 203–204.

² *Charmides*, 164d.

³ *Charmides*, 166c.

⁴ *Charmides*, 167c–d.

⁵ *Charmides*, 167e–169a.

with these matters, and this is why I am neither able to state categorically whether there might possibly be a science of science [...].¹

The dialogue leads to *aporia*, but Socrates suggests, in order to continue the discussion, that they *suppose* that the existence of such a science of science is possible, and that they can then investigate on another occasion if it really is possible or not.² It is important to highlight that the self-relation of knowledge of knowledge is explicitly only a supposition in Plato's *Charmides*.

Aristotle considers a similar problem from a bit different angle in *On the Soul*, where he studies the senses.³ He shows that in every sense it is clear that they have a specific medium through which we can perceive something. For example, the medium of vision is illumination, and through it we can perceive colors.⁴ Yet, according to Aristotle, touching is different from other senses: it does not have one specific organ and its objects are different: for example, pain, warmth, and softness. Furthermore, what is the medium of touching? Does it have a medium like other senses, or does the touching and the touched have a direct and immediate contact? Aristotle says that it only *seems* that we can directly touch the objects, but in reality, there is a medium of touching: touching happens through the *flesh*.⁵ Thus, all sensations have a medium through which they sense and they are not immediate.

Aristotle then raises the question of our awareness of sensations. According to him, we are aware of, for example, seeing, through a sense which must be either sight itself or some other sense: "either there will be two senses both percipient of the same sensible object, or the sense must be percipient of itself."⁶ Yet, according to Aristotle, "we must either fall into an infinite regress, or we must somewhere *assume* a sense which is aware of itself."⁷ He then arrives at the same difficulty as Plato, according to which if sight is aware of itself and sees itself, then it must be colored.⁸ The sensing sense must be itself sensible.

In contrast to Plato, Aristotle not only says that the awareness of the self is a supposition, but also states the reason why we have to suppose it: either we suppose the awareness of the self or we end in an infinite regress. As I noted in the previous chapter, a similar problem is also addressed by Descartes in his Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections. Descartes' "supposition" of the pre-reflective awareness may indeed have a relation to Gassendi's question about how anything can act on itself.

Gassendi, who was not satisfied with Descartes' responses to his objection to the *Meditations*, published further objections in a book, *Disquisitio Metaphysica sive Dubitationes et Instantiae* (1644). Descartes addressed these further objections in a letter to Claude Clerselier, 12th of January 1646, and the letter was pub-

¹ *Charmides*, 168e-169b.

² *Charmides*, 169d.

³ *Peri psyches*, 425b11-26.

⁴ *Peri psyches*, 419a20-25.

⁵ *Peri psyches*, 423b.

⁶ *Peri psyches*, 425b11-17.

⁷ *Peri psyches*, 425b11-17. Emphasis by JH.

⁸ *Peri psyches*, 425b18-26.

lished in the first French version of *Meditations*. Moreover, it is noticeable that even though the Sixth Set of Objections is a collection of objections from different authors collected by Mersenne and edited by Descartes himself, it seems that the first one of these is what Gassendi presents in *Dubitationes*. In the letter to Clerselier, Descartes refers to this objection: “[I]n order to know that I am thinking I must know what thought is; and yet, they [Gassendi] say, I do not know this at all, since I have denied everything.”¹ Descartes is very brief in his letter and only states: “I have denied only preconceived opinions – not notions like these, which are known without any affirmation or denial.”²

Yet, in his Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections, Descartes is more precise. I have already referred to this passage in Chapter One, when I explicated the conception of the pre-reflective *cogito*.³ Descartes states that we know what existence is and what thought is before any reflective knowledge.⁴ Descartes notes that it would lead to an infinite regress if we would know our thought and existence by reflection. In a certain sense, Descartes follows the Aristotelean *supposition* of self-awareness in order to avoid the infinite regress. This also answers to Gassendi’s earlier question of how we can know our own mind, or what is the relation of the mind to itself: we know ourselves directly and already before reflection – the mind knows itself before it expresses itself explicitly. Descartes avoids Gassendi’s demand for information and knowledge about the mind and its substance by stating that we cannot have any reflective knowledge of thought and existence, but that we know them directly and pre-reflectively.

Moreover, Descartes’ formulation opens up the possibility for an interpretation which argues for the *immediacy* of the self: if, for Descartes, meditation is a reflection, then this mediated knowledge of meditation presupposes the immediacy, the immediate pre-reflective knowledge. According to this interpretation, there must be an immediate and pre-reflective “internal awareness” before reflective knowledge.

Gassendi’s debate with Descartes provides background context for my reading of Merleau-Ponty’s lecture *The Incarnate Subject*, in which he investigates the role of the union of mind and body in Malebranche, Maine de Biran, and Bergson. As Jacques Taminiaux states in his Preface to the English translation of the lecture, Merleau-Ponty’s “purpose is to play these texts off one against the other, to uncover the underlying tensions they conceal, and in so doing, to contrast the implicit with the explicit.”⁵ The contradictory situation between the distinction and the union brings forth tensions which the Cartesian philosophers encounter: even if they decide to reject one side of the situation, in order to gain more coherence, the rejected side still figures implicitly. Merleau-Ponty explains the “latent content” and implication in the following way:

¹ AT IXA, 206/CSM II, 271.

² AT IXA, 206/CSM II, 271.

³ Chapter 1.2.

⁴ AT VII, 422/CSM II, 285.

⁵ UAC, -/12.

A philosophy is not chosen like an object. Choice does not suppress what is chosen, but sustains it marginally. The same Descartes who distinguishes so well between what arises from pure understanding and what pertains to the practice of life happens to map out at the same time the program for a philosophy which was to take as its principal theme the cohesion of the very orders he distinguishes. Philosophical choice (and doubtless all other choice) is never simple. And it is through their ambiguity that philosophy and history touch.¹

In a similar manner to which Descartes' decision to maintain the point of view of pure understanding also provokes the philosophy of embodiment, the philosophers in Cartesian tradition who promote the immediate self-relation also map the difficulties of this approach, and bring forth ideas for a different kind of philosophy. Merleau-Ponty brings forth in his lecture how the problem of self-relation presents a continuing challenge for Cartesian philosophers.

2.2 Malebranche and the Unreflected

In the lecture *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty studies Malebranche's concept of mind. According to Malebranche, we do not have an idea of our own mind. As he puts it: "We are but shadows to ourselves."² In a certain sense, Malebranche is close to Gassendi's position, according to which we know everything else better than ourselves. Yet, Malebranche also argues that there is an "inner sensation" through which we can feel ourselves. The "inner sensation" is close to Descartes' conception of the awareness through which we know ourselves before reflection. Before explicating Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Malebranche's concept of mind, let me first introduce what kind of approach Malebranche takes to Cartesian philosophy.

Malebranche's philosophical project was, simply put, to connect Descartes' physics with Augustine's metaphysics. In his major work, *The Search after Truth* (1674–1675), he goes through many Cartesian themes and forms a conception of ideas that takes influences from Augustine. Malebranche agrees with Descartes that we see through our mind, we see everything as ideas, but for Malebranche these ideas are not ours – we do not have any possession of the ideas. According to Malebranche, we see ideas only through God, which means that we do not perceive anything if we do not perceive God. His doctrine of the "vision in God" provoked objections from other Cartesian philosophers, and the debate with Antoine Arnauld led to the prohibition of his works by the Catholic Church.

If, for Gassendi, everything we can consider clearly and distinctly must be material, for Malebranche everything we see is ideal. According to Malebranche, when we perceive the sun, the object in our mind is not the material sun but the idea of the sun.³ Accordingly, in order to show that ideas are only in God, he

¹ S, 212–213/132.

² OC III, 150/Malebranche 1980, 626.

³ OC I, 413–417/Malebranche 1980, 217–219.

criticizes four ways to understand ideas. Firstly, the idea of the sun cannot be originated from the material sun, because the idea is not material but spiritual: ideas are spiritual and they do not resemble material things.¹ Secondly, the idea is not created by our brains either, because even though our perceptions leave traces in our brains, these are only material and cannot create ideas. According to Malebranche, to create ideas from matter is as impossible as to create an angel from a stone.² Thirdly, Malebranche argues that since the human mind is finite, God has not created the human mind with ideas, as there is an infinity of ideas, and therefore the finite mind cannot possess the infinity of ideas – and therefore the ideas are not innate.³ The fourth point is the most prominent in the context of my work: the mind cannot find ideas only by observing itself. The ideas must be outside of us. We can perceive passions and sensations within us: these are inside of us, but they do not provide any idea of what is outside of us.⁴

Malebranche combines Descartes' and Augustine's philosophies of ideas. Malebranche refers to Augustine's sermon on the New Testament, which concerns the pride of those who are professing themselves to be wise and prudent but instead become fools. Malebranche quotes "Say not that you are a light unto yourself:" according to him, only God can be a light unto himself, and only God can see all ideas by only considering himself. All things are in God, and thus it is not only their essence but also their existence which God sees. This spiritual existence exceeds our comprehension.⁵ Malebranche argues that we see only in God, and according to what God shows us in his light. Our mind depends on God, and our mind is in God in the same way as our body is in space.⁶ It is, thus, that all philosophers are enlightened by God – they find the truth because God allows them, not because they possess a gift of natural thought.⁷

Malebranche's philosophy is called occasionalism, because God occasions us to see the ideas. We cannot say that we see the world with our bodily eyes, because our mind is a spiritual being and separated from all material things. According to Malebranche, we must see through God's ideas, and we see the ideas only if we see God and God lets us see the ideas. We need to be connected to God in order to see the ideas. According to Malebranche, we need to love God in order for him to love us. In the same way, as we do not see anything if we do not see God, we do not love anything if we do not love God.⁸ So, our love which can only come from God is for God himself: "If God had made a mind and had given the sun to it as an idea, or immediate object of knowledge, it seems to me God would have made this mind and its idea for the sun and not

¹ OC I, 418–421/Malebranche 1980, 220–221.

² OC I, 422–424/Malebranche 1980, 222–223.

³ OC I, 429–431/Malebranche 1980, 226.

⁴ OC I, 433/Malebranche 1980, 228.

⁵ OC I, 434–435/Malebranche 1980, 229.

⁶ OC I, 437/Malebranche 1980, 230.

⁷ OC I, 439/Malebranche 1980, 231.

⁸ Judith Butler, in her article "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche," argues that Malebranche expresses here the same kind of chiasmic structure as Merleau-Ponty in his concept of flesh (Butler 2005, 195).

for Himself.”¹ God gives us the light for us to see him, to see his work – but not a light of our own.

Malebranche states that God is infinite – he exists necessarily because we have an idea of the infinite – but we do not understand the infinity. According to Malebranche, there would not be the finite without the infinite: we cannot deduce the infinite from the finite, but every finite being must be a part of the infinite being.² Thus, even though we see all the ideas *immediately in God*,³ we do not grasp God, because he is infinite. For Malebranche, even though God is pure reason, and all that we see is seen in him, we are nevertheless surrounded by non-knowledge, by shadows of God’s light. According to Malebranche, our mind is, on the one hand, immediately joined with the body,⁴ and on the other hand, is immediately joined with the “Word of God,” the ideas.⁵ According to Malebranche, “[o]nly God do we perceive by a direct and immediate perception”⁶ because only God is intelligible by himself. We perceive material things and bodies indirectly through the ideas in God. If we do not see all these things perfectly, it is not because the ideas were not perfect, but because our mind is finite.⁷

Malebranche follows Descartes in the idea of the infinity of God, and in that we only perceive the ideas with our mind, but he differs from Descartes in that these ideas that we see are not our finite knowledge and separated from the ideas of God but, on the contrary, we see the ideas of God. According to Alquié, even if Malebranche explicates the role of the ideas very differently than Descartes, they both share the same philosophical position, in which there is a problem of how to explicate in what way the mind can be related to anything outside of itself. For Malebranche, the ideas are outside of the mind, but they are of the same intelligible substance. Thus, according to Alquié, it is unclear how the mind can be in relation to something other, to the material.⁸

We can find an attempt to answer this question in “Elucidation Ten,” added to the third edition of *The Search after Truth* in 1678, where Malebranche explicates that we see the material extension through the “intelligible extension” in God. This explication, which was not in the original *The Search after Truth*, was intended to answer the objections made especially by Arnauld. Moreover, Malebranche wanted to distinguish his view from Spinoza, who published *Ethics* in 1677: *Ethics* had given rise to outrage with its identification of God and nature.⁹ According to Arnauld, Malebranche’s doctrine of the “vision in God” led to a bizarre consequence that we see God when we see any sensible things, for example, the sun, a dog, or a house:¹⁰ when we see something, we see God,

¹ OC I, 442/Malebranche 1980, 233.

² OC I, 441/Malbranche 1980, 232.

³ OC I, 442/Malbranche 1980, 232.

⁴ OC I, 125/Malbranche 1980, 50.

⁵ OC I, 457/Malbranche 1980, 241.

⁶ OC I, 449/Malbranche 1980, 236–237.

⁷ OC I, 450/Malbranche 1980, 237.

⁸ Alquié 2000, 200.

⁹ Rodis-Lewis 1963, 83–84.

¹⁰ Schmaltz 2006, 59.

face to face, we perceive God's essence.¹ Arnauld states that if we see an idea of every particular thing in God, it leads to the duplication of the material world with the intelligible world.²

Malebranche tries to evade the criticism presented by Arnauld, and insists that we do not see God as such: we see that "God's Reason" is infinite but we do not grasp it – we perceive ideas in God, but not the ultimate Reason of God.³ This is because our mind is not infinite, but "a kind of particular being."⁴ The human mind does not contain "intelligible extension," because this extension is being of the beings – existence – and not any particular thing. The intelligible extension is conceivable only by itself. Yet, Malebranche argues, it can be divided, and thus as the human mind cannot be divided it is not in the human mind.⁵ Moreover, Malebranche argues that there is not an intelligible representative of every particular material being: there is not a different idea of the sun which is setting and a sun at the midday, but an idea of the sun in general. When we see the sun, we see it through its generality, through its intelligible extension, which contains all the possible movements of the sun:⁶

[Y]ou see the intelligible sun now greater, now smaller, although it is always the same with regard to God. All that is needed for this is that we sometimes see a greater part of intelligible extension and sometimes smaller. Since the parts of intelligible extension are all of the same nature, they may all represent any body whatsoever.⁷

There is not, according to Malebranche's "Elucidation Ten," an infinity of particular ideas in God, but on the contrary, the idea of the infinite. For example, the intelligible extension does not contain the individual idea of every possible circle, but the idea of infinite possibilities of the circle. Thus, the intelligible extension does not contain actual shapes, but the idea of the shapes: "intelligible extension contains all the perfections, or rather, all the differences of bodies due to the different sensations that the soul projects on the ideas affecting it upon the occasion of these same bodies."⁸

In his lecture *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty gives an interpretation of Malebranche's idea of the intelligible extension. He argues, in contrast to Brunschvicg, that the intelligible extension cannot be explicated with analytical

¹ Arnauld 1990, 106, 135–140. Arnauld reasons in the following way: "For, if someone who saw the sun in God did not see God but the sun that God created, he would be seeing the material sun since it is the material sun that God has created. Now on Malebranche's account, someone who looks at the sun does not see the material sun but only the intelligible sun; thus he sees only God and not the sun that God has created." (Arnauld 1990, 140.)

² Arnauld 1990, 108.

³ OC III, 130–131/Malebranche 1980, 614.

⁴ OC III, 148/Malebranche 1980, 624.

⁵ OC III, 148–149/Malebranche 1980, 625. Descartes also mentions the "extension of the thought" in his letter to Elizabeth. Yet, for Descartes, the extension of thought is not in God, but it is the extension of the human mind. (AT III, 694/CSM-K, 228.) Therefore, the "intelligible extension" that Malebranche insists on is not the same that Descartes mentions.

⁶ OC III, 151–153/Malebranche 1980, 626–627.

⁷ OC III, 153/Malebranche 1980, 627.

⁸ OC III, 154/Malebranche 1980, 628.

geometry, because it is not an abstraction of the shapes, but rather “it contains its parts as a white canvas contains the drawings which will be traced upon it.”¹ It does not contain representations of all things, but it is the possibility of all things: “extension contains the internal seeds of every being.”²

Malebranche explains further that by means of the intelligible extension we can know the created extension, that is, the sensible and material things. Without the intelligible extension, we would not know anything, because the human mind is not capable of knowing anything clearly and distinctly by itself. By itself, the human mind is capable only of having sensations. Merleau-Ponty turns the focus from the sphere of pure ideas to the sensible, which Malebranche explains through the intelligible extension:³

Intelligible extension is neither on the side of the subject (it is not a fact of knowledge) nor on the side of the object (it is not an In Itself): it is the conceptual nucleus by which real extension opens up to consciousness.⁴

Thus, in this sense, and in contrast to what Alquié states, Merleau-Ponty shows how Malebranche attempts to establish a relation from the mind to what it is not: the relation between the mind and sensible things. According to Merleau-Ponty, the consciousness is not closed to itself in Malebranche’s philosophy: the mind does not possess the ideas and, therefore, it opens up to something other than itself.⁵ Malebranche explains that there is negativity in our perception of the things and in our relation to materiality. There cannot be any imperfection in God, and thus the negativity of the sensible world does not exist in God, but must come from our relation with the material world. Merleau-Ponty quotes Malebranche: “My hand *is* not my arm. It is real, but it contains, so to speak, the negation of my arm and of all the rest of the universe.”⁶ In this respect, it is hard to see how the divine intelligible extension could represent the material extension. Malebranche’s only answer is that it is incomprehensible for the finite human mind – it is a matter of the infinite. Nevertheless, according to Merleau-Ponty, there is a “connection with existence” in his philosophy.⁷ This “connection” is what Merleau-Ponty seeks from the Cartesian philosophers, *implying*, at the same time, the difference.⁸

¹ UAC, 30/49.

² UAC, 32/50.

³ Clara Da Silva-Charrak argues that there is an affinity between Malebranche’s “intelligible extension” and Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to elaborate a new conception of intelligibility in his later philosophy (Silva-Charrak 2000, 340). In a working note of May 1960, Merleau-Ponty refers to Malebranche when he explains the ontological structure of the flesh: there is an irreversibility in the reversibility, and the seeing (mind) cannot see itself (we do not have an idea of the mind) (VI, 302/249). In a certain sense, intelligible extension is “a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being,” as Merleau-Ponty explains his concept of elementary being, which he calls flesh (VI, 184/139).

⁴ UAC, 32/50.

⁵ UAC, 34/51.

⁶ UAC, 34/51.

⁷ UAC, 34–35/51–52.

⁸ See Chapter Four.

Merleau-Ponty opposes his reading of Malebranche to Brunschvicg's interpretation. According to Brunschvicg, Malebranche is in a kind of midway between Descartes and Spinoza: Malebranche's idealism is left at the halfway, because he attempts to *also* explicate the union of mind and body.¹ As I have already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Merleau-Ponty opposes Malebranche to Spinoza:

Spinoza will treat the mode of experience in the Sixth Meditation as "privative." Conversely, Malebranche will obscure the Cogito – which, henceforth, will no longer "detach" – so that neither the "I think" nor the proof of the existence of God will allow us to transcend our inherent nature as unreflective subjects. Thus are defined two opposing ways of restoring a balance to Cartesianism.²

Malebranche, unlike Spinoza, does not reject the union as a contradictory notion.³ Malebranche conceives the union, and this has an effect on his concept of the mind. For Malebranche, there is not only pure positivity of God, but also the negativity of our finiteness: the relation to materiality is traced by the negativity within our experience, which cannot exist in God. Our relation to God consists of the immediate and purely ideal positivity, but as in our relation to ourselves we are not in relation to God, the relation to ourselves cannot contain the light in God. Our self-relation is therefore negative, and it is only through this negativity that, according to Malebranche, we can understand the union of mind with the body. Let me explain this as, in my opinion, here we can finally grasp Merleau-Ponty's interest in Malebranche: the self-relation in the union of mind and body as not immediate and not positive.

What is crucial is that Malebranche states that we do not have an idea of our own mind.⁴ This may sound contradictory to his doctrine of the vision in God: if we see all ideas in God, then why do we not see the idea of our own mind also? If God comprehends all ideas to infinity, then he must also comprehend the idea of mind. And if God enlightens all the ideas in us, then why not the idea of ourselves? Gueroult states that it seems contradictory that at the same time we see the light of the ideas in God and we do not see it.⁵

Malebranche explains that we do not know our own mind in the same way as any other thing which we perceive through ideas: "we know it only through *consciousness*, and because of this, our knowledge of it is imperfect. Our knowledge of our soul is limited to what we sense taking place in us."⁶ By "consciousness" Malebranche means "inner sensation," which is not clear and distinct knowledge but obscure and confused. If we could see the idea of our mind, we would know how our mind feels, for example pain, without having ever actually felt any pain.⁷ According to Malebranche, when we know an idea

¹ Brunschvicg 1923, 336–357.

² UAC, 16/35.

³ See my Introduction and Chapter 1.6.

⁴ OC I, 451/Malebranche 1980, 237.

⁵ Gueroult 1955, 189–190.

⁶ OC I, 451/Malebranche 1980, 237.

⁷ Cf. Descartes' response to Gassendi, Chapter 2.1.

of a shape, for example a triangle, we know all the possible modifications it can have and not only a few examples. In the same way, we would know all the possible modifications of our mind if we had the idea of it. But, this is not the case with our mind, because the inner sensation shows us only a part of our mind. Nevertheless, this “knowledge” is important: we have a sensation of our existence. Yet, it is very imperfect knowledge, and we cannot be sure if the part we can sense is even the most essential of our mind.¹ As Merleau-Ponty points out, Malebranche goes even to the extent that he denies the Cartesian doctrine of the essence of mind as thought.² We may only sense the part of the mind which is thought, but, as Malebranche writes, “[e]ven if you would have something in the soul preceding thought, I have no wish to disagree.”³ The mind does not grasp its own essence. It has negativity, but negativity which is not nothing: even if the mind does not grasp itself, it does not allow us to say it is nothing – my thought must be related to something, it cannot be nothing.⁴ In Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy the idea of “a negativity that is not nothing” is central and thus, in a certain sense, has a Malebranchian background.⁵

Moreover, Malebranche elaborates his conception of the mind in contrast to Descartes’ *Second Meditation*: he denies that the mind is better known than the body.⁶ According to Nicholas Jolley, Malebranche’s critique of Descartes could be compared to Gassendi’s objections.⁷ Yet, Malebranche does not refer to Gassendi in *The Search after Truth*, and their philosophical aims seem to be very different: Malebranche is seriously religious philosopher, whereas Gassendi is considered to be an atomist, a materialist, and even an atheist.⁸ Nevertheless, Malebranche follows Gassendi in the opinion that our knowledge is attained through experience: “it is clear that if someone had never seen color or felt heat, he could not be made to know these sensations through any definition of them that might be given him.”⁹

In “Elucidation Eleven” Malebranche continues to explicate the absence of the idea of mind: it is not only that since we do not have the idea of mind, we cannot know if the mind is capable of a certain modification if we have not experienced it first, but also that when one feels, for example, pain, it cannot be directly perceived whether this sensation belongs to the mind or to the body which effects the mind.¹⁰ Even with more abstract thoughts, we do not know in which way they are related to the mind: “When I know that twice two is four, I know this very clearly, but I do not know clearly what it is in me that knows

¹ OC I, 451/Malebranche 1980, 238.

² UAC, 18/38.

³ OC I, 388–389/Malebranche 1980, 202.

⁴ UAC, 18/38.

⁵ VI, 198/151.

⁶ OC III, 163/Malebranche 1980, 633.

⁷ Jolley 2006, 50. Jolley argues that in this sense Malebranche is not a Cartesian philosopher (Jolley 1998, 114).

⁸ Cf. Alquié 2000, 69. Arnauld affirms that Gassendi’s argumentation seems to be valid, but because it leads to “damnable” consequences of materialism there must be something wrong with its premises (Arnauld 1990, 61).

⁹ OC I, 452/Malebranche 1980, 238.

¹⁰ OC III, 164–165/Malebranche 1980, 634.

it.”¹ Thus, Malebranche argues against Descartes, who responds to Gassendi’s objection: Descartes states that we know the mind better than the body, because for every attribute which we perceive there must be a corresponding attribute in the mind, the ability to perceive this attribute.² According to Malebranche, even if we could count infinity of these properties, it would not help us to know the idea of mind any better.³

We are conscious of ourselves, we have the inner sensation of ourselves, but we do not reach any clear and distinct knowledge of ourselves. Malebranche states that, for example, if we try to know if we are worthy of love or hatred, we cannot decide, but if we had the idea of our mind, we would know if we are good or bad.⁴ Yet, then there would be no freedom. We would be obliged to follow the reason of the ideas. We have an inner sensation of our freedom but we do not know it; freedom is, according to Malebranche, beyond our rational thought. It is exactly because we do not know our freedom that we are free: we must decide, but we cannot know if we have succeeded or not – it is God’s business to judge if our decisions and actions are good or not. Moreover, according to Malebranche, even though our knowledge of the mind is incomplete, we know by the inner sensation that our mind is immortal, spiritual and free.⁵

Malebranche also explains the union of mind and body through our lack of the idea of the mind. If we had a clear idea of both the mind and the body, it would be impossible to confuse them, which we in fact often do. The union of mind and body is their confusion, as Malebranche admits that we have “some difficulty in recognizing their difference.”⁶ We need reasoning in order to distinguish them, but if we had a clear idea of the mind, we could separate them without any consideration, and then they would not be united.

Merleau-Ponty describes Malebranche’s position: it is through the obscurity of our self-relation that we should understand Malebranche’s idea of the vision in God – the ideas are not in our possession, we do not reach them by consulting our mind. The ideas are clear in themselves, but the obscurity comes from our mind, and as Merleau-Ponty explicates, “[i]f I know myself, this will be by a kind of blind contact.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty also answers Arnauld’s objection to Malebranche – how can he speak about the mind if he does not have the idea of it – by stating that there is a difficulty of language here, and Malebranche constructs a “pseudo-idea” of the mind, in order to demonstrate what he means.⁸

The situation which Merleau-Ponty finds in Malebranche’s philosophy is related to the contradiction that he explicates in Descartes’ philosophy: when

¹ OC III, 167/Malebranche 1980, 635.

² AT VII, 360/CSM II, 249.

³ OC III, 168/Malebranche 1980, 636.

⁴ OC III, 170/Malebranche 1980, 637.

⁵ OC I, 453/Malebranche 1980, 239.

⁶ OC III, 171/Malebranche 1980, 638.

⁷ UAC, 19/38.

⁸ UAC, 21/40.

considering the unreflected, we need to speak in terms of reflection, even though it cannot penetrate the unreflected. According to Merleau-Ponty, “[t]here is, in Malebranche, the deliberate intention to introduce *the unreflected* into philosophy.”¹ The unreflected does not mean a certain part of our experience which could be reflected upon, but it is *the unreflected of the reflection*, unreflected by principle. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty explicates the unreflected as the blind spot of the mind: the mind or the consciousness cannot see itself because it is what sees, the reflection cannot return to itself because it is what reflects, it cannot coincide with itself.² Accordingly, “[w]hat it does not see is what makes it see.”³ There is the unreflected of reflection, the invisible of vision, and the untouchable of touching. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is in a similar manner for Malebranche that “[t]here is no clarity for me which does not imply obscurity, and this obscurity is myself.”⁴

In Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, vision, reflection, and thought have their assurance only through the world, from what we see, reflect upon, and think. If there is a seeing or touching “subject,” it must also be, in a reciprocal way, itself seen or touched. For Malebranche, rather than being active and creative, our mind is a “created reason” which acts only through what touches it, through the ideas in God.⁵ There is passivity in our relation to the world: on the one hand we are ignorant of ourselves, and on the other hand we are oriented towards the world which touches us.⁶ In his work *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques* (1683), Malebranche further explicates his Augustinian idea that the mind is not a light for itself but only darkness, and adds the sensation of touching:

[I] only perceive darkness in myself, and that my substance is not more intelligible for itself than the bodies which surround me. It is true that I sense myself, but I do not see myself, I do not know myself. And that I sense myself, is because I am touched, because I do not act on myself. [...] [I]t is necessary, that I sense myself in myself only when something touches me.⁷

The Malebranchian *cogito* is surrounded by darkness. It has awareness of itself only through what touches it, through the inner sensation, and it only knows what it knows when, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the intelligence is intelligibly “‘touched’ by the intelligible extension.”⁸ Thus, there is an untouched of the touching within the intelligible touching: one cannot touch the touch of the intelligible extension, the touch of God. One can only be touched and feel the

¹ UAC, 22/40. Natalie Depraz writes about the unreflected in Malebranche’s philosophy: “The unreflected is an essential composite of the sensation of the self, in the same way as passivity and opacity” (Depraz 1998, 221).

² VI, 55/33–34.

³ VI, 301/248.

⁴ UAC, 22/41.

⁵ UAC, 20/39.

⁶ UAC, 22/40.

⁷ OC X, 19–20. Translation by JH. In her article, “Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche,” Judith Butler translates: “I can only feel that which touches me” (Butler 2005, 186).

⁸ UAC, 22–23/41.

touch. God itself remains untouched. Also, within oneself, one only feels what touches, what is touching oneself, and not the self as it is. Therefore, there is also untouchable within the touch of the inner sensation, within one's ability to be touched. In this sense, we can elaborate Malebranche's notion of the intelligible extension in a rather close relation to Merleau-Ponty's later conception of the ontological structure: it is not only the sensible but also the intelligible which has the structure of connection and difference.¹ It is obvious that Merleau-Ponty does not affirm the whole of Malebranche's philosophy, but he nevertheless shows how it implies a concept of an impure consciousness which is not in possession of itself or of its ideas. According to Merleau-Ponty, Malebranche has already posed the problems of the contemporary philosophy, even though not clearly but rather as in a dream.²

In his last lecture, "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui," Merleau-Ponty considers the possibility of finding the Malebranchian "darkness" already in Descartes:³ "Malebranche [...] for whom we are but darkness for ourselves and for whom the light is not mine. But is it really mine for Descartes?"⁴ As I have shown in the previous chapter, Descartes already affirms the pre-reflective "internal awareness," which is for Malebranche the "consciousness" or "inner sensation."⁵ Even though this internal awareness or sensation gives the certainty of the self, it does not give a clear and distinct idea of the self. On the one hand, Malebranche rejects the reflective clarity of the self and Descartes' claim that we know the mind more clearly than the body, while on the other hand he affirms the "obscure evidence" of the self.⁶

In the work *Entretiens métaphysiques*, Malebranche writes that the understanding of the darkness within us – that we are not a light for ourselves – cannot but raise a feeling of horror.⁷ Merleau-Ponty refers to this passage in his lectures but does not clarify it.⁸ The groundlessness, the infinite regress, is described by Merleau-Ponty as an abyss which Descartes must also have seen. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty writes that here we "find in Descartes something like a metaphysics of depth."⁹ Descartes, as Merleau-Ponty writes, is neverthe-

¹ I will explicate Merleau-Ponty's idea of the ontological structure in Chapter Four.

² UAC, 30/47.

³ According to Da Silva-Charrak, Merleau-Ponty reads Descartes through Malebranche (Silva-Charrak 2000, 332; Silva-Charrak 2005, 10).

⁴ NC, 235. "Malebranche [...] pour qui nous ne sommes que ténèbres pour nous-mêmes et pour qui la lumière n'est pas mienne. Mais est-elle vraiment mienne pour Descartes?"

⁵ See Chapter 1.2.

⁶ In fact, Augustine, who is equally as important to Malebranche as Descartes, already conceives the mind's relation to itself as something different from its relations to objects of thought. Augustine expresses the self-relation as "a kind of inward presence": "That is to say, it would not think of it by means of an imaginary phantasy, as absent things or something of the same kind are thought of which have been touched by the sense of the body, but it would think of it by a kind of inward presence not feigned but real – for there is nothing more present to it than itself; just as it thinks that it lives, and remembers, and understands, and wills. And if it adds nothing from these thoughts to itself, so as to regard itself as something of the kind, then whatever still remains to it of itself, that alone is itself." (Augustine 2003, 57.)

⁷ OC XII-XIII, 115.

⁸ UAC, 18/38.

⁹ OE, 56/137.

less quick to wriggle himself out of this anxious and trembling abyss of knowledge: “for Descartes it is just as futile to plumb that abyss as it is to think the space of the soul and the depth of the visible.”¹ Descartes closes the abyss of metaphysics as quickly as he can, and for Merleau-Ponty this is one of the consequences of the Cartesian equilibrium or situation: metaphysics which gives us a reason to not do metaphysics.

2.3 Maine de Biran’s Concept of Self-Relation

Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly refer to Maine de Biran in *Phenomenology of Perception*, but the influence is visible, as he uses the Biranian notion “*le corps propre*,” “one’s own body.” Maine de Biran was one of the first philosophers to seriously elaborate the embodied experience as fundamental for philosophy, and even though he criticizes Descartes he also takes up his notion of the union of mind and body. Despite these common interests, in the lecture *The Incarnate Subject* Merleau-Ponty distances himself from Maine de Biran: he separates Maine de Biran’s understanding of the body from the phenomenology of the body. According to Merleau-Ponty, Maine de Biran’s thought is psychologism, as Maine de Biran does not separate philosophy from psychology: according to him, all evidence of philosophy comes from psychological facticity. One could suggest that this is not so far from Merleau-Ponty himself, as one could claim that he elaborates on the transcendental condition of experience on the basis of phenomenological “psychology.”² Yet, in *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty argues against the psychologism of Maine de Biran, and claims that he merely examines a psychological aspect of our embodied being.³ According to Merleau-Ponty, even though Maine de Biran studies the embodiment of the subject, he does not adopt the point of view of the lived body and lived world, and he merely examines the body from the point of view of the external observer, from a third person perspective.⁴

Maine de Biran made an impact not only on Bergson’s philosophy but also on phenomenology as well. Maine de Biran himself is influenced by, for exam-

¹ OE, 56/137.

² See Duchêne 2005, 50. Joseph Duchêne argues that a significant change occurs in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy from *The Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception* to *Eye and Mind* and *The Visible and the Invisible*: in his later thought, Merleau-Ponty argues that his earlier works were at least to some extent still attached to the philosophy of consciousness and to psychology, and thus it was necessary for him to elaborate a philosophy of the flesh, which does not begin with any psychological conception (Duchêne 2005, 52, 60). Merleau-Ponty writes in his working notes: “The whole architecture of the notions of the psychology (perception, idea – affection, pleasure, desire, love, Eros) all that, all this bric-a-brac, is suddenly clarified when one ceases to think all these terms as *positive* (the more or less dense ‘spiritual’) in order to think them not as negatives or negentivities (for that brings back the same difficulties), but as *differentiations* of one sole and *massive* adhesion to Being which is the flesh (eventually as ‘lace-works’)” (VI, 324/270).

³ UAC, 56/66, 68/75.

⁴ UAC, 68/75, 70/77.

ple, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Schelling,¹ and he was a prominent figure in the formation of the French school of spiritualism, thus influencing Victor Cousin (1792–1867) and Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900).² Bergson was particularly influenced by Maine de Biran and his followers, and yet even though he elaborated a philosophy of “immediate givenness” it is a very different philosophy.³ In the 20th century, through his phenomenological analysis of Maine de Biran, Michel Henry (1922–2002) detaches Maine de Biran’s philosophy from the spiritualist interpretations, passing on the idea of the immediate self-relation to the contemporary discussion of phenomenological philosophy.⁴ Moreover, Jacques Derrida suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy also belongs to the Biranian tradition, even though Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly admit it.⁵ Yet, in my view, while Derrida can be right that some elaborations in *Phenomenology of Perception*, for example on motricity of the body, may resemble Maine de Biran, I think he does not take account Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Maine de Biran in *The Incarnate Subject*. In this lecture, what is central in Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Maine de Biran is how it brings forth the problem of the *immediate self-relation*. He takes distance from Maine de Biran’s ideas of “intimate sense” and “primitive fact” as the immediacy of the self, but also finds ideas which open up different possibilities: in the end, Merleau-Ponty’s reading may not be very specific about Maine de Biran’s philosophy, but it tells more about his own interest and emphasis in philosophy.

Despite his influence on French philosophy, Maine de Biran did not publish much in his life. I will concentrate on his posthumously published work *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie et sur ses rapports avec l’étude de la nature*, which is Merleau-Ponty’s primary source and reference, and which is mentioned as his major work.⁶ Maine de Biran worked on *Essai* from 1811 to 1812, and again in 1822.

One of the central notions of Maine de Biran’s philosophy is the “primitive fact.” This means the sensation of the self as an immediate and intimate fact: through “immediate apperception” we have an “intimate sense” of the self as the “primitive fact,” which is the source of all our evidence. Maine de Biran contrasts his conception to that of Cartesian philosophers, especially to Descartes and Malebranche. And yet, in a certain sense, he elaborates exactly what Descartes called “internal awareness” and Malebranche “inner sensation.” The striking difference between them is that for the earlier philosophers the internal awareness is something pre-reflective and withdrawing from reflective knowledge, but for Maine de Biran, on the contrary, it is something reflective and immediately known.

Moreover, Maine de Biran elaborates his conception of the immediate intimate sense in contrast to Gassendi. As I argued in the first part of this chapter,

¹ UAC, 60/69.

² See Chapter 2.4 on Bergson.

³ See Gouhier 1948.

⁴ Henry 1975, 41–42. Zahavi 1999, 110–115.

⁵ Derrida 2005, 143–146.

⁶ O VII, IX. Romeyer-Dherbey 1974, 23.

for Gassendi “nothing acts on itself,” and thus we do not have an idea of our own mind. According to Maine de Biran, Gassendi considers that our ideas are only images and representations, duplications of the material things, and that he completely neglects the facticity of the ideas.¹ In *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée* Maine de Biran writes: “Yet, is it true that nothing acts on itself? Isn’t it that the opposite can be proved clearly by the evidence of the intimate sense [...]?”² Maine de Biran argues that a real reflection does exactly what Gassendi denies from it:³ it does not reduplicate the experience but is an immediate coincidence with the experience.⁴

In *Essai*, and in Maine de Biran’s thought more generally, the “primitive fact” is the starting point. As Merleau-Ponty points out, Maine de Biran does not use the term “fact” in its usual sense: it is not a realist concept, in the sense that there is a fact in the world which we observe. The Biranian “fact” has its positivity, but not in the sense that it would exist in itself.⁵ Nevertheless, it is not a “simple sensation” either.⁶ The point of view is not the pure mind outside of the sensation, which judges on the sensation external to itself, but for Maine de Biran the “fact” comes from the internal sensation, “*sens intime*.”⁷ Moreover, Maine de Biran detaches his conception from the philosophies of *a priori* – referring to Kant and Fichte – which he regards as derived from the primordial experience of the primitive fact.⁸

What Maine de Biran expresses, with the concept of the “fact” is a third point of view between the subject and the object.⁹ It is not an external, extensive thing, or the mind as a thinking substance, but a primitive fact of the consciousness which comes forth in the reciprocal differentiation of the object and the subject. Maine de Biran characterizes the intimate sense, which gives the primitive fact, as a distinction between an *effort* and a *resistance*: “[T]he productive force becomes *me* by the single fact of the distinction that forms itself between the subject of this free effort and the term which immediately resists with its own inertia.”¹⁰ There is then, on the one hand, the force of the subject, the free and voluntary effort of the subject, and on the other hand, there is the inertia of the resisting foreign body. According to Maine de Biran, the free will is the most intimate level of the existence of the self: “The force of the effort, the ability to begin or continue any serie of movements or actions, is the fact of the intimate sense that is as evident as our existence itself.”¹¹

Bernard Baertschi gives an example of the intimate sense: if someone has, for example, an iron ball in his hand, the ball pulls the arm down, and he needs

¹ O VII, 35–36.

² O III, 267 note. All translations of Maine de Biran by JH.

³ AT VII, 292/CSM II, 204.

⁴ Romeyer-Dherbey 1974, 59–60.

⁵ UAC, 65/73.

⁶ O VII, 2.

⁷ O VII, 5.

⁸ O VII, 12–ff.

⁹ O VII, 67.

¹⁰ O VII, 118.

¹¹ O VII, 123.

to exert an effort to keep it in his hand. Also, if he tries to close his hand, the movement of his fingers is stopped by the iron ball, no matter how hard the effort. According to Baertschi, this is the simplest example of what Maine de Biran means by the primitive fact: there is a voluntary effort of the subject and the resistance of the object.¹ The action of the subject is a reaction to a passively received external state.²

For Maine de Biran, then, the primitive fact consists of the necessity of the separation between the subject and the object: without this separation, there would be no knowledge of anything. Merleau-Ponty shows that Maine de Biran insists on the “primitive duality:” the unity of the subject and the object would be a contradiction and, thus, the two elements of the primitive fact are irreducible to each.³ Yet, Merleau-Ponty notices that Maine de Biran’s philosophy hesitates between the immediate interiority of the consciousness and the empiricist exteriority.⁴ The problem of contradiction between the duality and the unity haunts Maine de Biran’s philosophy. Let me elaborate on this a bit more before turning back to Merleau-Ponty’s reading.

For Maine de Biran, the effort as the will of the primitive fact is not an abstract idea, but has its origin in the concrete development of the individual. According to him, the individual develops from the instincts of childhood to the spontaneity of maturity, and through this process constitutes the personality of the self.⁵ Individuality and personality come forth in the “internal and immediate apperception” in which one’s own body distinguishes with its effort from the resistance of the foreign body.⁶ The difference entails the unity. According

¹ Baertschi 1982, 8.

² Baertschi 1982, 8–9. Maine de Biran’s description of activity and passivity is connected to his idea of habit, which he analyses in the essay *Sur l’influence de l’habitude* (1803). Maine de Biran’s thoughts on habit opened an important discussion in French philosophical tradition, which is outlined by Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair in their introduction to the English translation of Ravaissou’s *On Habit*. As Carlisle and Sinclair explain, for Maine de Biran, activity and passivity form the two sides of the self. In his essay *Sur l’influence de l’habitude*, Maine de Biran explains how we may become blind for our effort when the same effort is repeated and becomes a habit. On the one hand, habit is our progress and ability to exercise complex movements without hesitation, but on the other hand, it is also a blindness to ourselves. (Carlisle & Sinclair 2008, 8–11.) Ravaissou elaborates his concept of habit on Maine de Biran’s ideas in his work *Of Habit* (1838), but does not support Maine de Biran’s duality between passivity and activity. According to Ravaissou, even though habit is blind, it is not only passive but also free. (Ravaissou 2008, 55.) Carlisle and Sinclair state: “According to Ravaissou, the fact that habitual movements are still intelligent – that is to say, they still incline towards a goal – even when they cease to be voluntary shows that the whole range of human functions, right down to the depths of unconsciousness, is characterized by a spontaneous or unreflective intelligence” (Carlisle & Sinclair 2008, 14). Bergson continues this tradition, and he is strongly influenced by Ravaissou when he defines the spirit as “pure memory” which is unconscious, and which forms a continuity with the perception, and yet in contrast to Ravaissou, Bergson sees the habit as a mere automatism (MM, 89/95). Carlisle and Sinclair argue that Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur are closer to Ravaissou’s understanding of habit than Bergson. They see Ravaissou’s influence in Merleau-Ponty’s description of the habitual body which understands itself. (Carlisle & Sinclair 2008, 19.)

³ UAC, 57–58/67.

⁴ UAC, 58–60/68–69.

⁵ O VII, 137.

⁶ O VII, 142–143.

to Maine de Biran, the internal apperception happens through intimate *sensation* and it is, therefore, embodied – not an intellectual procedure. Maine de Biran gives an example: a child who was born wholly paralyzed cannot have any knowledge of his body, because he cannot have an internal apperception of the self through intimate sensation, and thus as he cannot sense the primitive duality he cannot have unity of his own bodily self either, and therefore, according to Maine de Biran, he is not a real individual person.¹ For Maine de Biran, the intimate sensation, which constitutes one's own body, cannot be replaced by an intellectual idea, just as one cannot wholly describe what it is to see to someone who has never seen.²

Maine de Biran, underlining the centrality of touching, also considers an experience of the “double sensation” in the constitution of one's own body, a phenomenon which is thematized by Husserl in the second book of *Ideas*, and which is central for Merleau-Ponty too.³ He describes how “the two hands that are moved one against the other by the same will, must give the double reply (*double réplique*) of effort and resistance.”⁴ The resistance and the effort are sensed “simultaneously in the organ which touches and in the organ which is touched.”⁵ Maine de Biran argues about the consequences of this experience in the following way:

The double reply can only happen between two consenting parts of the same body, and one of these parts must be less moved by the will. This double reply is the proper and unique condition which serves in distinguishing originally the body that belongs to us from those bodies that are foreign to it, and in separating them with a borderline that can no longer be erased.⁶

Maine de Biran shows, in a very similar manner as Husserl one century later, how in the experience of the double sensation our body is related to itself and is constituted as two sides of touching. Moreover, Maine de Biran argues that all our representations follow the same rules. The experience also implies, according to him, that we can only perceive our body from the “internal” perspective:

[T]here is an internal apperception of the presence or of the coexistence of one's own body that is completely related to a special muscular sense which can only act or know itself on the *inside* without being able to represent itself on the *outside*; and that from the core of the intimate sense an irresistible evidence engages to the two elements of the same fact, to the two terms of the relation between force and resistance; that the doubt of Descartes, which supposes that the body is nihilated while the thought subsists, is absolutely opposite to our understanding of the primitive fact [...].⁷

¹ O VII, 146.

² Husserl affirms the privilege of touch in the second book of *Ideas*: “A subject whose only sense was the sense of vision could not at all have an appearing Body” and “it becomes a Body only by incorporating tactile sensations” (Hua4, 150–151/158–159).

³ See Chapter 1.6.

⁴ O VII, 150.

⁵ O VII, 289.

⁶ O VII, 289.

⁷ O VII, 150–151.

According to Maine de Biran, the relation between the effort and the resistance is the key to understand our relation to exteriority and existence.¹ He states against Descartes that if we begin from the exclusion of the body and from the idea of the pure mind, we begin with an abstract idea of the absolute which is outside of the internal and factual experience.² In Maine de Biran's view, Descartes considers the voluntary subject from the point of view of the thinking substance or the thinking thing, *res cogitans*, and thus fails to see the effort in relation to the resistance, which, according to him, is something that cannot be surpassed without confusion.³ According to Maine de Biran, freedom remains abstract if one does not consider it through the duality of the primitive fact. Descartes obscures the free will when he tries to grasp it only within the pure mind, as a pure freedom of thought. The resistance of a foreign body can prevent freedom – for example, if one tries to press an iron ball with one's fingers the iron ball restrains one's will – but it is also only through the resistance that one comes to know his or her effort, and thus freedom. Freedom is nothing but the effort, an action towards what resists it. Necessity, according to Maine de Biran, is a sensation of our passivity, and therefore a mere privation of the intimate sensation, because through it one does not sense the effort. Even if we try to deny our freedom, we do so freely: freedom is a fact of the intimate sensation. What is crucial is that, according to Maine de Biran, there is no complete passivity and no absolute activity: there is only the reciprocal relation between passivity and activity, that is, the primitive fact.⁴

According to Maine de Biran, not only philosophy but also all research of nature should begin from the primitive fact, because “natural phenomenon cannot be known or represented without *me*.”⁵ Baertschi explicates that the primitive fact, the relation between me and not-me, between subject and object, nevertheless does not mean for Maine de Biran that there would be nothing without the subject, but rather it means that without the subject there would not be an object.⁶ The primitive fact is the source of all our evidence and knowledge.⁷ It is, therefore, the sphere of absolute certainty.⁸ Yet, the “absolute” being itself, in a Kantian fashion, is outside of our knowledge. Thus, the primitive fact is not a coincidence with the existence – the existence is not the subject or the object but exceeds this relation.⁹

In *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty contrasts his reading of Maine de Biran to Brunschvicg's interpretation. Let me shortly introduce Brunschvicg's general ideas of philosophy, as Merleau-Ponty often opposes to them.

In the background of Brunschvicg's idea of philosophy is his understanding of the history of philosophy. In *L'Expérience humaine et la causalité physique*

¹ O VII, 151.

² O VII, 155.

³ O VII, 156–157.

⁴ O VII, 179–180.

⁵ O VII, 162.

⁶ Baertschi 1982, 3.

⁷ Baertschi 1982, 13.

⁸ Baertschi 1982, 24.

⁹ Baertschi 1982, 3.

(1922) Brunschvicg opposes the Cartesian concept of movement to Aristotelean and Scholastic conception. According to Brunschvicg, Aristotelean tradition rests on an immediate experience of the lived reality, on the sensible appearance of the reality. The “Cartesian revolution,” then, moves the focus to the evidence of the purely intelligible reality, and “breaks the parallelism between the sensibly given and physical reality.”¹ For Descartes, the universality is not immediately in the sensible, but in the force of the reason which makes the judgments of the scientific experimentation:² “For Descartes the *universals* of the dialecticians are fictions of imagination; the mathematical demonstrations, which derive from original evidence, are the fundamentals of the true.”³

Brunschvicg regards the transition from Aristotelean philosophy to Cartesian philosophy as a huge step forward. Then, in the transition from Malebranche, who strictly limits the true to the purely intelligible,⁴ to Maine de Biran, “a total revolution” occurs once again, only this time a regressive one:

The values are distributed in opposite manner, as if the two philosophers were destined to live on antipodes of each other, or more exactly, as if the spirit of Maine de Biran was incapable of realizing anything of the distinct and the certain expect on the very conditions which are for the spirit such as Malebranche, a complete night.⁵

Brunschvicg argues that for Malebranche the union of mind and body is a mystery to which only God has access, but for Maine de Biran the union understood as one’s own body is a constitutive and essential part of the self.⁶ And moreover, the self – which according to Malebranche is only darkness for us and unattainable, felt only passively by the touch of the inner sensation – is for Maine de Biran, in contrast, attained by an immediate apperception and is the source of all our clarity.

In his work *Le progrès de la conscience dans la philosophie occidentale* (1927), Brunschvicg describes how in the philosophical and mathematical revolution accomplished by Descartes the human reason finally becomes the master of the universe, which in the ancient philosophy was only a dream.⁷ Descartes made the revolution possible by reaching the infinite thought through the finite ego. According to Brunschvicg, from the Cartesian ego it follows that there is only one common idea of mathematics, metaphysics, and religion for men, and this idea is immediate for the intellect.⁸ The Cartesian method also leads to an understanding of the unconscious mechanism of passions, and through this

¹ Brunschvicg 1922, 191. Translation by JH.

² Brunschvicg 1922, 192.

³ Brunschvicg 1922, 194. Translation by JH.

⁴ Brunschvicg 1922, 7.

⁵ Brunschvicg 1922, 30. Translation by JH.

⁶ Brunschvicg 1922, 30–31.

⁷ Brunschvicg 1927, 142.

⁸ Brunschvicg 1927, 146.

understanding men can liberate themselves from passions:¹ man becomes a remedy for himself.²

Merleau-Ponty opposes his view of philosophy to Brunschvicg's conception: for him, it is necessary for philosophy, in order to be genuine and expressive, to take seriously the unreflective experience. He does not see Maine de Biran's thought as a negation of philosophy but, on the contrary, as an attempt to widen the sphere of philosophy.³ Already in his first published article, "Christianism and Resentment," Merleau-Ponty describes how narrow is the philosophical position reached by the Brunschvicgian way of considering only what can be judged in the clear and distinct thought: "Of that which is not reduced to an object of science, we are not able to say anything, to think anything, not even that it exists."⁴ Merleau-Ponty defines the task of his philosophy in contrast to Brunschvicg: the task of philosophy is to extend its description to the forms of existence that the objective thought and science cannot exhaust.⁵ In the lecture *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty explicates the task of philosophy in the following way:

Every philosophy starts from a fact, but only the system which, starting from a fact, can account for other facts, will appear sound. Can idealism, for example, account for imagination? Can Biranism account for ideas? Beginning with a fact? This is true for all philosophers. The "transfer of evidence," instead of being a regression as Brunschvicg believes, is the very progress of philosophy. Brunschvicg himself, to the degree that he does not merely repeat what scholars say, is led to designate a term for those who read him the Mind, which cannot be expressed as scientific objects are. All philosophy is compelled to consider the metaphysical evidence of which Biran speaks. The mind is not completely whole in its works, otherwise there would no longer be any philosophy. It is Brunschvicg who suppresses problems: he speaks on behalf of a philosophy which considers itself as acquired, definitively in existence since the appearance of Cartesianism. But philosophy is a perpetual inquiry and must call into question ideal evidence itself.⁶

Both Malebranche and Maine de Biran explicate the Cartesian idea of the union of mind and body, which also leads to the question of the self-relation. For both Malebranche and Maine de Biran, the relation to the self is not an immediate coincidence of the self with the self. According to Malebranche, "I sense myself in myself only when something touches me."⁷ The "inner sensation" of which he writes is not a possession of the self by the intellect but, on the contrary, a passive sensation, an unreflective experience. According to Maine de Biran, then, the "intimate sense" does not give the sensation of the self without the effort in relation to the resistance of the object, and yet, it is a sensation of the self which comes from something other than the self. Neither of these conceptions can be reduced to an intellectual self-coincidence. In a certain sense, both

¹ Brunschvicg 1927, 152.

² Brunschvicg 1927, 153.

³ UAC, 52/63.

⁴ PAR, 32. Translation by JH.

⁵ PAR, 32-33.

⁶ UAC, 54-55/65.

⁷ OC X, 19-20. Translation by JH.

of these philosophers remain in the ambiguous Cartesian situation between the clear and distinct and the obscure and confused – they attest to the irreducibility of the Cartesian duality.

In his reading of Maine de Biran, Merleau-Ponty does not emphasize the immediacy of the primitive fact. He approaches the “fact” as something which is “not immediately consciousness,” but rather “the process of becoming conscious.”¹ As Merleau-Ponty points out, “[b]y ‘fact’ he means something which is grasped in the nascent state of reflection, where reflecting and reflected are in the process of distinguishing one another.”² Reflection realizes itself through its difference from the reflected, and not as an immediate coincidence with itself:

Biran does not begin with a being which exhausts itself in the consciousness that it has of itself, but with a being which is in the process of becoming consciousness that it exists, struggling for this consciousness against a pre-existing opaqueness, with a being which seeks to “become self.”³

Merleau-Ponty reads the Biranian “fact” as “a reflection turning toward the unreflected in which it takes root, an activity emerging from passivity.”⁴ For Maine de Biran, the certainty comes not from the *cogito*, of the explicit thoughts in which we restrict ourselves through the methodic doubt, but the truth must be there already, within the experience, or otherwise we will not find the truth: “Thinking is grasping at results for which we do not have all the premises.”⁵ There is a trust or faith in the experience before any intellectual consideration, and even if there is always a possibility of an error, it only concerns our explicit thoughts, not our primitive faith of the experience.⁶ Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes that for Maine de Biran the “fact” does not mean that we are immediately conscious and immediately free, but that we have to become conscious and become free through our actions. And yet, when we become a consciousness – the *cogito* – it is not through immediate coincidence but, on the contrary, through the withdrawing of the transcendent and excess of thought: we grasp our immanence only through what is transcendent within us.⁷

Merleau-Ponty argues that Maine de Biran’s aim is to examine the actual world, and not the possible, not a purely universal but a temporal experience, and that he foresaw the philosophical idea of the priority of existence over essence. Maine de Biran also opened the possibility for understanding a spatiality of the body not subordinated to the objective spatiality, an embodied consciousness. Nevertheless, even though Merleau-Ponty says that Maine de Biran expressed these possibilities, he also points out that Maine de Biran was not

¹ UAC, 57/67.

² UAC, 65/73.

³ UAC, 57/67.

⁴ UAC, 65/73.

⁵ UAC, 66/74.

⁶ Joseph Duchêne suggests that Maine de Biran’s “primitive fact” can be compared to Merleau-Ponty’s “perceptual faith,” which is a trust on our experience of the world, not yet knowledge, but the source of our knowledge (Duchêne 2005, 54). I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s idea of perceptual faith in Chapter Three.

⁷ UAC, 67/74.

able to realize them, and fell back to psychologism in the second and third parts of the *Essai*.¹ Even though Maine de Biran explicated the body as the condition for thought, he also limited his idea by pointing out that the body is only an important part of the self from which thought must be separated, and thus, he fell back to Cartesian dualism.² Maine de Biran criticizes Descartes's idea of the *cogito* as a thinking thing, but himself makes the *cogito* a psychic thing.³ According to Merleau-Ponty, Maine de Biran is not as far from Descartes as he claims to be.⁴

Thus, we can conclude that even though Merleau-Ponty regards Maine de Biran's philosophy as somewhat disappointing, his reading brings forth what he is searching for in the tradition, and in this respect tells us something about his own philosophy: the structure of connection and differentiation. Merleau-Ponty finds in Maine de Biran an idea of the self, surrounded by sensations before it has distinguished itself as an explicit self. Merleau-Ponty takes up Maine de Biran's concepts, such as "passive intuition," "foreign spectator," and "pre-world," which Maine de Biran nevertheless leaves aside as mere hypotheses.⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty: "From the beginning there is consciousness of self, but a consciousness which is also ignorance of self and which needs signs in order to conquer itself. Consciousness of self, then, is conceived of as a becoming, a process."⁶ Maine de Biran touches on a possibility to find a new kind of philosophy but does not grasp it, and, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, in the end we are back at the beginning, with the traditional distinction between the mind and the body.⁷

2.4 Bergson's Idea of Memory

Bergson's philosophical position has an affinity with Merleau-Ponty's position: both attempt to find a way beyond classical idealism, materialism, and dualism. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's relation to Bergson is complex. Bergson, whose professional career was already over when Merleau-Ponty was studying at the university, was considered as conservative and regressive by Merleau-Ponty's generation. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects Bergson; but, as Leonard Lawlor and Alia Al-Saji argue, he is closer to Bergson than he admits.⁸ Lawlor and Al-Saji claim that this is very much due to Merleau-Ponty's incorrect or unjustified reading of Bergson in his early work. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, however, Merleau-Ponty shows a much better understanding of Bergson, but at the same time once again distances himself from Bergson.

¹ UAC, 67-68/75.

² UAC, 69-70/76-77.

³ UAC, 71/77.

⁴ UAC, 71/78.

⁵ UAC, 75-76/80-81.

⁶ UAC, 78/83.

⁷ UAC, 81/85.

⁸ Lawlor 1998; Al-Saji 2007.

We can only assume that in the 30's Merleau-Ponty was as resistant as his generation to Bergsonian philosophy, which was regarded as a result of Cartesianism and spiritualism.¹ He, as many others of his generation, thought that traditional philosophy had lost its contact with reality, and sought an escape from the speculative philosophy of introspection, turning towards Husserlian phenomenology, as for example Sartre did by elaborating his existentialistic philosophy on the basis of phenomenology. Yet, later Merleau-Ponty states that if they had read Bergson carefully, they could have already found in him the same kind of philosophy that they were looking for:

If we had been careful readers of Bergson, and if more thought had been given to him, we would have been drawn to a much more concrete philosophy, a philosophy much less reflexive than Brunschvicg's. But since Bergson was hardly read by my contemporaries, it is certain that we had to wait for the philosophies of existence in order to be able to learn much of what he would have been able to teach us. It is quite certain – as we realize more and more today – that Bergson, had we read him carefully, would have taught us things that ten or fifteen years later we believed to be discoveries made by the philosophy of existence itself.²

Nevertheless, the influences that Merleau-Ponty takes from Bergson are not the whole of Bergson's philosophy – not "Bergsonism" as a doctrine. In the article "Bergson in the Making," Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the "audacious" Bergson who did not follow any dogma, and the Bergson who was identified with spiritualism.³ Once again, Merleau-Ponty reads the history of philosophy as a latent content within the explicitly written, not as a mere expression of already fixed ideas but as an openness of ideas, where becomes possible a "shift of meaning" which he finds in Bergson.⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, Bergson "found something different and something more than he was looking for."⁵

Merleau-Ponty comes particularly close to Bergson in two aspects and concepts. Firstly, his idea of expression as a return to the unreflected experience, which must cut its ties to the already acquired and already expressed, has similarities to Bergson's idea of intuition. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty's idea of reversibility as always approaching but never in fact realized is close to Bergson's concept of "partial coincidence." Merleau-Ponty discusses these ideas especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In order to describe the transition between the early and the later works, I will extend my reading from *The Incarnate Subject*, which is still attached to Merleau-Ponty's misplaced criticism of Bergson in *Phenomenology of Perception*, to Merleau-Ponty's later works, as they provide a

¹ See Arouet 1929; Nizan 1998.

² TD, 132.

³ S, 297/182-183.

⁴ S, 300/185.

⁵ S, 299/184. In the lectures *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty states: "In truth, we here guess at, more than we grasp, the thought of Bergson. In order to understand it well, we have to discern the valid meaning of his thought, which is hidden behind less satisfying appearances. It seems to oscillate between a spiritualism, which would see analogues of souls in the things, and a materialism, which would make the awareness of extrinsic relations of matter come to the fore." (N, 82-83/55.)

more comprehensive insight in Bergson's philosophy. I will continue to explicate Merleau-Ponty's reading of Bergson in the context of the new ontology, presented in *The Visible and the Invisible*, in Chapter Four. Let me now introduce what I find central in Bergson's thought in the context of my work.

Even though Bergson attempts to surpass dualism, duality is nevertheless essential to his philosophy. He approaches the duality between mind and body from different angles in his works. In his first major work, *Time and Free Will* (1889), Bergson establishes a separation between time as duration and space outside of us. In *Matter and Memory* (1896), the duality is between pure memory and pure perception, or between spirit and matter. In *Creative Evolution* (1907), he elaborates a duality between life and matter. And finally, in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), he elaborates on the duality between the evolution of life and evolved culture, between dynamic spirituality and static religion. I will concentrate here on *Matter and Memory*, as it is the most central work in Merleau-Ponty's reading of Bergson.

According to Merleau-Ponty, when *Matter and Memory* appeared it was a surprise, and it seemed obscure for contemporary readers – and indeed it still remains so for the later readers.¹ *Matter and Memory* was and, still is, quite hard to grasp, because on the one hand Bergson was ahead of his time, and on the other hand he used classical concepts. With the concepts of 19th-century French philosophy and the Cartesian tradition he formulated ideas which would become central to 20th-century thought. In this sense, the book itself is a great example of Bergsonian “creative evolution” and the *élan vital* in philosophy.² One of the main reasons why *Matter and Memory* is a very complicated work is that despite the dualistic starting point – between the pure perception of the matter and pure memory – he nevertheless demonstrates in the end how they are not without relations, and there is never a perception without memory. In *Time and Free Will* Bergson distinguishes the mind from the material world, but in *Matter and Memory* his aim is not this separation, but to show how the mind acts on the material world.³ In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson discusses the embodiment of the subject.⁴

At the beginning of *Matter and Memory*, Bergson takes as his task to show how memory is not reducible to matter, it is not mechanical: that is, memory cannot be limited to the functioning of the brain. In philosophical terms, he at-

¹ S, 300/184.

² In “Bergson in the Making” Merleau-Ponty writes about *élan vital*: “Bergson himself describes a pre-constituted being that is always presupposed at the horizon of our reflections, and is always already there to lift the fuse out of the anguish and the vertigo that are about to explode within us” (S, 304/187).

³ Jean Hyppolite states: “After having so severely separated duration and space – the interior life from the world – it is indeed necessary to attempt to bring them together again, because we live in the world and our freedom itself is an efficacious power only insofar as we can make something of ourselves pass into the exteriority of the matter. [...] *Matter and Memory* deals with this problem of the *insertion of our freedom into material being*.” (Hyppolite 1971, 472/115.)

⁴ It is in this respect that Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Bergson in *Phenomenology of Perception* is misplaced: Merleau-Ponty criticizes Bergson for intellectualism and ignores Bergson's attempt to describe embodiment (PP, 70–72/67–68, 76/72).

tempts to show that the dual relation between matter and memory cannot be understood by idealism, materialism, or dualism. Nevertheless, Bergson's starting point is dual: he affirms both spirit and matter, but his aim is to overcome the problems of dualism and demonstrate the relation between these two entities.¹ Beginning from the pure dualism between mind and body – a difference of kind – he elaborates a conception of the union of mind and body – a difference of degree.

In the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*, matter is understood as consisting of images. The concept of "image" means, according to Bergson, "a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing*."² It is not an idea, being for us, but it is not a thing in-itself either. Rather, it is a thing in-itself-for-us, but in the common sense: Bergson takes an example of color, which for the common sense exists in the object.³ For scientific realism, the color is a reflection of light, a thing in the material world, and for philosophical idealism the color is an idea we perceive according to the categories of our consciousness, and yet, in common sense experience, we perceive color as a property of the thing, for example a certain red as the red of the carpet.

According to Bergson, the body is an image in this sense; it is something we perceive in the same way as all the other things. It is matter because it is a part of the material world. Nevertheless, the body is also distinct from all other images or material things, because we do not perceive it only externally but also know it by internal affections.⁴ The body also has a privileged position in regard to all other objects that surround it: it is a "*centre of action*."⁵ My body can perceive the images of material things, or, as Bergson puts it, the images are perceptions of matter: "*I call matter the aggregate of images, and perception of matter these same images referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body.*"⁶

Bergson's argument, then, is simply that if the body is one of the images, it cannot contain or produce all the images. The brain, as the means for bodily action, is only one image among others. According to Bergson, if someone wants to claim that the neurons in the brain determine all representation, then one is obliged to say that these neurons are "either more or less than an image – in any case of another nature than an image – and from which representation will issue as by miracle."⁷ Thus, it would follow that we cannot have an image of the matter. But, as Bergson says, the truth is that we *do have* images of the matter: this is what natural sciences are about. In fact, in the Bergsonian context, science would be impossible without "images."

¹ MM, 1/vii.

² MM, 1/vii.

³ MM, 2/viii.

⁴ MM, 11/1.

⁵ MM, 14/5.

⁶ MM, 17/8.

⁷ MM, 18/9.

Bergson also considers a lesion of the brain which can diminish the perception: the disruption is not caused as if the perception of the images would happen in the brain, but because the lesion of the brain can prevent stimulation to come across to the motor mechanisms. The lesion of the brain makes the perception impotent and useless. According to Bergson, it does not make the perception theoretically inconceivable, but only practically impossible. Bergson regards the nervous system as a mere conductor of the movement of perception.¹ Bergson, therefore, makes a serious attempt to show the immateriality of the mind.

Nevertheless, as Bergson states, our body as the central image conditions all the other images: “[A]t each of its movements everything changes, as though by a turn of a kaleidoscope.”² The body and its organs condition perception, but they do not *produce* the representations, the images. The function of the brain is “to receive stimulation, to provide motor apparatus, and to present the largest possible number of these apparatuses to a given stimulus.”³ Perception, at this level, is a reaction to stimuli, and the brain is the apparatus which receives the perception and connects it to the actions and reactions of the body. This is what Bergson calls a *pure perception*. It is not an actual and concrete perception, because all perception includes memory and duration; it is a mere theoretical concept. According to Merleau-Ponty, the perception in this sense is like a photograph which is already taken but not yet developed – the development of the photo would add recollection and recognition.⁴ This kind of perception without memory would be an immediate and instantaneous coincidence with the perceived.⁵

Consciousness, then, is a perception of something attentively chosen. It is a very poor perception, because it excludes all that does not interest our needs. For Bergson, consciousness means the choice of a specific perception, which happens in “correspondence” with the functioning of the brain.⁶ Yet, even though we normally believe that conscious perception perceives the thing in-itself, it is only a part of the thing, and the thing in-itself remains unconscious to us:⁷

In one sense we might say that the perception of any unconscious material point whatever, in its instantaneousness, is infinitely greater and more complete than ours, since this point gathers and transmits the influence of all other points of the material universe, whereas our consciousness only attains to certain parts and to certain aspects of those parts.⁸

The unconsciousness within our experience raises the question of the memory. Our factual perception is not a pure perception, a coincidence with the per-

¹ MM, 42–43/39–40.

² MM, 20/12.

³ MM, 27/20–21.

⁴ N, 84–85/56–57.

⁵ MM, 31/26.

⁶ MM, 39/35.

⁷ MM, 41/38.

⁸ MM, 35/30–31.

ceived, yet according to Bergson this kind of coincidence remains an impersonal basis for perception, as the “externality itself.”¹ Actual perception, then, is intermingled with memory; memory enriches our present experience with the images of the past. Nevertheless, a recollection is not a weakened perception. As Bergson often repeats, the difference between memory and perception is not a difference of degree, but a difference of kind: perception relates to the matter and present, and memory to the mechanism of the unconsciousness.² Therefore, our perception does not “catch up” with the temporality of things, but rather, our perception happens through the temporality of our consciousness, which Bergson calls duration.³ Moreover, according to Bergson, the distinction and the union between subject and object should be thought through time and not space.⁴ According to him, there must be a *pure memory*, which is the spirit.⁵ Bergson is, therefore, rethinking the traditional separation between matter and spirit as a separation between perception and memory. Yet, he modifies significantly the meaning of spiritual: the spirit is not a clear and distinct universal and ideal being, but rather a past which cannot be fully presented – unconscious spirituality.

In the second chapter of *Matter and Memory*, Bergson elaborates on the idea of memory. In the same way as perception is to be separated from the functioning of the brain, memory must also be understood in a different sense. Therefore, if you damage the brain, “you do not necessarily destroy the past image, but you deprive it of all means of acting upon the real and consequently [...] of being realized.”⁶ Memory is not in the brain. In fact, the question “where is memory?” is not correct, because memory is not in space: it is everywhere and nowhere, it exists temporally. Or, to put it more briefly, *memory is time*, and time, according to Bergson, does not exist in the brain, it is not localized in the matter as such.

Bergson describes different kinds of memories. Most importantly, he separates repetitive memory, or habit, which recognizes in the present what was learned in the past, and memory which imagines and dreams about the past, “backward turning memory” (*mémoire régressive*). The repetitive memory can be useful, as it is directed towards the present situation and future, but the regressive, dreaming memory dives into the unconsciousness and is useless.⁷ As there is no actual perception which would not include recollection, there is no actual memory which would not be attached to a perception. Therefore, according to Bergson, memory-images are a mixture of memory and perception.⁸ Pure memory, then, does not have images: it is not imaginable. Pure memory does

¹ MM, 69/71.

² MM, 70/72.

³ MM, 72/75.

⁴ MM, 74/77.

⁵ MM, 76–77/81.

⁶ MM, 83/88.

⁷ MM, 88/93–94. Hyppolite points out that dreaming which is “abandonment of spirit to the past” must be separated from intuition which is “attention of spirit to itself” (Hyppolite 1971, 475/117).

⁸ MM, 147/170.

not contain objects or representations. Only when one associates the recollection with a present situation does the memory become an image.

That which I call my present is my attitude with regard to the immediate future; it is my impending action. My present is, then, sensori-motor. Of my past, that alone becomes image and consequently sensation, at least nascent, which can collaborate in that action, insert itself in that attitude, in a word make itself useful; but from the moment that it becomes image, the past leaves the state of pure memory and coincides with a certain part of my present. Memory actualized in an image *differs*, then, profoundly from pure memory. The image is a present state, and its sole share in the past is the memory whence it arose. Memory, on the contrary, powerless as long as it remains without utility, is pure from all admixture of sensation, is without attachment to the present, and is consequently unextended.¹

Pure memory conserves all that the individual conscience goes through. It is the totality of one's past, and remains unconscious. In *The Incarnate Subject* Merleau-Ponty states that Bergson renounces scientific realism for the realism of the "preexistence of total being."² Perception gives only a very limited and poor mode of being, and within us the pure memory contains the whole richness and fertility of being. In "Bergson in the Making" Merleau-Ponty writes that Bergson is the first philosopher who "established this circuit between being and myself which is that being exists 'for me,' the spectator, but which is also such that the spectator exists 'for being'."³ Pure memory does not limit itself in the conscious experiences of an individual: within pure memory, the duration of an individual experience connects with other durations, and in general with the whole heterogeneity of being.

In the third chapter of *Matter and Memory*, Bergson explicates the relation between present images, recollection, and pure memory with a figure of a cone. The tip of the cone points down, on a level which is horizontal and represents the present, which is also spatial. Bergson calls the tip of the cone "bodily memory," and as Merleau-Ponty notes, this shows how the body, which is present, is connected to time, and there is, according to Merleau-Ponty, "a comprehension of time by the body."⁴ On the highest level of the cone is the pure memory, which descends down and forms a connection with the habitual memory, that is, the bodily memory.⁵ The habitual memory is for Bergson a corporeal mechanism which is formed through the accumulation of past experiences: it is repetition of past experiences. According to Bergson, there is constant double movement between the top of the cone, pure memory, and the tip of the cone, present perception.⁶ Ideas can be fixed neither to the top nor to the tip, but are in constant movement between them. This constant movement between pure memory and perception is the *differentiation* of the self.

¹ MM, 156/180-181. Emphasis by JH.

² UAC, 85/88.

³ S, 301/185.

⁴ UAC, 89/92.

⁵ MM, 169/197.

⁶ MM, 180/210.

But the truth is that the general idea escapes us as soon as we try to fix it at either of the two extremities. It consists in the double current which goes from the one to the other, – always ready either to crystallize into uttered words or to evaporate into memories.¹

An intellectual effort consists of both dreaming and action. The cone image also shows how memory is “infinitely more” than actual perception: the past is wider than the present. Yet, everything in the intellectual effort depends on the attention to the current situation, “as in a pyramid which should stand upon its apex.”² Bergson claims that dreams and insanity are due to attention which is detached from present life.³ Bergson’s reasoning makes a very important turn here, from the importance of memory to the cruciality of perception. Nevertheless, for Bergson, the memory is not material, but matter can include memory: “Memory is, then, in no degree an emanation of matter; on the contrary, matter, as grasped in concrete perception which always occupies a certain duration, is in great part the work of memory.”⁴ This means that our grasp on materiality is mediated by our memory, it is a memory-image and not pure materiality – a very Cartesian conception, as already for Descartes the extended substance is grasped through the thinking substance, and is therefore conceived through ideas of the pure mind.

In the fourth chapter of *Matter and Memory*, Bergson considers the question of the relations between mind and body, between memory and matter. There seemed to be an inescapable incongruence between these two entities in the first chapter. The pure intuition of the pure memory is continuity, which must be broken into distinct words in order to have an expression.⁵ Philosophy not only consists of intuition, which seeks “experience at its source,” but a “decisive turn” to action and utility also has to happen, where the experience of the intuition “becomes properly *human* experience.”⁶ Bergson describes what he calls “the turn of experience:”

To give up certain habits of thinking, and even of perceiving, is far from easy: yet this is but the negative part of the work to be done; and when it is done, when we have placed ourselves at what we have called the turn of experience, when we have profited by the faint light which, illuminating the passage from the immediate to the useful, marks the dawn of our human experience, there still remains to be reconstituted, with the infinitely small elements which we thus perceive of the real curve, the curve itself stretching out into the darkness behind them.⁷

As Bergson explains, the return to the experience is only the negative part of philosophy, and the positive part of philosophy is to try to express from the grain of reality, which the intuition of our experience provides, the whole of the reality, which always exceeds our experience. Thus, for Bergson, philosophy is

¹ MM, 180/211.

² MM, 193/226.

³ MM, 194/227.

⁴ MM, 202–203/237.

⁵ MM, 203–204/239.

⁶ MM, 205/241.

⁷ MM, 206/241–242.

not an immediate reaction to the situations of social and political life. In the first place, philosophy must not be concerned with what happens in the world, for example politics or social imbalances. It must be a pure intuition which auscultates our own being, listens to the intensities of our unconscious memory. Philosophy must cut absolutely all ties to social life. In his later work, *The Two Sources of Moral and Religion*, Bergson writes that even Robinson Crusoe, shipwrecked on his small island, is too attached to society.¹ Yet, philosophy turns away from social activities only in order to turn back to them, and to become radical action – radical in the sense that it is not action as a mere repetition of habits, but action which is rooted to the possibilities and differentiation of pure memory.²

For Bergson, in a quite similar manner as in phenomenology, philosophy must follow the subjective experience, but Bergson does not limit this experience to consciousness: in his philosophical language, which differs from phenomenological philosophy, consciousness is only a very limited mode of experience. For example, when we perceive something, our perception is not only about the thing we perceive, the object of our consciousness, but matter in our perception always exceeds the consciousness, and Bergson calls it unconscious.

Philosophy, for Bergson, must cut its ties to the usefulness of everyday life and conversation.³ Here we find a possible Cartesian influence. Bergson is close to Descartes' idea that philosophy must withdraw from social life, from everyday practice and conversation – which for Descartes would be the union of mind and body, attached to the concrete present – and contemplate the pure

¹ Bergson 1959, 987. See Lawlor 2003, 68.

² Hyppolite explicates that the two movements consist of the split within the spirit, and its effort to unify itself: "No doubt we must still consider spirit, living memory, as uniting in itself the two possible movements, the movement towards the past which results in the ecstasis of a pure knowledge, where we unify ourselves with our past, and the movement towards the present – or better yet, towards the future (for which the world of our current perception sketches out possible realizations) – which results in, at the limit, that gesture that is in the process of being done. In both cases, spirit is outside of itself and loses itself in an unconsciousness. [...] Therefore, we must really situate the creative spirit between these two directions. [...] The finite spirit that we are is even nothing but the effort to unify itself, despite this duality that is always present within it." (Hyppolite 1971, 479–480/129.) According to Hyppolite, Bergson's philosophy is turned towards the future and action, and it inverts a statement of Plotinus: "[C]ontemplation is the shadow of action" (Hyppolite 1971, 488/126).

³ Leonard Lawlor argues that the turn or return to the "experience at its source" is Bergsonian equivalence for the phenomenological reduction. Yet, it is not a return to perceptual faith: for Bergson it is not a matter of "natural attitude" in the meaning of "common sense" (Lawlor 2003, 2). Bergson's philosophy is not about common or intersubjective ground in perceptual experience. As Lawlor puts it, his philosophy is not a philosophy of primacy of perception or primacy of consciousness, but rather primacy of memory and unconsciousness (Lawlor 2003, 60). Bergson's philosophical method, intuition, is not an immediate perception of the actually present, but a deepening to the duration of experience which involves unconscious memory (Lawlor 2003, 63). According to Lawlor, the pure memory is not something visible, but rather invisible (Lawlor 2003, 65). For Bergson, "the turn of experience" is not an easy task: it means that we need to turn away from actual perception, utility, society, action, matter, and even language. We need to turn to the sphere of memory, dream and spirit. Yet, the aim of this turn, as Lawlor clarifies, is then to turn back to utility and action, and therefore to form a relation to language. These are the negative and the positive parts of Bergson's method (Lawlor 2003, 68–69).

mind, which for Bergson is intuition of pure memory. Yet, it is crucial to note the difference between these conceptions, because for Bergson pure memory is not a clear and distinct idea of pure mind: it is not a pure consciousness of itself but, quite contrarily, it is unconscious. Here, in a certain sense, Bergson comes close to Malebranche, according to whom we are only shadows to ourselves, but have a consciousness of ourselves as an unreflective “inner sensation.” Thus, Bergson changes the meaning of Cartesian intuition: it is not directed towards the light of the clear and distinct, but rather to the continuous darkness of the duration. From the darkness of pure memory, Bergson shows how it is necessary to return to the social and practical life, and that the purpose of philosophy, and art too, is that it can rethink the living relation to the present. It is thus in connection to Cartesian tradition that in the final chapter of *Matter and Memory* Bergson discusses the union of mind and body connected to the present, action, and utility.

There is a difference of nature or kind between matter and memory, but there is also connection, which is a difference of degree.¹ Bergson shows with the cone image that there are degrees or intensities between pure perception, sensation, image, idea, and pure memory: there is movement from pure memory to perception, and also from actual perception to memory. Therefore, there is not only duality but also unity between spirit and matter:

[W]e can understand that spirit can rest upon matter and consequently unite with it in the act of pure perception, yet nevertheless be radically distinct from it. It is distinct from matter in that it is, even then, *memory*, that is to say a synthesis of past and present with a view to the future, in that it contracts the moments of this matter in order to use them and to manifest itself by actions which are the final aim of its union with the body.²

Bergson rethinks the traditional idea of spirit: spirit is not the idea of pure mind, clear and distinct, but instead temporality, that in its source remains obscure for the consciousness. Moreover, through his concept of the spirit he also rethinks the concept of matter, because in the end it is not a difference of kind between matter and spirit, but *a difference of degree*. In the first place, the difference of kind is that spirit is temporal and matter is spatial, but since Bergson elaborates his idea of the spirit as memory, and its connection to perception through temporality, matter must also be thought of in connection to time: they are parts of the same movement. Therefore, there are degrees of temporality: past, present, future, and all possible transitions between them.

Thus, between brute matter and the mind most capable of reflexion there are all possible intensities of memory or, what comes to the same thing, all the degrees of freedom. On the first hypothesis, that which expresses the distinction between spirit and body in terms of space, body and spirit are like two railway lines

¹ MM, 249/295–296. See Lawlor 2003, 44, 60.

² MM, 248/294.

which cut each other at a right angle; on the second, the rails come together in a curve, so that we pass insensibly from the one to the other.¹

Bergson explicates the relation between mind and body in a manner which comes close to Merleau-Ponty's later ideas of a chiasm, an intertwining, the invisible of the visible, and the flesh: matter is already the inscription of memory, as the presence of the past. Through the temporal process, matter and spirit are parts of the same texture: there is a thickness or flesh of time which connects the past to the present in a sense that there is both repetition and evolution in the actual material present. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty analyses Bergson's idea of differentiation – "ever new and always the same."² I will explicate Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of Bergsonian ideas in Chapter Four. In his later philosophy, Merleau-Ponty finds crucial the "vertical" presence of the past that Bergson articulates:

If matter does not remember the past, it is because it repeats the past unceasingly, because, subject to necessity, it unfolds a series of moments of which each is the equivalent of the preceding moment and may be deduced from it: thus its past is truly given in its present. But a being which evolves more or less freely creates something new every moment: in vain, then, should we seek to read its past in its present unless its past were deposited within it in the form of memory. Thus, to use again a metaphor which has more than once appeared in this book, it is necessary, and for similar reasons, that the past should be *acted* by matter, *imagined* by mind.³

Matter and Memory ends with a discussion on freedom and necessity: Bergson shows that they must also be thought of in the context of memory and matter. Pure memory is related to freedom: from pure memory comes a *virtual* state, something that is not yet actualized, but that is the possibility of a change and something new. Through repetition of "different *planes of consciousness*," the virtual state reaches materialization in an actual perception.⁴ The "virtual" means that the state is "not given as ready-made things superposed the one on the other."⁵ When the virtual materializes, the state becomes actual and determined by the necessity of matter. Bergson writes in the last lines of *Matter and Memory*:

Thus, whether we consider it in time or in space, freedom always seems to have its roots deep in necessity and to be intimately organized with it. Spirit borrows from matter the perceptions on which it feeds, and restores them to matter in the form of movements which it has stamped with its own freedom.⁶

The double movement between matter and spirit also comes forth in expression. In the essay "Life and Consciousness," published in the collection *Mind-*

¹ MM, 250/296–297.

² VI, 320/267.

³ MM, 251/297–298.

⁴ MM, 269–270/319.

⁵ MM, 272/322.

⁶ MM, 280/332.

Energy, Bergson describes how artistic expression is also an *effort* which happens against and according to the *resistance* of matter. Bergson also has his philosophical background in Maine de Biran: our thought is an effort which runs against and in connection with the resistance of matter. Let me quote Bergson's description of artistic effort:

A thought, taken by itself, is a reciprocal implication of elements of which we cannot say that they are one or many. Thought is a continuity, and in all continuity there is confusion. For a thought to become distinct, there must be dispersion in words. Our only way of taking count of what we have in mind is to set down on a sheet of paper, side by side, terms which in our thinking interpenetrate. Just in this way does matter distinguish, separate, resolve into individualities, and finally into personalities, tendencies before confused in the original impulse of life. On the other hand, matter calls forth effort and makes it possible. Thought which is only thought, the work of art which is only conceived, the poem which is no more than a dream, as yet cost nothing in toil; it is the material realization of the poem in words, of the artistic conception in statue or picture, which demands effort. The effort is toilsome, but also it is precious, more precious even than the work which it produces, because, thanks to it, one has drawn out from the self more than it had already, we are raised above ourselves. This effort was impossible without matter. By the resistance matter offers and by the docility with which we endow it, is at one and the same time obstacle, instrument and stimulus. It experiences our force, keeps the imprint of it, calls for its intensification.¹

There are, in a sense, two infinities in Bergson's philosophy. Firstly, there is an infinity of unconsciousness, memory, and intuition. It is like a painting or a piece of music which is not yet done, which has an infinity of unrealized possibilities, an infinity of ideas as a whole continuity which remains obscure, and crystallizes itself only as in a dream. In this sense, a mere intuition without articulation is only wandering through the ideas. Secondly, there is an infinity of matter, that is, infinite repetition of what has been formed within matter. When, for example, a painting or a piece of music has been finished, it is permanent in the sense that nothing can make it undone. Matter is the realization of ideas, which gets stuck to them, and repeats them endlessly. Between these, there is effort and resistance, differentiation and repetition which form the progress and the evolution.

The double movement or double turn in Bergson's philosophy is very close to Merleau-Ponty's description of the reflective return to the unreflective experience, which is also always distancing from the unreflected – and as I argued in Chapter One, this paradoxical movement of reflection is related to the contradiction of Descartes' philosophy between the union and the distinction. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty separates the terms "speaking word" and "spoken word," "*parole parlante*" and "*parole parlée*" – the speaking speech means expressive language, which must be separated from the already acquired language of the spoken speech.² In the work *Prose of the World*, he calls it "the paradox of expression:" expression tries to express something which

¹ Bergson 1959, 831–832. Bergson 1920, 28–29.

² PP, 229/229.

does not yet have an expression, but it needs to do this with the expressions that have been already expressed, that is, *instituted*. Philosophy tries to express something which exceeds the former discourse, but can do so only by utilizing the existing discourse. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the philosopher needs to carry out a “coherent deformation of the language.”¹

Even though Merleau-Ponty seems to be close to Bergson’s idea of expression in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he nevertheless rejects Bergson’s philosophy. Merleau-Ponty criticizes Bergson’s notion of intuition, which he sees as an all-swallowing fusion, an internal experience that unites the multiplicity in a formless indivision.² According to Merleau-Ponty’s reading, Bergson argues that the mind “interpenetrates” the multiplicity of the bodily life: the “consciousness snowballs upon itself,” as Merleau-Ponty writes.³ He argues that in Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*, the pure difference between matter and memory becomes a merging of one into another. The union of the extreme difference becomes a confluence of obscurity, an immediate and immanent contact with the self which has no outside. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no existence without transcendence: the pre-reflective self becomes a self through expression. There must be a passage from brute being to the acquired and expressed being. Furthermore, expression does not coincide with the unreflected life. There always remains a non-coincidence and a difference that cannot be exhausted: according to Merleau-Ponty, “it is never to eliminate, but merely to push further back the opacity that thought presents to itself”.⁴

Lawlor shows in his article “The End of Phenomenology: Expressionism in Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty” that the position that Merleau-Ponty addresses in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and which he rejects, is in fact also rejected by Bergson in *Matter and Memory*.⁵ In contrast to what Merleau-Ponty writes, Bergson does not claim that time would evolve from the present, and that the past would be a “weakened perception.”⁶ As Lawlor puts it, Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Bergson is simply incorrect, and moreover, as he criticises the position which Bergson also rejects, he is closer to Bergson’s philosophy than he admits. In a certain sense, Merleau-Ponty even supports Bergson’s position. Lawlor writes: “We must say therefore that Merleau-Ponty conceives the originary past or the sense of the past as a pure past, a past different in kind from the present perception and therefore as a past that was never present.”⁷ Lawlor refers to Merleau-Ponty’s description of the “original past:”

[R]eflection does not itself grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experience which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and

¹ PM, 160/113. S, 88/54.

² See Gutting 2001, 73.

³ PP, 247n1/321n47.

⁴ PP, 454/396.

⁵ See also Barbaras 1998, 33–61.

⁶ Lawlor 1998, 24.

⁷ Lawlor 1998, 25.

which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been present.¹

Alia Al-Saji further elaborates the Bergsonian interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the past. She argues that Merleau-Ponty's critique of Bergson in *Phenomenology of Perception* can perhaps be affirmed if one reads only the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*, and completely neglects the idea of the pure past.² In her article "The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Immemorial Past," Al-Saji interprets Bergson's "pure memory" and Merleau-Ponty's "past which has never been present" as the immemorial past. She refers to Merleau-Ponty's description of the painter's inspiration in *Eye and Mind*: "In the immemorial depth of the visible, something has moved, caught fire, which engulfs his body; everything he paints is in answer to this incitement [...]."³ Al-Saji defines the immemorial past as "neither lost presence, nor distant past; as both ground and abyss, the immemorial is a past that accompanies and makes possible the present."⁴ In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty makes a re-reading of Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, and finds "pure memory" to be the invisible of the visible, as a depth and absence which cannot be made present. Yet, I want to argue that even though Merleau-Ponty shows his closeness with Bergson's philosophy in this re-reading, he also makes a new critique: according to him, there is no coinciding with the "pure memory," it is not a matter of immediate intuition.⁵

Moreover, Barbaras argues that the reading of *Matter and Memory* which Merleau-Ponty presents in the course *The Incarnate Subject* shares the same attitude as in *Phenomenology of Perception*.⁶ Yet, in that lecture, Merleau-Ponty not only considers Bergson's philosophy through the presence, but already criticises the idea of the immediacy and coincidence. Merleau-Ponty refers to Bergson's description of how we have only "a fragment of the curve" and "not the totality of being."⁷ The philosopher does not simply coincide with the absolute being, but must use language in order to express the fragment of being which he experiences. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty sees as problematic the idea of an immediate intuition:

Bergson should therefore have disavowed his theory of immediation and constructed a theory of true communication. If the task of this philosopher is to "re-constitute the form of the curve," Bergson's philosophy cannot exhaust itself in immediation.⁸

¹ PP, 280/282.

² Al-Saji 2007, 181.

³ OE, 86/147.

⁴ Al-Saji 2007, 184.

⁵ VI, 163/122.

⁶ Barbaras 1998, 39.

⁷ UAC, 115/110.

⁸ UAC, 115/110. Merleau-Ponty also writes in the *Nature* lectures: Bergson's "philosophy is not a philosophy of coincidence [...]" (N, 80/52).

In “Bergson in the Making” and in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty also criticises Bergson’s conception of the coincidence. Merleau-Ponty refers to Bergson’s idea of the “partial coincidence.” In *Matter and Memory* Bergson explains that the idea of pure perception, in which there would be an immediate coincidence of the perception with the perceived object, “exists in theory rather than in fact.”¹ Since there is no full coincidence in fact, he describes the relation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object as the “partial coincidence.”² In the article “Bergson in the Making,” Merleau-Ponty nevertheless uses this term as defining Bergson’s understanding of our relation to our own duration, in the sense that there is a partial coincidence with our reflection on the unreflective life of our memory, which Merleau-Ponty defines as absolute knowledge, containing all our possible ideas:

A strange absolute knowledge, since we know neither all our memories nor even the whole thickness of our present, and since my contact with myself is “partial coincidence” (to use a term often used by Bergson which, to tell the truth, is a problematic one).³

On the one hand, there is the “inherence” of absolute knowledge, our immediate intuition, and coincidence with our memory, and on the other hand, there is the thickness of time which prevents the coincidence from being fully realized. According to Merleau-Ponty, therefore, “it is a non-coincidence I coincide with here, experience is susceptible to being extended beyond the particular being I am.”⁴ Merleau-Ponty reads Bergson’s idea of partial coincidence as coinciding with something which cannot be coincided with.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty refers to Bergson’s idea of partial coincidence again. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, there is neither a coincidence with the ideal nor with the mute being. Merleau-Ponty states that his aim is neither an intellectual essence nor a return to the immediate coincidence or fusion with the existent. In Chapter One I showed how Merleau-Ponty criticizes the idea of the intellectual possession of the pure mind already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and I explicated how Descartes also suggests the union of mind and body, which is unreflective and obscure for the mind. In *The Visible and the Invisible* we see clearly that Merleau-Ponty’s aim is not a fusion with the obscurity either. There is no immediate coincidence:

¹ MM, 68/71.

² MM, 246/292.

³ S, 299/184.

⁴ S, 299/184. In *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida makes his reading of Merleau-Ponty through this sentence, through this idea of “coincidence with the non-coincidence.” Derrida writes: “What makes reading Merleau-Ponty so troublesome (for me)? [...] [T]his experience of coincidence *with* noncoincidence, the coincidence of coincidence *with* noncoincidence [...]” (Derrida 2005, 211.) Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty explicitly criticizes this idea: “my contact with myself is ‘partial coincidence’ (to use a term often used by Bergson which, to tell the truth, is a problematic one)” (S, 299/184). In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty argues that the “originating,” (institution, memory, depth of the past) is non-coincidence and differentiation, and there cannot be coincidence with it (VI, 165/124). See Chapter 4.2.

If coincidence is lost, this is no accident; if Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being, and no disclosure will make us comprehend it. A lost immediate, arduous to restore, will, if we do restore it, bear within itself the sediment of the critical procedures through which we will have found it anew; it will therefore not be the immediate. If it is to be the immediate, if it is to retain no trace of the operations through which we approach it, if it is Being itself, this means that there is no route from us to it and that it is inaccessible by principle.¹

Immediacy is not a condition of experience, but makes experience impossible. On the contrary, distance and difference is the condition for experience: in order to have a connection, there must be differentiation. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is neither immediate coincidence with the pure memory nor immediate coincidence with the pure perception. The past of the memory is present only *as* past, through distance and differentiation. Accordingly, there is no “pure perception,” an immediate coincidence with the present experience without distance and mediation of the past. Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty, Bergson describes the experience as a partial coincidence:

It is a coincidence always past or always future, an experience that remembers an impossible past, anticipates an impossible future, that emerges from Being or that will incorporate itself into Being, that “is of it” but is not it, and therefore is not a coincidence, a real fusion, as of two positive terms or two elements of an alloyage, but an overlaying, as of a hollow and a relief which remain distinct.²

As Merleau-Ponty explicates, philosophy is indeed a return to being, a return to the past, and a return to itself, but not in the sense of a return to an immediate. There is an unreflected and pre-existing experience, but this experience is neither an immediate coincidence to which we must return through our reflection, nor something we have completely lost without a remainder. There is no original unity to which we must go back, or which is broken. Instead, there is connection and differentiation at the same time, implying each other, as proximity entails distance.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s description of Bergson’s idea of the partial coincidence comes very close to his own concept of the reversibility. Merleau-Ponty already refers to this idea in *Phenomenology of Perception*, without explicitly mentioning Bergson:

All that is required is that the coincidence of myself with myself, as it is achieved in the *cogito*, shall never be a real coincidence, but merely an intentional and presumptive one. In fact, between myself who have just thought this, and myself who am thinking that I have thought it, there is interposed already a thickness of duration [...].³

In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty writes about the structure of the flesh in a fashion which may remind us of Bergson’s partial coincidence:

¹ VI, 162-163/122.

² VI, 163-164/122-123.

³ PP, 397/402.

[W]e spoke summarily of a 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 reach coincidence, the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering.¹

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a difference between his idea of reversibility and Bergson's idea of the partial coincidence. Bergson thinks about the partial coincidence through the full coincidence: through the hypothetical extremes of pure perception and pure memory. The partial coincidence is the "real" perception which involves memory, and therefore is only partial coincidence. What Merleau-Ponty explicates as the ontological structure is not a non-coincidence with the full coincidence, not an inevitable distance through unattainable proximity, but the "idea of proximity through distance, of intuition as auscultation or palpation in depth."² In Merleau-Ponty's view, in the end Bergson lacks the "double reference," which Merleau-Ponty describes through Hegelian logic as "the identity of the retiring into oneself with the leaving of oneself, of the lived through with the distance."³ When we return to ourselves and to our experience, we communicate with our past, and thus we have already become something else, we do not coincide with our past, but rather we are distancing from ourselves, differentiating.⁴

The "originating" is not of one sole type, it is not all behind us; the restoration of the true past, of the pre-existence is not all of philosophy; the lived experience is not flat, without depth, without dimension, it is not an opaque stratum with which we would have to merge. The appeal to the originating goes in several directions: the originating breaks up, and philosophy must accompany this break-up, this non-coincidence, this differentiation.⁵

According to Merleau-Ponty, since there is no full coincidence we cannot define being and truth through immediacy. The differentiation, the divergence (*écart*) which Merleau-Ponty also approaches in *The Visible and the Invisible* through touching, is the untouchable connection between the touching and the touched: the untouchable does not mean that touching does not happen, but rather it means that without the difference between the touching and the touched there would be no connection either. The touching is *of* the touchable, *of* the "common stuff"⁶ – which does not mean a homogenous and immediate self-sameness and identity, but a heterogenic and plural differentiation of the common texture.

¹ VI, 194/147-148.

² VI, 170/128.

³ VI, 165/124.

⁴ Hyppolite, nevertheless, claims that there is a "double relation" in Bergson's philosophy: "[T]his double relation, which corresponds to the two possible directions of spirit, towards the past and towards the future, is *the life itself of spirit* [...]" (Hyppolite 1971, 484/123).

⁵ VI, 165/124.

⁶ VI, 253/200.

According to Merleau-Ponty, therefore, it is not through coincidence but through differentiation that we should define our relation to being.

In the lecture *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty shows that there is an underlying tension in Cartesian tradition between reflection of the mind and the lived experience of the body, corresponding with the contradiction that in *Phenomenology of Perception* he describes as central in Descartes' philosophy. From Gassendi to Malebranche, and from Maine de Biran to Bergson, the Cartesian contradictory relation between the distinction and the union is also explicated as a question of the self-relation: for Gassendi nothing acts on itself; according to Malebranche we are only shadows to ourselves; Maine de Biran hesitates between immediacy and process of distinction; and finally, Bergson explicates the repetition through differentiation. In this chapter, I have argued that Malebranche, Maine de Biran, and Bergson do not attempt to evade Descartes' contradiction by neglecting the lived union of mind and body as irrational, incoherent, and unphilosophical. Moreover, they propose an immediate self-relation, but *also* the differentiation of the self. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate in what manner Merleau-Ponty formulates the dual Cartesian situation in his later philosophy.

CHAPTER THREE: THE DUALITY OF CARTESIAN ONTOLOGY

But can there be two regions of the clear and distinct? It is impossible to juxtapose them. There is an extraordinary difficulty in thinking according to both the first and the second order 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.¹

In the preceding chapters, I have shown that Merleau-Ponty regards Descartes' philosophy as a contradictory duality between the distinction and the union of mind and body. This contradiction leads Cartesian philosophers to define the self-relation, on the one hand, in terms of immediate self-contact, and on the other hand also implicitly as a differentiation of the self. In his later works and lectures, Merleau-Ponty takes up the problem of the dual "Cartesian situation" and attempts to elaborate a new answer for it, "a new kind of balance."² Before I explicate Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of the new ontological structure in Chapter Four, I will further specify the Cartesian situation which he attempts to reformulate. In this chapter, I will show how Merleau-Ponty regards the Cartesian duality between the distinction of mind and body and the union as an ontological duality or "strabism" between the objectivist ontology and the ontology of the existent being.³ The separation between them forms the "Cartesian equilibrium," a balance of metaphysics "which gives us definitive reasons to leave off doing metaphysics."⁴ The response to Cartesian duality, nevertheless, cannot be *either-or*. In the essay *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty states that the objective thought and the philosophy of the existence are "two faithful and unfaithful offshoots of Cartesianism, two monsters born of its dismemberment."⁵

¹ N, 36/17-18.

² OE, 52-56/136-137.

³ N, 169/125.

⁴ OE, 56/137.

⁵ OE, 58/138.

Merleau-Ponty also finds the duality between the two ontologies in Husserl's phenomenology. In the lecture course *Nature*,¹ he argues that there is "a certain strabism of phenomenology:"² on the one hand, phenomenology interrupts its relation with the natural attitude and becomes eidetic phenomenology, and on the other hand, it finds the lived experience to be fundamental. In the article on Husserl, "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Merleau-Ponty restates what in *Phenomenology of Perception* he called the "dilemma" of phenomenology:³ phenomenology as a philosophy of consciousness and analysis of constitution unveils what the consciousness has not constituted, and shows the limit of the philosophy of consciousness.⁴ Merleau-Ponty argues that Husserl's phenomenology brings forth the dual situation of philosophy, and yet "Husserl doesn't manage to overcome the duality."⁵

In the working notes published with *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty articulates the problems of the approach he made in his earlier work, *Phenomenology of Perception*: on the one hand, the idea of the tacit *cogito* remains problematic, as the relation to the unreflected experience is not ontologically explicated,⁶ and on the other hand, *Phenomenology of Perception* partially retains the philosophy of consciousness.⁷ In his early work Merleau-Ponty brings forth the Cartesian contradiction and reformulates it as a paradoxical relation, but he does not yet sufficiently explicate the dual structure of Cartesian ontology and his answer to it as a new ontological structure. I argue that it is against this background that we can see the motivation for his later project on ontology.

In this chapter, I will begin to describe how Merleau-Ponty redefines the ontological situation in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In the first two chapters of his posthumously published manuscript, he unravels the duality between ideality and existence, consciousness and body, distinction and union. Merleau-Ponty shows how we should neither retain the dual situation of a philosophy of reflection between the unreflected and the reflection, nor attempt to overcome them by a synthesis in the manner of dialectical philosophy.

3.1 The Cartesian Situation

In Chapter One and Chapter Two we have seen how Merleau-Ponty criticizes the Cartesian perspective of the pure intellect: through the distinction of the mind from the body, Descartes establishes the "order of reasons" according to which the material world and the body becomes objectified as a mere thing. To

¹ The publication of the lectures contains three courses given in the academic years 1956–1957, 1957–1958, and 1959–1960 at the Collège de France. The original French publication also contains the resumes of these courses, which are left out from the English translation.

² N, 103–104/72.

³ PP, 419n1/425n8.

⁴ S, 293/180.

⁵ N, 104/72.

⁶ VI, 224/171; 229/176; 232–233/179.

⁷ VI, 237/183; 253/200.

this perspective, Merleau-Ponty adds the other Cartesian point of view: Descartes states that we also have to affirm the union of mind and body which, even though obscure and confused for the pure intellect, has its own clarity in the lived experience. In his lecture *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty articulates these two perspectives as different ontologies of Cartesian philosophy: the ontology of the object and the ontology of the existent.¹ Merleau-Ponty borrows from Maurice Blondel (1861–1949) the expression “ontological diplopia”² to describe the contradictory situation of Cartesian ontologies: the movement between these two modes of thinking which both call for and exclude each other.³ In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty defines the situation as “Cartesian equilibrium” in order to express the balance which Descartes establishes between objective thought and lived experience: they are both guaranteed and limited by God, as God is incomprehensible to us. Thus, Cartesian duality leads to accepting *either* the clear and distinct “order of the reason” *or* the lived experience of the existence. Merleau-Ponty defines these two possibilities as the “Cartesian monsters”⁴ as they neglect the whole “ontological complex”⁵ of Cartesian philosophy by abandoning one of the two possibilities. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty does not suggest that we should rediscover “the secret of Cartesian equilibrium:” according to him, Cartesian equilibrium is lost, and we must find a new kind of balance.⁶

I will first describe the two ontological possibilities of Cartesian philosophy analyzed by Merleau-Ponty in the *Nature* lecture. After this, I will further explicate the Cartesian situation as Merleau-Ponty expresses it in *Eye and Mind*. Allow me, nevertheless, to first briefly recall what I stated in Chapter One about Descartes’ conceptions of nature and in Chapter Two about reflection and the unreflected, as these two conceptions are interrelated.

In Chapter One I argued that in the *Meditations* Descartes explicates two concepts of nature:⁷ on the one hand, there is a nature of extensive things which the intellect perceives clearly and distinctly, for example in geometry, and on the other hand, there is a “general aspect” of nature which means “nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God.”⁸ The general aspect of nature is, therefore, the existence created by God, or even “God himself.” Moreover, we know the intellectual ideas of nature by “natural light,” which means our clear and distinct perception or intuition – and since God is not a deceiver, what we perceive with our natural light as clear and distinct must be true.⁹ In contrast, we are related to the general aspect of nature through our “natural inclinations,” which can be misleading: they are obscure and confused for the pure intellect – sensation, passions and so on. Natural inclinations stem from the union of the mind with the body: natural

¹ N, 169/125.

² Blondel 1963, 367.

³ N, 371/TLC, 158. See Barbaras 2001, 103–108/81–86.

⁴ OE, 58/138.

⁵ N, 370.

⁶ OE, 56/137.

⁷ See Chapter 1.6.

⁸ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56.

⁹ See Chapter 1.3.

inclinations are “taught by nature.” And yet, since God has created nature in general, and cannot deceive, “there is no doubt that everything that I am taught by nature contains some truth.”¹

I argued that Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes’ philosophy a contradiction: both the clear and distinct perception and the obscure experience of the union are guaranteed by God. This contradiction is not, in Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation, something that we should explain away, because according to him “perhaps Descartes’ philosophy consists in embracing this contradiction.”² In Chapter Two we saw that Merleau-Ponty mentions Spinoza and Brunschvicg as philosophers who attempt to correct Descartes’ philosophy by removing this contradiction: the union of mind and body is regarded as privative, and therefore rejected. Yet, Merleau-Ponty shows how Malebranche, Maine de Biran, and Bergson attempt to explicate the union of mind and body, which effects their conception of the mind: all of them establish the unreflected experience as central to the self-relation. The problem of the relation between mind and body thus consists, for Merleau-Ponty, of the relation between reflection and the unreflected. In this sense, we must understand the dual situation of Cartesian ontology as a relation between reflection and the unreflected: the ontology of the object is formed by intellectual reflection, and the ontology of the existent is contact with the unreflected experience.

In the first course of *Nature*, given in 1956–1957, Merleau-Ponty begins with a short description of the background for Descartes’ notions of nature: *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* in Scholastic philosophy. *Natura naturans* is the interior of nature, the creative nature of God. *Natura naturata* is the exterior nature, the nature created by God.³ In Descartes’ philosophy, as I have argued, God is incomprehensible to us, and therefore our knowledge of nature concerns the created nature, the pure exteriority which becomes mechanical nature, “a machine,” “a system of laws.”⁴ This nature is, nevertheless, contingent: God could have created another kind of nature because he is omnipotent; and yet, Descartes states in *Principles of Philosophy* that nature can be considered as “morally certain” because God is “sovereignly good and the source of all truth,” a certitude that extends to all that is demonstrated in and by mathematics and physics.⁵

In the second course, given 1957–1958, Merleau-Ponty comes back to Descartes’ ideas of nature, and defines this first approach as “the ontology of the object.” Descartes reduces the exterior nature of *natura naturata* to extension. The objective ontology is “a purification of the immediate contact that we have with Being.”⁶ Nature is homogenized and “everywhere equally full because it is

¹ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56.

² PP, 52–53/49.

³ N, 26/9.

⁴ N, 28/10.

⁵ N, 30/13. AT VIII A, 327/CSM I, 289–290. Merleau-Ponty analyses the question of the contingency of created nature through Descartes, Leibniz, Malebranche, and Spinoza, but I leave out this discussion here (see N, 27–31/10–13).

⁶ N, 169/126.

equally empty."¹ The laws of nature are derived from God, and they must be necessary, as God wishes them to be as they are. The objective ontology is the philosophy of intellectual understanding and judgment of the mind.² According to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes "undoes the unreflected communion with the World by striving to discern 'objective reality' and to reduce it to what it can signify when we think it clearly and distinctly."³ All that is before the reflection is done away with.

According to Merleau-Ponty, such philosophy is marked by "a certain strabism."⁴ This strabism comes forth, for example, in the "dilemma of Being and Nothingness:" being includes everything and a non-being is nothing, and therefore a thought must be something as it is not nothing. Being as the full plenitude becomes defined through "a nothingness which it endlessly affirms that it is not, but of which it does not stop thinking, as if there were a being of nothingness."⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, this reveals that Cartesian philosophy is "unstable" and "exposed to a reversal."⁶ In the first course, Merleau-Ponty explicates this idea further. According to him, Kant argues that there is something in the space which resists pure understanding, and Spinoza states that the sensible is an abstraction from the non-being. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty points out, for Descartes the sensible as the "non-thought" is: "That which is negative for intelligence is positive for life."⁷ The strabism of Cartesian philosophy is thus an expression for the dual situation between pure intellect and the union of mind and body.

In order to explicate this passage, let me remind that according to Descartes all falsity is caused by nothingness, since God cannot contain any defects.⁸ It may at first seem that sensation is defined as a non-being, as it contains something privative: it can be false. Yet, on the contrary, Descartes argues that even though sensation can be false, it is not nothing. On the one hand, sensation can be misleading, but on the other hand it must contain "some truth"⁹ and is "sufficiently clear and distinct."¹⁰ Thus, Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes an idea of "negativity that is not nothing."¹¹ From the perspective of the pure intellect, the sentient life of the union is negative but not pure negativity, as it is not nothing: it has its own positivity.

In the second course of *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty defines Descartes' second perspective on nature as the ontology of the existent being. The natural inclination is not completely false, but "a sufficient motive of evidence."¹² The existential ontology is the obscure truth: we can understand it "only by the use of life

¹ N, 170/126.

² N, 171/127.

³ N, 170/126.

⁴ N, 171/127.

⁵ N, 172/127.

⁶ N, 172/127.

⁷ N, 34/16.

⁸ AT VII, 54/CSM II, 38. See Chapter 1.4.

⁹ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56. See Chapter 1.6.

¹⁰ AT VII, 83/CSM II, 57-58.

¹¹ VI, 198/151.

¹² N, 172/128.

and not by the understanding."¹ It is the experience of the embodied life. Therefore, Cartesian ontology is marked by the duality between the distinction and the union. According to Merleau-Ponty, the first ontology gives a "speculative world" and the second ontology gives the "existing world."² The first one is defined by Descartes as nature in the "limited" sense,³ and the second as nature in the "general" sense.⁴ By the second idea of nature, Descartes rehabilitates the exterior nature in the broad sense, and it is not reduced to a pure object.⁵ In the "general" sense of nature, there is a relation between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, a "natural productivity" which, for Descartes, "appears as the very productivity of God."⁶ According to Descartes, "if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God."⁷ Merleau-Ponty argues that here nature is not only created, but must be "continuous creation."⁸ Merleau-Ponty is looking for a concept of nature in which nature would not be only a product and an object, but productivity:

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 original productivity that continues [to operate] beneath the artificial creations of man. It both partakes of the most ancient, and is something always new.⁹

In the resume of the first course, Merleau-Ponty defines the objectivistic idea of nature as a general idea of the being in-itself. According to him, the idea of the in-itself emerges historically and philosophically from the idea of the infinite being which is the cause of itself: that is, God. Yet, the difficulty of this conception is expressed by Descartes in his hesitation of the union of mind and body: on the one hand, the union is essential for the human being, but on the other hand, on the basis of the experience of union, it is difficult to understand the in-itself of the pure understanding.¹⁰ In the resume of the second course, Merleau-Ponty describes the to-and-fro movement between these two positions as an "ontological complex" which is "perhaps [...] common to almost all western ontology:"¹¹

Could we not find what has been called an "ontological diplopia" (Blondel), which after so much philosophical effort we cannot expect to bring to a rational reduction and which leaves us with the sole alternative of wholly embracing it, just as our gaze takes over monocular images to make a single vision of them.

¹ N, 173/128.

² N, 173/128.

³ AT VII, 82/CSM II, 57.

⁴ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56. See Chapter 1.6.

⁵ N, 173/128.

⁶ N, 169/125.

⁷ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56.

⁸ N, 173/129.

⁹ N, 169/125. See Chapter 4.6.

¹⁰ N, 359.

¹¹ N, 370. Translation by JH.

Viewed in this way, the continual shifting of philosophies from one perspective to the other would not involve any contradiction, in the sense of inadvertence or incoherence, but would be justified and founded upon being. All one could do is to ask the philosopher to admit this phenomenon and reflect upon it, rather than merely suffering it and occupying alternatively two ontological positions, each of which excludes and invites the other.¹

Descartes suggests, in his letter to Elizabeth of 28th of June 1643, that the contradictory situation between the two positions can be *easily* avoided: “Your Highness will easily be able to return to the knowledge of the distinction between the soul and the body in spite of having conceived their union.”² Yet, the easiness of the to-and-fro movement does not help us to avoid the fact that these two positions are contradictory. According to Merleau-Ponty, the first three *Meditations* take the position of the natural light, and the last three elaborate the position of natural inclinations. Through these positions, we have, for example, a completely different concept of space.³ As Merleau-Ponty points out, the actual world and lived experience are qualified as valid arguments in the last three *Meditations*, whereas in the first three they were explicitly rejected as false.⁴ We already saw above how this “reversal” culminates in the conception of being and nothingness. Merleau-Ponty then asks, in accordance with his earlier statement in *Phenomenology of Perception* about the contradiction of Descartes’ philosophy on the one hand,⁵ and in accordance with his description of the two Cartesian possibilities in *The Incarnate Subject* on the other hand:⁶

How is this reversal of criteria possible? How, in the name of evidence, does he [Descartes] assign a value to what is obscure without entering into contradiction? If that is not possible, philosophy sees itself cut in two.⁷

In his lectures on *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty considers Gueroult’s attempt to reconcile the Cartesian positions in the work *Descartes’ Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*. Gueroult explicates the relation of the two positions as both belonging to the “order of reasons” of Descartes’ philosophy:

The existence of the actual world no doubt supposes the evidence of another order, but this order is not radically different, because it continues to belong to the chain of reasons. There are thus two zones of truth: the zone of absolute truth, and the zone of that which is not false and, as not false, can be affirmed as true. This positivity gives way to a negation of negation. But thanks to the divine guaranty, Descartes fully obeys the order of reason. As Guérout says, Descartes’ rationalism remains rigorous, even if it is not absolute.⁸

¹ N, 371/TLC, 158.

² AT III, 695/CSM-K, 228.

³ See Chapter 1.5.

⁴ N, 34–35/16.

⁵ PP, 52–53/49.

⁶ UAC, 16/35.

⁷ N, 35/16.

⁸ N, 36/17. Gueroult states: “Descartes’ rationalism is therefore rigorous, not because it is absolute (meaning because it reduces irrational elements to what is rational, in which the

Therefore, Gueroult suggests that the two positions can be understood as coherently rational if only we keep in mind Descartes' restriction of their regions as "primitive notions," explicated in the correspondence with Elizabeth: the two orders cannot be thought together at the same time, but they can be thought separately.¹ Yet, the problem is that if the union is obscure for the pure intellect, it is nevertheless clear for itself, and therefore it seems that there are two regions of clarity, two separate orders of evidence.²

However, Merleau-Ponty points out that Descartes and Gueroult do not manage to keep the two orders separated: on the one hand, the sensation becomes "confused thought" and is intruded into the order of the intellectual evidence, and on the other hand, it is a "lived state" of the union.³ There is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a "subjective-objective character of the 'Sixth Meditation':" on the one hand, the body is the subject of the sensation, and on the other hand, it is the object thought by the mind.⁴ For the mind's part, it must be contaminated in the mixture with the body and cannot remain pure, and for the body's part, it cannot be the machine that the mind thinks it is.⁵ In order to make the concept of the union work, it is not enough that the body is extensive, but it also needs to have "the attributes of the soul."⁶ Yet, here we encounter the limits of Descartes' approach: the body and the mind must *also* remain distinct. Therefore, the "unified body is not the body itself, but rather my body as thought by the soul."⁷ The union of mind and body is, in the end, "only a conception."⁸ Merleau-Ponty explicates:

Descartes forgoes truly taking account of the unity of the body. The unity, coming only from the soul, is worthless for the animal and thereby disallows a veritable substantial union of soul and body. If this union were to be realized, the soul would have to be understood as descending into the body and the body as entering the soul. Now this is impossible for Descartes.⁹

As Merleau-Ponty states, "[w]hat is missing is a common standard."¹⁰ The two orders cannot be thought of at the same time, but still they have to be intermingled. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is exactly this indecision which separates

irrational elements become irrational only in appearance), but because it determines completely, through reason, the irrational elements that we believe we are capable of discovering in the work of God (error, sensation) and in God himself (incomprehensibility)" (Gueroult 1953b, 299/237).

¹ AT III, 693/CSM-K, 227. N, 36/18. See Chapter 1.6.

² N, 36/17. According to Saint Aubert, Merleau-Ponty questions if Gueroult suggests even a clear and distinct knowledge of the obscure and confused sensations (Saint Aubert 2005, 41), as Gueroult writes: "[T]he science of passions (even though it has, as object, sensations, things that are in themselves obscure and confused) is capable of bringing to us clear and distinct knowledge and complete certainty" (Gueroult 1953b, 257/205).

³ N, 36/18.

⁴ N, 36/18.

⁵ N, 36-37/18-19.

⁶ N, 38/19.

⁷ N, 38/19.

⁸ N, 38/19.

⁹ N, 39/20.

¹⁰ N, 38/19.

Descartes from Spinoza, who coherently embraces the pure understanding.¹ Descartes retains the unreflected and withdrawing character of the body: the union cannot be conceived and “the irrationalism of life” remains “as the counterweight to rigorous rationalism.”² Merleau-Ponty argues, repeating *Phenomenology of Perception*, that the “contradiction is constitutive of the human.”³ Only God can think of the composition of the two orders, and for the human mind that is incomprehensible.⁴

An endless “to-and-fro movement” seems to be exactly the situation of Cartesian ontological duality: “There is not a question of choosing between the realities that are proposed, and leading all of them back to just one among them.”⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, we must take literally Leibniz’s expression “labyrinth of the first philosophy:” “The task of philosophy would be to describe and elaborate such a concept of being that the contradictions would be neither accepted nor ‘surpassed’ but would find in it their place.”⁶

In the work *The Being of the Phenomenon*, Barbaras argues that the to-and-fro movement between essence and existence is exactly what Merleau-Ponty is after in his own philosophy. Between the essence and the existence, philosophy cannot be reduced to either of them, “since each calls for the other.”⁷ The instability of the “ontological diplopia” means that because either of the two possibilities expresses the complete situation, “each of them is led to pass into its other.”⁸ Therefore, Barbaras points out, what is central is not the duality of the opposites, not “pure” essentiality or “pure” existentiality, but the movement between essence and existence. Barbaras explains: “By overcoming the fixity of the terms in which the opposition is expressed, we shall overcome the relation as oppositional relation.”⁹ There is a passage from one to the other which, at the same time, overcomes the duality and retains it: existence forms the essence but

¹ N, 39/20.

² N, 39/20.

³ N, 174/129.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty also analyses Jean Laporte’s (1886–1948) suggestion of a third ontology at the level of God, which would unite the two orders of the distinction and the union (N, 176–178/131–132). Yet, Merleau-Ponty shows that we end up at the beginning, in the “zig-zagging between the plane of essences and the plane of existences” which Descartes also finds (N, 179/133). Merleau-Ponty makes here another reference to Blondel’s “ontological diplopia:” “Hence in all Christian thinking, a zigzagging between conditional essentialism and subordinate existentialism, we associate positivism and negative theology. In a sense, God is and the world is nothing; in another sense, God is obscure, and only the world is clear. It’s in this way that Blondel could speak of an ‘ontological diplopy,’ co-substantial with all Christian philosophy.” (N, 179/134.)

⁵ N, 180/134–135.

⁶ N, 371. Translation by JH. Merleau-Ponty adds that this task has not been realized by “modern dialectics” as they hold on to pre-dialectical ontology, that is, the dual situation. In my opinion, Merleau-Ponty refers here especially to Sartre. In the last part of this chapter I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Sartre’s dialectics and his own suggestion of the dialectical movement without synthesis.

⁷ Barbaras 2001, 105/82.

⁸ Barbaras 2001, 106/84.

⁹ Barbaras 2001, 106/84.

nevertheless withdraws from it, and essence is grounded in existence but does not exhaust it.¹

In this sense, it is the contradiction which Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes already in *Phenomenology of Perception* that he elaborates in his later philosophy into an ontological structure. The instability, incoherence, contradiction or paradox between essence and existence is the crux of Merleau-Ponty's conception of ontology: it becomes in his later philosophy the intertwining and the chiasm of different dimensions – the flesh.² Yet, it is crucial that even if Merleau-Ponty approaches what is paradoxical in our experience – as I will show later in this chapter – his goal is certainly not to remain in Cartesian conceptions: he does not claim that we should *stay* in the Cartesian diplopia or equilibrium, but that we must find a *new* kind of balance.³

In the work *Le scénario cartésien: Recherches sur la formation et la cohérence de l'intention philosophique de Merleau-Ponty*, Emmanuel de Saint Aubert cites Merleau-Ponty's still unpublished manuscript entitled *La Nature ou le monde du silence*, where Merleau-Ponty explicitly states that the “ontological diplopia” between the ontology of the object and the ontology of the existent, and the to-and-fro movement between them, is insufficient.⁴ In the manuscript, Merleau-Ponty describes the Cartesian situation as a “labyrinth” from which we must escape: on the one hand, there is an object or an idea, and on the other hand, there is a subjective being of experience, and their totality is incomprehensible. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty writes according to Saint Aubert, “Descartes is at the same time the most profound and the least satisfying of the philosophers.”⁵

Saint Aubert argues that it is the Cartesian order of “confusion” that Merleau-Ponty elaborates as *encroachment* (*empiètement*). In his lecture *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty shows the confusion of the “two regions of the clear and distinct.”⁶ He asks: “Is the confusion of two domains, to which Guérault and Descartes ask us not to fall prey, avoidable if feeling is taken such as it is given – that is, as confused – as simultaneously and indissolubly a lived state and knowledge?”⁷ Saint Aubert explicates that Merleau-Ponty wonders if Guérault suggests a clear and distinct knowledge of the obscure and confused things.⁸ If the union – the obscure and confused – is considered from the point of view of the clear and distinct thought of the pure intellect, it is, then, no longer the obscure and confused.⁹ This, in turn, not only means a purification of the experience, but also an evasion of the experience as such, because the “union has to be real, a mixture, a

¹ Barbaras 2001, 106–107/84–85.

² See Chapter Four.

³ OE, 56/137.

⁴ Saint Aubert 2005, 35n3. On the manuscript *La Nature ou le monde du silence* see Saint Aubert 2005, 187.

⁵ Saint Aubert 2005, 35n3. Translation by JH.

⁶ N, 36/17.

⁷ N, 36/18.

⁸ Saint Aubert 2005, 41. Guérault writes: “[T]he science of passions (even though it has, as object, sensations, things that are in themselves obscure and confused) is capable of bringing to us clear and distinct knowledge and complete certainty” (Guérault 1953b, 257/205).

⁹ Saint Aubert 2005, 41–42.

contamination.”¹ I explicated above that the problem is in that the “unified body is not the body itself, but rather my body as thought by the soul.”² According to Saint Aubert, Merleau-Ponty’s idea is that Descartes cannot account for his discovery of the order of existing which resists systematic rationalism.³ It is, therefore, the *confusion* which Merleau-Ponty attempts to think about: as Descartes writes in the *Sixth Meditation*, “confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body.”⁴

According to Merleau-Ponty, the “confused thinking” is an indirect attestation of Descartes’ relation to being, which is “under the order of reasons, before and after it.”⁵ Saint Aubert explicates, referring to Merleau-Ponty’s final lecture, “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui,” that it is not that in the *Sixth Meditation* we find the natural inclination after the jurisdiction by the natural light, but, on the contrary, that through the natural inclination we finally find the guarantee for the natural light, but as limited, not as a measure of existence.⁶ According to Saint Aubert, Merleau-Ponty’s idea is to elaborate the encroachment (*empiétement*) of the mind to the body and the body to the mind, which for Descartes is confusion.⁷ Saint Aubert suggests that we should read Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Descartes through his concept of the flesh. The flesh, which according to Merleau-Ponty “is not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable by itself,” is the formulation of the experiential union of mind and body, which, similarly according to Descartes, “can be understood only through itself.”⁸

In Chapter Four, I will explicate how Merleau-Ponty elaborates in *The Visible and the Invisible* on the encroachment – the confusion – as the connection (*lien*) between the differentiation of the connecting (*liant*) and the connected (*lié*).⁹ Merleau-Ponty explicates this ontological structure through touching and seeing: my touching body and the touched thing are of the same touchable being, which is differentiating, diverging, in order for there to be a touch. The same goes for seeing: the seer is of the visible, and at the same time distancing itself from the visible. Moreover, there is not only encroachment within the different dimensions, but also between them: “there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible.”¹⁰ Each dimension is a “total part” of the encroachment of being, of the dimensionality in general. Merleau-Ponty argues that the encroachment is the answer to the problem of the Cartesian duality: “The unicity

¹ N, 36/18.

² N, 38/19.

³ Saint Aubert 2005, 42.

⁴ AT VII, 81/CSM II, 56.

⁵ NC, 224. Translation by JH.

⁶ NC, 225. Saint Aubert 2005, 47.

⁷ Saint Aubert 2005, 23.

⁸ VI, 185/140. AT III, 666/CSM-K, 218. Saint Aubert 2005, 27.

⁹ VI, 71/47. In the English translation “*lien*,” “*liant*,” and “*lié*” are translated as “bond,” “binding,” and “bound.” I will translate them as “connection,” “connecting,” and “connected,” in order to preserve more clearly the distinction between “*lien*” and “*liant*,” as in English “bond” and “binding” can both mean “*lien*” and, thus, can be confused.

¹⁰ VI, 177/134.

of the visible world, and, by encroachment, the invisible world, such as it presents itself in the rediscovery of the vertical Being, is the solution of the problems of the 'relations between the soul and the body'."¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, "Being is this strange encroachment [...] junction at a distance."² Therefore, the encroachment, the connection between different dimensions, does not surpass the distance, the divergence. The mind, which thinks about the body, distances itself from the body, and yet is of the same ontological texture, and cannot cut its ties to the body. Merleau-Ponty's idea of the ontological structure is neither a complete "confusion" nor a complete "distinction;" there is neither unity without difference nor distinction without encroachment.

Thus, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty does not suggest *either* of the two possibilities as an answer for the Cartesian contradiction. In *Eye and Mind*, he explicates what becomes of the two options when they are cut away from each other, and thus from the "Cartesian equilibrium." The "Cartesian situation" is a double vision: there is the "thought of seeing," the vision which we reflect, and there is the actual vision which we exercise.³ The "secret of Cartesian equilibrium" consists of that the intellect cannot conceive the union, and yet this obscure area leaves nothing out of our clear and distinct "map of Being," because God sustains it and God cannot deceive.⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, thus, on the one hand, Descartes opens the possibility of "a metaphysics of depth" as the "abyssal Being" of God, and on the other hand, he forms "a metaphysics which gives us definitive reasons to leave off doing metaphysics," as God is incomprehensible to us.⁵

According to Merleau-Ponty, modern science and philosophy do not wish to hold onto the Cartesian balance between the knowledge of clear and distinct ideas derived from the attributes of God and the obscure and unknown existence of God. Science has lost from its sight the "unfathomable God," the "abyssal Being" and the unreflected experience. Merleau-Ponty argues that modern psychology takes into its possession the "domain of contact with oneself and with the world which Descartes reserved for a blind but irreducible experience."⁶ Objective science has become hostile to the philosophy of the unreflected contact, and yet science introduces notions which for Descartes would have been confused thoughts. Philosophy, for its part, opposes itself to scientific objectivism, "plunging itself into that dimension of the composite of soul and

¹ VI, 286–287/233.

² VI, 269/216.

³ OE, 52–54/136.

⁴ OE, 55/137.

⁵ OE, 56–58/137–138. The idea that God's being is an abyss (*Ungrund*) for us is a formulation by Kant: "The unconditioned necessity, which we need so indispensably as the ultimate sustainer of all things, is for human reason the true abyss" (Kant 1998, 574). This idea is the starting point in Schelling's philosophy, as Merleau-Ponty points out in his lectures *Nature* (N, 59–60/36–37). I will explicate Schelling's influence on Merleau-Ponty in Chapter 4.6. Gueroult also states that there is "the inscrutable abyss of God's wisdom" which Descartes' philosophy indicates (Gueroult 1953b, 194/155).

⁶ OE, 57/137. Let me remind that in the Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections of *Meditations* Descartes suggests the "internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge" (AT VII, 423/CSM II, 285). See Chapter 1.2.

body, of the existent world, of the abyssal Being.”¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, this is what happens when we choose only one of the Cartesian possibilities and neglect the other: “Our science and our philosophy are two faithful and unfaithful offshoots of Cartesianism, two monsters born of its dismemberment.”²

Merleau-Ponty does not specify which scientific theory he refers to, or who is the philosopher he means here. Nevertheless, the picture is clear: on the one hand, there is the “objective thought” to which everything is an object, a concept, a theory, and on the other hand, there is a philosophy of an immediate coincidence with the obscurity of being. In a certain sense, both of these share the Cartesian view of the infinite truth of God, the *in-itself*: for “science” it is the objective and explicit reality, and for “philosophy” it is the incomprehensible existence. They both also share the idea of an immediate contact: for “science” it is the immediate coincidence of the ideas with reality, as Descartes defines the clear and distinct perception as necessarily true, and for “philosophy” it is the immediate coincidence with being, the pre-reflective awareness of thought and existence articulated by Descartes. Yet, Merleau-Ponty’s statement in *Eye and Mind* can give a misleading idea that he completely neglects science, and that he regards a philosophy of pure coincidence as possible. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty has an optimistic view of science, which comes forth especially in his lectures on *Nature*: the problem is, rather, the self-understanding of science through Cartesian conception.³ Moreover, although there may be philosophies

¹ OE, 57–58/138.

² OE, 58/138.

³ In his lecture *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Heidegger for his concept of science, which does not allow any understanding of its own ontological situation: “But modern science often criticizes itself and its own ontology. Also, the radical opposition, traced by Heidegger, between ontic science and ontological philosophy is valid only in the case of Cartesian science, which posits nature as an object spread out in front of us, and not in the case of a modern science, which places its own object and its relation to this object in question.” (N, 120/85.) Cartesian science means an attitude towards the world of a pure intellect in front of a pure object, the pure inspection of the object. This is a result of the Cartesian separation between the thinking substance and the extensive substance – as Merleau-Ponty states: “science still lives in part on a Cartesian myth: a myth, and not a philosophy, because if the consequences remain, the principles are abandoned” (N, 120/85). The principles of Descartes, to which Merleau-Ponty refers, are not only the distinction and the judgement of the intellect – “I think that I see” – but also the union of mind and body which means intermingling of understanding and material body. Science is not outside of the experience of being but it is “experience in its most regulated form” (N, 122/87). In Merleau-Ponty’s view, “science must understand itself; it must see itself as a construction based on a brute, existent world [...]” (OE, 11/122). It means that science too, and not only philosophy, must understand itself as a reflection on an unreflected experience, that is, as a discourse which has its deep relations with the brute or wild being, but which nevertheless is not the brute being: science and philosophy participate in the same ontological structure, which is connection through difference. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty expresses his worry about manipulation: if we identify the real with the scientific knowledge, then we comprehend reality as purely determinate, the real is conceived on the basis of construction, and therefore also open to manipulation (OE, 12/122). Our freedom is thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, not a given fact which we have even if we do not understand it: our self-understanding is significant, and therefore it is not useless to speak about science in philosophical terms. In my view, Merleau-Ponty does not contest scientific objectification as such: in the same way as philosophy, science must use concepts, it must idealize and universalize, and thus it must objectify. Rather, he protests against the idea that scientific knowledge is the measure of the real. In contrast, science must be understood as a con-

which explicitly define themselves as an immediate contact with being, Merleau-Ponty shows that such a *direct ontology* is impossible, and that these philosophies implicitly reveal themselves as articulations of the differentiation of being.¹ We cannot provide an answer to the Cartesian situation from either of the two positions. Yet, according to Merleau-Ponty, we cannot recreate the secret of Cartesian equilibrium:

The secret has been lost, and lost for good, it seems. If we are ever again to find a balance between science and philosophy, between our models and the obscurity of the “there is,” it must be a new kind.²

struction on the basis of regulated forms of reality, that is, as a scientific discourse. Let me give few examples. If a certain neuroscientific research does not find in the brain a positive sign of freedom, it does not mean that freedom does not exist: rather, it means that this neuroscience is rigorously regulated scientific discourse in which such a notion as “freedom” is not compatible. The neuroscience must operate “within the given situation of knowledge” (VI, 279/225), and thus, even if it cannot discover the existence of freedom, it cannot conclude the inexistence of freedom either, without exceeding its designated field. Moreover, the scientific discourse is, as any discourse, open to changes: it is possible that through its internal critique and changes, another neuroscientific research is able to find a new sphere and conception in which such a notion as freedom is possible. To give another example, in Euclidian geometry it has been thought to be a universal truth that the sum of the angles of a triangle are 180° , and yet in the concept of space of the theory of relativity, it is possible that the sum of the angles is more or less than 180° due to the bending of space. Moreover, the conception of the physical theory of relativity does not discard purely mathematical Euclidian geometry – they are on the basis of different regulations, different ways of understanding the “real,” both of which are correct in their own determined fields. Merleau-Ponty underlines the importance of the self-understanding of sciences. He writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*: “Philosophy is not 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 by the question. But a physics that has learned to situate the physicist physically, a psychology that has learned to situate the psychologist in the socio-historical world, have lost the illusion of the absolute view from above: they do not only tolerate, they enjoy a radical examination of our belongingness to the world before all science.” (VI, 47–48/27.) And again, in a working note: “The scientific deduction-experimental fact parallelism is neither to be contested, nor to be understood as a proof of a *realism* of science. It is founded on the fact that the deductive science renders explicit the structures, the *pivots*, certain traits of the inner framework of the world. This *truth* of science, far from making a philosophy useless, is founded and guaranteed only by a relation of transcendence with Being, an inherence of the subject and the object of science in a preobjective Being.” (VI, 279/226.) Science, then, must be understood through the ontological structure of the thickness of being which connects and differentiates: it is the changes in science that show its adherence to the order of pre-objective being, as it is not a discovery of perfectly immutable universal essences. In the resume of the course *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty states that Cartesian idea of nature as a pure object and ontology of the in-itself has adhered to scientific discourse, although contemporary science could offer the “possibility of another ontology” (N, 359, translation by JH). In the course *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty shows how in the transformations of science we can find philosophical significance and the development of a notion of nature through which it is possible to approach the “new ontology” (N, 371–372).

¹ Merleau-Ponty shows that Bergson’s philosophy of immediate intuition is in fact a philosophy of differentiation (see Chapter 2.4 and Chapter 4.2). Moreover, he criticizes Heidegger of the conception of “direct ontology” (see Chapter 3.3 and Chapter 5.1). According to Merleau-Ponty, “it is perhaps the law of ontology to be always indirect and to proceed to being only through beings” (N, 370, translation by JH). And again: “*One cannot make a direct ontology*” (VI, 233/179).

² OE, 56/137.

In Merleau-Ponty's view, Descartes is right in that the lived experience can only be understood from within: only the body can understand the body.¹ Yet, Descartes is wrong in separating the mind from the body as completely different orders. There is difference, but it is within the same framework, the same texture, and not a distinction by an incomprehensible abyss. The whole relation must be thought of in a new way.²

3.2 The Duality of Phenomenology

In the course *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a duality of perspectives in Husserl's phenomenology which corresponds with the Cartesian duality: "a certain strabism of phenomenology."³ Merleau-Ponty shows that "Husserl doesn't manage to overcome the duality."⁴ On the one hand, there is the eidetic phenomenology and a "rupture with the natural attitude," and on the other hand, there is the return to the lived experience and to the "pre-philosophical foundation of man."⁵ These two "sides" of phenomenology do not entirely fit together, but form two different pictures – and hence the metaphor of strabism. Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explicates the dual character of Husserl's phenomenology. In a footnote on transcendental phenomenology, he distinguishes two reductions described by Husserl in *Crisis*: the reduction to the lifeworld and "a second 'reduction' [...] in which all the world's obscurities are elucidated."⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, there is a "dilemma" in Husserl's philosophy: either phenomenological analysis dispels all obscurity of experience and we do not need a return to the lived obscure experience, or if we scrutinize the lived experience we cannot ever completely evade the obscurity it presents to us. This dilemma, as I already stated in Chapter One,⁷ corresponds with the contradiction that Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes: that is, the dual ontological situation of Cartesian philosophy.⁸ In his article on Husserl, "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Merleau-Ponty returns to the dual character of phenomenology between natural attitude and transcendental attitude. In the article, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the "absolute consciousness," or the transcendental constituting consciousness which Husserl insisted on to the end of his life, reveals the limits of the philosophy of consciousness,⁹ and that "[w]hat resists phenomenology within us."¹

¹ Even if there is a non-coincidence in the texture of the body, it is only within this texture that the body can be understood as the body: rather than being an obstacle, the non-coincidence or the difference is our access to the embodied texture (see VI, 194/148).

² OE, 58–60/138.

³ N, 103–104/72. Françoise Dastur states that Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre situates at the confluence of French Cartesian tradition and phenomenological tradition (Dastur 2001, 7).

⁴ N, 104/72.

⁵ N, 103/72.

⁶ PP, 419n1/425n8.

⁷ See Chapter 1.1.

⁸ See previous part of this chapter.

⁹ S, 293/180.

Some scholars have argued that Merleau-Ponty completely abandons phenomenology in his later philosophy. For example, Gary Madison states that “Merleau-Ponty completely rejects Husserl’s transcendental subjectivity and phenomenological immanentism.”² According to Madison, in his later philosophy Merleau-Ponty overcomes the Husserlian correlation between intentional subject and object. He argues that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is “understandable only as an overcoming of the Husserlian ontology.”³ In contrast to Madison, I argue that Merleau-Ponty regards that Husserl’s phenomenology reveals the limitations of the consciousness philosophy, and thus it turns towards the opacity and transcendence of experience. Therefore, on the one hand, Husserl is stuck to the ontological duality of Cartesian philosophy, and on the other hand, he reveals a passage to another kind of ontology. There is, according to Merleau-Ponty, an “unthought” of Husserl’s philosophy, the “shadow” of the philosopher which he did not quite manage to see himself, but which was *implied* by his explicit philosophy: “At the end of Husserl’s life there is an unthought-of element in his works which is wholly his and yet open out on something else.”⁴

I will explicate how Merleau-Ponty understands the dual situation of Husserl’s phenomenology. Although Merleau-Ponty certainly does not claim that Husserl’s philosophy in its entirety should be reduced back to Cartesian philosophy, he finds the problem of Cartesian duality or contradiction surviving in Husserl’s analyses of the transcendental consciousness and lived experience. I will show how the movement between the dual positions also shows, according to Merleau-Ponty, the limits of the “philosophy of consciousness,” and therefore opens the possibility for his elaboration of the new ontology.

In “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” Merleau-Ponty takes up the two perspectives he finds in Husserl’s philosophy. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is a duality between “the world of nature” and “the world of mind:” on the one hand, as reduced to the transcendental thought, nature becomes the correlate of the mind, and on the other hand, we are still living in the nature, which was already there prior to our thought.⁵ Accordingly, there is a “dual direction of Husserl’s reflection, which is both an analytics of essences and an analytics of existences.”⁶ The duality corresponds with the “problematic of reduction” which he already expressed in *Phenomenology of Perception*.⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, “Husserl assigns contradictory characteristics to reduction,” and yet, as in the case of Cartesian philosophy, the contradiction is not a “chance or naivete” and should be understood as an essential feature of Husserl’s philosophy.⁸ Merleau-Ponty finds in Husserl a similarly contradictory

¹ S, 290/178.

² Madison 1981, 205.

³ Madison 1981, 205.

⁴ S, 260/160.

⁵ S, 264–265/162–163.

⁶ S, 278/171.

⁷ S, 262/161. PP, V/xii; 419n1/425n8. See Chapter 1.1.

⁸ S, 263/161.

movement as in Descartes: reflection takes its input from the unreflected experience and through reflection we have an idea of the experience, but this idea is not the unreflected experience itself and it “withdraws into its transcendence.”¹ Moreover, Merleau-Ponty identifies this movement of reflection with Hegelian logic, to which he refers many times in *The Visible and the Invisible*: “re-entering self” means “going-outside self.”² This movement of differentiation is central to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology: the connection or “return” implies the difference or “leaving.” I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s description of differentiation in the next chapter, but here it is central to note that when Merleau-Ponty finds the contradictory duality in Husserl, it is not *merely* a critique: it is the movement between the two directions which opens up onto a new kind of ontology and which must be defined in other terms than that of the philosophy of consciousness.

In a similar manner as in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes two characterizations of reduction in his article “The Philosopher and His Shadow.”³ Firstly, the reduction is not natural in the sense that it is not concerned with the nature of the natural sciences: it disconnects with the natural attitude in order to bring forth the acts which constitute it. Therefore, nature is relativized and idealized: “In the realm of ‘reduction’ there is no longer anything but consciousness, its acts, and their intentional object.”⁴ Secondly, Merleau-Ponty points out that when “Husserl says that reduction goes beyond the natural attitude, he immediately adds that this going beyond preserves ‘the whole world of the natural attitude’.”⁵ Even if reduction returns to the immanence of consciousness, the transcendence of the world is retained. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, in his later philosophy Husserl does not reduce the objective to the subjective, but reveals “a third dimension in which this distinction becomes problematic.”⁶ Referring to the second book of *Ideas*, Merleau-Ponty states that the natural attitude is not only a scientific and naturalistic attitude which regards everything as mere things, as objects; it is also the personalistic attitude “that naturalism cannot account for, and here things are not nature in itself for us but ‘our surroundings’.”⁷

According to Husserl, the personalistic attitude is “the attitude we are always in when we live with one another, talk to one another, shake hands with

¹ S, 263/161.

² S, 263/161. See VI, 55/34; 74/49; 93-94/65; 124/91; 165/124; 233/179; 252/199. Hegel states in *The Science of Logic*: “Essence, as the complete turning back of being into itself, is thus at first the indeterminate essence; the determinacies of being are sublated in it; it holds them *in itself* but without their being posited *in it*. Absolute essence in this simple unity with itself has *no existence*. But it must pass over into existence, for it is *being-in-and-for-itself*; that is to say, it *differentiates* the determinations which it holds *in itself*, and, since it is the repelling of itself from itself or indifference towards itself, *negative* self-reference, it thereby posits itself over against itself and is infinite being-for-itself only in so far as in thus differentiating itself from itself it is in unity with itself.” (Hegel 2010, 338.)

³ PP, 419n1/425n8.

⁴ S, 264/162.

⁵ S, 264/162.

⁶ S, 264/162.

⁷ S, 266/163.

one another in greeting, or are related to one another in love and aversion, in disposition and action, in discourse and discussion."¹ In this attitude, "we consider the things surrounding us precisely as our surroundings and not as 'Objective' nature, the way it is for natural science."² As I argued in Chapter One, there is an affinity between Husserl's description of personalistic attitude and lived experience of the body with Descartes' conception of the union of mind and body.³ In "The Philosopher and His Shadow" Merleau-Ponty implicitly underlines the connection between the two philosophers. The subject-object correlation of the natural attitude which reduction reveals is essential for the constitution of natural scientific attitude – it is in a similar manner that Descartes establishes the order of pure intellect in relation to extensive nature as pure objectivity. As we have seen, for Descartes the union of mind and body is not relative to the pure intellect, but is a different kind of relation to the things.⁴ Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty points out that in the personalistic attitude we know things "in a different way."⁵ In this second sense, the natural attitude is not yet a "thesis" nor yet, in fact, a chosen attitude:

[I]t is "prior to any thesis," because it is the mystery of a *Weltthesis* prior to all theses. It is, Husserl says in another connection, the mystery of a primordial faith and a fundamental and original opinion (*Urglaube, Urdoxa*) which are thus not even in principle translatable in terms of clear and distinct knowledge, and which – more ancient than any "attitude" or "point of view" – give us not a representation of the world but the world itself.⁶

There is an unreflected which the reflection cannot exhaust, which the reflection cannot translate into "clear and distinct knowledge." Merleau-Ponty refers to Descartes' conception of the union which remains obscure and confused for the intellect but has its own clarity:⁷ "There is a clarity, an obviousness, proper to the zone of *Weltthesis* [...]"⁸ Merleau-Ponty also refers to Husserl's third book of *Ideas*, where he finds a similar notion to Descartes' union of mind and body.⁹ Husserl approaches the unreflected as a "pre-theoretical constitution," as an "operating or latent intentionality."¹⁰

According to Merleau-Ponty, the *doxa* of the natural attitude is not just any opinion from which we must ascend to knowledge, but it is *Urdoxa* as the condition for all knowledge. The transcendental attitude after the phenomenologi-

¹ Hua4, 183/192.

² Hua4, 183/192.

³ See Chapter 1.6.

⁴ AT III, 692/CSM-K, 227.

⁵ S, 266/163.

⁶ S, 266-267/163.

⁷ AT III, 691-692/CSM-K, 227.

⁸ S, 267/164.

⁹ Husserl states: "While the *res extensa*, if we inquire of its essence, contains nothing of mentalness and nothing that 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" (Hua5, 117/104). Merleau-Ponty translates in a more Cartesian manner: "esprit réel d'un corps," "the real mind of a body" (S, 268/164).

¹⁰ S, 269/165. See Chapter 1.3.

cal reduction elucidates this “clarity” of the *Urdoxa*, but remains essentially incomplete. When, in the phenomenological reduction, we change our attitude from natural attitude to transcendental attitude, we do not leave the natural attitude behind and change our point of view from “false” to “true” ideas:

There is a preparation for phenomenology in the natural attitude. 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. Reciprocally, the transcendental attitude is still and in spite of everything “natural” (*natürlich*).¹

Merleau-Ponty refers to the second book of *Ideas*, where Husserl explains the shift from natural attitude to “the absolute, nature-constituting, consciousness” through the phenomenological reduction.² According to Husserl, the transcendental attitude is “in a certain sense [...] very natural, but it is *not a nature-attitude* [...] it is *not nature in the sense of all the natural sciences* but is, so to say, something *contrary to nature*.”³ Yet, the relations of the attitudes must be, according to Husserl, finally understood by “a return to absolute consciousness” through which we must gain a distinction “without confusion,” an “absolutely certain distinctness.”⁴ Merleau-Ponty presents a question similar to what he presents in *Phenomenology of Perception* about Descartes’ pure mind: “How will that infrastructure, that secret of secrets this side of our theses and our theory, be able in turn to rest upon the *acts* of absolute consciousness?”⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl never explicitly answered this question, and the relation between the two sides of reduction, the pre-theoretical constitution and the absolute consciousness, is an unthought of Husserl’s philosophy.⁶

Nevertheless, by bringing forth the “unthought-of elements,” Merleau-Ponty attempts to show that for Husserl the “absolute mind” is, indeed, related to the unreflected experience and essences to existence. Merleau-Ponty refers to a passage in the second book of *Ideas* where Husserl contemplates the relation between God, the absolute spirit, and us: even the absolute spirit must have an experiential lived body in order to be able to communicate with us.⁷ Moreover,

¹ S, 267/164.

² Hua4, 179/189.

³ Hua4, 180/189.

⁴ Hua4, 180/189–190.

⁵ S, 268/165. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty notes a similar problem in Descartes’ philosophy: “[I]f our union with the body is substantial, how is it possible for us to experience in ourselves a pure soul from which to accede to an absolute Spirit” (PP, 232/231–232)? See Chapter 1.6.

⁶ S, 269–270/165.

⁷ S, 279/171. Husserl states: “Shall we say that God sees the things as they are in themselves while we see them through our sense organs, which are a kind of distorting eye-glasses? That things are filled space with absolute quality and it is only that we know nothing of it? But should the things which appear to us as they appear to us be the same as the things which appear to God as they appear to God, then a unity of mutual understanding would have to be possible between God and us, just as, between different men, only through mutual understanding is there the possibility of *knowing* that the things seen by the one are *the same* as those seen by the other. But how would the identification be thinkable if not in the sense that the supposed absolute spirit sees the things precisely also

Merleau-Ponty shows that Husserl even conceives the limits of phenomenology: "Sensible being is not only things but also everything sketched out there, even virtually, everything which leaves its trace there, everything which figures there, even as divergence and a certain absence."¹ Merleau-Ponty finds in Husserl the idea of absence in the presence, the invisible of the visible which is central to his new ontology.² In Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, the absence is also present in the phenomenological analysis itself:

The pre-objective order is not primary, since it is established (and to tell the truth fully begins to exist) only by being fulfilled in the founding of logical objectivity. Yet logical objectivity is not self-sufficient; it is limited to consecrating the labors of the pre-objective layer, existing only as an outcome of the "Logos of the esthetic world" and having value only under its supervision.³

Merleau-Ponty refers to the double movement of *Fundierung*, which he had already explicated in *Phenomenology of Perception* in connection to his conception of the *cogito*.⁴ The "deeper level" of "carnal intersubjectivity" is sedimented in the constitution of "logical objectivity," and thus forgotten as "carnal intersubjectivity," as it forms the sense of the "logical objectivity." The "carnal intersubjectivity" becomes "unconscious of itself," and "the spring of constitution can no more be found in its beginning than in its terminus."⁵ There is, at the same time, discontinuity and continuity of the constitution:

It is discontinuous, since each layer is made from forgetting the preceding one. It is continuous from one end to the other because this forgetting is not simple absence (as if the beginning had not existed) but a forgetting what the beginning literally was to the profit of what it has subsequently become [...].⁶

Merleau-Ponty brings forth the "encroachments, reboundings and circularities" of Husserl's phenomenology, and in a certain sense the contradictory, or rather the paradoxical, movement which Husserl encountered.⁷ According to him,

through sensuous appearances, which, likewise, have to be exchangeable in an understanding that is reciprocal – or, at least, unilateral – as is the case with the appearances we share among us men? And if not in that case, then God would be blind to colors, etc., and men blind to his qualities. Is there any sense, however, to arguing about which are the true qualities? The new qualities would again be secondary and would be eliminated once more by physics, which has to be the same for all, if the things are the same. Obviously, the absolute spirit would also have to have a Body for there to be mutual understanding, and thus the dependency on sense organs would have to be there as well." (Hua4, 85/90.)

¹ S, 280/172. Husserl writes: "We now have to note, however, that what is experienceable in the original sense, being which can be primally present, is not all of being, is not even all experienceable being" (Hua4, 163/171).

² See Chapter Four.

³ S, 281/173.

⁴ PP, 451/458. See Chapter 1.2.

⁵ S, 282/173.

⁶ S, 286–287/176.

⁷ S, 288/177. Merleau-Ponty states in the Preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*: "All the misunderstandings with his interpreters, with the existentialist 'dissidents' and finally with himself, have arisen from the fact that in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it and, also, from the fact that from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world" (PP, VIII/xv). Ac-

“since we *are* at the junction of Nature, body, soul, and philosophical consciousness, since we live that juncture [...] the transcendental field has ceased to be simply the field of our thought and has become the field of the whole of experience [...]”¹ Merleau-Ponty argues that Husserl “does not hide the fact that intentional analytics leads us conjointly in two opposite directions.”² Merleau-Ponty refers to the second book of *Ideas*, where Husserl indicates the problem of “the relation between the world of ideas and the world of experience.”³ According to Merleau-Ponty, the relation necessarily also entails something that we cannot exhaust, and that which is at the limit of phenomenology: a “phenomenology of phenomenology” brings forth the “non-phenomenology” of phenomenology.⁴

With the idea of the “non-phenomenology” of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty relates his article “The Philosopher and His Shadow” to his project on ontology, to the ontological structure in which touching entails an untouchable, and vision always has an invisible element. The “shadow” that a philosopher necessarily bears, the “non-phenomenology” of phenomenology, is therefore not a lack that could be overcome by some more capable philosophy: it is the condition of philosophy, the withdrawing of the “ground” that philosophy must take account. Merleau-Ponty refers to Schelling: “What resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the ‘barbarous’ principle Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it.”⁵ I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Schelling in the next chapter. Jason Wirth expresses clearly what is most crucial here in this context: “For Schelling, a positive philosophy has always left something outside of itself, some kind of untamable and barbarian reminder. This remainder leaves even the most successful accounts fundamentally incomplete.”⁶ It is the incompleteness which Merleau-Ponty finds central in Husserl’s phenomenology:

According to Toadvine, the “‘paradox’ of the world is here presented as the primary object of phenomenology” (Toadvine 2002, 81).

¹ S, 288-289/177.

² S, 289/178.

³ Hua4, 210/221. Ted Toadvine demonstrates that Merleau-Ponty’s article “The Philosopher and His Shadow” is partially a reaction to Paul Ricoeur’s article “Husserl’s *Ideas II*: Analyses and Problems” (Ricoeur 2007): “In fact, it seems likely that Merleau-Ponty’s essay is in part a response to Ricoeur’s analysis of *Ideen II*, in which Ricoeur insistently and repeatedly underlines the differences between Husserl’s transcendental method and the approach of such ‘existential phenomenologists’ as Gabriel Marcel and Merleau-Ponty. In Ricoeur’s words, Husserl ‘does not dream of a fusion of the transcendental and the objective within an ambiguous experience which somehow holds them in an irresolvable suspension’” (Toadvine 2002, 73-74; Ricoeur 2007, 67). Ricoeur continues this passage underlying the polarity in Husserl’s work: “*Ideas II* is constructed on the extreme polarity of an exiled ‘pure ego’ and an objectified ‘man.’ This is why the second part ends in the abrupt contrast between the absolute subject regarded as absolute within which the psyche is included. I am at the two extremities: as man at the extremity of objectification, as transcendental ego at the extremity of subjectivity.” (Ricoeur 2007, 67-68.)

⁴ S, 289-290/178.

⁵ S, 290/178. Translation modified by JH.

⁶ Wirth 2003, 17.

Husserl always presents the “return to absolute consciousness” as a title for a multitude of operations which are learned, gradually effected, and never completed. We are never wholly one with constitutive genesis; we barely manage to accompany it for short segments.¹

The absolute constituting consciousness is, according to Merleau-Ponty, constituted by the philosopher himself: the “constituting consciousness is the philosopher’s professional impostor.”² The correlation of an immanent constituting subject and the constituted transcendent world as its object is a structure which Merleau-Ponty already rejects in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

We must not envisage the subject as constituting, and the multiplicity of its experiences or *Erlebnisse* as constituted: we must not treat the transcendental Ego as the true subject and the empirical self as its shadow or its wake. If that were their relationship to each other, we could withdraw into the constituting agency, and such reflection would destroy time, which would be left without date or place.³

The world is not constituted by the consciousness but, on the contrary, the consciousness finds itself situated in an already constituted world.⁴ Before the consciousness of the world, there is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a deeper relation with the world, which is embodied and perceptual relation.⁵ The embodied world is never “constituted” in a complete manner: “A world which, as Malebranche puts it, never gets beyond being an ‘unfinished work’, or which, as Husserl says of the body, is ‘never completely constituted’, does not require, and even rules out, a constituting subject.”⁶

For Merleau-Ponty, the idea of the constitution by the acts of consciousness gives too much value to the conscious activity of the subject, and ties the sense of the world to the domination of the subject.⁷ In his course “Institution in Personal and Public History,” he defines his conception of the *institution* in contrast to constituting consciousness: the institution “makes no sense for consciousness or, what amounts to the same thing, everything for consciousness is instituted in the sense of being posited.”⁸ Every institution is, for the “constituting consciousness,” necessarily a constitution of its own constitutive activity, if the constitution is to be meaningful, but according to Merleau-Ponty this is not a sufficient understanding of institution:

To constitute in this sense is nearly the opposite of to institute: the instituted makes sense without me, the constituted makes sense only for me and for the “me” of this instant. Constitution [means] continuous institution, i.e., never done.

¹ S, 292/179.

² S, 293/180.

³ PP, 487–488/495.

⁴ PP, 494/502.

⁵ PP, 490/498.

⁶ PP, 465/472.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty criticizes the idea of constitution in so far as it is an act of constituting consciousness, but not in the sense of “latent” constitution: “The word ‘constitution’ undoubtedly has a very large meaning for Husserl, who always distinguished a constitution by acts from a ‘latent’ constitution [...]” (N, 112/79).

⁸ IP, 37/8.

The instituted straddles its future, has its future, its temporality, the constituted depends entirely on the “me” who constitutes [...].¹

By “institution” Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl’s concept “*Stiftung*,” but as I will show in Chapter Four, he also modifies the meaning of the process of the institution, as it is not, according to him, dependent on the constituting or instituting consciousness. In the summary of the course “Institution in Personal and Public History,” Merleau-Ponty argues against the idea of constituting consciousness: “Even if we grant that certain of the objects are ‘never completely’ constituted (Husserl), they are at each moment the exact reflection of the acts and powers of consciousness.”² What Merleau-Ponty sees as problematic in Husserl’s philosophy is “the ideology of ‘consciousness’.”³ According to him, “[t]he whole Husserlian analysis is blocked by the framework of *acts* which imposes upon it the philosophy of *consciousness*.”⁴ Yet, Merleau-Ponty shows in “The Philosopher and His Shadow” that in bringing forth the “impossibility of a complete reduction”⁵ Husserl’s phenomenology shows precisely the insufficiency of the position of the constituting consciousness:

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 constituted. This senseless effort to submit everything to the properties of “consciousness” (to the limpid play of its attitudes, intentions, and impositions of meaning) was necessary – the picture of a well-behaved world left to us by classical philosophy had to be pushed to the limit – in order to reveal all that was left over: these beings beneath our idealizations and objectifications which secretly nourish them and in which we have difficulty recognizing noema.⁶

The philosophy of a pure constituting consciousness shows its own limits, “[w]hat resists phenomenology within us.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty highlights that the passage from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude, or to the “absolute consciousness,” is not the whole of Husserl’s philosophy: the contrast between the constituting consciousness and our embodied experience brings forth the movement which cannot be reduced to either of them. In a certain sense, it is exactly because Husserl makes a remarkable contribution to the study of the lived experience, and also supports the philosophy of the consciousness, that his philosophy crystallizes the Cartesian contradiction, according to which consciousness is conditioned by the lived body but cannot conceive it without idealization, and therefore transforms the body into an ideal object and leaves the unreflected experience to withdraw “into its transcendence.”⁸

¹ IP, 37/8.

² IP, 123/76.

³ NWN, 419.

⁴ VI, 297/244.

⁵ PP, VIII–IX/xv.

⁶ S, 293/180.

⁷ S, 290/178.

⁸ S, 263/161.

In the *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty explicates the duality of Husserl's phenomenology. He relates Husserl's duality to the problem that Schelling faces: "how to rehabilitate the idea of Nature in the framework of reflexive philosophy,"¹ that is, how to describe the relation between transcendental reflection and nature as the unreflected primordial ground (*Urgrund*), which remains by principle unthought and is, therefore, a non-ground (*Ungrund*).² According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl encounters a similar problem in his conception of transcendental attitude and natural attitude.³ On the one hand, Husserl argues that transcendental attitude overcomes the naïve natural attitude and shows the necessity of the transcendental consciousness, and on the other hand, the disconnection with the natural attitude is made only in order to show its functioning within passivity. He argues that Husserl formulates a dual position:

Husserl thus oscillates between these two directions: on the one hand, the rupture with the natural attitude: on the other hand, the understanding of this pre-philosophical foundation of man. The unreflected in Husserl is neither maintained as such nor suppressed: it remains a weight and a springboard for consciousness. It plays the role of founding and founded; and to reflect, then, is to reveal the unreflected. Hence a certain *strabism of phenomenology*, which at certain moments explains what is at the superior degree; but, on the contrary, at other moments, what is superior is presented as a thesis on the ground. Phenomenology denounces the natural attitude and at the same time does more than any other philosophy to rehabilitate it.⁴

Merleau-Ponty finds a similar *strabism* in phenomenology as in Descartes' philosophy.⁵ I showed in the previous part of this chapter that Merleau-Ponty uses the notions "strabism" and "diplopia" to underline the contradictory character of the duality in Descartes' philosophy between the pure understanding and the lived experience of the union. Moreover, "strabism" and "diplopia" refer to the ontological duality between existence and essence, between existent being and objective being.⁶ Merleau-Ponty sees that even though he was trying to unite these two points of view towards the end of his life, nevertheless "Husserl doesn't manage to overcome the duality."⁷

Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a "double postulate" in the second book of *Ideas*.⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl acknowledges the lived experience as the unreflected source of our active idealizations.⁹ And yet, after the description of the lived body, Husserl writes at the end of his work that "these are only 'preparatory' analyses, prepared according to the natural atti-

¹ N, 102/71.

² Merleau-Ponty finds in Schelling's philosophy "a fecund contradiction" (N, 61/37). See Chapter 4.6.

³ N, 102/70-71.

⁴ N, 103-104/72. Emphasis by JH.

⁵ N, 171/127.

⁶ N, 370-371/-. See Chapter 1.6.

⁷ N, 104/72.

⁸ N, 104/72.

⁹ N, 105-106/73.

tude, and that the phenomenological analysis shall revoke the naivetés of it.”¹ It remains unclear and problematic if the transcendental attitude is based on the unreflective field, and if this unreflective field is the natural attitude that the transcendental attitude is trying to clarify. For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology remains as a problem for itself:

Must we pass from *doxa* to *episteme*, or from *doxa* to *urdoxa*, to primordial *doxa*? 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.²

Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a contradiction of positions in Husserl’s phenomenology, closely related to the contradiction he finds in Descartes. Yet, this does not mean that he identifies phenomenology with Cartesian philosophy: the importance of phenomenology to Merleau-Ponty is in that it establishes a method to describe what was non-philosophical for Cartesian tradition. He states in *Phenomenology of Perception*: “phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking.”³ In *Nature*, he affirms: “Phenomenology denounces the natural attitude and at the same time does more than any other philosophy to rehabilitate it.”⁴ Yet, phenomenology faces the problem of duality in a similar manner as Cartesian philosophy: how to attach reflection to the unreflected.⁵

¹ N, 112/79. See Hua4, 151/419.

² N, 112–113/79. Emphasis by JH.

³ PP, II/viii.

⁴ N, 104/72.

⁵ David Carr argues that Merleau-Ponty is mistaken if he thinks that there is Cartesian dualism in Husserlian phenomenology: “Merleau-Ponty’s and Ricoeur’s works are critical not so much of transcendental phenomenology as of traditional metaphysical dualism. If they claim to find traces of this doctrine in Husserl and Kant, they are, I think, mistaken.” (Carr 1999, 139.) Carr claims that this critique goes back to Heidegger’s criticism of Husserl’s transcendental-empirical distinction. According to Carr, Heidegger misreads Husserl as an inheritor of the “Cartesian substantialization of the subject” (Carr 1999, 139–140). Carr argues that Heidegger himself belongs to the transcendental tradition, and that his critique is only apt to “metaphysical idealism” and philosophers who, instead of accepting what Husserl called “the paradox of subjectivity,” “reduced the world to representation,” for example Descartes (Carr 1999, 140). Carr refers to *Crisis*, where Husserl states that a subject for the world is also an object in the world, and thus there is “the paradox of human subjectivity” (Hua6, 182/178). According to Husserl, “each transcendental ‘I’ within intersubjectivity [...] must necessarily be constituted in the world as a human being; in other words, that each human being ‘bears within himself a transcendental ‘I’” (Hua6, 190/186). Carr explicates that both of these “sides” belong to the same self and yet, “[t]hese two descriptions of the subject – subject for the world and object in the world – are equally necessary and essentially incompatible” (Carr 1999, 135). In my view, this formulation of the paradox of subjectivity has a striking similarity precisely with the duality which Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes and Husserl. Carr is mistaken on the duality which Merleau-Ponty describes: it is not the substantial dualism between pure mind and extensive body, but the duality between the pure mind and the union of mind and body. In the latter duality, the subject is defined exactly as world-constituting or the perception of clear and distinct ideas, on the one hand, and as intersubjective worldly experience, on the other hand. And it is precisely as “equally necessary and essentially incompatible” that Descartes defines these two positions.

3.3 From Tacit *Cogito* to Vertical Being

In this chapter, I have explicated how Merleau-Ponty formulates the dual and contradictory Cartesian situation, and how he also finds a similar duality in Husserl's phenomenology. In the following, I will show how the duality of Cartesian ontology forms the background for Merleau-Ponty's later project of ontology, as he attempts to answer it by formulating a new ontological structure.

In the posthumously published and unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible* we have four chapters of the first introductory part of the work, one appendix, and 102 working notes selected by the editor, Claude Lefort. Merleau-Ponty changed the name of his project a few times, and before *The Visible and the Invisible* it was called "The Origin of Truth" and "Being and World." The text we have in the published *The Visible and the Invisible* does not contain the earliest manuscripts and all of the working notes. The first chapter concerns reflection and its relation to the unreflected experience. The second chapter consists of Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre's philosophy and his insight on the dialectical thought. The third chapter is a critical analysis of Bergson's intuitive method, and the fourth chapter is an outline of the "new ontology." I will show that all of these chapters include discussion of Cartesian ontology, although not always in explicit and direct fashion.

I will separate my reading of *The Visible and the Invisible* into a more critical part focused on the duality of Cartesian ontology in this chapter, and an elaboration of the new ontological structure in the next chapter. In the following, I will begin with Merleau-Ponty's self-criticism of *Phenomenology of Perception* in his working notes. Then, in the next part of this chapter, I will explicate his concept of reflection in the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "Reflection and Interrogation." Finally, in the last part of this chapter, I will explicate Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre and the elaboration of his concept of the dialectic. In the following, I will read through some of Merleau-Ponty's working notes, which are extremely dense and rich, and thus I do not wish to explicate them fully. Yet, the working notes are crucial to indicating the direction in which Merleau-Ponty was developing his philosophy. I will introduce some central themes and concepts of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, which I will continue to explicate in the next chapter. A concept like "vertical being" may seem strange and imaginary at first, but if we keep in mind the Cartesian background of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical interrogation it will help us to understand the *change* that he attempts with his new concepts.¹

According to a working note dated February 1959, Merleau-Ponty's plan was, in the first part of the work, to give a "first outline of ontology" by starting

¹ As we will see, for example, the relations of mind and body are not understood as two impossible substances side by side, but through *vertical* relation (VI, 281/228) as *implications* of one another (VI, 252/199). Merleau-Ponty regards it as necessary to define new concepts for philosophy: "Ontology would be the elaboration of the notions that have to replace that of transcendental subjectivity, those of subject, object, meaning" (VI, 221/167). See Chapter Four.

from the present “contradictions” and “ruins of philosophy,” which are not limited only to “the classical philosophy” but can also be found in the more contemporary philosophies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre, as “its contrary.”¹ This, according to Merleau-Ponty, would lead to the “‘destruction’ of the objectivist ontology of the Cartesians.”² The critical aspect would also be directed towards his own earlier work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, as it would need an “ontological explication” and, moreover, as it partially “retained the philosophy of ‘consciousness’.”³

In another working note, from July 1959, Merleau-Ponty states that the “problems posed in *Ph.P.* [*Phenomenology of Perception*] are insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction.”⁴ Even if the idea in *Phenomenology of Perception* is to study the unreflected experience of the lived body, “one’s own body,” the thematization is also necessarily an objectification of the experience: a separation of the order of the unreflected experience from “the ‘objective’ order,” then, is problematic because the explication of both of these “orders” happen by reflection and in language.⁵ I argued in Chapter One that Merleau-Ponty explicates the Cartesian contradiction and, in a certain sense, reformulates the contradiction⁶ in his own philosophy as a paradoxical relation: the unreflected is the “source” of reflection which reflection turns into reflected, and thus the unreflected “withdraws into its transcendence,” as he states in “The Philosopher and his Shadow.”⁷ Therefore, the unreflected is posited by reflection and consciousness: it is an object of consciousness, something reflected. The problem with this approach is, according to Merleau-Ponty, that it does not manage to reveal the “the order of brute or wild being which, ontologically, is primary.”⁸

In his earlier work, the Cartesian duality between distinction and union is reformulated as a paradoxical relation between reflection and the unreflected.

¹ VI, 236/183.

² VI, 237/183. “Destruction” refers most probably to Heidegger’s understanding of Descartes in *Being and Time*. See Chapter 5.1.

³ VI, 237/183. Merleau-Ponty’s self-criticism in his working notes was not intended for public consumption. We cannot take these self-critical notes as a statement according to which there would be a “turn” in his later philosophy that would reject his earlier works, their methods, and their results. Yet, despite being intended to serve only as private notes – or, in fact, exactly because of that – we can be certain that Merleau-Ponty was not completely satisfied with his earlier works: he writes that in *Phenomenology of Perception* he presented a problem but not a sufficient answer (VI, 229/175–176). In this work, my idea is that we can trace the problem, and its solution, by following Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Descartes, continuing from the early work to the last manuscripts: in his early work he articulated the contradictory duality of Cartesian philosophy but did not explicate its ontological framework, and thus lacked the “ontological explication” of the paradoxical relation which in his later works he formulates as the “order of the implication.” In brief, in his later philosophy Merleau-Ponty explicates the new ontological structure in relation to the duality of Cartesian ontology which his early work already indicated.

⁴ VI, 253/200.

⁵ VI, 253/200.

⁶ According to Barbaras, in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty “gains access to the phenomenal terrain by means of categories that conceal its originality and that then call forth contradictory interpretations” (Barbaras 2001, 36/17).

⁷ S, 263/161.

⁸ VI, 253/200.

The main problem in the dual and contradictory situation of Cartesian ontology is that either there is an absolute distance between reflection and the unreflected, the distinction, or there is an immediate proximity, the union – and both of these exist at the same time but, nevertheless, cannot be thought of at once.¹ Let me repeat: the dual situation of Cartesian ontology is contradictory because there is absolute distance and immediate proximity at the same time. Therefore, as I will show in the next chapter, Merleau-Ponty attempts to think about the relation between proximity and distance in a new way: as a texture which is both connection (*lien*) and difference (*écart*). According to him, we must think about a “common stuff of which all the structures are made,” and which is “of the transcendent.”²

In his later philosophy, the perspective is not that of the intentionality of the “first person,” a transcendental subject, be it transcendental consciousness or transcendental body, but rather the “intentionality within being.”³ The relations which Merleau-Ponty considers as “vertical” form a chiasmic structure of connection and difference: the subject is a part of the flesh, a fold of the ontological texture, and not a supposition of an immediate coincidence of the self with itself, which would constitute the unity of the meaningful world: the unity of experience is not in the constituting consciousness, but in the unreflected, “brute being,” which is transcendent within the experience. It is only through a kind of self-differentiation that there can be a self-relation: “the Self to be understood [...] as the unity by transgression.”⁴ According to him, this kind of philosophy is “not compatible with ‘phenomenology,’ that is, with an ontology that obliges whatever is not nothing to *present* itself to the *consciousness* across *Abschattungen*, and as deriving from an originating donation which is an *act* [...]”⁵ However, this statement does not allow us to think that Merleau-Ponty completely rejects phenomenology.⁶ According to Jacques Taminiaux, Merleau-Ponty’s self-criticism is only partial. Merleau-Ponty does not state that he rejects all of his earlier work but that it needs to be revised and reinterpreted, and thus it can be said that his later philosophy is not a complete refusal of Husserlian phenomenology either.⁷ We will see, in Chapter Four, that in his later philosophy Merleau-Ponty especially elaborates the Husserlian concept of the institution as the thickness of experience, time, and language.

The problematization of his early concept of “*tacit cogito*” in the working notes brings forth, from the later point of view, how the position in *Phenomenology of Perception* was partially stuck to the philosophy of consciousness, and therefore also to a duality between reflection and the unreflected. Merleau-Ponty criticizes “*tacit cogito*” in three working notes from early 1959. All of

¹ See Chapter 1.6.

² VI, 253–254/200.

³ VI, 298/244.

⁴ VI, 254/200.

⁵ VI, 298/244.

⁶ Taminiaux 1985, 123.

⁷ Taminiaux 1985, 127–128.

these working notes problematize the relation of the “silence” of the *cogito* and language.

In the first working note, entitled “Tacit Cogito,” Merleau-Ponty gives a formulation of Descartes’ idea of the *cogito*: “The Cogito of Descartes (reflection) is an operation on significations” which “therefore presupposes a prereflective contact of self with self.”¹ In Chapter One I showed that Descartes formulates an idea of pre-reflective awareness of thought and existence in his Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections of *Meditations*.² Moreover, in Chapter Two I added the perspective of Cartesian tradition, in which pre-reflective self-relation remains a problem from Malebranche to Bergson: on the one hand, the pre-reflective self is understood as an immediate contact with the self, especially by Maine de Biran, and on the other hand it is only “shadows,” as Malebranche puts it, or attained through differentiation, as Bergson demonstrates. In the working note, Merleau-Ponty attaches the Cartesian concept of the pre-reflective contact with the self to Sartre’s idea of the “non-thetic consciousness [of] self” and to his own conception of the tacit *cogito*.³ Thus, it is crucial to note that Merleau-Ponty admits that his conception in *Phenomenology of Perception* is, indeed, a reformulation of the Cartesian notion of the pre-reflective *cogito* – which is the counterpart of the “philosophy of consciousness,” or “philosophy of reflection” to use the expression in the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Merleau-Ponty puts it frankly: “What I call the tacit cogito is impossible.”⁴ The reason for the impossibility is simply that in order to have “the idea of ‘thinking’ [...] it is necessary to have words.”⁵ An idea of “thinking” without language cannot be thought, the “prereflective contact of self with self” cannot be reflected on, and the silence of the “tacit *cogito*” cannot be articulated: they are mere *suppositions*, either in absolute distance or in immediate proximity, but in both cases only given as significations in language. As soon as one begins to reflect on the unreflected, for example on the lived body, it becomes reflected, a conception, thematization, and so forth.⁶

The idea of the “constituting consciousness” does not help us with this problem, because it is also only a thematization, construction, and signification, and in any case is constituted by us. According to Merleau-Ponty, the “constituting consciousness” is only a “combination of words” which have their “sedimented significations” and do not refer to any “flux of the *Erlebnisse* as *Selbstgegeben*,” self-given experience.⁷ Thus, Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea of the self-given immediate experience. According to him, there is a “mythology” of an immediate self-consciousness, “a prereflective contact of self with self,” to which the “consciousness” would refer to.⁸ These ideas are only formed by “dif-

¹ VI, 224/170–171.

² AT III, 422/CSM II, 285. See Chapter 1.2.

³ VI, 224/171.

⁴ VI, 224/171.

⁵ VI, 224–225/171.

⁶ VI, 233/179.

⁷ VI, 225/171.

⁸ VI, 225/171.

ferences between significations."¹ The "transcendental" is "of transcendencies," and thus of the differences.² Merleau-Ponty continues to explicate his idea of the "true transcendental" in the next working note: "The transcendental field is a field of transcendencies."³ In *Phenomenology of Perception* he already argued:

[T]he truly transcendental [...] is not the totality of constituting operations whereby a transparent world, free from obscurity and impenetrable solidity, is spread out before an impartial spectator, but that ambiguous life in which the forms of transcendence have their *Ursprung*, and which, through a fundamental contradiction, puts me in communication with them, and on this basis makes knowledge possible.⁴

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty discovers the "fundamental contradiction" through which "communication with" the "forms of transcendence" becomes possible, and yet, as he states in his later work – in the second working note on the tacit *cogito* – this possibility was not completely realized in the early work: in Merleau-Ponty's own words, the "tacit Cogito should make understood how language is not impossible, but cannot make understood how it is possible."⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he does not have a solution, but merely manages to present the problem of the relations between "transcendence," the silence of the "tacit *cogito*," the "unreflected" experience, and language. In his later work, Merleau-Ponty does not deny that there are "non-language significations" and "a world of silence," but he argues that "they are not accordingly *positive*."⁶ According to the third note on the tacit *cogito*, there is silence "under the cogito of *Wesen*, of signification," but the "description of silence rests entirely on the virtues of language."⁷ When "the world of silence" is articulated, for example as a "description of the human body," it is "no longer this world of silence."⁸ Thus, ontology cannot be purely positive, as there must be *negativity* of "silence" and "brute being."

In a certain sense, the "tacit *cogito*" is a negative concept, a supposition of "a *Grund* of which one could not say anything."⁹ It is a negative "in-itself," incomprehensible – like the God of Descartes – an abyss. From this perspective, we can understand Merleau-Ponty's statement that the "more contemporary philosophies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre" share the classical "contradictions:"¹⁰ the "ground" is understood either as purely positive being or as purely negative nothingness, but in both cases, it is beyond our reach, as if we had nothing to do with it. In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty associates "negative philosophy" with "negative theology."¹¹ In the last part of this chapter, I

¹ VI, 225/171.

² VI, 225/171.

³ VI, 226/172.

⁴ PP, 418/425.

⁵ VI, 229/176.

⁶ VI, 225/171.

⁷ VI, 232–233/179.

⁸ VI, 233/179.

⁹ VI, 229/175.

¹⁰ VI, 236/183.

¹¹ VI, 233/179.

will concentrate on Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre's negative philosophy. For Merleau-Ponty, being should not be approached as purely negative or purely positive.¹ Thus, "negativity" and "positivity" must also be articulated in a new way: as I will explicate in the next chapter, in *The Visible and the Invisible* one of the central topics is "negativity that is not nothing," the invisible of the visible.²

According to Merleau-Ponty, in his earlier philosophy there remains "the problem of the passage from the perceptual meaning to the language meaning, from behavior to thematization."³ The "unthematized" must extend itself to the thematization, that reflection is *of the unreflected*, that there is not pre-reflective and immediate coincidence, but not a complete rupture either, as in both cases reflection would be impossible. The silence is not outside of language:

Moreover the thematization itself must be understood as a behavior of a higher degree – the relation between the thematization and the behavior is a dialectic relation: language realizes, by breaking the silence, what the silence wished and did not obtain. Silence continues to envelop language [...] of the thinking language.⁴

The unreflected must be understood *within* reflection, and silence *within* the language. We cannot understand how language is possible from a supposed position "outside" of language, and we cannot understand the movement of expression if we suppose a completely closed "inside" of language, an achieved language with absolutely fixed significations, without the openness of the "silence" of language. Therefore, reflection and the unreflected, language and silence, are of the same texture, different "sides" of the same movement which is a temporal and continuous *institution*, "*Stiftung* preparing an *Endstiftung*."⁵ In the next chapter I will explicate Merleau-Ponty's approach to institution: for him, the past and the future are open dimensions, and the end of the institution remains unfinished.

In the third working note on the "*tacit cogito*," Merleau-Ponty explicates his idea of the *incompleteness*. As I stated before, he does not neglect phenomenology: in the working notes, Merleau-Ponty comes back to the "impossibility of a complete reduction" described in *Phenomenology of Perception*.⁶ According to

¹ Even if being cannot be analyzed as an essentially positive phenomenon – it is the phenomenality of phenomena and therefore not a phenomenon – it should not be regarded as purely negative either, as it brings forth the positivity of a phenomenon. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty does not accept the Heideggerian "authentic" perspective on being as "being-toward-death," as for him being is not understood as nothingness: "The principle of principles here is that one cannot judge the powers of life by those of death, nor define without arbitrariness life as the sum of the forces that resist death, as if it were the necessary and sufficient definition of Being to be the suppression of non-being" (VI, 117/84–85).

² VI, 198/151.

³ VI, 229–230/176. Pascal Dupond states: "La naïveté du *cogito* tacite est de croire qu'il suffit d'effacer par abstraction les médiations discursives dont le *cogito* est le résultat, de le réputer sans parole pour rejoindre la conscience silencieuse" (Dupond 2004, 168).

⁴ VI, 230/176.

⁵ VI, 228/176. See Chapter Four.

⁶ PP, VIII/xv. See Chapter 1.1.

Merleau-Ponty, the reduction is an operation which “little by little” and “more and more” discloses “the ‘wild’ or ‘vertical’ world.”¹ As I argued above, for Merleau-Ponty the method of reduction or reflection does not mean “a going back up to the ‘conditions of possibility’,” to a supposition of transcendental “constituting consciousness.”² What the reduction will show is *circularity*: rather than claiming to regain the *a priori* conditions of possibility, it is disclosing of the *implications*.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty elaborates an idea of “order of implication:”³ instead of the “order of reasons” and transparency of understanding, our understanding of history, language, time, nature, and being is always involved or implicated in these textures. In a similar way, as Merleau-Ponty explains, that in order to have a vision the seer must be *of* the visible and the seer and the visible must implicate each other,⁴ we are in relation, for example, to history because we are *of it*, we are implicated in history. This is why Merleau-Ponty states that his plan is to clarify his “philosophical project by recourse to Descartes and Leibniz.”⁵ Philosophy is always involved in history, and can change the situation only by a circular movement which little by little exposes the new direction in relation to what it leaves behind, from which it forms difference by repetition.

In the Preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes phenomenology as “unfinished,”⁶ an “ever-renewed experiment,”⁷ and a “perpetual beginning.”⁸ Merleau-Ponty explicates that the “wild and ‘vertical’ being is *by definition* progressive, incomplete,” and thus, the “incompleteness of the reduction” does not mean a failure of reduction: the incompleteness “is not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself, the rediscovery of vertical being.”⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, the incompleteness means *openness*: the reduction opens to the “brute,” “wild” or “vertical” being, which means that it “opens unlimited dimensions”¹⁰ and an unlimited “domain,”¹¹ that is, inexhaustible possibilities, the institution as the ontological structure of temporal *differentiation* never finished, never completed.¹² The “wild being” (*l’être sauvage*) or “vertical being” (*l’être vertical*) does not mean an untamed and yet unknown nature to be examined thoroughly by reduction and reflection: it is negativity in the sense of the invisible that is not a visible from another perspective, as in geo-

¹ VI, 231/177.

² VI, 231/177.

³ French original “l’ordre de l’implication” is translated in English as “order of involvement” (VI, 117/85). However, on another occasion, “l’ordre du sous-entendu” is translated as “the order of implication” (VI, 252/199).

⁴ VI, 177–178/134–135.

⁵ VI, 231/177. On Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Leibniz see Saint Aubert 2005, 185–240.

⁶ PP, XVI/xxiii.

⁷ PP, IX/xv.

⁸ PP, IX/xv; 75–76/72.

⁹ VI, 232/178.

¹⁰ VI, 271/218.

¹¹ VI, 185/140.

¹² In his last lecture, “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui,” Merleau-Ponty formulates his conception of the *cogito* as “vertical *cogito*” (see Chapter 5.1). On the modification of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of *cogito* see Hotanen 2014.

metric spatiality depth is breadth seen from the side,¹ but an invisible dimension of visibility which cannot be made visible,² as the thickness of our experience forms “the immemorial depth of the visible.”³ The “wild being” is not a certain yet unknown fact which must be discovered and thematized, but an inexhaustible dimension of possibilities which is involved in all our perception, expression, and thinking. Merleau-Ponty states: “There will therefore be a whole series of layers of wild being.”⁴

The circular or repetitive character of reflection thus means *differentiation*: “reflection [...] wishing to return to itself, *leaves itself*.”⁵ Merleau-Ponty refers to Hegelian logic, as I explained in the previous part of this chapter: accordingly, when reflection realizes itself, it differentiates from itself and becomes something else. When reflection reflects the unreflected experience as its own source, the experience is not unreflected but becomes reflected experience – it is of *the same* but not the same. The return to the “originating” is at the same time repetition and differentiation.⁶ Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty: “One cannot make a direct ontology.”⁷ Ontology must be “intra-ontology,” “a world seen with-

¹ See Chapter 1.5.

² VI, 281/227–228.

³ OE, 86/147.

⁴ VI, 233/178. Merleau-Ponty writes in Chapter Three of *The Visible and the Invisible*, referring to Jean Wahl: “[T]here is a whole architecture, a whole complex of phenomena ‘in tiers,’ a whole series of ‘levels of being,’ which are differentiated by the coiling up of the visible and the universal over a certain visible wherein it is redoubled and inscribed. Fact and essence can no longer be distinguished, not because, mixed up in our experience, they in their purity would be inaccessible and would subsist as limit-ideas beyond our experience, but because – Being no longer being *before me*, but surrounding me and in a sense traversing me, and my vision of Being not forming itself from elsewhere, but from the midst of Being – the alleged facts, the spatio-temporal individuals, are from the first mounted on the axes, the pivots, the dimensions, the generality of my body, and the ideas are therefore already encrusted in its joints.” (VI, 153–154/114.) Merleau-Ponty reformulates the Bergsonian influence: “We have to pass from the thing (spatial or temporal) as identity, to the thing (spatial or temporal) as difference, i.e. as transcendence, i.e. as always ‘behind,’ beyond, far-off... the present itself is not an absolute coincidence without transcendence; even the *Urerlebnis* involves not total coincidence, but partial coincidence, because it has horizons and would not be without them[.]” (VI, 249/195.)

⁵ VI, 233/179.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty explicates: “The ‘originating’ is not of one sole type, it is not all behind us; the restoration of the true past, of the pre-existence is not all of philosophy; the lived experience is not flat, without depth, without dimension, it is not an opaque stratum with which we would have to merge. The appeal to the originating goes in several directions: the originating breaks up, and philosophy must accompany this break-up, this non-coincidence, this differentiation.” (VI, 165/124.) In his working notes Merleau-Ponty refers, in the same sentence, firstly to Nietzsche’s expression “*circulus vitiosus deus*” in *Beyond Good and Evil* about the repetition of the beginning (Nietzsche 1966, 68; Chouraqui 2014, 228–231), and secondly to gnostic Christian mysticism of God before he creates, *sigè-bythos*, “a silent abyss,” the “primordial ground” as “God is silent in a limitless abyss” (Baan 2013, 14–15): “The reversal itself – *circulus vitiosus deus* – is not hesitation, bad faith and bad dialectic, but return to *Σιγή* the abyss” (VI, 233/179). In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty refers to the expression “*sigè l’abîme*” in Paul Claudel’s work *Art poétique* (PM, 157/111). My reading of these passages is that Merleau-Ponty refuses a possibility of *grounding* the incompleteness, the circularity, the vicious circle of infinite regress, the abyss, the vertical being, on a *supposition* of immediate coincidence within objective knowledge or transcendental consciousness.

⁷ VI, 233/179.

in inherence in this world,"¹ and at the same time, "indirect ontology," "being in the beings."² Philosophical reflection must be understood from within the unreflected experience, and it remains always indirect: connection is formed only through difference.

In his later project on ontology Merleau-Ponty is concerned with Heidegger's philosophy, as we can see from his references to some of Heidegger's concepts in his working notes. Some scholars have argued that Merleau-Ponty separates his own "indirect" ontology from Heidegger's "direct" ontology: Merleau-Ponty's was not planning for a Heideggerian ontology but, on the contrary, for a confrontation with Heidegger's ontology.³ Saint Aubert argues that in the unpublished manuscripts of Merleau-Ponty we can see that he takes a critical distance from Heidegger.⁴ In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's criticism can be regarded in connection to Heidegger's conception of "ontological difference:" in *Being and Time*, Heidegger states that "being is never explicable by beings."⁵ From the "ontological difference" follows the separation between ontic sciences and ontological philosophy.⁶ In his working notes and lectures, Merleau-Ponty criticizes *both* Heidegger's understanding of science *and* his understanding of ontology. Moreover, as I showed in Chapter One, Merleau-Ponty already opposes Heidegger's separation between "authentic" and "inauthentic" temporality in *Phenomenology of Perception*.⁷

In the lecture *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty argues that "the radical opposition, traced by Heidegger, between ontic science and ontological philosophy is valid only in the case of Cartesian science," for which the object is merely in front of us, as a thing in-itself, but it is not correct in the case of "a modern science, which places its own object and its relation to this object in question."⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, "modern science often criticizes itself and its own ontology."⁹ Moreover, in the resume of the course, Merleau-Ponty states that in contrast to the ontology of the object of Cartesian science, a contemporary science opens up the "possibility of another ontology."¹⁰ The lecture course attempts to approach this "new ontology" through the development of the notion of nature.¹¹

In another lecture, "La philosophie aujourd'hui," Merleau-Ponty provides a reading of Heidegger. Claude Lefort states in his "Preface" to the publication

¹ VI, 280/227.

² VI, 233/179.

³ Saint Aubert poses a question: "n'y a-t-il pas, a l'égard de Heidegger, une position radicalement nouvelle de Merleau-Ponty a partir de 1958" (Saint Aubert 2006, 102). Marc Richir argues: "Merleau-Ponty nous engage, implicitement, au parricide à l'égard de Heidegger: il n'y a pas de pur 'il y a' ontologique comme condition de possibilité *a priori* de la révélation ou de la phénoménalisation de l'étant, mais il y a un 'il y d'inhérence'" (Richir 1982, 142).

⁴ Saint Aubert 2006, 101.

⁵ Heidegger 1996, 193.

⁶ Heidegger 1996, 9.

⁷ See Chapter 1.6.

⁸ N, 120/85.

⁹ N, 120/85.

¹⁰ N, 359. Translation by JH.

¹¹ N, 371.

of the lecture that Merleau-Ponty at the same time defends Heidegger from incorrect interpretations and criticizes him for the “direct ontology.” The problem of “direct ontology” is that it leads to complete silence, as being is inexplicable without beings. For Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, philosophy has to advance through the “indirect expression” of being within our contact with the world, through art, and through the “adventures of science.”¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, in *Being and Time* Heidegger’s idea of ontology is “direct philosophy:” Heidegger analyses *Dasein* as “an abyss of meaninglessness”² in opposition to beings.³

Yet, in the lecture “La philosophie aujourd’hui” Merleau-Ponty also notes that insofar as in his later philosophy Heidegger no longer defines being through nothingness and in pure opposition to the positivity of science, but as a “common setting” (*milieu*) that is not nothing,⁴ there is a “turn towards an analysis which is no longer direct.”⁵ Moreover, according to Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger describes a distance that we have in our relation to ourselves: “the presence to the self is imperception,”⁶ and there is “distant proximity.”⁷

My idea has been here to show that Merleau-Ponty’s “new ontology” is an attempt to answer the contradictory dual situation of Cartesian ontology which he had already formulated in *Phenomenology of Perception*. We can now understand his need for an “ontological explication” of the results of his early work.⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, perception will be understood as differentiation or divergence (*écart*), which opens to the “‘wild’ or ‘brute’ being.”⁹ In the following part of this chapter, I will show how Merleau-Ponty opens up the discussion on the paradox of experience in the beginning of *The Visible and the Invisible*, and recommences from where he left off in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

¹ NC, 9. Translation by JH.

² Heidegger 1996, 142.

³ NC, 94; 148.

⁴ NC, 102–103.

⁵ NC, 95. Translation by JH. Françoise Dastur argues: “On ne peut pas en effet opposer simplement l’ontologie directe de Heidegger à l’ontologie indirecte de Merleau-Ponty [...]. Le méthode ‘indirecte’ de Merleau-Ponty et sa ‘philosophie négative’ trouvent en effet leur anticipation chez Heidegger lui-même [...]” (Dastur 2001, 199.) Franck Robert states: Merleau-Ponty “a toujours conscience de la tentation mystique de la pensée heideggerienne, qui oublierait le sens même de l’apparaître en son déploiement sensible. Merleau-Ponty refuse de lire Heidegger en ce sens: non seulement il refuse de l’interpréter en ce sens, mais il n’a de cesse que de déployer la richesse du penser heideggérien en le confrontant à sa propre ontologie du Sensible, jusqu’à découvrir dans le second Heidegger les voies d’une ontologie indirecte, c’est-à-dire d’une approche non frontale, latérale, de l’Être.” (Robert 2005, 352.)

⁶ NC, 137. Translation by JH.

⁷ NC, 148. Translation by JH. My intention is not here to analyze Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Heidegger exhaustively, but to demonstrate firstly that Merleau-Ponty does not regard himself as a mere follower of Heidegger, and secondly that his ontology cannot be reduced back to Heideggerian ontology. One of the significant differences between these philosophers and their ontologies is their relation to Descartes and Cartesian philosophy. I will return to this matter in Chapter 5.1.

⁸ VI, 237/183. See also VI, 222/168; 230/176.

⁹ VI, 222/168.

3.4 The Paradox of Experience

At the beginning of the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "Reflection and Interrogation," Merleau-Ponty explicates "the contradictions of the perceptual faith."¹ The perceptual faith is "the naïve evidence of the world," the evidence of the lived experience, or in Cartesian terms the clarity of the union of mind and body which is obscure for the pure mind.² Beginning from the perceptual faith, philosophical conceptualization "reverses the roles of the clear and the obscure:"³ the evidence of the world which is clear in the practice of life becomes obscure when philosophy attempts to articulate it. Merleau-Ponty begins his elaboration of the new ontology by entering "into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions."⁴ In a certain sense, in his later work he begins with the very contradiction which he articulated in his earlier work as the contradiction embraced by Descartes' philosophy,⁵ and as the "fundamental contradiction" of phenomenology:⁶ on the one hand, there is the irresistible naïve evidence of perceptual experience, and on the other hand, there is philosophical reflection, which gets its inspiration from this experience, does not coincide with it and distances from it.⁷ The "naïve certitude of the world" is "strong in practice" but "weak when it wishes to convert itself into theses."⁸ Reflection constantly works over the naïve certitude of the unreflected experience, distances itself from it, and becomes itself naïve if it wishes to cut its ties from the unreflected experience to become a pure thought.⁹ Here we have, once again, the Cartesian contradiction between the union and the distinction:

Everything comes to pass as though my power to reach the world and my power to entrench myself in phantasms only came one with the other; even more: as though the access to the world were but the other face of a withdrawal and this retreat to the margin of the world a servitude and another expression of my natural power to enter into it. The world is what I perceive, but as soon as we examine and express its absolute proximity, it also becomes, inexplicably, irremediable distance. The "natural" man holds on to 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.¹⁰

The contradictory or paradoxical relation between the unreflected experience and reflection, the dual situation of the proximity of the lived experience and

¹ VI, 75/50.

² VI, 18/4.

³ VI, 18/4.

⁴ VI, 17/3.

⁵ PP, 52-53/49.

⁶ PP, 418/425.

⁷ VI, 55/34.

⁸ VI, 30/13.

⁹ VI, 56/34.

¹⁰ VI, 23-24/8.

the transcending distance of the reflection which was already characterized in *Phenomenology of Perception*, is a central theme in the later work. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty begins *The Visible and the Invisible* by articulating the dual situation of Cartesian ontology, which I explicated in the first part of this chapter. Merleau-Ponty shows, on the one hand, that the unreflected experience and naïve evidence of perceptual faith is not *immediate coincidence* of the lived experience, but *proximity* which already entails *distance*, and on the other hand that reflection must take into account not only the experience through idealization and the correlation between thought and its object, but the divergence (*écart*) and differentiation of experience which is the source of its articulation.

As we saw in the previous part of this chapter, Merleau-Ponty's plan is to show "little by little" the vertical being; his idea is, quite certainly, not *only* to make an interpretation of Descartes' philosophy or to make a new formulation of the philosophy of reflection. The incompleteness and circularity of his approach means that "everything that is said at each 'level' anticipates and will be taken up again."¹ And moreover, "[w]hat is constantly and principally implied throughout this whole first part is the *λόγος*."² Thus, "language" is anticipated and implied already in Merleau-Ponty's approach on the relation between reflection and the unreflected. In Chapter Four, I will show how language figures in his thematization of the institution, and how it implies temporality. In the following, I will concentrate on the Cartesian aspect of the relation between the perceptual faith and reflection which, according to Merleau-Ponty, calls for "hyper-reflection," *surréflexion*.

Merleau-Ponty begins *The Visible and the Invisible* with a critique of Cartesian doubt, in a very similar manner to that he presented in *Phenomenology of Perception*.³ Firstly, our perception of the world should not be replaced by "thought of perception," as our thought on perception rests entirely on the perceptual experience.⁴ And secondly, we should not suppose that all our perceptions may be false, because we could not separate a false perception from a true perception if we did not have true perceptions.⁵ Merleau-Ponty, therefore, begins from *perceptual faith*: this means our trust in our perception of the world

¹ VI, 231/177–178.

² VI, 232/178. As we have only a manuscript of the first part at our disposal, and the work remains utterly incomplete, it makes reading of *The Visible and the Invisible* quite problematic. One cannot simply take what is expressed in the beginning of the work as the "position in ontology" which Merleau-Ponty was to affirm, but as we lack the rest of the work, we cannot completely see where these first initiations were going either: "I will finally be able to take a position in ontology, as the introduction demands, and specify its theses exactly, only after the series of reduction the book develops and which are all in the first one, but also are really accomplished only in the last one" (VI, 233/179). Yet, we can see here the need for defining the point of entry for Merleau-Ponty's ontological project: from the point of view of the Cartesian problem of the relations between mind and body we can, at least, see *one* reason for his new articulations of the ontological structure, which may not have been the final reason accomplished by the "last reduction" but which already gives the direction of the ontology in the "first reduction."

³ See Chapter 1.1 and Chapter 1.2.

⁴ VI, 19/4.

⁵ VI, 19/5.

before any “theses” or analyses of our perception. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty explicates this faith in the following way:

Natural perception is not a science, it does not posit the things with which science deals, it does not hold them at arm’s length in order to observe them, but lives with them; it is the ‘opinion’ or the ‘primary faith’ which binds us to a world as to our native land, and the being of what is perceived is the antepredicative being towards which our whole existence is polarized.¹

By “primary faith” Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl’s concept of *Urdoxa* or *protodoxa*, introduced in the first book of *Ideas*.² According to Heinämaa, Husserl argues that “all experience includes primordial belief” that “posits the object as real and certain.”³ Heinämaa states that Merleau-Ponty, nevertheless, criticizes Husserl’s conception and modifies it: in Merleau-Ponty’s approach the “primary faith” is not a “general thesis” of the world in the natural attitude which could be suspended. According to Heinämaa, Merleau-Ponty takes the “primary faith” in Descartes’ sense of passions: it is primordial affectivity which cannot be reduced because it is not a statement or thesis. Heinämaa explicates: “Both the thesis and its suspension presuppose – as their condition of possibility – the affective bonds that tie us to the world.”⁴ Moreover, Heinämaa points out that Merleau-Ponty takes the influence for his understanding of the “primary faith” from Husserl’s second book of *Ideas*, which “characterized our natural attitude as non-thetic.”⁵

In *The Visible and the Invisible* the concept of “perceptual faith” refers to this “non-thetic” characteristic of experience as it is, according to Merleau-Ponty, “before any position.”⁶ As I argued above in this chapter, Merleau-Ponty also finds in Husserl the dual situation between lived experience and transcendental consciousness, the “double postulate” between the unreflected experience and reflection which refers back to Cartesian tradition.⁷ In the beginning of *The Visible and the Invisible* the idea is not only to explicate the “perceptual faith” but also to show its obscurity, the contradictory movement between the two positions: there is not only a pre-thetic feeling or presentiment (*pressentiment*)⁸ of unity and connection, but also the distance and difference through which our thought approaches this pre-theoretic experience.⁹ According to Merleau-Ponty, the contradiction or paradox is already found in the experience:

The questioning here is not a beginning of negation, a perhaps put in the place of being. It is for philosophy the only way to conform itself with the vision we have in fact, to correspond with what, in that vision, provides for thought, with the

¹ PP, 371–372/375.

² Hua3, 216/252. PP, 395/400. See also S, 266/163.

³ Heinämaa 1999, 53.

⁴ Heinämaa 1999, 54.

⁵ Heinämaa 1999, 54.

⁶ VI, 17n*/3n1.

⁷ N, 104/72.

⁸ VI, 24/9.

⁹ The title of the first part of chapter one in *The Visible and the Invisible* is “The Perceptual Faith and Its Obscurity.”

paradoxes of which that vision is made, the only way to adjust itself to those figured enigmas, the thing and the world, whose massive being and truth teem with impossible details.¹

Merleau-Ponty begins from the paradoxes of perceptual experience: “the perceptual faith is a paradox.”² To begin with experience does not mean, according to Merleau-Ponty, either “the naïve idea of being in itself” or “the correlative idea of a being of representation, of a being for the consciousness.”³ Moreover, the actual experience should not be reduced to appearances, as if we would find some form of primary givenness in them. Through an example of the monocular images of two eyes, Merleau-Ponty explicates how our binocular perception has its variations and parts, but which do not form the “real perception” by a synthesis: “the relation between the things and my body is decidedly singular,” it is either appearance *or* the “real” thing.⁴ The first form of the paradox of perceptual experience is that we have both the divergency of the appearances and the “real perception” of the “things themselves.” Merleau-Ponty points out that these two are of different orders: “The monocular images *are* not in the same sense that the thing perceived with both eyes *is*.”⁵ The monocular images do not explain how we have an experience of the singular thing in our vision – a “faith” that our vision reveals the “things themselves” – and yet, it is with our two eyes that we look at the visible thing. According to Merleau-Ponty, in “the exercise of life” these two views work “without difficulty” but when we try to understand their relation as theses, “they destroy one another and leave us in confusion.”⁶ Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Descartes’ letter to Elizabeth of 28th of June 1643: the union of mind and body works without difficulty in the “ordinary course of life,” but when we try to explicate the relation between mind and body, it becomes confused.⁷

There is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a “certain divergence”⁸ in our bodily experience which already “has shattered the illusion of a coinciding of my perception with the things themselves.”⁹ Our body forms a distance, a thickness between the perceived thing and the perception: we do not *coincide* with the perceived thing. According to Merleau-Ponty, in a similar manner our perception does not coincide with the body either. When we perceive, we do not perceive the body itself: “the moment perception comes my body effaces itself before it and never does the perception grasp the body in the act of perceiving.”¹⁰ When we perceive, it is not our body that comes forth, but the perceived things. Our body *as perceiving* evades from the perception. Or when we attempt to perceive the body, when we touch the right hand with the left hand, “this reflection

¹ VI, 18–19/4.

² VI, 53/31.

³ VI, 21/6.

⁴ VI, 23/8.

⁵ VI, 22/7.

⁶ VI, 23–24/8.

⁷ AT III, 692/CSM-K, 227.

⁸ VI, 22/7.

⁹ VI, 24/8.

¹⁰ VI, 24/9.

of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment.”¹ The body as touched is never the body as touching. Merleau-Ponty comes back to this non-coincidence within ourselves later in chapter four of *The Visible and the Invisible*, “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” and also in his working notes.² I will explicate his conception of the *untouchable* in Chapter Four.

At the moment, my intention is to show that in the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty begins with the Cartesian situation and formulates it as a *paradox*.³ Referring to the “double sensation” described by Husserl⁴ and Maine de Biran,⁵ Merleau-Ponty shows, on the one hand, how the body never coincides with itself in touching itself, and on the other hand, how “this last-minute failure does not drain all truth from that *presentiment* I had of being able to touch myself touching.”⁶ Thus, we have divergence within our body and *also* a presentiment or feeling of its unity. When we perceive, our body is *ignorant* of itself, and thus does not distinguish itself – in a similar manner as a child perceives “one block of common life wherein the perspectives of each are not yet distinguished.”⁷ Yet, when our body attempts to perceive itself, to articulate itself, and to objectify itself, it can do so only from distance, and by forming difference with itself. Yet, the movement from the “presentiment” of adhesion to the distancing and differentiation is not from the “originating” to the “originated:”

[T]here is no longer any philosophy of reflection, for there is no longer the originating and the derived; there is a thought traveling a circle where the condition and the conditioned, the reflection and the unreflected, are in a reciprocal, if not symmetrical, relationship, and where the end is in the beginning as much as the beginning is in the end.⁸

According to Merleau-Ponty, the unity of our experience is a *presentiment*: the connection of ourselves with ourselves is not a “primordial level” of immediate self-coincidence from which only afterward we distance ourselves. The presentiment does not mean a *supposition* of “the confused universe of the immediate, lived experience” from which we would distinguish ourselves with our reflection.⁹ On the contrary, as Merleau-Ponty states, we know the “immediate” only through reflection: the “immediation” is a retrospective supposition, a grounding for the reflection set by reflection itself. The “immediate” is one of the two Cartesian positions. As I explicated in the first part of this chapter, Merleau-Ponty describes the *either-or* between two “Cartesian monsters:” *either* the dis-

¹ VI, 24/9.

² VI, 194–195/147–148; 307–309/254–256.

³ See VI, 178/135.

⁴ See Chapter 1.6.

⁵ See Chapter 2.3.

⁶ VI, 24/9. Emphasis by JH.

⁷ VI, 28/12.

⁸ VI, 56–57/35. See also VI, 165/124.

⁹ VI, 31/14.

inction of absolute consciousness and ideal knowledge *or* the immediate coincidence of existence and embodied life.¹

The “presentiment” means that the whole truth is not in the differentiation, as it also entails the connection, a common texture or structure.² Merleau-Ponty begins *The Visible and the Invisible* from the dual and contradictory situation of Cartesian ontology: both the union and the distinction have their truths, which are clear for themselves but obscure for each other. The move away from this traditional situation that Merleau-Ponty makes is exactly in that he does not begin from either of these two positions, which would immediately exclude and presuppose the other. He begins from the paradoxical movement between proximity and distance, connection and difference, and not from a supposition of immediate coincidence with the unreflected bodily life, or from a supposition of an absolute consciousness completely distinct from the embodied experience. As I will show in the next chapter, Merleau-Ponty reformulates the situation as an “order of the implication,” as the ontological texture, structure, or element of connection and differentiation – that is, the *flesh*.³

The paradox of perceptual experience consists in that it provides us with the certainty of the world and unity of things, a trust that what we see are the “things themselves,” and that our perception is one with our body, and yet the experience also shows us the world and the things distant from us, as not completely uncertain, but not completely certain either. There is a paradox of non-coincidence with our body – a distance with the most proximate.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the others “who see ‘as we do,’ whom we see seeing and who see us seeing, present us with but an amplification of the same paradox.”⁴ If our own perception does not grant access to the things themselves, it is even more difficult to understand how the others would have the access: “and, by a sort of backlash, they also refuse me this access which I deny to them.”⁵ The others double the perceived thing, as there are both my thing and the others’ thing. When the other speaks, I am a mere listener, and yet I understand the others’ words about the things he or she sees only in accord-

¹ OE, 58/138. See Chapter 3.1.

² Merleau-Ponty writes in his working notes: “Against the doctrine of contradiction, absolute negation, [and] the *either or* – Transcendence is identity within difference” (VI, 279–280/225).

³ Let me quote a paragraph from chapter four of *The Visible and the Invisible* in order to show the direction of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology: “We understand then why we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being-perceived – and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body; it is that this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. It is for the same reason that I am at the heart of the visible and that I am far from it: because it has thickness and is thereby naturally destined to be seen by a body. [...] I who see have my own depth also, being backed up by this same visible which I see and which, I know very well, closes in behind me. 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 the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.” (VI, 178/135.)

⁴ VI, 25/9.

⁵ VI, 25/9.

ance with the things *I see*. According to Merleau-Ponty, we must admit that the world is not only our own private world, but it does not help us out of the paradox:

The intervention of the other does not resolve the internal paradox of my perception: it adds to it this other enigma: of the propagation of my own most secret life in another – another enigma, but yet the same one, since, from all the evidence, it is only through the world that I can leave myself. [...] The communication makes us the witnesses of one sole world, as the synergy of our eyes suspends them on one unique thing. But in both cases, the certitude, entirely irresistible as it may be, remains absolutely obscure; we can live it, we can neither think it nor formulate it nor set it up in theses. Every attempt at elucidation brings us back to the dilemmas.¹

In a similar manner as there is an irresistible cohesion of my own body with itself, there is an indisputable communion with the others too, and at the same time as I do not coincide with myself and I cannot touch myself touching, there is an insurmountable difference between me and the others. Merleau-Ponty does not claim that these two relations – my relation to my own body and my relation with the others – are completely symmetrical, and yet, according to him, they share the same structure of connection and difference.² Merleau-Ponty formulates the situation in the following way: on the one hand, “it is this unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us,”³ and on the other hand, “we come to realize that all that for us is called thought requires that distance from oneself, that initial openness which a field of vision and a field of future and of past are for us.”⁴

As I showed in the previous part of this chapter, Merleau-Ponty argues that the unreflected experience of our perceptual life cannot be approached without language. We think within language already before we have grasped the idea of the *ego cogito*: “We speak and we understand speech long before learning from Descartes (or rediscovering for ourselves) that thought is our reality.”⁵ Within language we also find the structure of connection and difference. Our language connects with the *instituted* meanings which, according to Merleau-Ponty, are “much less thoughts than monuments of our historical landscape.”⁶ These common opinions are the “obvious,” the visible surface of our language. And yet, through differentiation within language, from which every sign gets its signification in the first place, we reach “the true, that is, the invis-

¹ VI, 27/11.

² In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty states: “[T]he same question arises with regard to every *other*, to the alter ego in particular – And *to that other than me who is the I reflected on*, for myself who reflects. [...] When I perceive the child, he is given precisely in a certain divergence (*écart*) (*originating presentation of the unrepresentable*) and the same for my perceptual lived experience for myself, 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, 257/203.)

³ VI, 27/11.

⁴ VI, 28/12.

⁵ VI, 28/12.

⁶ VI, 30/14.

ble" within language – the unreflected "mass of contingencies."¹ The non-instituted, the invisible is the differentiation within the instituted and the visible, "a *pregnancy* of possibles," as Merleau-Ponty states in his working notes.²

According to Merleau-Ponty, when one attempts to say "what no one sees," and express something different within language, nothing seems to guarantee that one comes to "compatible propositions."³ Yet, not only is the audacious attempt to express what is non-instituted precarious, but "nothing is more improbable than the extrapolation that treats the universe of truth as one world also, without fissures and without impossibles."⁴ The necessity to operate within an already instituted language and with already instituted meanings does not render the expression of the not yet instituted impossible. On the contrary, the instituted itself gets its meaning from instituting differentiation: expression and institution show the underlying contingency of the institution, that instituted ideas are not eternal but changing universalities, open for re-institution.⁵

Merleau-Ponty does not clarify his idea of language at the beginning of *The Visible and the Invisible*, but the outline of his conception already comes forth.⁶ He takes up what in *Phenomenology of Perception* is explicated as "a distinction between a *speaking word* and a *spoken word*," "*parole parlante*" and "*parole parlée*."⁷ This, as I stated above, is what Merleau-Ponty in his later working

¹ VI, 30/14. Emmanuel Alloa argues that in Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy there is a strong influence from the Saussurean idea of the diacritical, according to which signifiers get their meaning through their differences with other signifiers (Alloa 2009; Alloa 2013). Alloa explicates: "[C]'est en particulier le concept saussurien du *diacritique* qui permettra de préciser cette intuition tentant à la fois de penser une matrice commune et un opérateur de différenciation, préoccupation qui traverse toute la dernière philosophie" (Alloa 2009, 255). In the article "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," Merleau-Ponty explicates: "What we have learned from Saussure is that, taken singly, signs do not signify anything, and that each one of them does not so much express a meaning as mark a divergence of meaning between itself and other signs. Since the same can be said for all other signs, we may conclude that language is made of differences without terms; or more exactly, that the terms of language are engendered only by the differences which appear among them" (S, 63/39). See also VI, 229/175.

² VI, 304/250.

³ VI, 30/14.

⁴ VI, 30/14.

⁵ See PM, 126–127/90; S, 125/77. Merleau-Ponty elaborates an idea of expressive language in which essences are not yet acquired, not yet "clear and distinct," but rather open to possibilities: the vertical being, the transcendence and contingency of the invisible, is implicated as differentiation within the visible and "objective" order.

⁶ See Chapter Four.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty explicates: "Or again one might draw a distinction between a *speaking word* and a *spoken word*. The former is the one in which the significant intention is at the stage of coming into being. Here existence is polarized into a certain 'significance' which cannot be defined in terms of any natural object. It is somewhere at a point beyond being that it aims to catch up with itself again, and that is why it creates speech as an empirical support for its own not-being. Speech is the surplus of our existence over natural being. But the act of expression constitutes a linguistic world and a cultural world, and allows that to fall back into being which was striving to outstrip it. Hence the spoken word, which enjoys available significances as one might enjoy an acquired fortune. From these gains other acts of authentic expression – the writer's, artist's or philosopher's – are made possible. This ever-recreated opening in the plenitude of being is what conditions the child's first use of speech and the language of the writer, as it does the construction of the word and that of

notes regards as an essential aspect of the distinction between “tacit *cogito*” and “spoken *cogito*” and which, according to himself, he did not successfully explicate.¹ In *The Visible and the Invisible*, the “silence” is not defined in opposition to language, but as the silence implicated in language. For example, scientific theories are not in opposition to artistic expression, but are also the articulation of the vertical being, the opening of possibilities, of contingency.²

Merleau-Ponty analyses the Cartesian position of science: the objective truth of science does not dispel “the obscurities of our naïve faith in the world” but “is on the contrary its most dogmatic expression, presupposes it, maintains itself only by virtue of that faith.”³ Science which believes that its research discovers the reality in-itself, “the Great Object” as the correlate for its “Absolute Mind,”⁴ and which forgets itself as a *research*, articulation, and discourse, bases itself on the naïve faith in our perception which forms “our certitude [...] of having access ‘to the things themselves’ or of having an absolute power to survey (*survol*) the world from above.”⁵ As I already argued in the first part of this chapter, this is a formulation of the Cartesian “ontology of the object.”⁶ In contrast to a philosophy which dreams of an immediate coincidence with the pre-reflective experience of the perceptual faith, Cartesian science believes in completely cutting its ties with the perceptual faith – and here we have one of the two “Cartesian monsters.” I will not analyze here the whole passage on science, but let me note again that, in the end, Merleau-Ponty is optimistic about contemporary science: accordingly, a science which understands itself within the same texture it researches, and within the scientific discourse, finds the differentiation and the movement of the true, which does not allow for an idea of the “in-itself.”⁷

The perceptual faith is the source of truth as a blind trust in what we see and which, therefore, does not exclude the possibility of error: “the certitude I have of being connected up with the world by my look already promises me a pseudo-world of phantasms if I let it wander.”⁸ As Merleau-Ponty points out, the possibility of error is not excluded from our “natural light,” and if we want

concepts. Such is the function which we intuit through language, which reiterates itself, which is its own foundation, or which, like a wave, gathers and poises itself to hurtle beyond its own limits.” (PP, 229/229.)

¹ Merleau-Ponty states: “The tacit Cogito does not, of course, solve these problems. In disclosing it as I did in *Ph.P.* [*Phenomenology of Perception*]. I did not arrive at a solution (my chapter on the Cogito is not connected with the chapter on speech): on the contrary I posed a problem.” (VI, 229/176.)

² Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Proust: “Literature, music, the passions, but also the experience of the visible world are – no less than is the science of Lavoisier and Ampère – the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas” (VI, 196/149).

³ VI, 32/15. Once again, we can see a strong Husserlian influence here.

⁴ VI, 32/15.

⁵ VI, 32–33/16.

⁶ VI, 35/17.

⁷ VI, 32/15; 47–48/27. See Chapter 1.5 and Chapter 3.1.

⁸ VI, 48/28.

to understand our openness to the world, we must not replace it with an absolute truth.¹

Descartes' separation between the "natural light" and the "natural inclination" is an attempt to move from the contradiction between truth and error within our perceptual experience to the truth of thought: regardless of the uncertainty of our perception, we can be certain that we "think that we see."² I argued in Chapter One that for Descartes our "natural light" is limited as it does not provide an access to the infinite truths of God, and our "natural inclinations" are not completely false as they are not nothing but are "taught by nature" – nature which is created by God or even "God himself."³ Already in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty shows that the "natural light" borrows its evidence from the "natural inclinations," and that the relation between these remains unthought in Descartes' *Meditations*.⁴

According to Merleau-Ponty, reflection adopts the conviction of our access to the things themselves from our trust in the perceptual world. Thus, the perceptual faith becomes the self-evidence of thought, which is synonymous with the self-appearance: "appearing to itself, is its whole being – that is the being we call mind (*esprit*)."⁵ The unity of our experience, the "presentiment" of the connection, becomes the "transcendental subject" which conditions our experience: "It converts it into its truth; it discovers in it the adequation and assent of thought with thought, the transparency of what I think for myself who thinks it."⁶ Hence, the unity which we experience in our perceptual life is converted into an ideal unity which dissipates all diversities of experience.⁷

According to Merleau-Ponty, philosophical reflection "recuperates everything except itself as an effort of recuperation, it clarifies everything except its own role."⁸ In a similar manner, as we are ignorant of our body when we perceive and trust in our perception, the "mind's eye too has its blind spot."⁹ There is ignorance of the self, a "blind spot," which is not complete unawareness of the self. Reflection is "not unaware of itself – which would be contradictory to its definition," and yet, it does not coincide with "the prior presence of the world, of which it is tributary, from which it derives all its energy."¹⁰

In the working notes, Merleau-Ponty explicates his idea of the "blind spot" or "*punctum caecum*" of the consciousness. The "imperception in percep-

¹ The differentiation, divergence, and re-institution is not an approximation of the pre-established, *a priori* universal truth, the in-itself. As an articulation of the true, it does not exclude the possibility of misleading and deception. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty this does not mean complete relativism or nihilism, but on the contrary the necessity of responsibility of our action and expression, that is commitment to our past and history; differentiation always implies connection. See Chapter 5.2.

² AT VII, 33/CSM II, 22. See Chapter 1.2.

³ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56. See Chapter 1.6.

⁴ See Heinämaa 2003, 39.

⁵ VI, 51/30.

⁶ VI, 51/30.

⁷ VI, 52/31.

⁸ VI, 55/33.

⁹ VI, 55/33.

¹⁰ VI, 55/33–34.

tion" or "blindness of consciousness" means that "[t]o see is to not see."¹ Moreover, the "imperception" and "blindness" does not contradict the fact that "to see is always to see more than one sees."² Our perception of a visible thing always involves invisibility. This invisibility does not mean something actually non-visible, for example, the back side of the visible thing that becomes visible when we move around it, but invisible *in principle*. Merleau-Ponty states:

*What it does not see it does not see for reasons of principle, it is because it is consciousness that it does not see. What it does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest (as the retina is blind at the point where the fibers that will permit the vision spread out into it). What it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible, is the flesh wherein the object is born.*³

Our relation to the "brute" being is necessarily indirect: when we see something, we do not see how it comes to be this something. We see an object, a something, and yet, as we see *according to* the invisible, we see more than we see, and our vision extends to the depth of the visible, to the invisible thickness of our experience, and we always see more than an object. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, in principle the consciousness "sees the things *through the other end*," through the invisible, and yet "in principle it disregards Being and prefers the object to it."⁴

There is, therefore, a paradox of connection and distance within our reflection in a similar sense as in perception. Reflection remains naïve if it does not take into account its distancing from itself: "our power to re-enter into ourselves is exactly measured by a power to leave ourselves, which is neither older nor more recent than it, which is exactly synonymous with it."⁵ Reflection must take account this indirectness and this divergence in our relation to being: it is openness as an incessant differentiation. Reflection cannot leave behind the unreflected, the wild or vertical being, because it is *of it*. It is exactly because reflection is tied to the same experiential tissue which it attempts to clarify that it both has access to it and remains distant from it: "What is given is not a massive and opaque world, or a 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."⁶ Thus, our relation with the world, which Merleau-Ponty calls "the openness upon the world,"⁷ cannot be understood from the Cartesian situation between pure thought and opaque experience of the world.

According to Merleau-Ponty, philosophy is an expression of experience, and thus it is not necessary, in the sense of Cartesian doubt, to reduce perceptu-

¹ VI, 278/225.

² VI, 300/247.

³ VI, 301–302/248.

⁴ VI, 302/248.

⁵ VI, 56/34.

⁶ VI, 57/35.

⁷ VI, 57/35.

al experience to the thought of perception.¹ Our thought and expression always gets its sense from experience, and therefore there is no order of “pure thought” which would be self-sufficient. The essence of perception which the reflection articulates not only gathers up the invariant, without which there would not be perception, but it also modifies perception into this essence, and necessarily does not exhaust perception, because the essence would not have any meaning without the perception, and perception is not an object before the reflecting consciousness.² Philosophical explication is not a translation of the “text” of the experience: “it is useless if one does not have the text at one’s disposal.”³ Philosophical reflection does not capture the excessive and withdrawing heterogeneity of experience.

According to Merleau-Ponty, philosophical reflection not only articulates the experience, but changes it.⁴ The withdrawing of the experience must also be taken into account in philosophy: if philosophy is defined as reflection, reflection cannot be a return to the immediate but, on the contrary, it must be recognition of the experience as withdrawing. Therefore, to take account of this movement of differentiation, a kind of “meta-level” of reflection is needed: Merleau-Ponty proposes “a sort of hyper-reflection,” *surréflexion*, which would take account of “the transcendence of the world as transcendence.”⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, this operation should not “lose sight of the brute thing and the brute perception” and of “our mute contact with the things.”⁶ The “brute thing” or “brute being” does not mean an “original” thing in-itself, or a pure fact, but the invisibility of the thing, and of being: it is what in our experience resists reflection, but which also opens its possibilities and does not stop it.⁷

Philosophical reflection, therefore, must take into account how the unreflected always flees from reflection. Thus, “*surréflexion*” is a concept very similar to the “incompleteness of reduction” and “indirect method” of ontology which I have earlier explicated in this chapter. By “hyper-reflection” Merleau-Ponty certainly does not mean reflection on reflection in the sense that from perception, “I see,” we move to the reflection of perception, “I think that I see,” and finally to reflection on reflection of perception, “I think that I think that I see.” This kind of regressive “distancing” is, obviously, not what he is after. I have argued how Descartes attempts to answer the problem of infinite regress by suggesting pre-reflective knowledge.⁸ In the first chapter of *The Visible and the*

¹ VI, 58/36.

² On “eidetic variation” see Chapter 4.1.

³ VI, 58/36.

⁴ VI, 61/38.

⁵ VI, 61/38. Toadvine argues that in “hyper-reflection” we can “recognize the same structure of radical, second-order reflection that Merleau-Ponty had already described in *Phenomenology of Perception*” (Toadvine 2014b, 28). Merleau-Ponty states in *Phenomenology of Perception*: “The task of radical reflection, the kind that aims at self-comprehension, consists, paradoxically enough, in recovering the unreflected experience of the world, and subsequently reassigning to it the verificatory attitude and reflective operations, and displaying reflection as one possibility of my being” (PP, 278–279/280).

⁶ VI, 61/38.

⁷ VI, 67/43.

⁸ See Chapter 1.2 and Chapter 2.1.

Invisible, Merleau-Ponty argues that instead of intellectualizing the “prelogical bond,” “the secret of our perceptual bond” with the world, “the organic bonds between the perception and the thing perceived,” and thus avoiding the paradoxical character of the situation with a supposition of coincidence and immediacy, we must, on the contrary, set the task of expressing this connection which entails differentiation.¹ It is, therefore, an open task, incomplete and indirect, exactly because reflection never breaks the bond or connection it has with the experience of the world.

In the last part of the first chapter, Merleau-Ponty considers transcendental philosophy and its claim that transcendental reflection “would not modify the perception.”² As he later refers explicitly to Husserl, we can suggest that he is commenting especially on Husserl’s phenomenology. Husserl argues, for example in *Crisis*, that the phenomenological reduction does not lose anything from the natural world, and does not change it, but instead changes the attitude towards it.³ According to Merleau-Ponty, by “transforming the world into a noema” reflection “metamorphoses the effective world into a transcendental field” and finds the reflecting subject as the transcendental subject: the illusion of transcendental reflection would be to find itself already at work in the constitution of the world before it has become aware of itself.⁴ Instead, reflection begins from our factual situation and is always posterior to our experience:

Precisely because it is 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, that, starting with this spectacle, it would travel the very route that the constitutive principle had followed in the opposite direction.⁵

Transcendental reflection as “retrospective construction” begins with our factual situation, from the unreflected experience, and cannot coincide with it.⁶ The “factual” is, in a certain sense, something that resists the reflection, but in contrast to Maine de Biran’s idea of resistance, it does not give us an immediate self-coincidence. For Merleau-Ponty, the transcendental philosophy which is concerned with the conditions of the possibility of experience is always posterior to the experience, which withdraws from its grasp. The reflection is not a pure mind for which the world would be a simple correlative. According to him, “[t]his is what Husserl brought frankly into the open when he said that every transcendental reduction is also an eidetic reduction.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty states that this means that every attempt to understand the world “from within” is also detachment. Moreover, it means that eidetic reflection “leaves untouched the problem of our unreflected being,” and according to Merleau-

¹ VI, 61/38.

² VI, 68/44.

³ Hua6, 154–155/152. See Zahavi 2002, 9.

⁴ VI, 67–68/43–44.

⁵ VI, 69/45.

⁶ VI, 70/45.

⁷ VI, 70/45.

Ponty, "Husserl simply agrees to take up the problem which reflective attitude ordinarily avoids – the discordance between its initial situation and its ends."¹ As I argued above in this chapter, Merleau-Ponty states that Husserl brings forth the limits of the philosophy of consciousness: "forgetting this non-knowing of the beginning which is not nothing, and which is not the reflective truth either, and which also must be accounted for."²

3.5 Movement of the Dialectic

Merleau-Ponty ends the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* with a reference to Hegel: "to retire into oneself is also to leave oneself."³ Philosophical reflection "transforms the perceptual faith" but does not take itself into account as a transformation.⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, it is a philosophical lie (*mensonge*) which transforms "the openness upon 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."⁵ Therefore, the whole relation between subjective being and being itself must be reconsidered.

In the second chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "Interrogation and Dialectic," Merleau-Ponty considers dialectical philosophy and especially Sartre's work. Merleau-Ponty's account of the Sartrean dialectics can be read in connection with his interpretation of Cartesian duality. For Descartes, the reflecting mind and the unreflected body (lived body, the union of mind and body) are known only through themselves, are immediate for themselves, but unattainable for each other. I explicated earlier in this chapter that in *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty calls this Cartesian dual situation the "Cartesian equilibrium."⁶ I will now explicate how in Sartre's philosophy of *Being and Nothingness*, Merleau-Ponty finds these two sides: immediate consciousness which is nothing, and immediate being that is the in-itself. Even though Sartre attempts to distance his philosophy from Cartesian philosophy, Merleau-Ponty shows how close his philosophy of negativity actually is to the Cartesian philosophy of reflection. Perhaps, then it is especially Sartre that Merleau-Ponty addresses when he writes in the Preface of *Signs* that "those who reject this or that in Descartes do so only in terms of reasons which owe a lot to Descartes."⁷

¹ VI, 71/46.

² VI, 74/49.

³ VI, 74/49.

⁴ VI, 75/50.

⁵ VI, 76/51.

⁶ OE, 56/137.

⁷ S, 22/11. Indeed, the latter part of the Preface turns into a critique of Sartre's views. We also find a similar critique of Heidegger in "Everywhere and Nowhere:" "The same philosopher who now regrets Parmenides and would like to give us back our relationships to Being such as they were prior to self-consciousness owes his idea of and taste for primordial ontology to just this self-consciousness" (S, 250/154).

Sartre's concept of immediate pre-reflective *cogito*¹ differs from Descartes' idea of the *cogito* in that it cannot be assimilated with any kind of thing, be it a conscious thing or a thinking thing, *res cogitans*. For Sartre, the pre-reflective *cogito* is not a thing, but is nothing (*néant*). The pre-reflective *cogito* is the negation of everything, since it is nothing; it is empty of all content. It is not a self, but is an immediate nothingness.² It is, in relation to itself, being "for-itself," which is nothing.³ Consciousness is nothing, and being is. According to Sartre, being is the "in-itself."⁴ The opening onto being that every human being is for himself or herself, is nothing.⁵

Sartre gives many examples of negativity, and these have become as famous as his philosophy. He describes to his reader how he has made an appointment with his friend Pierre in a café, but Pierre is not there. This experience involves a negative intuition of the nothingness which "haunts being."⁶ Sartre also discusses the waiter in a café and his "obligation" to be what he is, a waiter. In respect to this example, he argues that a person is a waiter only by negation: "I am a waiter in the mode of *being what I am not*."⁷ The experiencing self is determined through multiplicities of negations, that is, the self is not this something or that something, or any other something. Finally, there is also the famous example of peeping through a keyhole and suddenly being caught in this activity and witnessed by someone else. This is an experience of being objectified and alienated, of transcending the transcendence of nothingness and finding oneself as something, an object for the other.⁸

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre gives descriptions of false self-identifications with something, for example: being "a waiter," being "a moral person," or being "ashamed." Sartre calls this type of identification "bad faith," and thus points to a fundamental form of self-deception in which the person or the self does not recognize its own nothingness, that is, its own freedom from being socially defined as this or that. The structural problem is that others seem to objectify us, and thus subordinate our transcendence and freedom. And, correspondingly, we are able to objectify their transcendence and to conceive it as transcendence transcended, and therefore deprived of its absolute otherness.⁹ This then is the basic situation which Sartre parallels to Hegel's dialectic of mas-

¹ In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty assimilates Sartre's concept of the pre-reflective *cogito* and his own concept of the tacit *cogito* (VI, 224/171). According to Dupond, from this point of view the affinity of Sartre's project and Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is evident. He argues that Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre in *The Visible and the Invisible* is also self-criticism (Dupond 2004, 160). Nevertheless, I doubt that this interpretation is completely correct: in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty never takes the Sartrean position of immediate nothingness, but on the contrary, criticizes it in the chapter on freedom (see Chapter 5.2).

² Sartre follows the Hegelian logic: "Being, the indeterminate immediate, is in fact nothing, and neither more nor less than nothing" (Hegel 2010, 35). See Chapter 1.4.

³ EN, 72/34.

⁴ EN, 34/lxvi.

⁵ EN, 83/44-45.

⁶ EN, 47/11.

⁷ EN, 100/60.

⁸ EN, 317/259.

⁹ EN, 302/263.

ter and slave.¹ According to Sartre, “[t]he essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein* [being with]; it is conflict.”²

Yet, since nothingness is not something, is not any being, its negative relation to being is immediate: there is *nothing* between them, *nothing* that separates them. Sartre writes: “the For-itself is immediate presence to being, and yet at the same time it slips in as an infinite distance between itself and being.”³ Drawing from 20th century phenomenology, Sartre also describes the relation between nothingness and being as being-in-the-world. Even if consciousness is nothing for itself, it is always consciousness of something, directed at something, about something. Yet, consciousness cannot wholly objectify itself, not even on the basis of the objectifications that others may produce of it. This is because as immediate nothingness consciousness cannot be an object for itself.⁴ Therefore, there is a dual tension in Sartre’s philosophy: on the one hand consciousness cannot objectify itself, cannot conceive itself as an object in the world, but on the other hand consciousness cannot remain “outside” of the world, because it is consciousness of something and therefore in the world.

In his critical reading, Merleau-Ponty detects three kinds of immediacy in Sartre’s philosophy of negation. Firstly, there is the immediacy of pre-reflective *cogito*, that is, its nothingness, the being for-itself. Secondly, Sartre argues for an immediate relation between nothingness and being. Thirdly, there is an immediate sameness of reflection and the unreflected. Through these three points, Merleau-Ponty shows how, in spite of trying to distance himself from the Cartesian philosophy of reflection, Sartre, nevertheless, repeats the Cartesian duality: the distinction between the pure mind and the union of mind and body becomes a perspectival opposition of nothingness and being. Sartre equates reflection and the unreflected, but in so doing renders everything into reflection, and thus does not escape the philosophy of reflection.⁵

The problem with Sartre’s concept of the pre-reflective *cogito* is very similar to the problems encountered in the Cartesian tradition: How should we understand and characterize the relation between reflective *cogito* and pre-reflective *cogito*? Merleau-Ponty points out that a Cartesian⁶ could solve this problem by arguing that pre-reflective *cogito* is at the core of reflective *cogito*, that pre-reflective *cogito* is “something in us that is more ourselves than the *cogito* and the reflection that introduces it.”⁷ Sartre, however, cannot proceed this way because for him “I am nothing”⁸ – in other words, there is nothing more central or more profound in us than the nothingness. Yet, if we are immediately nothing, then how is it possible that we do not comprehend ourselves completely and are opaque to ourselves? If we begin with pure nothingness, then it

¹ EN, 276/237.

² EN, 470/429.

³ EN, 270/218.

⁴ EN, 572–573/528.

⁵ Dupond 2004, 143.

⁶ We could add that this Cartesian could be Malebranche. See Chapter 2.2.

⁷ VI, 98/69.

⁸ VI, 98/69.

is hard to understand our openness to something, and if we start from our openness to something, then it is hard to understand ourselves as immediate nothingness.

According to Sartre, there is an infinite distance between nothingness and being, but at the same time their relation is immediate, since nothingness can be consciousness only by being directed at being. Sartre's approach differs from Cartesian philosophy in that for Sartre consciousness is not a substance, not even a negative substance, since substantialization would make it a positive being. It is exactly because of its pure negativity that Sartrean consciousness can be in immediate contact with being. As Merleau-Ponty explains, it is "calling for being in order to not be nothing, and, as such, called forth by being as the sole supplement to being that would be conceivable, a lack of being, but at the same time a lack that constitutes itself into a lack, hence a fissure that deepens in the exact measure that it is filled."¹

In his novel *Nausea*, Sartre famously describes how the main character Roquentin sees the root of a chestnut tree and is captured by its pure existence: he becomes the root because he is nothing. The root simply is, and he cannot undo it or understand it; he cannot stop the root from occupying him. Yet, at the same time as the root fills Roquentin's consciousness, it also deepens his nothingness, since he is not this root and cannot be it; even when it possesses him completely, he cannot possess its existence. Thus, a being, the root, shows Roquentin his inevitable nothingness which is impossible to comprehend because it is not something, and cannot become an object of consciousness.²

In Sartre's philosophy, the reflection, the immanence of my thought, and the unreflected perceptual faith are immediately the same, because to be nothing is to be in the world. We cannot think about the world without being in the world, and there is no consciousness of the world without nothingness.³ Therefore, the Cartesian duality between pure mind and lived body vanishes, because their relation is not a compound or a union. As Merleau-Ponty states: "compound and union are impossible between what is and what is not, but, for the same reason that makes the compound impossible, the one could not be thought without the other."⁴ For the Cartesian philosophy of reflection, the problem of the relation between reflection and the unreflected experience can be solved only by reference to the immanence of thought, making perceptual faith a form of consciousness of the world, "I think." For Sartre's philosophy of negation, perceptual faith is our relation to the world, because there is *nothing* that separates us from the world.⁵ Therefore, that which are distinguished and abstracted in the analysis – being and nothingness – are concretely tied together and mutually dependent.⁶

¹ VI, 79/53.

² Sartre 2003, 181–192.

³ VI, 83/56–57.

⁴ VI, 81–82/55.

⁵ VI, 90/62.

⁶ VI, 92/64.

In a certain sense, Sartre comes close to the position that Merleau-Ponty defends – “to retire into oneself is identical to leaving oneself”¹ – but Merleau-Ponty sees Sartre’s dialects as misleading. According to him, the philosophy of negation “begins by opposing being and nothingness absolutely, and it ends by showing that the nothingness is in a way within being, which is the unique universe. When are we to believe it? At the beginning or at the end?”² Sartre attempts to form a synthesis of being and nothingness, but “[t]he two movements – that by which nothingness invokes being and that by which being invokes nothingness – do not merge into one: they cross.”³ On the one hand, nothingness is an openness to being, is the consciousness of being, and on the other hand, being possesses nothingness. These two relations – openness and possession – are not identical, as Merleau-Ponty argues: in the first case the perspective is of nothingness, and in the second the perspective is of being.⁴

As Merleau-Ponty points out, it is difficult to explain how consciousness is nothing without falling back on some kind of positivity, at a minimum a power to negate.⁵ For immediate nothingness, the body is in-itself, an object, a being, something transcendent, but it is not the self, because the self is nothing, as for Cartesian philosophy the essence of the ego is not the body, not something extensive. Yet, from the point of view of our being in the world, the opaqueness of the body does not allow us to consider ourselves as nothing. Merleau-Ponty points out that one could argue that the logical difficulties are not crucial here, because Sartre’s analysis is about our experience of being, and what is crucial is that the analysis does not, in the end, help us understand the experience, but merely provides an abstraction of it.⁶ Sartre’s philosophy is, according to Merleau-Ponty, an ambivalent philosophy that cannot decide for one or for the other, “the absolute contradiction and the identity of being and nothingness.”⁷ In the end, the philosophy of negation provides a synthesis of “one sole universe of thought,”⁸ and in this way Sartre repeats the Cartesian duality between thought and embodied world: nothingness and being are opposed, but their relation is a relation of immediacy in a similar manner as Cartesian philosophy resolves the opposition between the pure mind and the perception of the world as a “thought of perception.” According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre’s philosophy is therefore still a philosophy of consciousness.⁹

Consequently, Sartre’s analysis of otherness builds on his opposition between pure being and pure nothingness. Since I am pure nothingness, the event

¹ VI, 93–94/65. Cf. EN, 48/14.

² VI, 95/66. Merleau-Ponty describes the incoherence of Sartre’s philosophy in a similar manner as Descartes’ contradiction in *The Incarnate Subject*: “If we take the methods of the First Meditation seriously, are we not led to consider the Sixth as an aberration? And conversely, if we take the Sixth Meditation seriously, how were the methods of the First possible?” (UAC, 16/35.)

³ VI, 95/66.

⁴ VI, 95/66–67.

⁵ VI, 96/67–68.

⁶ VI, 105–106/75–76.

⁷ VI, 104/73.

⁸ VI, 104/74.

⁹ VI, 135/99.

when I become *something* for the other is an “ontological catastrophe,” and therefore “we have the incomprehensible and impossible task of restoring to Being.”¹ For Merleau-Ponty, the complete opposition between me and the other results from an idealization, and does not grasp our belonging to the sensible world and to history.² In *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty argues against Sartre’s conception of freedom, which as an attempt to liberate us from all ties to history abstracts freedom and devastates our means of freedom.³

Sartre’s dialectic of being and nothingness tries to make a synthesis of these opposites. His dialectics begins from the supposition of immediate being and immediate nothingness in order to affirm their ambivalent mixture – thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Merleau-Ponty writes: “what in a philosophy of the negative identifies the absolute distinction between being and nothingness and the description of nothingness sunken into being – is that they are two forms of immediate thought.”⁴ These two forms of immediate thought are structurally similar to the two Cartesian positions that Merleau-Ponty describes in *Eye and Mind* as the “Cartesian monsters:” pure objectivity of being as the in-itself and pure coincidence with existence as the nothingness of the for-itself. Merleau-Ponty takes Sartre’s philosophy to be a “return to the reflective dichotomies of a thought.”⁵

What Merleau-Ponty proposes as an alternative is that one should begin not with such presuppositions, but from the realization that “there is being, there is a world, there is *something* [...], there is cohesion, there is meaning.”⁶ Our openness to being, the proximity of something, means that there is also *distance*. According to Merleau-Ponty, both the Cartesian philosophy of reflection and Sartre’s philosophy of negation lack a proper conception of distance and proximity, and thus suppose an immediate connection.⁷ In both cases, the transcendence is absorbed into the immanence of thought.

Proximity, the return to the “self,” to experience and to the world, is also at the same time a distancing of the “self” from experience and from the world – this is the ontological structure which Merleau-Ponty insists on in *The Visible and the Invisible*.⁸ It is not a theoretical contradiction, as in the case of Descartes’ philosophy,⁹ but an expression of the paradox of experience: our experience opens to the world and forms a connection with it, and at the same time our experience is differentiation, distancing.

In a similar manner as Merleau-Ponty does not completely neglect the method of reflection, but develops a new concept of reflection as “hyper-

¹ VI, 115–116/83.

² VI, 116–117/84.

³ See Chapter 5.2.

⁴ VI, 118–119/86.

⁵ VI, 122/89.

⁶ VI, 121/88.

⁷ VI, 122/88–89.

⁸ See Chapter Four.

⁹ See Chapter One.

reflection," he does not completely disregard the dialectics.¹ What is prominent in the dialectical thought, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that it does not stop to logical contradictions and impossibilities, but proceeds as "movement, progress, surpassing" in which each term can lead to its opposite and reversal.² The dialectical thought does not reduce being into one position, but regards it as "a system of several entries."³ The dialectic traverses through transitional stages: the past stages call for the present stages, and the present stages retain the past stages by retroactively modifying them. Merleau-Ponty describes the movement of the dialectic:

Hence there is a question here not of a thought that follows a pre-established route but of a thought that itself traces its own course, that finds itself by advancing, that makes its own way, and thus proves that the way is practicable. [...] In particular it does not formulate itself in successive statements which would have to be taken as they stand; each statement, in order to be true, must be referred, throughout the whole movement, to the stage from which it arises and has its full sense only if one takes into account not only what it says expressly but also its place within the whole which constitutes its latent content.⁴

On the one hand, there is implication and involvement, and on the other hand, there is difference and contradiction – integration and differentiation.⁵ In this sense, according to Merleau-Ponty, the dialectic is what he is looking for.⁶ And yet, according to him, the dialectic is "by definition unstable."⁷ The "absolute" is the negation of itself, being is pure positivity and the "dialectical movement becomes pure identity of the opposites, ambivalence."⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, both Hegel and Sartre fall into the same ambivalence: the dialectical movement becomes position through the negation of negation, and "ceases to [...] be the dialectical movement, converts it into signification, thesis, or thing said."⁹ Merleau-Ponty states that this is a "bad dialectic," which becomes formalization and "imposes an external law upon the content and restores for its own uses the pre-dialectical thought;" it becomes an "auto-constitution" of a pre-figured signification and a "thesis."¹⁰ If the dialectic begins with the positing of immediate being and immediate nothingness, thesis and antithesis, and becomes a synthesis of the opposites, it cannot retain the withdrawing, distancing, and differentiating character of experience, but is merely idealization: "The bad dialectic is that which does not wish to lose its soul in order to save it, which wishes to be dialectical immediately, becomes autonomous, and ends up at cynicism, at formalism, for having eluded its own double meaning."¹¹

¹ VI, 125/92.

² VI, 123/89.

³ VI, 123/90.

⁴ VI, 123–124/90.

⁵ VI, 124–125/90–91.

⁶ VI, 125/92.

⁷ VI, 126/92.

⁸ VI, 127/93.

⁹ VI, 127/93.

¹⁰ VI, 127–128/93–94.

¹¹ VI, 129/94.

The “double meaning” refers to Hegelian logic, “the profound idea of *self-mediation*, of a movement through which each term ceases to be itself in order to become itself, breaks up, opens up, negates itself, in order to realize itself.”¹ The “good dialectic” retains the double movement according to which “to retire into oneself is also to leave oneself.”² The “good dialectic” which Merleau-Ponty is proposing, and what he calls “hyperdialectic,” is therefore “the dialectic without synthesis.”³

The dialectical thought must take account of what remains outside all thematizations, idealizations, and conceptualization: non-coincidence, the invisible, the untouchable, the unconscious, brute or vertical being. Surpassing is always only partial: the return to being is becoming of *something*, transformation, but not comprehension of a totality, the “absolute.” Surpassing does not conserve all former states as acquired, nor does it leave them completely behind as a “lower level” of meaning or truth. Merleau-Ponty’s reinterpretation of the dialectic is connected to his idea of the *institution*: the temporal thickness of our experience involves repetition, differentiation, exclusion, and progress, but also sedimentation, forgetting, and unthought as the latent content of the explicated thought.⁴ It involves newness and development, but only through repetition and differentiation.

Philosophy does not decompose our relationship with the world into real elements, or even into ideal references which would make of it an ideal object, but it discerns articulations in the world, it awakens in it regular relations of prepossession, of recapitulation, of overlapping, which are as dormant in our ontological landscape, subsist there only in the form of traces, and nevertheless continue to function there, *continue to institute the new* there.⁵

Merleau-Ponty’s “dialectic without synthesis” does not neglect the sensible world as acquired, and for him language is not a solution to all philosophical problems. To argue that everything is mediated or structured by language is once again to repeat the basic conversion of Cartesian arguments of doubt and dream and the malicious demon, and to reduce the experience or the brute being to reflective signification, to “it seems that I see,” *videre videor*.⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, language establishes a world in the same sense as sensibility establishes a world.⁷ They both are *total parts* of being, different dimensions of the same ontological structure.

Philosophy must not replace the unknown with the known, or the unconscious by possession of consciousness; philosophy is not a matter of knowledge, because dissimulation, withdrawing, and distance are essential to all experience.⁸ Philosophy is, therefore, not a coincidence with being, but it is not a rup-

¹ VI, 126/92.

² VI, 74/49.

³ VI, 129/94–95.

⁴ See Dastur 2009, 40.

⁵ VI, 137/100–101. Emphasis by JH.

⁶ VI, 130/95–96.

⁷ VI, 132/96.

⁸ VI, 138/101.

ture either.¹ In Cartesian terms, philosophy is neither the immanent thought of the pure mind nor a coincidence with being by the union of mind and body – as “two forms of immediate thought.” According to Merleau-Ponty, the situation of philosophy is paradoxical: “as an approach to the far-off as far-off, it is also a question put to what does not speak.”² Philosophy interrogates mute experience and expresses it: philosophy is not only a repetition of what already exists, but also differentiation and re-formation of the experience:

If this paradox is not an impossibility, and if philosophy can speak, it is because language is not only the depository of fixed and acquired significations, because its cumulative power itself results from a power of anticipation or of prepossession, because one speaks not only of what one knows, so as to set out a display of it – but also of what one does not know, in order to know it – and because language in forming itself expresses, at least laterally, an ontogenesis of which it is a part.³

Expression strives for what it cannot express, and it expresses more than it expresses – in the same way as every visible is invisible and vision sees more than it sees. The main idea of Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy, in contrast to the Cartesian philosophy of reflection and the dialectic of the absolute, is that the unknown, the untouchable, and the invisible must not be excluded as something that is outside of clear and distinct thought nor included as the negation of the positivity but must be conceived as fruitful absence, negativity which is not nothing nor empty.

In this chapter, I have argued that Merleau-Ponty regards Cartesian ontology as a dual position between the idealization and the experience of being. Moreover, I have argued that Merleau-Ponty also finds a corresponding duality in Husserl: phenomenology poses the relation between reflection and the unreflected as a problem of the limit of consciousness. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty shows that we should neither retain the Cartesian duality between the reflective mind and the unreflected being, nor attempt a dialectical synthesis of them. Instead of the duality between pure consciousness and immediate perceptual experience – the two impossible ontological positions of Cartesian philosophy – Merleau-Ponty begins *The Visible and the Invisible* by demonstrating the necessity to think of a relation between connection and difference, proximity and distance, repetition and differentiation. In the next chapter, I will show how Merleau-Ponty forms his new ontology as a structure or texture of the double relation of connection and difference.

¹ VI, 135/99.

² VI, 138/102.

³ VI, 139/102.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE NEW ONTOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

Universality of our world, not according to its “content” (we are far from knowing it entirely), not as recorded fact (the “perceived”) but according to its configuration, its ontological structure which envelops every possible and which every possible leads back to.¹

Before I explicate what I will discuss in the present chapter, let me first briefly summarize what has been stated in the preceding chapters. In Chapter Three, I showed how Merleau-Ponty analyzes the *duality* of Cartesian ontology: on the one hand, through the *distinction* of mind and body there is an “ontology of the object” – theoretical attitude, pure mind, objective thinking – and on the other hand, there is the *union* of mind and body which opens an “ontology of the existent,” our embodied and lived experience of the world.² I showed that according to Merleau-Ponty the “Cartesian equilibrium” between these two positions consists of the exclusion of the lived experience from the philosophy of consciousness: God, incomprehensible to us, sustains both our clarity and our obscurity.³ In Chapter One, I showed that in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty articulates the Cartesian situation as a *contradiction*:⁴ on the one hand, the unreflected lived experience is the source for the reflective philosophy – we cannot “think that we see” if we do not see first⁵ – and on the other hand, the unreflected experience withdraws from the objectifying grasp of the reflective philosophy.⁶ In Chapter Two, I argued that in his analysis of Cartesian philosophers after Descartes, Merleau-Ponty shows that the attempts to solve the problem of the relations of mind and body lead to a *tension* between immediacy and differentiation: Malebranche, Maine de Biran, and Bergson formulate concep-

¹ VI, 282/229.

² N, 169/125.

³ OE, 55/137.

⁴ PP, 52–53/49.

⁵ PP, 429/436.

⁶ PP, 454/460–461. See also S, 263/161.

tions of *both* immediate self-relation *and* differentiation of the self.¹ Moreover, in Chapter Three I showed that in his working notes published with *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty states that in his earlier work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, he on the one hand, partially retained the position of the philosophy of consciousness,² and on the other hand, formulated the unreflected source of reflection as the “tacit *cogito*,” which rendered further analysis impossible, as the relation between language and “silence” remained inconceivable.³

Furthermore, in the previous chapter, I showed that Merleau-Ponty begins *The Visible and the Invisible* by describing the Cartesian situation, by entering “into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions.”⁴ In our pre-theoretic experience, we have a trust or a faith in the evidence of our perception which precedes reflective thought: we have a “*presentiment*”⁵ of the unity of our experience that our perception reveals the “things themselves,” and that our body is one. Merleau-Ponty describes this “presentiment” in parallel with Descartes’ concept of the union of mind and body: when we live it and are ignorant of it, it seems to be irresistible, but when we try to express it, the unity disappears and we see distances and differences everywhere.⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, “the perceptual faith is a paradox.”⁷

This paradoxical proximity and distance, connection and divergence, adhesion and differentiation form the structure which Merleau-Ponty elaborates as his “new ontology.”⁸ The paradox which we find on the level of perceptual experience can also be found on the intersubjective level,⁹ and on the level of articulation and language.¹⁰ According to Merleau-Ponty, philosophical reflection itself remains within this ontological structure, does not coincide with the “originating” and must take account of the differentiation of the texture of which it is a part.¹¹ Therefore, as I explicated in the previous chapter, ontology is necessarily *indirect*.¹²

In this chapter, I will analyze Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the ontological structure in *The Visible and the Invisible*. I argue that through this ontological structure Merleau-Ponty reformulates the relations between mind and body, the Cartesian duality. Let me recall that for Merleau-Ponty the duality is not about two substances, but of two positions – the objectifying pure mind and the lived experience of the body – the distinction and the union. Merleau-Ponty shows that it is not only with the reflective thought that there occurs distancing from our experience, but it is already within our sensible experience that we diverge into seeing and seen, touching and touched, and so on. Yet, since it is

¹ See Chapter Two.

² VI, 237/183.

³ VI, 224–225/171.

⁴ VI, 17/3.

⁵ VI, 24/9.

⁶ VI, 27/11.

⁷ VI, 53/31.

⁸ VI, 222/169.

⁹ VI, 25/9.

¹⁰ VI, 30/14.

¹¹ VI, 56–57/35; 165/124.

¹² VI, 233/179.

our own body which splits into the seeing body and the visible body, and since there must be some kind of unity of experience, as otherwise I would not recognize my left hand as my own when touching with my right hand, we find the problem of paradoxical unity and distinction already in different sensible dimensions, touching and seeing. My claim is that Merleau-Ponty takes this paradoxical double reference of connection and difference – the *chiasm* – as *the structure* of our existence; and not only of our existence, but as the structure of every dimension of being. Merleau-Ponty states in his working notes: “This is not anthropologism: by studying these 2 leaves we ought to find the structure of being.”¹

What is crucial in this “doubling up of my body into inside and outside”² is that the two sides of our body do not coincide: when touching myself, my body as touching and my body as touched do not coincide, and there remains an irreversible difference. There is no immediate self-relation, no pre-reflective coincidence of the self with itself: “To touch *oneself*, to see *oneself*” is not “to reach *oneself*, it is on the contrary to escape *oneself*, to be ignorant of *oneself*, the self in question is by divergence [...] which consequently does not cease to be hidden or latent.”³ Thus, on the one hand, we have our body as touched, seen, and eventually as objectified and thematized, and on the other hand, we have our experiential body, touching, seeing, as “a being at” (*être à*).⁴ Our sensing body escapes the attempt to objectify it – it has an untouchable and invisible side: distancing, deepening of our experience, thickness of our being, openness to the contingency of the vertical or brute being.

In Cartesian terms, the pure mind and its idea of the body as an extensive object, clear and distinct, does not coincide with the experience of the body as the union of mind and body, which remains obscure for the pure mind.⁵ God sustains both our clarity and our obscurity, since nature is “nothing other than God himself.”⁶ Yet, God remains incomprehensible to us.⁷ Merleau-Ponty states in *Eye and Mind*: “We have to go to these lengths to find in Descartes something like a metaphysics of depth.”⁸ It is here that in Descartes’ philosophy we find an “indirect ontology,” which Merleau-Ponty elaborates in his later philosophy as an ontology of the *flesh*. For Descartes, “God’s being is for us an abyss,” incomprehensible, and it is only in these negative or indirect terms that he approaches being.⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, we “touch here the most difficult point,” but it is possible to approach this structure of being indirectly, as a *dimensionality* of different dimensions: we can approach the invisible through the visible as “the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals.”¹⁰

¹ VI, 317/264.

² VI, 317/264.

³ VI, 303/249.

⁴ VI, 303/249.

⁵ AT III, 691–693/CSM-K, 227.

⁶ AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56.

⁷ AT VII, 55/39.

⁸ OE, 55–56/137.

⁹ OE, 56/137.

¹⁰ VI, 195/149.

Before I explicate the interpretation of Descartes' philosophy in *The Visible and the Invisible*, I will show how Merleau-Ponty formulates the ontological structure as a texture which can be opened from different perspectives, of which every part is a *total part*: "The 'World' is this whole where each 'part,' when one takes it for itself, suddenly opens unlimited dimensions – becomes a *total part*."¹ The invisible or absence within the vertical being opens up the dimensions of *time, history, and institution*. In Merleau-Ponty's ontology, the conception of being does not converge with an immutable and universal idea of God. The thickness and depth of our experience opens onto a past which, on the one hand, is the source of our present significations, and on the other hand, remains unconscious, forgotten, as "a negativity that is not nothing."² The vertical being is not only *our experience*, but opens to historicity as an institution – to the *flesh of the world*.

4.1 The Texture of Experience

In the previous chapter, I explicated how Merleau-Ponty begins *The Visible and the Invisible* by articulating the paradox of connection and difference within our experience. I showed that he re-interprets the Cartesian duality between the union and the distinction: our "naïve certitude of the world" is "strong in practice" but "weak when it wishes to convert itself into theses."³ Merleau-Ponty argues that the paradox is already within our corporeal experience, and can also be found in our relations with others, and in language. In the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the problematic relation of the reflection to the unreflected, on which the reflection leans but which it cannot capture: he argues that we have to take account of the withdrawing character of experience and being. In the second chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, he argues that we should not attempt to "overcome" the duality between the reflection and the unreflected by a dialectical synthesis: the paradoxical movement between them is essential to our relation with being.

In the third chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "Interrogation and Intuition," Merleau-Ponty takes a deeper approach to the paradoxical relation between the reflection and the unreflected: it is no more a question of the naïve reflection which does not understand its own conditions in the unreflected, but a question of how can we reflect the unreflected, what is our relation to being, and what is the philosophical articulation of being? The unreflected experience deepens to the temporal thickness: our present field of experience extends to the past and opens up a temporal horizon.

I will explicate how Merleau-Ponty shows that the question of our relation to being cannot be answered by the two Cartesian positions, the "Cartesian

¹ VI, 271/218.

² VI, 198/151.

³ VI, 30/13.

monsters,"¹ either by reducing being to "the signification 'Being',"² pure essence, or reducing being to facticity, coincidence with existence, because neither of these approaches takes into account the withdrawing character of experience: the thickness and depth of experience. In the third chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "Interrogation and Intuition," Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that philosophy cannot capture any essences – that is, invariants – without proceeding through variation and differentiation, characteristic of perception and facticity.³

Merleau-Ponty begins the third chapter, "Interrogation and Intuition," with a reference to Descartes' methodic doubt: "the split between vision and the visible, between thought and being do not [...] establish us in the negative," but instead, "installs oneself in what remains, in sensations, opinions."⁴ Even if we try to presuppose nothing, that which remains after doubt is "not nothing."⁵ The divergence between our embodied being and our thought is made into an "infinite distance:" "as passive beings we feel ourselves caught up in a mass of Being that escapes us, or even maneuvered by an evil agent, and we oppose to this adversity the desire for an absolute evidence, delivered from all facticity."⁶ Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, the methodic doubt refers to being which it represses, and from which it takes all its inspiration for the idea of absolute evidence. The concealment of being becomes a "falsity of Being itself, a Great Deceiver" which "pushes before itself the screen of our thought."⁷ In contrast to the Cartesian train of thought, Merleau-Ponty argues that in order to realize its will to become radical, philosophy would have to take account its relation to being, "the umbilical bond that binds it always to Being."⁸

According to Merleau-Ponty, the question of our relation to being leads to the question of essence. Moreover, since being applies not only to a particular being but to everything, it is a question about "universal meaning, which would be capable of sustaining logical operations and language and the unfolding of the world as well."⁹ It is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a question of the essence of being, "that without which there would be neither world nor language nor anything at all."¹⁰ The naïve philosophical reflection which thinks it is a pure mind, a "pure spectator,"¹¹ finds all its answers in the essences, and "more effectively than through the doubt, philosophy succeeds in detaching itself from all beings, because it changes them into their meaning."¹² According to Merleau-Ponty, philosophy would become "an exact science, the sole exact one," because in natural sciences "truths of fact and truths of reason overlap" and

¹ See Chapter 3.1.

² VI, 146/109.

³ Merleau-Ponty writes in his working notes: "[U]nderstand perception as differentiation, forgetting as undifferentiation" (VI, 250/197).

⁴ VI, 143/105–106.

⁵ VI, 143/106.

⁶ VI, 143–144/106.

⁷ VI, 144/106.

⁸ VI, 144/107.

⁹ VI, 145/107.

¹⁰ VI, 145/107.

¹¹ VI, 148/110.

¹² VI, 145/108.

“remain to be interrogated.”¹ Philosophy would become an absolute “*survol*.”² Yet, as I argued in Chapter One, Descartes notices that there are not only the reflective truths of the “natural light” but also the unreflected experience of “natural inclinations:” already before the knowledge of the essences we have the experience of the world. Merleau-Ponty states: “This knowledge is beneath the essence, it is the experience of which the essence is a part and which it does not envelop.”³ Hence, as the essence is formulated only after the experience, it is not primary and cannot provide the answer to the philosophical question of being.⁴

According to Merleau-Ponty, the essences do not give the “primitive meaning of Being” and “they are only its manner or its *style*.”⁵ Already in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty explicates the unity of experience as a “style” through which, on the one hand, a bodily functioning can become articulated by words, and on the other hand, our thoughts and expressions get their affective impacts.⁶ In accordance with *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states that in order to be able to communicate with our “essences” and our “styles,” they must open “upon the same world.”⁷ We cannot communicate without some kind of universality. This universality, according to Merleau-Ponty, is not in the essences, but in the experience, which opens to being:

When philosophy ceases to be doubt in order to make itself disclosure, explicitation, the field it opens to itself is indeed made up of significations or of essences – since it has detached itself from the facts and the beings – but these significations or essences do not suffice to themselves, they overtly refer to our acts of ideation which have lifted them from a brute being, wherein we must find again in their wild state what answers to our essences and our significations.⁸

Merleau-Ponty articulates the double movement between reflection and the unreflected: reflection forms its essences on the basis of the unreflected experience, but distances from it. The distance of the essence to the “brute being,” to existence, is inevitable, and philosophy must take account of this distancing, but at the same time, it must take notice that the distance is not absolute, and we never detach from the unreflected experience. In order to have a “pure essence which would not be at all contaminated and confused with the facts,” the “spectator” of the essence would have to be “himself without secrets, without laten-

¹ VI, 146/108.

² See Chapter 1.1.

³ VI, 147/109.

⁴ VI, 147/109.

⁵ VI, 147–148/109. Emphasis by JH.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty states in *Phenomenology of Perception*: “the body converts a certain motor essence into vocal form, spreads out the articulatory style of a word into audible phenomena, and arrays the former attitude, which is resumed, into the panorama of the past, projecting an intention to move into actual movement, because the body is a power of natural expression” (PP, 211/211). The “style” expands to thought, which has an affective significance: “the spoken or written words carry a top coating of meaning which sticks to them and which presents the thought as a style, an affective value, a piece of existential mimicry, rather than as a conceptual statement” (PP, 212/212).

⁷ VI, 148/110. See Chapter 1.4.

⁸ VI, 148–149/110.

cy, if we are to be certain that nothing be surreptitiously introduced into it."¹ And yet, since the distance between the essence and the experience is never absolute, our "ideation" is never pure and remains connected to "the fabric of experience, this flesh of time."² Every ideation stems from my duration (*durée*), as Merleau-Ponty states, using the Bergsonian notion. This means that there is a whole network of past experiences behind each actual experience. There are temporality and historicity within actual experience, and therefore actual experience is never without absences and without depth. According to Merleau-Ponty, "this is why I am not sure of having penetrated unto the hard core of being" with the essence grasped as an *invariant* from which all inessential characters are removed.³

Here Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl's idea of eidetic variation, or free variation in imagination: to capture the essence, that is, to intuit it, one needs to vary individuals. This is needed in order to separate the inessential from the essential. If by removing some character of a thing in the imagination, the thing does not become something else, the character is inessential. We arrive at the invariant when we have isolated all the inessential characters, and only have the necessary characters without which the thing would change into something else.⁴ Husserl writes in *Experience and Judgment*:

[A] unity runs through this multiplicity of successive figures, that in such free variations of an original image, e.g., of a thing, an *invariant* is necessarily retained as the *necessary general form*, without which an object such as this thing, as an example of its kind, would not be thinkable at all.⁵

David Morris argues that, for Husserl, the object of consciousness is never complete or finished, but "an always incomplete flow."⁶ Variation is a continuous flowing activity which never gives the universal as complete or fixed, but, as Husserl writes in *Cartesian Mediations*, "with its *indeterminateness*, it has a *determinate structure*."⁷ The incompleteness and indeterminateness guarantees the possibility of a shift, which, according to Morris, is "like a Gestalt shift in which what had previously appeared as a rabbit now appears as a duck."⁸ The variation allows us to discover something new – generality, universality and essentiality, a determinate structure, "invariance in variation, a style manifest in variation."⁹ Morris also compares Husserl's concept of variation to Bergson's concept

¹ VI, 149/111.

² VI, 150/111.

³ VI, 151/111–112.

⁴ VI, 149/111.

⁵ EU, 411/341.

⁶ Morris 2005, 271.

⁷ Hua1, 83/45.

⁸ Morris 2005, 273.

⁹ Morris 2005, 274. Moreover, Morris claims that Husserl's eidetic variation has a profound root in the Hegelian logic of concepts: "With Husserlian variation we are no longer pursuing transcendent universals [essences in Hegelian terms], but concepts, structures of processual fields of singular variation" (Morris 2005, 277). Adding to the context, he also mentions that "Derrida's *différance* is perhaps another name for Husserlian variation" (Morris 2005, 284).

of intuition and states: “[A]t the ideal level, Husserlian invariants become static, whereas Bergsonian invariants are always varying.”¹ In this sense, Merleau-Ponty is closer to the Bergsonian conception, since for him “total variation” is impossible and variation is never complete.² Yet, as I have argued already in Chapter One and Chapter Three, for Merleau-Ponty Husserlian phenomenology is continuous renewal, an open task.

Merleau-Ponty argues that within our field of experience we can exclude the inessential, but we are not able to determine what belongs necessarily and essentially to the being which we are varying in our imagination. This is because we cannot “soar over” (*survoler*) our field of experience, to “suspend or at least reactivate all the sedimented thoughts with which it is surrounded.”³ We would have to “suspend” our temporality and our embodiment, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, “is not only impossible for me to do in fact but would deprive me of that very cohesion in depth of the world and of Being without which the essence is subjective folly and arrogance.”⁴ Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the essence is “not a positive being.”⁵ We have access to essences only within the texture of our experience. What we have is a thickness or depth of our experience through which we have a vision of the essence as an *invisible*, not as positive but as “a negativity that is not nothing.”⁶ As I will explicate in this chapter, this means that essentiality is always temporal, and time has its own thickness in which we are connected and from which we differentiate: “the ontological structure which envelops every possible.”⁷

According to Merleau-Ponty, if we begin with an opposition of the fact and the essence, an antithesis of an individual thing in a certain point of space and time, and an idea which is “forever and nowhere,” we make the essence inaccessible. The essence is not “a second positivity beyond the order of the ‘facts,’ that would “appear all naked” – on the contrary, “it is always clothed,” and “at the heart of the coiling up of experience over experience.”⁸ The fact and the essence are of the same texture. In the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty expresses this texture through the dimension of the visible: the idea is the invisible of the visible, “not the contrary of the sensible” but “its lining (*doublure*) and its depth.”⁹

From the position of the pure mind outside of the visible, the “pure spectator” without visible body, Merleau-Ponty situates philosophical analysis in the midst of the visible: space and time are not transparent to us, they “extend beyond the visible present, and at the same time they are *behind* it, in depth, in hiding.”¹⁰ The essence must be attained through the visibility since “I the seer

¹ Morris 2005, 283.

² VI, 149–150/111–112.

³ VI, 150/112.

⁴ VI, 150–151/112.

⁵ VI, 149/111.

⁶ VI, 198/151.

⁷ VI, 282/229.

⁸ VI, 151/112–113.

⁹ VI, 195/149.

¹⁰ VI, 152/113.

am also visible.”¹ The philosopher’s “mind” cannot be outside of the visible world, an immaterial substance,² because then the world would be inaccessible: we would not gain “pure ideality” but a “zero point of Being,”³ and we would “withdraw to the bottom of nothingness.”⁴ Instead, Merleau-Ponty claims that we must think of the visibility from *within*, from our adhesion to the visible which provides our access to the essentiality:

What makes the weight, the thickness, the flesh of each color, of each sound, of each tactile texture, of the present, and of the world is the fact that he who grasps them feels himself emerge from them by a sort of coiling up or redoubling, fundamentally homogeneous with them; he feels that he is the sensible itself coming to itself and that in return the sensible is in his eyes as it were his double or an extension of his own flesh.⁵

Here Merleau-Ponty elaborates further the “presentiment,” which I already analyzed in the last chapter, of a feeling that we see the “things themselves” and can touch ourselves touching:⁶ “It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand.”⁷ And yet, this “one sole and *massive* adhesion to Being which is the flesh,” can be understood only through “*differentiations*,” through concepts and dimensions.⁸ The connection between the seer and the visible must also be a difference at the same time: “it is not possible that we blend into it [the visible], nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation by disappearance of the seer or of the visible.”⁹ The ontological structure is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a texture or a flesh, “a spatial and temporal pulp where the individuals are formed by differentiation.”¹⁰ The things and my body are of the same visibility, of the same texture: “I experience their solidity from within insofar as I am among them and insofar as they communicate through me as a sentient thing.”¹¹

The things that we experience are not in themselves, in their own specific time and space, completely separated from our time and space. As we are differentiations of the same texture, there is, between the things and us, a “system of equivalences,” a thickness of time which we share. We can approach these connecting “systems,” these “hinges,” as *institutions*, as I will explicate later in

¹ VI, 152-153/113.

² Merleau-Ponty states in his working notes: “We are following the order of the material, there is no order of the reasons – – The order of the reasons would not give us the conviction that the order of the material give – – philosophy as center and not as construction.” (VI, 220/166.)

³ VI, 152/113. See Chapter 1.4.

⁴ VI, 150/111. See Chapter 3.5.

⁵ VI, 153/113-114.

⁶ VI, 24/9. See Chapter 3.4.

⁷ VI, 173/130-131.

⁸ VI, 324/270.

⁹ VI, VI, 173/131.

¹⁰ VI, 153/114.

¹¹ VI, 153/114.

this chapter.¹ The thickness of time means that our vision of the present is always doubled by the latency of the past. Merleau-Ponty refers to Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) concept of the screen memory when he states:

Like the memory screen of the psychoanalysts, the present, the visible counts so much for me and has an absolute prestige for me only by reason of this immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere, which it announces and which it conceals.²

Let me explicate this reference, as it is significant for Merleau-Ponty's conception of the invisible. In his article "Screen Memories" (1899), Freud explicates that the screen memory "owes its value as a memory not to its own content, but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed."³ A screen memory is paradoxically covering and repressing something and at the same time bringing forth this something as an associative connection. According to Freud, an indifferent event from our childhood which is recollected clearly – "too clearly" – while other events, particularly if more important, of the same period remain obscure or forgotten, can be a screen memory.⁴ Freud argues that there are two opposing psychological forces at work here – one which tries to remember and another which tries to prevent the memory: "The result of the conflict is therefore that, instead of the mnemonic image which would have been justified by the original event, another is produced which has been to some degree associatively *displaced* from the former one."⁵ Thus, we have a visible memory, but not of the "original event," which remains invisible under this memory-image. And yet, there is an *associative* connection between the "raw material" and the memory-image.

Freud gives an autobiographical⁶ observation of a particularly fixed and indifferent childhood memory which includes yellow flowers as a "disproportionately prominent element in the situation as a whole."⁷ It seems that it is almost certain that this memory did not occur. Instead, the memory itself was recalled at the age of seventeen, when deeply in love and longing for a fifteen years old girl who had a yellow dress: "I can remember quite well for what a long time afterwards I was affected by the yellow colour of the dress she was wearing when we first met, whenever I saw the same colour anywhere else."⁸ The phantasy of the girl in the yellow dress was transformed into a childhood memory and became unconscious.⁹

There are not only two memories, one hiding behind the other, one conscious and the other unconscious, an unstructured childhood experience dis-

¹ VI, 238/184.

² VI, 153/114.

³ SE3, 320.

⁴ SE3, 305–306.

⁵ SE3, 307.

⁶ SE3, 309n1.

⁷ SE3, 312. The analysis of this case is more detailed than I can explicate here. I will only bring forth what I find crucial in the context of Merleau-Ponty's ontology.

⁸ SE3, 313.

⁹ SE3, 316.

placed by adulthood memory-image, but rather an unconscious association of a phantasmatic element which traverses through both memories and which is represented, in this particular case, by the “over-emphasis on the yellow.”¹ The screen memory brings forth a trace of the repressed as the *relation* between its “content and some other.”² Repetitive associative relations, traces of the repressed, and the over-emphasis on certain details bring forth the unconscious content, and yet “the raw material of memory-traces out of which it was forged remains unknown to us in its original form.”³ Thus, Freud concludes, it may be “questioned whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood: memories *relating to* our childhood may be all that we possess.”⁴ We may form the memory-images retrospectively, but what remains of the repressed unconscious contents or motives is the *relation*: the latent content of the past radiates to the adult memory as an associative force.

In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty takes up the example of a yellow color as an element. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly refer to Freud’s article “Screen Memories,” and in any case it is clear that he adds the perspective of his “new ontology” and elaborates the idea of the elementary “yellow” in the philosophical context. The working notes show that Merleau-Ponty was elaborating the conceptions of psychoanalysis on the basis of his ontology of the flesh, as he states, as “an *ontological* psychoanalysis.”⁵ Merleau-Ponty refers explicitly to Freud’s analysis of the “Wolfman” in “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” (1918), in a working note where, again, he takes up the example of the color yellow: a memory of a yellow-striped butterfly which rouse anxiety in the patient is associatively connected to yellow-striped pears, which are in the patients mother tongue of Russian called “Grusha,” which in turn is the name of a young maid who the psychoanalyst concludes to have opened her legs like the butterfly its wings.⁶

According to Merleau-Ponty, the associational relations are due to their *overdetermination*: “there is no association that comes into play unless there is overdetermination, that is, a relation of relations, a coincidence that cannot be fortuitous.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty states that the “tacit Cogito ‘thinks’ only overdeterminations.”⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, overdetermination means that “any entity can be *accentuated* as an emblem of Being.”⁹

According to Merleau-Ponty, “it is precisely within its particularity as yellow and through it that the yellow becomes a universe or an *element*.”¹⁰ In another working note, he clarifies: “There is no longer a problem of the concept,

¹ SE3, 318.

² SE3, 320.

³ SE3, 322.

⁴ SE3, 322.

⁵ VI, 323/270.

⁶ SE17, 89–91. VI, 293–294/240. See also Richir 1987, 95; Burke 2005, 193.

⁷ VI, 294/240.

⁸ VI, 294/240. In the next part of this chapter I will show that according to Merleau-Ponty there is an articulation of the unreflected experience, the “voices of silence” (S, 130/81).

⁹ VI, 323/270.

¹⁰ VI, 272–273/218.

generality, the idea, when one has understood that the sensible itself is *invisible*, that the *yellow* is capable of setting itself up as a level or a horizon."¹ An idea is not in an invisible, supersensible world, in the sense of Platonic idealism, an original truth from which all the sensible things are privative variations; an idea is the invisible *of the visible*, in a parallel sense, as for Freud there is no memory of the "original" content or event, but an unconscious associative relation which comes forth in the conscious memory-images, a trace of the past, a trace of the repressed within the memory-image.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the "'associations' of psychoanalysis are in reality 'rays' of time and of the world."² The sensible becomes an idea which is universal in the sense that it opens to the associative relations of our experience and memory: "The 'World' is this whole where each 'part,' when one takes it for itself, suddenly opens unlimited dimensions – becomes a *total part*."³ The sensible particularity opens universal dimensions. According to Merleau-Ponty, the relation between a part and the whole is not a "sign-signification relation:" there is not a certain signification to which the yellow refers, but the part comes with the "roots" of the whole.⁴ The "parts overlap," the vision of the present does not stop on the visible surface, but deepens to the invisible thickness of the visible, to the "encroachment:" "Perception is not first a perception of *things*, but a perception of *elements* [...] of *rays of the world*, of things which are dimensions, which are worlds [...]"⁵ The universal is not above our experience, an intemporal *a priori*, but "beneath" our experience, as an element of the past: "it is not before, but *behind us*."⁶

Let me return to the chapter "Interrogation and Intuition." Merleau-Ponty states that the essences are not another realm outside of the sensible, as every sensible thing already opens up the "latent content of the past."⁷ Every sensible something is "mounted on the axes, the pivots, the dimensions, the generality of my body, and the ideas are therefore already encrusted in its joints."⁸ Every sensible something is "a certain style, a certain manner of managing the domain of space and time over which it has competency, of pronouncing, of articulating that domain, of radiating about a wholly virtual center."⁹ Every visible thing opens an invisible dimension of the past, of signification and essentiality. The invisible – "the raw material of memory-traces," to use Freud's expression¹⁰ – does not become visible itself. It is the "wholly virtual center" of visibility. In the third chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty provides an analysis of Bergson's philosophy, and thus the "virtual" may refer to Bergson's idea: to the virtual state of pure memory which actualizes through repetitions of

¹ VI, 290/237.

² VI, 293/240.

³ VI, 271/218.

⁴ VI, 271/218.

⁵ VI, 271/218.

⁶ VI, 271/218.

⁷ VI, 153/114.

⁸ VI, 154/114.

⁹ VI, 154/115.

¹⁰ SE3, 322.

different planes of consciousness and becomes materialized in actual perception.¹ The ideality is buried in the connections and differentiations of the texture that structures our experience.

Merleau-Ponty also refers to Heidegger's concept of the essence: "a certain manner of being, in the active sense, a certain *Wesen*, in the sense that, says Heidegger, this word has when it is used as a verb."² Merleau-Ponty refers to Heidegger's example of a high school building in *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Heidegger explicates that the Being (*Sein*) of the high school building cannot be found from the beings (*Seiendes*) that are contained in it – from hallways, stairs, and so on – or from the high school building that *is*: "we do not find this Being within the being."³ Yet, according to Heidegger, for those familiar with the building "this building really is what it is and how it is."⁴ For those, the building has a smell: "One can, as it were, smell the Being of such buildings, and often after decades one still has the scent in one's nose. The scent provides the Being of this being much more directly and truly than it could be communicated by any description or inscription."⁵ There is a difference between the *what* and *how* of being. According to Merleau-Ponty, when we return to our high school building after thirty years, the building is not only for us an object which

¹ MM, 269–270/319. See Chapter 2.4. Husserl also uses the term "virtual" in "Origin of Geometry" when he describes the transformation of the originally instituted sense in writing: writing is "communication become virtual" (Hua6, 371/361).

² VI, 154/115. The concept of *Wesen* is one of the most central references to Heidegger's philosophy in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Richir argues that this reference is also a point of separation: "[P]eut-on dire [...] que l'essence charnelle, le *Wesen* verbal, le pouvoir d'ester [French translation of verbal *Wesen*], par exemple de la couleur, joue, en tant qu'emblème du visible, le rôle d'un existentiel? Faut-il admettre que, chez Merleau-Ponty, s'évanouit la stricte distinction heideggerienne entre existentiel et catégorie (détermination d'être de l'étant qui n'est pas de l'ordre du *Dasein*)? Ou plutôt, y a-t-il chez lui un entrecroisement irréductible des deux (comme le fait penser son rejet de l'il y a pur au profit d'un 'il y a d'inhérence' : cf. VI, 190)? Faut-il conclure, dans un registre plus classique, que s'évanouit pareillement la distinction stricte entre réel et imaginaire ou, à tout le moins, que les deux s'entrecroisent irréductiblement, qu'il n'y a pas de 'réel' qui ne soit transi d'imaginaire', et pas d'imaginaire' qui ne soit ramené, de son fond, dans le 'réel' (cf. VI, 175)? A ces questions, nous répondrons par l'affirmative [...]" (Richir 1987, 94–95.)

³ Heidegger 2000, 36.

⁴ Heidegger 2000, 36.

⁵ Heidegger 2000, 36. Merleau-Ponty explicates his idea of the verbal *Wesen* in the working notes: it is "first expression of the being that is neither being-object nor being-subject, neither essence nor existence: what *west* (the being-rose of the rose, the being-society of society, the being-history of history)" (VI, 228/174). Moreover, "it is what Bergson rather badly called the 'images'" (VI, 228/174). Merleau-Ponty refers to Bergson's idea of "memory-images," which are a mixture of memory and perception (see Chapter 2.4). In another working note, Merleau-Ponty states: "Each field is dimensionality, and Being is dimensionality itself. It is therefore accessible indeed by my perception. It is even my perception that presents to me in a spectacle the reference of lateral transcendence from the 'appearances' to the essence as a nucleus of (verbal) *Wesen*." (VI, 280/227.) In Merleau-Ponty's later ontology, every field of experience, for example smell, is a dimension of being, and therefore our perception always opens to a certain dimension of being, which in turn is a "total part" of being as dimensionality. Merleau-Ponty calls his ontology "Intra ontology," which understands the world "within inherence in this world, by virtue of it" (VI, 280/227). Thus, Merleau-Ponty seems to elaborate the concept of *Wesen* in a very different direction than Heidegger: whereas Heidegger says that "we do not find this Being within the being," a high school, Merleau-Ponty says quite the opposite, that "Being is [...] accessible indeed by my perception" (VI, 280/227).

can be described by its objective characters, but it has “a certain affective texture,” for example sonority and odor which disclose to us its sensible essence.¹ Essences are buried in the texture or flesh of our experience, and experience is therefore not flat: every experience has depth and thickness. Merleau-Ponty states:

In short, there is no essence, no idea, that does not adhere to a domain of history and of geography. [...] We never have before us pure individuals, indivisible glaciers of beings, nor essences without place and without date. Not that they exist elsewhere, beyond our grasp, but because we are experiences, that is, thoughts that feel behind themselves the weight of the space, the time, the very Being they think, and which therefore do not hold under their gaze a serial space and time nor the pure idea of series, but have about themselves a time and a space that exists by piling up, by proliferation, by encroachment, by promiscuity – a perceptual pregnancy, perpetual parturition, generativity and generality, brute essence and brute existence, which are the nodes and antinodes of the same ontological vibration.²

There is, on the one hand, the thickness of our experience and history, and on the other hand, articulation and differentiation: there is confusion and distinctness at the same time. Thus, Merleau-Ponty rejects the “distinction between fact and essence,” and according to him the milieu we thus find ourselves in is “the very sphere of our life and of our life of knowledge.”³ Merleau-Ponty rejects the separation between the “pure essences” of knowledge and the factuality of our lived experience: the “solidity” of our experience is neither in a “heaven of ideas” nor in a “ground of meaning” – once again, Merleau-Ponty rejects the two Cartesian possibilities.⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, in Husserl’s phenomenology, there is not “one sole *Wesensschau*,”⁵ an intuition of the essences, that would be complete and final, but continuous renewal – it is because we never leave the “environment of brute existence and essence.”⁶

¹ VI, 154n1/115n2.

² VI, 154–155/115.

³ VI, 155/115.

⁴ VI, 155/116.

⁵ Marc Richir states: “S’il est donc juste de dire qu’il n’y a pas de *Wesensschau* chez le dernier Merleau-Ponty, c’est à condition d’ajouter qu’il n’y a pas, chez lui, de *Wesensschau* qui soit pure, détachée des phénomènes – comme le donne à penser Husserl dans l’avant-dernier chapitre d’*Erfahrung und Urteil*. Car il y a bien quelque chose comme une *Wesensschau* toute virtuelle en même temps que toujours déjà au travail dans l’intuition (ou la vision, ou plus généralement l’appréhension) de tel ou tel phénomène. Ce travail, la mise en œuvre de cette virtualité, est précisément ce que Merleau-Ponty nommait ‘le travail de l’expérience sur l’expérience qui est le contexte charnel de l’essence’ (VI, 157), cela même qui articule une expérience à ses variantes.” (Richir 1987, 79.)

⁶ VI, 155–156/116–117. Husserl makes a distinction between “exact” essences and “inexact” essences in the first book of *Ideas*: “Geometrical concepts are ‘ideal’ concepts, expressing something which cannot be ‘seen;’ their ‘origin’ and therefore their content are essentially other than those of *descriptive concepts*; as concepts they express, not ‘ideals,’ but essences drawn immediately from intuition simpliciter. Exact concepts have as their correlates essences which have the characteristic of ‘ideas’ in the Kantian sense. Contrasted with these ideas, or ideal essences, we find *morphological essences* as the correlates of descriptive concepts.” (Hua3, 138/166.) The question arises, does Merleau-Ponty reject Husserl’s distinction between the two kinds of essences? In the *Institution*-lecture Merleau-Ponty approaches the question of the status of purely ideal entities in mathematics and geometry. He de-

According to Merleau-Ponty, being is not *one*, *two*, or *several*: being is “the dimensionality to which these moments, these leaves, and these dimensions belong.”¹ Every dimension is a “total part” of being: sensible being, ideal being, and linguistic being all open an unlimited dimension.² Moreover, “every dimension is of the hidden.”³ Every dimension has depth and thickness. There is, in every dimension, a hidden side: the invisible of the visible, the untouchable of touching, the unconscious of consciousness, the unreflected of reflection, and the unthought of thinking. Merleau-Ponty argues that an idea opens to the universal “precisely because it is [...] an *unthought*.”⁴ An idea becomes universal not because it is possessed and self-evident, but on the contrary, because it excites more thoughts, remains open, and is fecund: “Ideas that are too much possessed are no longer ideas.”⁵ An idea opens a dimension *because* it is not possessed, because it has depth. I will explicate in this chapter Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the institution and historicity – the fecundity and life of ideas – and the sensible ideas, the invisibles of the visible.

The essences are perceived only within the sensible experience: “As the nervure bears the leaf from within, from the depths of its flesh, the ideas are the texture of experience, its style, first mute, then uttered.”⁶ The style of a certain being is given to us only “within the thickness of being.”⁷ Thus, our openness to

nies that mathematical beings would have the properties we find in them before we discover these properties: there are not in the perceptual world the equivalences for mathematical ideas, and thus they are formed only through idealization. Mathematics is not outside of history and institution: “our mathematical beings” do not “already have the properties that the future will recognize in them” (IP, 97/56). Merleau-Ponty states: “Therefore there is a fitting together of different perspectival views; there is no fitting together of all of them in an absolute knowledge which is completely decentered and final, i.e., an absolute knowledge without the implications of undeveloped sense. Perceptual naivete remains. The passage from the particular to the universal is never finished.” (IP, 97/56.) Therefore, Merleau-Ponty does not deny that there are mathematical entities – it would make no sense to claim that all mathematics is merely sensible. Yet, he argues that the purely mathematical ideal entities are in the same ontological texture of knowledge, history, and language in which we also relate to the sensible ideas. There are different types of ideas, but not two separated spheres of ideality: both mathematical ideas and sensible ideas have the same ontological structure, which implicates the thickness of history and its articulation. In the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty opposes his conception of mathematical entities to that of Brunshvicg’s: “The equivalence that analytic geometry establishes between space and number to be understood, not as a spiritualization of space (Brunshvicg), but indeed as a spatialization of the understanding, as an intuition of the ontological equivalence of space and number before a subject of knowledge that is *of the world*” (VI, 279/225–226). Mathematical concepts are differentiations of the carnal world: they idealize the world but never leave it. Merleau-Ponty states: “The scientific deduction-experimental fact parallelism is neither to be contested, nor to be understood as a proof of a *realism* of science. It is founded on the fact that the deductive science renders explicit the structures, the *pivots*, certain traits of the inner framework of the world. This *truth* of science, far from making a philosophy useless, is founded and guaranteed only by a relation of transcendence with Being, an inherence of the subject and the object of science in a preobjective Being.” (VI, 279/226.)

¹ VI, 157/117.

² VI, 158/118; 271/218.

³ VI, 272/219

⁴ VI, 159/119.

⁵ VI, 159/119.

⁶ VI, 159/119.

⁷ VI, 160/119.

being can be only through our connection with it: "Our thesis is that this *there is* [*il y a*] by inherence is necessary [...]"¹ In the next part of this chapter, I analyze how Merleau-Ponty explicates our relation to "thickness of being," which is not a coincidence but differentiation, dehiscence.

4.2 Differentiation and Articulation

Merleau-Ponty argues in *The Visible and the Invisible* that essences and facts should not be opposed, because we have access to essences only within the texture of our experience. Only within the texture of experience can something have a meaning. A philosophical attempt to understand the meaning of being or the essence of being is, thus, a question of our relation with being. In the previous part of this chapter, I showed that for Merleau-Ponty our relation with being is necessarily inherence and connection: we cannot detach from being to become a pure spectator without any ties, an essence does not take us out of the facticity of being. The thickness of experience is our access to being.

With the "essence" of time and space, we do not yet understand our relation to time and space.² We also have to take into account "this indestructible tie between us and hours and places" which is inexhaustible: "a secret knowledge of space and time as beings to be questioned, a secret knowledge of interrogation as the ultimate relation to Being and as an ontological organ."³ The questioning or interrogation is endless, because we never coincide with time or space – we never coincide with being: there is not only inherence but also divergence. In the following, I will analyze Merleau-Ponty's explication of the differentiation of experience, which is equally necessary as the connection with being. Through connection and difference, we can also understand the articulation of being in language and expression.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the "answer" to the philosophical questioning is neither the essence nor "the return to the immediate, the coincidence, the effective fusion with the existent."⁴ We can see the reference to the Cartesian duality here. Let me revise briefly what I have argued on duality and immediate coincidence in the earlier chapters. In Chapter Three, I showed that Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between two Cartesian positions and ontologies: the ontology of the object and the ontology of the existent. The ontology of the object is the position of the pure mind, of the clear and distinct perception of essences which distances itself from existing things through the methodic doubt. The ontology of the existent is the position of the union of mind and body which Merleau-Ponty interprets as the experience of the existent, of facticity. In Chapter One I showed that Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a contradiction between these two fields of evidence in Descartes' philosophy, between distinc-

¹ VI, 190n*/145n5.

² VI, 161/121.

³ VI, 162/121.

⁴ VI, 162/122.

tion and union: reflection leans on the unreflected experience but does not coincide with it. In Chapter Two, I argued that Merleau-Ponty finds in philosophers after Descartes a tendency to think not only one of these two positions, but an attempt to think both: our distinction from the existent and our connection with it. Malebranche argues that we see all ideas in God, and yet we do not have an idea of our own mind, we do not know ourselves. And nevertheless, according to Malebranche, we have an “inner sensation” of ourselves. The double movement is expressed clearly by Maine de Biran who argues that we distinguish ourselves and become selves in the process of separating our effort from the resistance of things, and through this process we have an immediate self-relation, an “intimate sense” of ourselves. Bergson modifies the Cartesian situation significantly, as he explicates the double movement between mind and body as repetition and differentiation between pure memory and perception. I will now return to Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Bergson’s philosophy, since in the chapter “Interrogation and Intuition” Merleau-Ponty explicates his idea of differentiation through Bergson.

In Chapter Two, I explicated how Merleau-Ponty criticizes Bergson’s ideas of pure perception and pure memory. Pure perception is a coincidence of the perception with the perceived, an immediate contact with actual and material presence. Nevertheless, according to Bergson, it “exists in theory rather than in fact.”¹ Pure memory is the preservation of the past as purely non-material and non-sensual. Bergson argues that memory is “pure from all admixture of sensation, is without attachment to the present, and is consequently unextended.”² Pure memory does not have any ideas or representations of which we could be conscious of as such: we need to descend to memory with our intuition and then break the undifferentiated core of memory, in order to repeat the memory as an image – which means, at the same time, differentiation of the memory. In a certain sense, Bergson reverses the roles of Cartesian clarity and obscurity: the pure perception by our sensing body is completely clear and distinct, and the pure memory of our mind is completely obscure and indistinct. Between pure perception and pure memory, there is not only difference of the kind but also difference of the degree: between complete perception and solid memory, there are “thousands of different planes of consciousness, a thousand integral and yet diverse repetitions of the whole of the experience through which we have lived.”³ Therefore, we have full coincidence only theoretically, and we have “partial coincidence” factually. Bergson transforms the Cartesian ideas of distinction and union: we have a theoretical distinction and factual union as the partial coincidence.⁴

It is crucial to take note of what Merleau-Ponty refutes in Bergson’s philosophy, and what he reaffirms. In a similar manner as Merleau-Ponty does not

¹ MM, 68/71.

² MM, 156/180-181.

³ MM, 272/322.

⁴ MM, 250/297.

completely neglect reflection and the dialectic, he does not completely neglect intuition either.¹ What he criticizes is the idea of an immediate intuition:

If coincidence is lost, this is no accident; if Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being, and no disclosure will make us comprehend it. A lost immediate, arduous to restore, will, if we do restore it, bear within itself the sediment of the critical procedures through which we will have found it anew; it will therefore not be the immediate. If it is to be the immediate, if it is to retain no trace of the operations through which we approach it, if it is Being itself, this means that there is no route from us to it and that it is inaccessible by principle.²

Merleau-Ponty explicates how there is neither coincidence with the present perception nor with the past. An idea of the immediate fusion of the perception with the perceived thing makes the experience impossible: either the perceiver or the perceived will disappear. In a similar manner, if I coincide with the past in pure memory, I am situated in the past, which in turn is now my present, and thus the past disappears. Yet, according to Merleau-Ponty, if pure memory into which the present is changed “is an invisible, then there is indeed a past, but no coinciding with it – I am separated from it by the whole thickness of my present.”³ In a similar way as we saw in the previous part of this chapter that Freud doubts if we have any memories “*from our childhood,*” and states that “*memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess,*”⁴ Merleau-Ponty argues that our memories do not coincide with the past, and the past can be recollected only if it is renewed in the present – which means that the past can become present only by differentiation, as something different than what it was, and yet connected to what it was.⁵

The memory of the past is not a more or less complete reconstruction of an “*original past*” as it was, a coincidence of our present consciousness with an experience that was previously unconscious, “*I think that,*” which would replace what was unreflected, repressed, or forgotten. According to Merleau-Ponty, consciousness should not be understood as “*a series of individual (sensible or non sensible) I think that’s.*”⁶ Merleau-Ponty states that the Cartesian idea of consciousness as a clear and distinct perception persuades us to understand consciousness as “*a flux of individual Erlebnisse.*”⁷ In contrast, Merleau-Ponty argues in his working notes:

¹ See Chapter Three.

² VI, 162–163/122.

³ VI, 163/122.

⁴ SE3, 322.

⁵ VI, 163/122. Bergson states: “If matter does not remember the past, it is because it repeats the past unceasingly, because, subject to necessity, it unfolds a series of moments of which each is the equivalent of the preceding moment and may be deduced from it: thus its past is truly given in its present. But a being which evolves more or less freely creates something new every moment: in vain, then, should we seek to read its past in its present unless its past were deposited within it in the form of memory. Thus [...], it is necessary [...] that the past should be *acted by matter, imagined by mind.*” (MM, 250–251/297–298.)

⁶ VI, 293/240.

⁷ VI, 293/240. See also VI, 248/195.

[T]he “consciousness” itself to be understood [...] as openness upon *general* configurations or constellations, rays of the past and rays of the world at the end of which, through many “memory screens” dotted with lacunae and with the imaginary, pulsate some almost sensible structures, some individual memories.¹

A reactivated, reconstructed, or recollected memory is not a consciousness of a certain individual past experience, but openness to a “constellation” of the “rays of the past,” to the associative relations of our experiences. The connecting texture of experience – the “rays of the past,” the sensible essences or traces – always entails distancing and withdrawing of the past. We are separated from the past by the thickness of time. The past is past only through and due to distance and forgetting: Merleau-Ponty states in his lecture notes on *The Problem of Passivity* that memory is not opposed to forgetting.² Without the thickness of time and forgetting, there would be no past and no memory.

Merleau-Ponty analyzes memory and temporality within the same ontological structure as vision: there is no visible without the invisible, and the invisible is not another visible which can become visible, not a hidden visible, but the “interior armature” which the visible “manifests and which it conceals.”³ We saw above that Merleau-Ponty understands the pure memory as the invisible.⁴ In his working notes on Bergson’s philosophy, Merleau-Ponty affirms: “The solution is to be sought in vision itself: memory will be understood only by means of it.”⁵ Every vision of a visible thing includes the invisible: the depth of the visible as temporal, as memory, as a ray of the past, and as a sensible essence. According to Merleau-Ponty, “to see is always to see more than one sees” and “perception is imperception.”⁶ On the one hand, the past is included in every perception, and on the other hand, we can never perceive our past. An experience contains more “content” that we can realize, conceive, and comprehend at the moment of that particular experience: there is a latent content which evolves in time, for example, something that we realize only later, and thus the past not only recedes, but it may also come forth. Recollection is not identification, but differentiation. Merleau-Ponty states:

We have to pass from the thing (spatial or temporal) as identity, to the thing (spatial or temporal) as difference, i.e. as transcendence, i.e. as always “behind,” beyond, far-off . . . the present itself is not an absolute coincidence without transcendence; [...] the present, also, is ungraspable from close-up, in the forceps of attention [...].⁷

¹ VI, 293/240.

² IP, 270/209.

³ VI, 195/149.

⁴ VI, 163/122.

⁵ VI, 248/194.

⁶ VI, 300/247. Merleau-Ponty states in the Introduction of *Signs*: “To see is as a matter of principle to see farther than one sees, to reach a latent existence. The invisible is the outline and the depth of the visible. The visible does not admit of pure positivity any more than the invisible does.” (S, 38/20–21.)

⁷ VI, 249/195.

We do not coincide with the memory because it is present only through transcendence; even our actual present is not given to us in complete fullness without transcendence, as an immediate contact without distance. According to Merleau-Ponty, “we find in our experience a movement toward what could not in any event be present to us in the original and whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences.”¹ There is past for us exactly because we do not coincide with our experience – not in the past, not in the present, not in the future. Thus, in Bergson’s terms, we only have “partial coincidence” with the present perception, and “partial coincidence” with the past. Merleau-Ponty explicates Bergson’s concept as a coincidence with the coincidence that never was, and never will be, as coincidence with the impossibility of coincidence, coincidence with the non-coincidence:²

It is a coincidence always past or always future, an experience that remembers an impossible past, anticipates an impossible future, that emerges from Being or that will incorporate itself into Being, that “is of it” but is not it, and therefore is not a coincidence, a real fusion, as of two positive terms or two elements of an alloy, but an overlaying, as of a hollow and a relief which remain distinct.³

Implicitly, Merleau-Ponty referred to the “impossible past” already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as the “past which has never been present.”⁴ There never was the past which we now remember, there never was the coincidence with the experience which is now past. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty calls the past the “immemorial depth (*fond*) of the visible.”⁵ Al-Saji interprets Merleau-Ponty’s idea as the “immemorial past:”⁶ “[A]n immemorial that is neither lost presence, nor distant past; as both ground and abyss, the immemorial is a past that accompanies and makes possible the present.”⁷ The “impossibility” of the past does not mean that “nothing happened” in the past, or that we only imagine our past, but it means that there never was a coincidence with the present – and there never will be, so that the coincidence of the pure perception is always anticipated but never realized, an “impossible future.” According to Merleau-Ponty, “the future is not nothingness, the past is not the imaginary” and “there

¹ VI, 211/159.

² S, 299/184.

³ VI, 163–164/122–123.

⁴ PP, 280/282.

⁵ OE, 86/147.

⁶ The idea of the “immemorial past” is central to Schelling’s philosophy of time. Merleau-Ponty takes some influences from Schelling as Patrick Burke and Robert Vallier, among others, have argued (See Burke 2013; Vallier 2013). Schelling elaborates on the idea of the “immemorial past” in his work *The Ages of the World*: time is not a representation, but a work of the primordial forces of expansion and contraction (Scribner 2005, 150). I will return to Merleau-Ponty’s remarks on Schelling later in this chapter, but my intention is not to give an exhaustive analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Schelling’s philosophy in this work.

⁷ Al-Saji 2007, 184. Al-Saji suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s re-reading of Husserl in *The Visible and the Invisible* should be understood in relation to his reading of Bergson: “Rather than reading Bergson through Husserlian time-consciousness, Merleau-Ponty’s interest in Husserl now seems to have a Bergsonian inflection” (Al-Saji 2007, 185; see also Barbaras 1998, 33–61; 71–73). In the following part of this chapter I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Husserl’s concept *Stiftung*, institution.

is the present, but the transcendence of the present makes it precisely able to connect up with a past and a future."¹

Merleau-Ponty describes philosophy as the interrogation of the *relation* with the past, but refuses the idea that this means "a return to an immediate."² For Merleau-Ponty, the distance with our experience is not something that we "add" only afterward, when we reflect on our experience: the unreflected experience is not an immediate, "a fusion, a coincidence."³ Merleau-Ponty explicates his ontology through the sensible dimensions in order to show the thickness of our experience: our seeing eyes are also visible, and our touching hands are also touchable, and therefore there is the connection which entails difference already in our sensible experience. Accordingly, "the weight of the natural world is already a weight of the past."⁴ The past remains present *vertically* in the sensible because every sensation happens "from within" the sensible. It is exactly because we are *of* the texture of the sensible being that we differentiate from it.

Merleau-Ponty criticizes Bergson's idea of the coincidence: even if the coincidence is only a theoretical concept, and we merely coincide with the non-coincidence,⁵ we should not understand our *relation* with being, our "overlapping or encroachment,"⁶ from the point of view of coincidence. Merleau-Ponty points out that Bergson reproduces the situation of the philosophy of reflection: "the secret of Being is in an integrity that is behind us."⁷ Bergson reaffirms the Cartesian duality between reflection and the unreflected, distinction and union. He elaborates the Cartesian situation significantly, and articulates the return to the unreflected and the "deepening of experience" which, according to Merleau-Ponty, are "certainly the hallmark of philosophy by opposition to naïve cognitions," and yet he makes the supposition of an immediate coincidence of

¹ VI, 249/196. Here Merleau-Ponty writes in contrast to Sartre.

² VI, 164/123.

³ VI, 164/123.

⁴ VI, 164/123. Merleau-Ponty uses a concept, "weight of the past," which has both Schellingian and Bergsonian connotations. Merleau-Ponty states in his course *Nature*: "For Schelling, Nature is a weight; it is never annihilated, even when it is overcome" (N, 77/50). Thus, Merleau-Ponty connects the "weight" to Schelling's concept of the "barbaric principle," which I will explicate in the last part of this chapter. Judith Norman explicates Schelling's conception of the "weight" in the following way: "As with Schelling, the relation to the past is a source of melancholy, and has the quality of a weight or anchor on the present" (Norman 2004, 99). Donald Landes argues that "weight" has a paradoxical structure in Bergson's philosophy: "Bergson sketches two types of memory: habitual memory and recollection, and in both cases the past has a *weight*, for it can influence the actual behavior of a real body. And yet, although Bergson speaks of a past that preserves itself, it seems that memory exists only insofar as there are real bodies properly situated and constructed so as to provide a medium for the return of the past into the present. Hence, we already see a paradoxical relationship at work between the two sides of our guiding image - there is a codependency of weight as material and weight as influence in the virtual survival of the past and the role of bodies subject to its influence." (Landes 2015, 132.) In the *Nature* course Merleau-Ponty examines the connection between Schelling and Bergson. He states: "Bergson's philosophy is related to Schelling's because the whole of Bergson is in the idea of a unity as something that goes without saying and is primordial" (N, 80/53).

⁵ S, 299/184.

⁶ VI, 165/123.

⁷ VI, 165/124.

the self with the self.¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, we never leave the adherence and differentiation of our sensible life, “the identity of the retiring into oneself with the leaving of oneself, of the lived through with the distance,” Merleau-Ponty states, repeating once again the Hegelian formulation.² Therefore, the retroactive movement of philosophy is towards the future; memory opens to the future:

The “originating” is not of one sole type, it is not all behind us; the restoration of the true past, of the pre-existence is not all of philosophy; the lived experience is not flat, without depth, without dimension, it is not an opaque stratum with which we would have to merge. The appeal to the originating goes in several directions: the originating breaks up, and philosophy must accompany this break-up, this non-coincidence, this differentiation.³

Merleau-Ponty elaborates the idea of differentiation, not between pure mind and mere body, between two theoretical positions, but within *dimensions* of being. If we have a factual experience of the visible thing only through our difference with it as a seer, then we should not suppose a coincidence of the vision: “It is therefore necessary that the deflection (*écart*), without which the experience of the thing or of the past would fall to zero, be also an openness upon the thing itself, to the past itself, that it enter into their definition.”⁴ Our relation with the visible is already differentiation, and not only after a turn in the intuition of the pure memory. As Merleau-Ponty states in his article “Bergson in the Making,” the idea of “partial coincidence” is problematic.⁵ We should not define our self-relation and our relation to being – past or present – from the perspective of coincidence, even if it is only “partial.”

One of the most prominent problems in Bergson’s philosophy is that of language: on the one hand, philosophical intuition must leave the practical sphere of language in order to coincide with the pure memory, and on the other hand, philosophy must use language in order to express its ideas.⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Bergson, at first language is an obstacle for the coincidence with the pure memory, “a power for error,” and thus the philosopher must “keep silent, coincide in silence.”⁷ Nevertheless, after the intuition of the pure memory, the philosopher must use language, and “[o]ne has to believe, then, that language is not simply the contrary of the truth, of coincidence, that there is or could be a language of coincidence, a manner of making the things themselves speak.”⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, Bergson seeks for a language the words of which would not be organized by the philosopher, but by “virtue

¹ VI, 165/124.

² VI, 165/12.

³ VI, 165/124.

⁴ VI, 166/124.

⁵ S, 299/184.

⁶ See Chapter 2.4.

⁷ VI, 166/125.

⁸ VI, 167/125.

of a natural intertwining of their meaning," by "lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and their exchanges."¹

The question of language is central for Merleau-Ponty's later ontology, and for his reformulation of the Cartesian duality between the essences of language and mute coincidence with existing things – of the two "Cartesian monsters."² In Chapter Three, I showed that Merleau-Ponty criticizes his earlier conception of the "tacit *cogito*" as the silence of the unreflected thought. According to Merleau-Ponty, "the tacit *cogito* is impossible."³ We cannot think without language. Moreover, it is this supposition of an irreducible distance between thinking in language and the unreflected silence which cannot be uttered that brings forth how Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* remains partially attached to the "philosophy of 'consciousness'."⁴ He argues that, in his early work, he should have connected the chapter on speech to the chapter on *cogito*.⁵ Rather than being outside of language, the "silence" should be understood *within* the language.

Once again, Merleau-Ponty refuses Bergson's idea of the coincidence: "if language is not necessarily deceptive, truth is not coincidence, nor mute."⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, language is not outside of the rays of the past, and it is connected to the "mute things it interpellates."⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, there are things that are not yet expressed, that are not yet things said, but the language is not the opposite of them: "language is not a mask over being, but [...] the most valuable witness to Being."⁸ Language is not coincidence with the things, but it is not a rupture with them either: "it does not interrupt an immediation that would be perfect without it, that the vision itself, the thought itself, are, as has been said, 'structured as a language,' are *articulation* before the letter."⁹ Merleau-Ponty refers to Jacques Lacan's famous formulation: "the unconscious [...] is structured like a language."¹⁰ The unconscious is not without articulation. Merleau-Ponty writes in *Eye and Mind*: "there is a system of equivalences, a Logos of lines, of lightning, of colors, of reliefs, of masses – a nonconceptual presentation of universal Being."¹¹ There is no "tacit *cogito*" that would not already be an articulation of experience, the world, and history.¹²

¹ VI, 167/125.

² See Chapter 3.1.

³ VI, 224/171.

⁴ VI, 237/183.

⁵ VI, 229/176.

⁶ VI, 167/125.

⁷ VI, 167/125.

⁸ VI, 167/126.

⁹ VI, 167–168/126.

¹⁰ Lacan 2006, 737. On Merleau-Ponty's relation to Lacan see Saint Aubert 2006, 223–227; 246–249. Eran Dorfman claims that a confrontation with Lacan in 1960 influenced Merleau-Ponty's later conception of language as not opposed to perception, and hence the quote from Lacan (Dorfman 2007, 228n48).

¹¹ OE, 71/142.

¹² "The tacit *Cogito* 'thinks' only overdeterminations," Merleau-Ponty writes in his working notes (VI, 294/240).

In Merleau-Ponty's view, there is, in a certain sense, a language of things.¹ Yet, the articulation of mute things is neither a language of coincidence nor a closed "system" of language.² The vision and the unconscious are "structured like a language," but language does not mean a closed system of fixed significations, but an incessant differentiation of significations. Moreover, the movement of differentiation is not only between significations in a language, but also between what is not yet expressed and what is already expressed, between the "speaking word" and "spoken word:" "the folding over [...] of the visible and the lived experience upon language, and of language upon the visible and the lived experience."³ According to Merleau-Ponty, there is an "operative language which has no need to be translated into significations and thoughts [...] because it brings to the surface all the deep-rooted relations of the lived experience wherein it takes form."⁴ Thus, in this sense, Merleau-Ponty affirms Bergson's idea of different planes of articulation, "a thousand integral and yet diverse repetitions of the whole of the experience through which we have lived."⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, "philosophy is an operative language" which is "called forth by the voices of silence, and continues an effort of articulation which is the Being of every being."⁶

It is not only that the past cannot be reconstructed *as it was* – but also, and exactly because of that, it is always *to be* reconstructed: the past remains open for new reappropriations, reactivations, and articulations. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty states that articulation of the present and our expression gets its force from this past, which never was present:

Every visual something, as individual as it is, functions also as a dimension, because it is given as the result of a dehiscence of Being. What this ultimately means is that the hallmark of the visible is to have a lining of invisibility in the strict sense, which it makes present as a certain absence. [...] There is that which reaches the eye head on, the frontal properties of the visible; but there is also that which reaches it from below – the profound postural latency whereby the body raises itself to see – and that which reaches vision from above like the phenomena of flight, of swimming, of movement, where it participates no longer in the heaviness of origins but in free accomplishments. Through vision, then, the painter touches both extremities. In the immemorial depth of the visible, something has moved, caught fire, which engulfs his body; everything he paints is in

¹ Merleau-Ponty states: "[I]n a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests" (VI, 203–204/155).

² Merleau-Ponty argues against a structuralist idea of language as a closed system: "It is the error of the semantic philosophies to close up language as if it spoke only of itself [...]" (VI, 167/126).

³ VI, 168/126. Here Merleau-Ponty uses the concept "speaking word," "*parole parlante*," which he elaborated in *Phenomenology of Perception* (PP, 229/229).

⁴ VI, 168/126. In Chapter One I explicated Merleau-Ponty's conception of "operative intentionality." According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl distinguishes between the intentionality of an act and operative intentionality, which "produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, and furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language" (PP, XIII/xx).

⁵ MM, 272/322.

⁶ VI, 168/126–127.

answer to this incitement, and his hand is “nothing but the instrument of a distant will.” Vision is the meeting, as at a crossroads, of all the aspects of Being.¹

The past opens a path to be followed but does not define what will follow: there is a “crossroads” of the connection and difference. In the next part of this chapter, I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s idea of expression in relation to his conception of institution: memory and forgetfulness are not opposed, but are equally necessary for the fecundity of history.

At the end of the chapter “Interrogation and Intuition,” Merleau-Ponty returns to the two positions of Cartesian duality. According to him, they are not so different. The “infinite distance” from the essences is absolute trust in language, and the “absolute proximity” of contact with the silence of things is absolute distrust in language: in both cases, problems of language and mediation are ignored.² The intuition of pure essences and coincidence with existence are two forms of positivism that suppose that the “thing itself” can be present before us in its full completeness. The supposition of “internal adequation of the idea or self-identity of the thing,” blocks our vision, prevents us of seeing the depth of the visible, the “far-offs.”³ Both sides of the Cartesian dual situation suppose immediate coincidence, either with ideal entities or with embodied things, and thus they lack the mediation of the thickness and distance which is our means for differentiation and articulation:

That every being presents itself at a distance, which does not prevent us from knowing it, which is on the contrary the guarantee for knowing it: this is what is not considered. That the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh, that I “am of the world” and that I am not it, this is what is no sooner said than forgotten: metaphysics remains coincidence. That there is this thickness of flesh between us and the “hard core” of Being, this does not figure in the definition: this thickness is ascribed to me, it is the sheath of non-being that the subjectivity always carries about itself.⁴

In the last part of this chapter I will argue that it is through this “flesh” that Merleau-Ponty understands the relation between distinction (distance) and union (proximity) as not contradictory, not mutually excluding, but as *implications* of each other. Nevertheless, according to Merleau-Ponty, this structure of “proximity through distance,”⁵ of the invisible of the visible, of the depth of the present, is not an “answer” to philosophical questioning in the traditional sense: it does not stop the questioning by presenting an “originating” idea from the past or “things themselves” in the present, but instead it shows that the depth is endless, that there is always more distance to go. The present articulates the past only by forgetting it.⁶ Proximity through distance means that they are

¹ OE, 85–86/147.

² VI, 169/127.

³ VI, 169/127.

⁴ VI, 169/127.

⁵ VI, 170/128.

⁶ “[U]nderstand perception as differentiation, forgetting as undifferentiation” (VI, 250/197).

within one another, one in another, *ineinander*¹ – Merleau-Ponty uses Husserl’s terminology:

The *Stiftung* of a point of time can be transmitted to the others without “continuity” without “conservation,” without fictitious “support” in the psyche the moment that one understands time as chiasm

Then past and present are *Ineinander*, each enveloping-enveloped – and that itself is the flesh²

4.3 Institution and Expression

Through the analysis of Bergson’s philosophy of memory, Merleau-Ponty explicates the ontological structure of connection and difference within temporality: time is both duration, connects us to the past, and remains open. In order to maintain that time is not fixed, not already ended and closed, but remains open for changes and newness – that time is not dead but is alive – all the sameness and duration, the repetition of the past, must not only carry the weight of the past forward but must also diverge from the past. We can never repeat the past as such, and our memory differentiates it. Through Bergson’s ideas of repetition and differentiation, Merleau-Ponty shows that by repeating the “same” we necessarily differentiate it and produce something “new:” the present is “ever new and always the same.”³

In the first part of this chapter, I showed how Merleau-Ponty argues that essences are the texture of our experience. An essence is not something in front of us, a visible thing before our gaze or a purely ideal thing in our thought, a positive being. The essence is the deepening of the visible, the invisible which gives the style of the visible, and therefore is not the contrary of the visible. It is “this indestructible tie between us and hours and places.”⁴ The essence is a ray of time, an associative connection.⁵ It is a sensible something, a part of the sensible which ceases to be this particular something and “suddenly opens unlimited dimensions – becomes a *total part*.”⁶ In the following, I will continue to explicate what this means: how should we understand our relation to such essences?

In the second part of this chapter, I argued that for Merleau-Ponty the visible is structured like a language: the visible is articulated like a language – even if it does not mean that it is expressed by explicit words. The articulation of the essences – sensible or linguistic – opens up a question which is related to time: the question of the *origin*.⁷ I showed that according to Merleau-Ponty there is no

¹ See VI, 156/116; 226/172; 228/174; 234/180; 257/204; 297/244; 321/268; 322/268.

² VI, 321/267–268.

³ VI, 320/267.

⁴ VI, 162/121.

⁵ VI, 293/240.

⁶ VI, 271/218.

⁷ Let me recall that Merleau-Ponty’s first title for the project of ontology was *Origin of the Truth*.

coincidence with the “originating,” and we can only follow the differentiation of the originated, dehiscence of being.¹ We are both tied to persisting dimensions of experience and differentiate them, expressing them in a new way or in a new context. We never coincide with the “originating” experience of an event, because the experience is never a full and immediate coincidence with itself. There is no “point of time” or “originating” event that we could go back to in order to restore the original sense of an experience. We are *of* time and separated from the past by the thickness of our present. According to Merleau-Ponty, “time is not an absolute series of events, a tempo – not even the tempo of the consciousness – it is an institution, a system of equivalences.”²

Between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, and especially in the early 50’s, Merleau-Ponty concentrated on the research of expression and language: this comes forth in his unfinished and posthumously published project *The Prose of the World* and in his lecture courses.³ Yet, very soon after abandoning *The Prose of the World*, of which he nevertheless published the most central part in the article “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty focused on studying historicity.⁴ In the course “Institution in Personal and Public History,” Merleau-Ponty connects the themes of expression and history: expression is not without history and history comes articulated through expression. Merleau-Ponty elaborates on Husserl’s concept of “*Stiftung*,” “institution,” and analyses Husserl’s text “Origin of Geometry” in the lecture course *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. From the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*, we can see that the concept of the institution is central for his project of ontology, although there is no chapter concerning institution in the posthumously published work. In the following, I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the institution in relation to his project of ontology. Let me first study how Husserl analyses institution.

In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl clarifies the idea of primal instituting (*Urstiftung*), to which all the apperceptions in which we “noticingly grasp” a pregiven sense of an object, point back.⁵ We apprehend a sense of an object without a thinking act, at a glance. Therefore, the sense must have been already constituted. *Urstiftung* means the constitution of a sense formation for the first time. According to Husserl, we see physical things according to an already instituted objective sense: there is “givenness beforehand” (*Vorgegebenheit*). The new sense may function as an institution and “found a pregivenness that has a richer sense.”⁶ Husserl gives an example of a child who for the first time understands the sense of scissors, and afterward sees scissors without any need for reproducing the original institution of scissors.

¹ VI, 165/124.

² VI, 238/184.

³ See *Le monde sensible et le monde de l’expression* and *Recherches sur l’usage littéraire du langage*, both from the year 1953 (MSME; RULL).

⁴ The lecture of 1953–1954 *Matériaux pour une théorie de l’histoire* has not yet been published. See the resume of the course (RC, 43–55).

⁵ Hua1, 141/111.

⁶ Hua1, 141/111.

In *Crisis*, Husserl explicates the idea of institution further. He argues that there is a “teleology in the historical becoming of philosophy” and a “unity running through all the [philosophical] projects of history that oppose one another and work together in their changing forms.”¹ The primal institution of philosophy can be found from the *inside* of history, from the “teleological beginning, the true birth of the European spirit as such,” from the “Greek primal establishment.”² Philosophy modifies this primal institution and is a “reestablishment,” a re-institution (*Nachstiftung*). History can be clarified “by inquiring back into the primal establishment of the goals which bind together the chain of future generations.”³ According to Husserl, these goals are sedimented in our history and can be reawakened; these goals can also be criticized, as they open new possibilities and new goals. The philosopher’s self-reflection on what he is seeking, the ever-renewing questioning, is what the philosopher has inherited from “his spiritual forefathers:” “It is to make vital again, in its concealed historical meaning, the sedimented conceptual system which, as taken for granted, serves as the ground of his private and nonhistorical work.”⁴ According to Husserl, it not only means a reawakening of the chain of thinking in history, but the “total unity” of philosophical thinking: everything that counts as philosophical must be related to the idea of philosophy, which is pregiven by the primal institution.⁵

Furthermore, according to Husserl, the primal institution leads to a final institution (*Endstiftung*), an “absolute success” of the task: “At this point philosophy, as an infinite task, would have arrived at its apodictic beginning, its horizon of apodictic forward movement.”⁶ Only through the final institution would be revealed “the hidden unity of intentional inwardness which alone constitutes the unity of history.”⁷

In “The Origin of Geometry,” written in 1936, Husserl is more specific about the nature of the *Stiftung*. According to Husserl, the originally instituted sense has “an existence which is peculiarly supertemporal and which [...] is accessible to all men.”⁸ The objectivity of the sense is *pregiven* (*vorgegeben*) in all new reproductions of the sense. All the future institutions and modifications must share the original institution, but it is also forgotten in the sense that these more recent institutions cover it: constitutive history forms “sediments” similar to those of geography. Husserl states that there is either a passive understanding or reactivation of the original sense that was sedimented.⁹ The self-evidence in which the original sense was given becomes past, but being past is not nothing, it can be lived through again. Husserl writes:

¹ Hua6, 71–72/70.

² Hua6, 72/71.

³ Hua6, 72/71.

⁴ Hua6, 73/71.

⁵ Hua6, 73/72.

⁶ Hua6, 73–74/72.

⁷ Hua6, 74/73.

⁸ Hua6, 368/356.

⁹ Hua6, 371/361.

Now if the originally self-evident production, as the pure fulfillment of its intention, is what is renewed (recollected), there necessarily occurs, accompanying the active recollection of what is past, an activity of concurrent actual production, and there arises thereby, in original “coincidence,” the self-evidence of identity: what has not been realized in original fashion is the same as what was previously self-evident. Also constituted is the capacity for repetition at will with the self-evidence of the identity (coincidence of identity) of the structure throughout the chain of repetitions.¹

Husserl then argues that what “is lacking is the *persisting existence* of the ‘ideal objects’ even during periods in which the inventor and his fellows are no longer wakefully so related or even are no longer alive.”² Husserl continues by explaining that the objectivity of such an institution and its reactivation is dependent on writing.³ Through writing, the ideal objects intuited by the geometer reach intersubjective objectivity and continual existence. According to Husserl, “the writing-down effects a transformation of the original mode of being of the meaning-structure.”⁴ On the one hand, written signs are “sensibly experienceable,” and on the other hand, they open “virtual” communication.⁵

Nevertheless, Husserl states that in modernity we are in a situation in which the sciences are not interested in their original sense, but without a successful reactivation we do not even know if the sciences ever had an original sense.⁶ History is the *interweaving* (*Ineinander*) of sedimentations and “the vital movement of the coexistence.”⁷ The cultural present implies the cultural past: “it implies a continuity of pasts which imply one another, each in itself being a past cultural present.”⁸ The self-evidence of the original sense is not given as a historical fact, but every historical fact implies it. Husserl states:

All [merely] factual history remains incomprehensible because, always merely drawing its conclusions naively and straightforwardly from facts, it never makes thematic the general ground of meaning upon which all such conclusions rest, has never investigated the immense structural *a priori* which is proper to it.⁹

The self-evidence of the original sense is a universal *a priori* and “a genuine history of the particular science, is nothing other than the tracing of the historical meaning-structures given in the present, or their self-evidences.”¹⁰ Moreover, according to Husserl, “as the expression ‘*a priori*’ indicates, it lays claim to a strictly unconditioned and truly apodictic self-evidence extending beyond all historical facticities.”¹¹ Husserl states that we cannot understand factualness without presupposing the historical *a priori*.

¹ Hua6, 370/360.

² Hua6, 371/360.

³ Hua6, 371–372/360–361.

⁴ Hua6, 371/361.

⁵ Hua6, 371/361.

⁶ Hua6, 376/366.

⁷ Hua6, 380/371.

⁸ Hua6, 379–380/371.

⁹ Hua6, 380/371.

¹⁰ Hua6, 381/372.

¹¹ Hua6, 381/373.

Next, Husserl presents the question of the method through which the universal *a priori* of the historical world can be attained. According to him, we can attain “truly apodictic certainty” only with a free variation which runs through all the “conceivable possibilities for the life-world.”¹ The universal *a priori* must be an “invariant throughout all conceivable variation.”² Geometry is not bound to a certain time and factual tradition, but is “valid with unconditioned generality for all men, all times, all peoples, and not merely for all historically factual ones but for all conceivable ones.”³ According to Husserl, every historical fact presupposes this “invariant or absolute *a priori*.”⁴ Husserl underlines the necessity of such analysis of the “totality of history,” of the “internal history,” and of the “full meaning which ultimately gives it its unity,” on which the “usual factual study of history in general” must be grounded in order to have any meaning.⁵ Within the totality of history, “a teleological reason running throughout all historicity announces itself.”⁶

Merleau-Ponty already refers to Husserl’s concept of *Stiftung* in *Phenomenology of Perception*. An original institution, or “the initial establishment or foundation” in which a new meaning is formulated, retains the content “in the nature of a radical contingency,” and thus its “concrete richness will never be finally exhausted by knowledge and action, and whose spontaneous method they will ceaselessly reapply.”⁷ There is a “latent content” of every institution – an implicit meaning which sustains all the explications, the unreflected experience on which every reflection is based but which reflection never exhausts.

In Chapter One, I showed that in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty articulates our “blind adherence to the world,”⁸ that we are not “in space” but “of it,”⁹ and that time “is the archetype of the *relationship of self to self*.”¹⁰ According to Merleau-Ponty, the *cogito* must be understood through its temporal thickness.¹¹ It is this adherence to history and to the world which Merleau-Ponty later explicates with the concept of the institution. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the structure of the institution comes forth specifically in the last chapter on freedom.¹² I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s concept of freedom in Chapter Five.

Merleau-Ponty explicates the concept of the institution in the resume of his course “Institution in Personal and Public History.” He distinguishes the point of view of the institution from the philosophy of consciousness, for which

¹ Hua6, 383/375.

² Hua6, 385/377.

³ Hua6, 385/377.

⁴ Hua6, 385/377.

⁵ Hua6, 386/378.

⁶ Hua6, 386/378.

⁷ PP, 148/146.

⁸ PP, 294/296.

⁹ PP, 173/171.

¹⁰ PP, 487/495.

¹¹ PP, 456/464.

¹² See PP, 506/515.

every object is constituted by the consciousness.¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, the institution is not constituted by a consciousness, but is a *field* of becoming.² The instituted is what can be shared by me and others, and it connects me with my past as a “hinge” (*charnière*). The “hinge” is a concept which Merleau-Ponty repeatedly uses in his working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*: it is the invariant,³ the invisible framework of intersubjectivity which connects me to others.⁴ Merleau-Ponty understands the generality of an idea or a concept as the hinge which connects us with others and with the past.⁵ In the course, Merleau-Ponty studies institutions on different levels: organisms, the private history of a person, artistic expression, scientific knowledge, and culture. What he is looking for is a general structure. Merleau-Ponty explicates the concept of the institution in the following way:

Therefore by institution, we were intending here those events in an experience which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable sequel or a history – or again the events which deposit a sense in me, not just as something surviving or as a residue, but as the call to follow, the demand of a future.⁶

In accordance with Husserl, Merleau-Ponty defines the institution as a continuum of a sense. Institution entails universality, as it opens a field of generality. Yet, whereas Husserl argues for *a priori* unity of the sense, Merleau-Ponty focuses on the openness of the universality and describes its changing character. The institution is not only conservation, because what follows is not the same: institution ties together what follows, and yet it does not define what will follow.⁷ Repetition of the institution is differentiation, a “new life” of the institution.⁸ In the unfinished work *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty explicates the fecundity of the institution in artistic expression:

Husserl has used the fine word *Stiftung* to designate, first, the unlimited fecundity of each moment of time which, precisely because it is singular and passes, can never stop having been or being universally. And more than that, the fecundity, derived from a moment of time, the transactions of culture which open a tradition, which continue to have a value after their historical appearance, requiring beyond themselves transactions which are others and the same ones. It is thus that the world as soon as he has seen it, his first attempts at painting, and the whole past of painting create for the painter a *tradition*, that is, Husserl says, *forgetting of origins*, the duty to start over again otherwise and to give the past, not

¹ Merleau-Ponty states: “In the concept of institution we are seeking a solution to the difficulties found in the philosophy of consciousness” (IP, 123/76). See IP, 37/8.

² IP, 123/76.

³ VI, 289/236.

⁴ VI, 287/234.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty states: “Replace the notions of concept, idea, mind, representation with the notions of *dimensions*, articulation, level, hinges, pivots, configuration” (VI, 277/224).

⁶ IP, 124/77.

⁷ IP, 125/77–78.

⁸ S, 95/59.

survival, which is the hypocritical form of forgetfulness, but the efficacy of resumption or “repetition,” which is the noble form of memory.¹

Merleau-Ponty refers to the persistence of the primal institution described by Husserl. The universality of a present is in that once it has taken place, nothing can undo it. There is a similarity here with Descartes’ argument in the *Third Meditation*; in Chapter One I stated that there is a temporal dimension in Descartes’ *Meditations*.² Descartes argues that “so long as I continue to think I am something,” even God could not “make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist.”³ Yet, as Descartes states, we would not doubt, want, or “lack anything at all,” if our existence would be only dependent on ourselves.⁴ From the fact that we existed a while ago, it does not follow that we exist now. According to Descartes, it is of the “nature of time” that to preserve something is similar to creating something anew.⁵ Descartes does not recognize such power in the thinking mind, and states: “this very fact makes me recognize most clearly that I depend on some being distinct from myself.”⁶ Thus, for Descartes, the persistence of time depends on God, incomprehensible to us.

In “The Origin of Geometry,” Husserl also recognizes the “lacking” of the “*persisting existence* of the ‘ideal objects’.”⁷ For Husserl, the persistence is not given by God, but is acquired through *writing*.⁸ In his lecture course *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty studies how writing introduces “an essential mutation in speech.”⁹ According to Husserl, the “writing-down effects a transformation of the original mode of being of the meaning-structure.”¹⁰ Through writing, the ideal sense attains persisting existence, which is possible to reactivate without direct contact with the original institution of the sense. Yet, at the same time, writing transforms the sense into linguistic signs which

¹ PM, 95–96/68. Translation modified by JH. Merleau-Ponty published the third chapter as the article “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” and it includes the same passage as cited here with some changes. The translation of *The Prose of the World* by John O’Neill follows here the passage of the translation of “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” published in the work *Signs* and translated by Richard C. McCleary. Nevertheless, two significant changes in the French originals are then lost. Firstly, in the article the forgetting of origins is specified as the “power to forget” (S, 95/59) but in the earlier version simply as something which comes about in tradition. Secondly, in *The Prose of the World* Merleau-Ponty uses the term “repetition,” which he later replaces with “new life,” and yet it is clear that repetition does not simply mean “the same” but also “the new.”

² See Chapter 1.3.

³ AT VII, 36/CSM II, 25.

⁴ AT VII, 48/CSM II, 33.

⁵ AT VII, 49/CSM II, 33.

⁶ AT VII, 49/CSM II, 34.

⁷ Hua6, 371/360.

⁸ Let me recall that for Descartes the infinite truth of God is not accessible for finite beings, and we have to limit ourselves to our finite knowledge (see Chapter 1.4).

⁹ RC, 166. HLP, –/8. A few years after Merleau-Ponty’s lecture *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Derrida analyzed Husserl’s concept of writing and its consequences on phenomenology in his Introduction to the French translation of Husserl’s “Origin of Geometry” (Derrida 1989, 87). On the relation of Merleau-Ponty’s and Derrida’s readings of “Origin of Geometry” see Lawlor 2002, xxi–xxxii.

¹⁰ Hua6, 371/361.

awake their general linguistic significations, not the original sense as such. Therefore, the awakening of the sense is at first passive: it is like associations which give “a more or less clear memory.”¹ According to Husserl, the sedimented sense must be reactivated in order to make it self-evident again.

Merleau-Ponty argues that through the written sense we do not gain a possession of the original sense, but openness to a tradition: the instituted sense is not given without forgetfulness of the origin.² According to Husserl, the originally instituted can become sedimented by new institutions, and it can be “sunk into obscurity.”³ The institution is not only conservation of the past as it is sedimented by new institutions or re-institutions: our relation to the past includes forgetfulness. At the beginning of the article “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” Merleau-Ponty writes: “Establishing a tradition means forgetting its origins, the aging Husserl used to say.”⁴

However, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, there are two forms of forgetfulness: the “survival, which is the hypocritical form of forgetfulness,” and fecund forgetfulness, “the efficacy of resumption or ‘repetition,’ which is the noble form of memory.”⁵ The survival of the institution as tradition is an “acquired sense which is like a monument.”⁶ It is merely passive and conservative forgetfulness. Merleau-Ponty does not deny its significance: it is like the museum or the library, which enable us to see or read the works of history, and yet it does not open us to the expressive activity which produced the works.⁷ The “monumental sense” is not reactivated, but merely sedimented thought.⁸

The written, the “survival,” the “persisting existence,” is necessary for the reactivation of institution, history, and the past. It supports the reactivation, which according to Merleau-Ponty is the “reconquest of a certain forgetfulness; it consists in going farther in the same direction.”⁹ However, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is impossible to reactivate everything: we can reactivate neither the whole of history nor the originally instituted sense in a purely *a priori* universal and intemporal ideal form.¹⁰ We cannot eliminate passivity and “reactivate all of what, however, conditions what follows.”¹¹ In fact, a complete reactivation, a “coincidence with the totality of the *Urstiftung*,” would be “the death of the *logos* since forgetfulness makes tradition fruitful.”¹² Merleau-Ponty states that history and the *a priori* universal should not be opposed: they belong to the same structure which includes forgetfulness and “the element of nonreactivation.”¹³ The reactivation is not only a restoration of the instituted

¹ Hua6, 371/361.

² HLP, 22/20.

³ Hua6, 371/361.

⁴ S, 259/159.

⁵ PM, 96/68. Translation modified by JH.

⁶ HLP, 78/64.

⁷ PM, 102/72.

⁸ HLP, 70/58.

⁹ HLP, 78/64.

¹⁰ HLP, 30/26; 70–71/58–59; 79/65.

¹¹ HLP, 72/59.

¹² HLP, 23/20.

¹³ HLP, 76/63.

past, but also an institution and a becoming of tradition: it is sedimentation itself.¹ The *a priori* is structural and concrete: it is not an ideal sense, but a ground as the depth of time.² Reactivation is not only the recollection of an idea, but its expression: reactivation is differentiation. Thus, it is “the possibility of error, but this possibility of error is also possibility of truth: we cannot reactivate everything.”³ According to Merleau-Ponty, sedimentation and reactivation are not opposed, but implicate each other:

[T]he synthesis here is not for me the actualization of the whole path that has been followed, but rather the possession of pivots, hinges, matrixes of possibilities, negative equivalents or traces of positive acts, things forgotten that are fruitful, that is, operative negations. For Husserl, thought is of itself temporal.⁴

Forgetfulness through sedimentation does not mean that the institution is done away with, that it has ceased to exist. The institution is at the intersection of the two: preservation and construction, forgetfulness and memory, passivity and activity.⁵ The institution is the *hinge* in between. Merleau-Ponty argues that, on the one hand, forgetfulness is never total, and on the other hand, there is no complete reactivation. Within the institution there is a double movement between forgetting and reactivation which is central to Merleau-Ponty’s ontological structure of connection and difference. In this chapter I will show that Merleau-Ponty elaborates it as a concrete structure: there is institution already in sensation, in touching, and in vision.

In the course “The Problem of Passivity: Sleep, the Unconscious, Memory,” Merleau-Ponty states: “It is forgetfulness that preserves, not absolute forgetting, as the past had never been lived, but forgetfulness that still counts in consciousness as a soldier counts in the company: the forgetfulness which is disclosed as forgetfulness and thereby even as secret memory.”⁶ Here too, Merleau-Ponty separates between two types of forgetfulness: one which is denial of the past, repression, and another which is not opposed to memory, but a source of its fecundity.⁷ In Merleau-Ponty’s view, passivity is a necessary element of active recollection. We should not understand memory and institution either as pure passivity or as pure activity. Both the idea that we blindly repeat our history and the idea that we can decide to change everything equally reject our relation to the past. There is neither total conservation nor complete construction.⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, a “true theory of passivity is as remote from ‘my past explains me entirely’ as it is from ‘I create the sense of my past ex nihilo’.”⁹

¹ HLP, 80/65.

² HLP, 81/67.

³ HLP, 70/58.

⁴ HLP, 29/26.

⁵ IP, 269–270/208–209.

⁶ IP, 256/197.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty states: there is “positive forgetfulness and negative forgetfulness” (IP, 99/58).

⁸ See IP, 267/206.

⁹ IP, 160/119. Here Merleau-Ponty argues against Sartre’s idea of freedom (see Chapter 5.2).

Merleau-Ponty describes the denial of the past through Freud's theory of repression. I will not go into the details of Merleau-Ponty's discussion on repression here, but let me simply point out that Merleau-Ponty finds in Freud the formula according to which "it is by pushing back into forgetfulness that we make the past inaccessible, but also immutable."¹ Repression does not get rid of the past, but instead preserves it and produces "the distinctive force of the repressed; it is the 'no' that produces the power of the affirmation of the unconscious."² According to Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, the negativity of the repressed is not an absence, but through the "return of the repressed" it "overflows us, precisely insofar as it is not historically known, but only in its trace."³ Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty points out that according to Freud all forgetfulness is not repression.⁴

In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty explicates two forms of historicity or attitudes towards history. The first rejects the past as past, and is arrogant towards the past as if we had no relation to it. The second is "the life which the past in a continuous exchange finds in us and bring to us."⁵ The past is not dead. It continues to live in us, but not as the same. The repetition of the past is a "new life" of the past, and differentiation. Merleau-Ponty describes "reactivation" as not opposed to forgetfulness and sedimentation through artistic expression: "the life which this historicity continues to lead in each artist who revives, renews, and recaptures with each painting the entire undertaking of the past."⁶

In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty explicates how painting brings forth the *structure* of visibility, the texture of the visible: painting is an ontology of the visible, "conceptless universality and opening upon things."⁷ In the lecture "La philosophie aujourd'hui," Merleau-Ponty states that "painting is a kind of philosophy: input of the genesis [,] philosophy completely in action."⁸ Painting shows how history, institution, and essences are implicated in the visible, that there is no purely ideal and intemporal level of *a priori* universal which could be reactivated. Reactivation is not opposed to the passive following of the tradition: it is the continuation of the institution which differentiates and *interrogates* the total field of the institution through the partial visible opening of a painting. According to Merleau-Ponty, "[t]his philosophy [...] is what animates the painter – not when he expresses opinions about the world but in that instant when

¹ IP, 257/197. Merleau-Ponty refers to Freud's text "Delusion and Dreams in Jensen's *Grädiva*" in which Freud states: "repression, by which something in the mind is at once made inaccessible and preserved" (IP, 227/173; 230/175. SE9, 40).

² IP, 230/175–176.

³ IP, 230/176.

⁴ IP, 256/197. Merleau-Ponty states in his reading notes on Freud: "It would be necessary to examine an action which is not delusional, which is not a return of the repressed, and to show in it nevertheless the kinship with oneirism, even in the reasoning" (IP, 282/219).

⁵ PM, 101/72.

⁶ PM, 101–102/72. On Merleau-Ponty's idea of institution and artistic expression see Johnson 1993, 24–25.

⁷ OE, 43/133.

⁸ NC, 58. Translation by JH. See NC, 39. See also Vallier 2015, 109.

his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cézanne's words, he 'thinks in painting'.¹ Merleau-Ponty states that there is, indeed, an *a priori* universal structure of painting, a "task" of painting which is realized in every painting:

In whatever civilization it is born, from whatever beliefs, motives, or thoughts, no matter what ceremonies surround it – and even when it appears devoted to something else – from Lascaux to our time, pure or impure, figurative or not, painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility.²

Yet, as Merleau-Ponty continues, this is a truism: a painting is visible. The "visibility" is not a positive sense, a pregiven idea – unlike the originally instituted sense of the scissors in Husserl's example – which every painter immediately possesses and coincides with as soon as he or she is painting. The sense of painting is not visible, something we see "at a glance."³ To see "at a glance" is to remain forgetful in the prosaic sense: it is a naïve perceptual faith in "things themselves," to believe in the proximity and immediate contact of our vision and the visible things.⁴

Painting does something opposite to this: it does not take the "self-evidence" of the visible "at a glance," but on the contrary makes it a problem. Painting brings forth the distance of our vision: "It gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible; [...] opens upon a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or the caesurae."⁵ Visibility is the problem of painting, and painting is an open interrogation of the visible: "There is no end to this questioning, since the vision to which it is addressed is itself a question."⁶ The institution of painting is not attained through "total variation,"⁷ which would exhaust all the possibilities of painting because painting is itself variation, differentiation. In the same sense as philosophy is an endless task, incomplete, indirect, painting is an endless interrogation of the visible.⁸ It is also this "interrogation" in philosophy which Merleau-Ponty attempts to find in the first three chapters of *The Visible and the Invisible*: not the self-evidence of a positive *a priori* universal sense of philosophy, but the sense of philosophy as a problem for itself, interrogation of its own possibility.⁹ Merleau-Ponty states in the resume of the course on institution:

¹ OE, 60/139.

² OE, 26/127.

³ Hua1, 141/111.

⁴ See Chapter 3.4.

⁵ OE, 27/127.

⁶ OE, 59–60/138.

⁷ See VI, 149/111.

⁸ OE, 91/149.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty states in the article "The Philosopher and His Shadows:" "Husserl spoke of the possibility that phenomenology is a question for itself, of the existence of a 'phenomenology of phenomenology' upon which the ultimate meaning of all foreseeable analyses depends, and on the continuing problematic nature of integral, self-contained, or self-supporting phenomenology, these possibilities can already be seen in a reading of *Ideen II*. He does not hide the fact that intentional analytics leads us conjointly in two opposite directions. On the one hand it descends toward Nature, the sphere of the *Urpräsentierbare*; whereas it is drawn on the other hand toward the world of persons and minds." (S, 289/178.) In Chapter Three I showed that Merleau-Ponty analyzes Husserl's phenomenol-

Thus, rather than a problem, there is an “interrogation” of painting, which is enough to give a common meaning to all its endeavors and which is enough to turn them into a history, but this common meaning never allows us to anticipate the history by means of concepts.¹

According to Merleau-Ponty, every particular “problem” of painting, every “emblem” of the visible – depth, color, line, and so on – opens the dimension of visibility. Therefore, the painters “quest is total even where it looks partial.”² Every painting reactivates the whole tradition, and there is no final painting which would exhaust all the possibilities of painting, because the dimension of the visible is endless. The “sensibly experienceable” opens to the “virtual,” as Husserl states about writing.³ Every visible radiates “about a wholly virtual center,” the invisible which is the deepening of the visible.⁴ In the “Origin of Geometry,” Husserl states that there is a “hidden dimension,” an “inner depth-dimension” of history.⁵ Nevertheless, according to Merleau-Ponty, there is no coinciding with the inner sense of history, with the vertical being, because our present is not “immanent consciousness” without thickness: “it is transcendent consciousness, it is being at a distance, it is the double ground of my life of consciousness, and it is what makes there be able to be *Stiftung* not only of an instant but of a whole *system of temporal indexes*.”⁶ The invisible of the visible is *depth*: there is not one truth of the past, but always more depth, more possibilities, “the truth is this beyond the truth, this depth where there are still *several relationships* to be considered.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty states:

There is sense, and particularly fruitful sense, sense capable of founding always and founding always new acquisitions, only through sedimentation, trace (here push Husserl: *Stiftung* is not enveloping thought, but open thought, not the intended and *Vorhabe* of an actual center, but intended “off-center” which will be rectified, not the positing of an end, but the positing of a style, not frontal grasp but a lateral divergence, algae brought back from the depths.)

Impossibility of total reactivation. And yet, the whole sense of what precedes “passes into” what follows. But that results in the fact that no advance can be reactivated by itself. (It also results in the fact that they are wholly in each, total parts, and that we can think starting from the last.)⁸

ogy as a problem of the dual position. In the second book of *Ideas*, Husserl indicates the problem of “the relation between the world of ideas and the world of experience” (Hua4, 210/221). Merleau-Ponty states: “Thus there are problems of mediation between the world of Nature and the world of persons – even more, between the world of constituting consciousness and the results of the labor of constitution – and the ultimate task of phenomenology as philosophy of consciousness is to understand its relationship to non-phenomenology” (S, 290/178).

¹ IP, 125/78.

² OE, 89/148. In the course on institution Merleau-Ponty states: “Time is the very model of institution: passivity-activity, it continues, because it has been instituted, it fuses, it cannot stop being, it is total because it is partial, it is a field” (IP, 36/7).

³ Hua6, 371/361.

⁴ VI, 154/115.

⁵ Hua6, 381/372; 381n2/373n*.

⁶ VI, 227/173.

⁷ VI, 291/237.

⁸ HLP, 30–31/26.

Institution as a “ray of the past,” an “emblem” or “element” of being, a “hinge” between past and present, between ourselves and others, is a structure of connection and difference. Differentiation, depth, distance, and thickness are not only due to the fact that, for example, there is nearly four hundred years between us and Descartes. It is because Descartes himself already “swarms with inner differences” and “Descartes himself did not at any moment coincide with Descartes.”¹ There is a “natural inclination,” an adherence to the unreflected field of experience from which every “clear and distinct” idea of the “natural light” is formed as differentiation. In the following, I will explicate that there is an absence in every present field, the untouchable of the touchable and the invisible of the visible.

4.4 Double Reference

After explication of essences and experience, memory and differentiation, institution and expression, we can understand Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the *dimensionality* – being of different dimensions. There is institution and essentiality already in seeing and touching. What we see is not only a visible surface, but we see this surface *according to* its invisible depth; what we touch is not only the edge of the touchable, but the untouchable thickness. Touching and seeing are of the same ontological structure or texture as memory and language: Merleau-Ponty calls this structure or texture² the *flesh*.

In the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty shows how touching is of the touchable and seeing is of the visible. There is “a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient.”³ Merleau-Ponty explicates through the encroachment, intertwining, and confusion within touching and seeing how in every dimension of being there is no coincidence: there is always a divergence between the touching and the touched, between the seer and the visible, because otherwise there would be no appearance, no differentiation, no clarity, and no distinctiveness. It is exactly because my two hands are of the same body that my experiences of touching and being touched “slip away at the very moment they are about to rejoin,” and that “there is always a ‘shift,’ a ‘spread’ (*écart*), between them.”⁴ There is necessarily both connection and difference – not as a contradiction but as implications. The confusion or the encroachment is necessary for the distinctiveness or differentiation.

¹ S, 212/131.

² Merleau-Ponty does not define his concepts by references to etymology, but let me bring forth that there is an etymological connection between “structure” and “texture.” “Texture,” in Latin “*textura*,” means etymologically “structure,” “network,” “web,” “framework,” and “tissue.” Latin “*texere*” means “to weave.” It has its root in Greek “*tekton*,” “carpenter,” which comes from “*tekhne*,” “art,” “technique.” Furthermore, “*tekhne*” has its root in “*tikto*,” “to beget,” “to give birth,” “to produce,” “to generate,” “to bring forth.”

³ VI, 187/142.

⁴ VI, 194/148.

Merleau-Ponty explicates that the difference between my body as sentient and my body as sensed does not come only afterward, for example from an objectifying gaze of the other, as Sartre claims.¹ Merleau-Ponty states in his working notes: “The other’s visible is my invisible; my visible is the other’s invisible; this formula (that of Sartre) is not to be retained.”² The invisible is not a consciousness which has a visible body. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty opposes his ontology to the division between being and nothingness.³ The invisible is neither nothingness nor a positive being: it is “a negativity that is not nothing.”⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, the “separation” (*écart*) between the sentient and the sensed “is not a no I affect *myself* with, a lack which I constitute as a lack by the upsurge of an *end* which I gave myself – it is a *natural* negativity, a first institution, always already there.”⁵ The sentient and the sensed are connected through the absence, through the negativity, in the same way as in the previous part of this chapter I explicated that the persistence of an instituted sense is attained only through its sedimentation and forgetfulness. According to Merleau-Ponty, the touching and the touched are neither connected in the body nor in the consciousness, but “in the *untouchable*.”⁶ Merleau-Ponty argues that the invisible is the presentation of an absence, a hollow.⁷ The “invisible of the visible” is “belongingness to a ray of the world.”⁸ The invisible is the “invisible hinge,” which both connects and differentiates the dimension of the visible.⁹ In the following, I will explicate the ontological structure of connection and difference in seeing and touching.

Merleau-Ponty begins the chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm” from a perspective which is not that of the reflection outside of the reflected, but of the vision in the midst of the visible. The adherence of the seer to the visible does not mean that they blend into each other, because then the vision would vanish. There is a paradox of connection and difference in the experience.¹⁰ On the one hand, vision seems to come from the visible things themselves, and on the other hand, vision seems to envelop the things without hiding them. In vision, there is distance and proximity at the same time.

Merleau-Ponty analyzes a color, red. I showed above in this chapter that in his working notes Merleau-Ponty analyzes the color yellow as an emblem of being, as a ray of the past, as an element and as a total part of an associative relation. Here Merleau-Ponty takes a similar approach to the color red. According to Merleau-Ponty, red is not “a *quale*, a pellicle of being without thickness.”¹¹

¹ EN, 317/259. See Chapter 3.5.

² VI, 269/216.

³ Merleau-Ponty states: “It would be better to speak of ‘the visible and the invisible,’ pointing out that they are not contradictory, than to speak of ‘being and nothingness’” (S, 38–39/21). See Chapter 1.4.

⁴ VI, 198/151.

⁵ VI, 270/216.

⁶ VI, 307/254.

⁷ VI, 308/254. See also VI, 211/159.

⁸ VI, 300/247.

⁹ VI, 291/237–238.

¹⁰ See Chapter 3.4.

¹¹ VI, 174/131.

Before focusing on the particular red before our eyes, red “emerges from a less precise, more general redness, in which my gaze was caught, into which it sank.”¹ Merleau-Ponty describes different dimensions of variation of red: textures, surroundings, geographical and historical manifestations of red. Moreover, red can be also “a fossil drawn up from the depths of imaginary worlds.”² In a certain red there is always involved a depth of time, “a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world.”³ The red is, according to Merleau-Ponty, rather than a color, a difference between colors. The relation between vision and the visible includes a texture of the visibles, “the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things.”⁴

In previous parts of this chapter, I showed how Merleau-Ponty analyzes Husserl’s concepts of variation and institution, Freud’s ideas of associative relation and memory screen, Bergson’s conception of memory, and Heidegger’s concept of verbal essence. The flesh as a texture which is not a thing, but the latency of things, can be understood through these previous conceptions on essentiality, historicity, time, and relations: the flesh is a structure of connection and difference understood within a certain dimension, or in between different dimensions, as an encroachment, intertwining. This is what Merleau-Ponty explicates at the beginning of the chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” in order to elaborate a philosophy which does not retain the dual structure of Cartesian philosophy of reflection.

A visible something is not in front of us as a mere object, it is not only a conscious thought of something, a Cartesian “I think that.” In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty explicates his conception of the texture of the visible in contrast to Descartes’ idea of vision in *Optics*. The objectifying approach to vision in *Optics* is made possible by *Discourse on the Method* – Descartes published them together anonymously. From the point of view of the *ego cogito*, we are the pure mind which does not require a body to exist.⁵ Thus, in *Optics* Descartes states that “it is the soul which sees, and not the eye.”⁶ Descartes adds that what we receive with our eyes does not necessarily resemble the things themselves at all: he gives an example of engravings. According to Descartes, the figures in engravings do not resemble the things they present to our mind. The engravings are like “signs and words [...] which in no way resemble the things they signify.”⁷ In this objectifying approach, a mirror is a simple surface which reflects light in a similar way as it reflects the movement of a ball.⁸ Moreover, “the

¹ VI, 174/131.

² VI, 175/132.

³ VI, 175/132.

⁴ VI, 175/132–133.

⁵ AT VI, 32–33/CSM I, 127.

⁶ AT VI, 141/CSM I, 172. Let me recall that in *Meditations* Descartes argues that “something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind” (AT VII, 32/CSM II, 21). See Chapter 1.2.

⁷ AT VI, 112/CSM I, 165.

⁸ AT VI, 89/CSM I, 156.

colours are nothing other than the various ways in which the bodies receive light and reflect it against our eyes."¹

According to Merleau-Ponty, in Descartes view the visible is only "a text to be read, a text totally free of promiscuity between the seeing and the seen."² The vision is "the mind's inspection, judgment, a reading of signs."³ Light is a mere contact with the eye, and the "reading mind [...] deciphers the impacts of the light qua thing upon the brain and which could do this quite as well if it had never inhabited a body."⁴ Descartes makes of the visible world a construction by the pure mind and "elevates certain properties of beings into a structure of Being."⁵

In Chapter Three, I showed that in his later philosophy Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that we cannot overcome Descartes' ontology of the object simply by rejecting it and beginning from the other perspective that Descartes also explicated: the ontology of the existent, the lived experience of the body, the union of mind and body. A return to the unreflected experience leads back to the contradictory duality of reflection and the unreflected: even if we understand the unreflected as the condition of reflection, the unreflected is attained only through reflection, from which grasp the unreflected withdraws.⁶ In Descartes' philosophy the contradiction is inevitable: the distinction between mind and body presupposes the union of mind and body and vice versa, and yet they remain inconceivable together.⁷ Our existence and truth are guaranteed by God, which is an incomprehensible abyss to our finite knowledge. According to Merleau-Ponty, "Cartesian equilibrium" is a limitation of philosophy to the objective order, and from that point of view "it is just as futile to plumb that abyss as it is to think the space of the soul and the depth of the visible."⁸ Therefore, in *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty concludes that the equilibrium between our ideas and sensible experience "must be of a new kind."⁹

In Merleau-Ponty's view, philosophy must begin from the texture of visibility "that separates and reunites."¹⁰ Let me indicate only two of the dimensions of visibility which Merleau-Ponty investigates in *Eye and Mind*. Within the texture of our experience, sensible color is not a secondary quality, but "a conceptless universality,"¹¹ "the dimension of color [...] which creates [...] identities, differences, a texture, a materiality, a something."¹² Depth is not a third dimension, but "the reversibility of dimensions," a "deflagration of Being."¹³ Depth is not only spatial, but also temporal: "the immemorial depth (*fond*) of the visi-

¹ AT VI, 85/CSM I, 153.

² OE, 40/132.

³ OE, 54/136.

⁴ OE, 59/138.

⁵ OE, 47/134.

⁶ See Chapter 1.6.

⁷ AT III, 693/CED, 70.

⁸ OE, 56/137.

⁹ OE, 56/137.

¹⁰ OE, 84–85/147.

¹¹ OE, 43/133.

¹² OE, 67/141.

¹³ OE, 65/140.

ble.”¹ The dimension of visibility brings forth the divergence and the adherence of being:

Seeing is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present from within at the fission of Being only at the end of which do I close up into myself.²

In both Chapter Three and the present chapter I have argued that in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty elaborates the ontological structure of distinction and union, distance and proximity, difference and connection, in which these two “sides” are neither excluding nor contradictory. The “double relationship” must be understood in the midst of a certain dimension: the seer must be itself of the visible, and the touching must be of the touchable.³ Merleau-Ponty clarifies our relation to the texture or flesh of things. As I already noted, the perspective which Merleau-Ponty takes in the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* is not that of consciousness: the point of view is not “as if” we were not already embodied, already seeing and touching, but, on the contrary, we are in the midst of sensible world. The question is not about a “representation” of a color for the mind, or of a material color as a reflection of light which acts on our eyes, but of the “ontological power”⁴ and “ontological function”⁵ which a color brings forth.

In the chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty makes a parallel between vision and touch. He states that “one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command,” and that the “palpation of the eye is a remarkable variant” of the tactile palpation.⁶ Merleau-Ponty explicates vision by analogy with touching. Within touching, it is clear that there is both active touching and a passive sensation of touching: when I touch a table with my hand, my hand both palpates the surface of the table and at once becomes passively exposed to the “touch” of the table – my hand is at the same time touching and being touched. Merleau-Ponty describes that the movements of touching incorporate themselves into the touchable universe which they interrogate. There are “three dimensions which overlap but are distinct:” active touching as the sensation of a surface, the passive sentiment of being touched, and finally the *reversibility* between the touching and the touched.⁷ Merleau-Ponty argues that it is “no different for the vision:” both the touch and the vision share the same structure.⁸ Merleau-Ponty describes the reversibility:

[T]ouching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand while it is palpating the things, where the “touching subject” passes over to the rank of the

¹ OE, 86/147.

² OE, 81/146.

³ VI, 192/146.

⁴ OE, 43/133.

⁵ VI, 271/217.

⁶ VI, 175/133.

⁷ VI, 176/133.

⁸ VI, 176/133.

touched, descends into the things, such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things.¹

The role of my touching hand reverses to touchable when I touch it with my other hand, and thus the touching hand is itself a touchable. Here, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly refer to Husserl's description of the "double sensation" in the second book of *Ideas* – he does not mention the term in *The Visible and the Invisible* – but it is clear that he is influenced by Husserl's formulation.² Husserl shows that the lived body is constituted in a double way in touching: my body is both touching and touched, and I can experience this, for example when touching my left hand with my right hand. Husserl states that "the sensation is *doubled* in the two parts of the Body" and "the Body is originally constituted in a double way."³ The double sensation is necessary for the constitution of the lived body, which is not only sentient but also sensible: "I *sense* 'on' it and 'in' it."⁴

Nevertheless, there seems to be a difference between Merleau-Ponty's description of reversibility and Husserl's description of double sensation. For Husserl, my hand is being touched by what it touches, but the touch is "localized" in the touching hand, not in the things.⁵ Merleau-Ponty describes touching from a different aspect in *The Visible and the Invisible*, as he argues that "the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things."⁶

It is, nevertheless, clear that this difference between Merleau-Ponty's and Husserl's description of the touch is a more complicated matter: already in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty argues that Husserl elaborates a phenomenology of the operative intentionality that is passive and anonymous.⁷ In his article "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Merleau-Ponty continues to defend his interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology as the "unthought" of Husserl.⁸ In his working notes included in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes the idea of operative intentionality as the "intentionality within being," separating it from the perspective of the philosophy of consciousness.⁹ Merleau-Ponty's description of the touch of things is thus motivated by his interpretation of Husserl's concept of passivity.¹⁰

¹ VI, 176/134.

² See chapters 1.2, 1.6, 2.3 and 3.4.

³ Hua4, 145/153.

⁴ Hua4, 145/153.

⁵ Hua4, 146/153–154.

⁶ VI, 176/134.

⁷ See Chapter One.

⁸ See Chapter 3.2.

⁹ VI, 298/244.

¹⁰ Husserl states in the second book of *Ideas*: "Opposed to the active Ego stands the *passive*, and the Ego is always passive at the same time whenever it is active, in the sense of being affected as well as being receptive, which of course does not exclude the possibility of its being sheer passivity. [...] 'Being touched' as originating in a thing is something subjective whose source is the Object [...]" (Hua4, 213–214/225.) According to Husserl, "the Ego thought of as purely passive [...] is mere nature" and "mere nature is the entirety of the 'mechanical I-do'" (Hua4, 338/349). Husserl describes these unconscious mechanisms between the ego and nature: "Here we have 'unconscious' Ego-affections and reactions. What is affecting goes toward the Ego, though not toward the waking Ego, the Ego of 'conscious'"

There is yet a clear difference between Husserl's analysis and Merleau-Ponty's idea of what he calls "double relationship"¹ and "double reference:"² whereas Merleau-Ponty argues that the same structure can also be found in vision, Husserl states that "in the case of an *Object constituted purely visually* we have *nothing* comparable."³ Husserl states: "An eye does not appear to one's

attention, occupation, etc. The Ego always lives in the medium of its 'history;' all its earlier lived experiences have sunk down, but they have aftereffects in tendencies, sudden ideas, transformations or assimilations of earlier lived experiences, and from such assimilations new formations are merged together, etc. – just as in the sphere of primal sensibility, whose formations also pertain to the medium of the Ego, to the Ego's actual and potential possessions. All this has its natural course, thus even each free act has its comet's tail of nature [...]. Ego and nature stand in contrast, and every act also has its natural side, namely its underlying basis in nature [...]" (Hua4, 338/350.) Husserl's formulation corresponds with the contradiction or paradox of the Cartesian duality: "I can decide freely, and at the same time I am following my habitual inclination" (Hua4, 339/350).

¹ VI, 192/146.

² VI, 181/137.

³ Hua4, 147/155. In *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida criticizes Merleau-Ponty for assimilating touching and seeing "in a way that Husserl would never have deemed legitimate" (Derrida 2005, 186). Derrida analyses Husserl's concept of "double sensation" as "the self-relation of touch [...]" which is *immediate, spontaneous, direct, intuitive*, and without equivalent in a mirror or mediation" (Derrida 2005, 171.) Derrida describes double sensation in the following way: "the feeling-itself-touching of the finger immediately is a feeling-itself-touched of the finger, even when my finger does not touch another one of my fingers: when it touches anything whatsoever external to my body and my finger, my finger feels itself touched by the thing that it touches" (Derrida 2005, 163). Derrida refers to Husserl's analysis of the mirror: "[I]t cannot be said that I see my eye in the mirror, for my eye, that which sees *qua* seeing, I do not perceive. I see something, of which I judge indirectly, by way of 'empathy,' that it is identical with my eye as a thing (the one constituted by touch, for example) in the same way that I see the eye of an other." (Hua4, 148n1/155n1.) Derrida interprets Husserl: "the eye is not seen by the eye, not *immediately* seen by the eye" (Derrida 2005, 170). The difference, then, between seeing and touching is, according to Derrida's interpretation, in that touching is immediate and direct but seeing is mediated and indirect. In touching there is not "any insinuation of alterity," but in seeing there is something "foreign to the body proper," a "dint of an 'intruder,'" that is, a mirror or the vision of an other (Derrida 2000, 171). As Derrida points out, the difference between sight and touch is finally, according to Husserl, in "localization:" "The eye is not seen and color sensations cannot be localized right in the seeing eye, or right in the eye appearing 'visually,' as would be the case for the touched object perceived right on the touching hand" (Derrida 2005, 171). Yet, in contrast to Derrida's reading of "double sensation," Merleau-Ponty does not claim that there is the same kind of immediate and direct coincidence in sight that there is in touch, but on the contrary that there is no coincidence in either case (VI, 194/147-148; 307-308/254). When commenting on "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Derrida does not take into account what Merleau-Ponty states in the beginning of the article: Merleau-Ponty does not claim to write "an 'objective' history of philosophy" (S, 260/159) but attempts to think an "unthought-of element" of Husserl's works which is "wholly his and yet opens out on something else" (S, 260/160; see also HLP, -/5). Moreover, Derrida claims that Merleau-Ponty compromises the otherness or alienness of the experienced on the ground that Merleau-Ponty renders symmetrical the experience of touching one's own body and the experience of touching the other's body. According to Derrida, Husserl "clearly says that I can *never* have access to the body (*Leib*) of the other *except* in an indirect fashion, through appresentation, comparison, analogy, projection, and introjection" (Derrida 2005, 190). Yet, Merleau-Ponty shows that there is no direct access to the other's lived body or bodily experience in touching, and that our relation to our own body is also indirect: there is an un-touchable dimension within our self-touching: "[W]hat I will never touch, he does not touch either, no privilege of oneself over the other here, it is therefore not the *consciousness* that is the un-touchable" (VI, 307/254; see Derrida 2005, 213). What Derrida ignores in his reading is that the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's ontology is not a conscious subjectivity or body-subject but the visibility of the world: it is not a question of the constitution of the

own vision [...].” The eye is not localized in the vision itself, but only through touching, for example when we touch our eye with a finger.¹ The eye does not “touch” the visible, and does not get touched by the visible; the visible is not “continually in contact” with the eye, and thus “I do not see myself, my Body, the way I touch myself.”² According to Husserl, “the seen Body is not something seeing which is seen, the way my Body as touched Body is something touching which is touched.”³ Therefore, the lived body can be “constituted originally only in tactuality and in everything that is localized with the sensations of touch.”⁴ Husserl states:

other as the invisible of *my* visible (VI, 269/216), but of the invisible of the world which is not possessed by me or the other and which possesses us both (VI, 319/266). The “sameness” between me and another is in that we are both inscribed in the texture of the sensible being: to pretend that the other is completely incomprehensible to me, is to suppose a complete coincidence with the other. According to Derrida, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy involves two forms of “intuitionism” of the flesh: immediacy and coincidence on the one hand, and distance and non-coincidence on the other. Thus, the motto or the core claim of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy for him is *coincidence with the non-coincidence* (Derrida 2005, 198; 199). Nevertheless, Derrida does not consider the Cartesian background of Merleau-Ponty’s argumentation, which Merleau-Ponty himself makes explicit. In a certain sense there are two forms of “intuitionism” in Descartes’ philosophy: the intuitionism of the distinction on the one hand, and the intuitionism of the union on the other. These “intuitionisms” are related to what Merleau-Ponty describes as two Cartesian monsters in *Eye and Mind*: the objectivism of the pure mind and the lived experience of the union. In Cartesian philosophy, the distinction and the union both have their own intuitive evidence, are in function at the same time, and yet remain impossible for the understanding. This, in my view, is exactly the problem that interests Merleau-Ponty in Descartes’ philosophy, and to which he searches for a new answer: how can we think connection and difference, proximity and distance, at the same time, within a singular and plural texture or structure? The structure here is not “coincidence with the non-coincidence:” we do not have an immediate presence of something completely diffusing, an experience which breaks up into a non-experience. The invisible, the untouchable, is not, as Merleau-Ponty often repeats, a negativity which is nothing, but is a pregnancy of meaning, a radiation of the immemorial depth. I have argued that there is, for Merleau-Ponty, not an original immediate coincidence, but an openness which is ignorance about the already differentiating and is forgetfulness of the institution already established, but nevertheless not closed, a never-ending repetition and change, always open to new possibilities. After his critique of Merleau-Ponty’s work, Derrida refers to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the invisible: the visible deepens to the invisible and “the vision is tele-vision, transcendence, crystallization of the impossible” (VI, 327/273; see Derrida 2005, 215). In *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* Derrida does not elaborate his interpretation of this reference, but in another work, *Memoirs of the Blind*, he announces “a program for an entire rereading of the later Merleau-Ponty” in order to understand better what Merleau-Ponty means by the invisible (Derrida 1993, 52). Nevertheless, Derrida gives of this rereading only a reference to Merleau-Ponty’s description of the invisible as something that is not a visible elsewhere, something that is hidden but could become visible: “The invisible is *there* without being an *object*, it is pure transcendence, without an ontic mask” (VI, 282–283/229). However, Derrida calls it an “*absolute invisibility*” (Derrida 1993, 52). This is a misunderstanding, as Merleau-Ponty explicates that the invisible is “not an absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible” (VI, 198/151).

¹ Hua4, 148/156.

² Hua4, 148/155.

³ Hua4, 148/155.

⁴ Hua4, 150/158.

All sensings pertain to my soul; everything extended to the material thing. On this surface of the hand I sense the sensations of touch, etc. And it is precisely thereby that this surface manifests itself immediately as my Body.¹

In Husserl's view, a touchable thing "points to an immediate relation to the Body," to the body as touching.² There is an immediate relation between the body as touching and the body as touched. Thus, in Husserl's view of the touching of one's own body there is both the divergency of the double sensation and an immediate self-relation.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty argues that there is no immediate coincidence between the touched and the touching. The reversibility, not only between the touching and the touched but also between the seeing and the visible, is "a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact."³ According to Merleau-Ponty we "never reach coincidence."⁴ Already in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty argues that our "two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other."⁵ Accordingly, "I touch myself only by escaping from myself."⁶

Merleau-Ponty articulates a general structure of the sensible through his notion of "double reference." The perspective is not only in the body-subject and its constitution. The visible is not an object in front of a seeing subject, but the vision is possessed by the visible: the seer does not only have a visible body, but becomes inscribed in the visible.⁷ Let me come back to this after I have explicated how Merleau-Ponty describes the "double reference" and the sensible texture.

Merleau-Ponty argues that there is both connection and difference in touching. The touching is of the touchable, and nevertheless the touching and the touched do not coincide: "[T]he touching is never exactly the touched."⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, there is a difference between a sentiment of being entirely "enclosed" within the tactile and acting upon the touchable "from without."⁹ Merleau-Ponty states that the same difference also applies to vision: "there is as much difference as between the movements of my eyes and the changes they produce in the visible."¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a similar kind of adherence *and* distance in the sense of touch and in the sense of vision. On the one hand, touching is not an immediate contact, and on the other hand, vision happens within the visible at once.

It is crucial to understand what kind of conception of sensation the parallel or analogy between vision and touching is based on. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty criticizes the Cartesian identification of vision and touch: "The Car-

¹ Hua4, 150/157.

² Hua4, 150/158.

³ VI, 194/147.

⁴ VI, 194/147.

⁵ PP, 109/106.

⁶ PP, 467/474.

⁷ VI, 319/266.

⁸ VI, 254/307.

⁹ VI, 176/134.

¹⁰ VI, 176/134.

tesian model of vision is modeled after the sense of touch."¹ In *Optics*, Descartes argues that vision in the eyes occurs when the light enters the eyes, in a similar manner as a "blind man touches bodies with his stick."² According to Descartes, "one might almost say that they [blind] see with their hands, or that their stick is the organ of some sixth sense given to them in place of sight."³ Merleau-Ponty interprets that this means that vision is touching by means of light, and light is an "action by contact."⁴ Descartes reduces vision to a contact "conceived as it might be by those who cannot see."⁵ For Merleau-Ponty, we need to give back to vision that which is elementary to it: vision is an openness to distance.⁶ Thus, Merleau-Ponty is *not* proposing with the parallel between vision and touching that there would be a similar kind of immediate contact in vision as there is in touching. On the contrary, in Merleau-Ponty's view, there is no immediate contact in touching either. What he aims to show with the parallelization is that in both senses there is divergence and adherence, activity and passivity: there is the depth of the touchable and thickness of the visible. Moreover, in both senses, there is reversibility between the sentient and the sensed.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the experience of the visible belongs also to the touchable, as it is "given to me within the context of the movements of the look," that is, the movements of the eyes.⁷ There is "encroachment" between the visible and the tactile which entails that "every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility."⁸ The "visible in the tangible" and the "tangible in the visible" are "total parts," they give a complete opening to the sensible world, and yet they differ, "do not merge into one," and "are not superposable."⁹

To be clear, Merleau-Ponty does not claim that touching and vision are exactly the same, or that the visible world and the touchable world are completely interchangeable. Instead, he shows that vision does not come from the outside of the visible, in the same manner as touch does not come from the outside of the touchable. According to Merleau-Ponty, vision "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."¹⁰ Vision implies that "he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*."¹¹ Merleau-Ponty explicates that there is reciprocal continuity and connection between the seer and the seen: "It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication."¹²

¹ OE, 37/131.

² AT VI, 114/CSM I, 166.

³ AT VI, 84/CSM I, 153.

⁴ OE, 37/131.

⁵ OE, 59/138.

⁶ OE, 59/138.

⁷ VI, 177/134.

⁸ VI, 177/134.

⁹ VI, 177/134.

¹⁰ VI, 177/134.

¹¹ VI, 177/134-135.

¹² VI, 178/135.

Merleau-Ponty argues that there is not only the flesh within touching but also in vision, and the flesh is defined by the reversibility of the sentient and the sensible.¹ We sense the sensible because we are of the sensible, because we have a sensible body, and we do not merge with the sensible because the thickness of the sensible separates us from it as the sentients: "It is for the same reason that I am at the heart of the visible and that I am far from it."² I showed above that a color is not only a quality and a surface of the visible, but deepens to past visions and has a temporal thickness. The sentient body which "is not itself a thing," has its own depth and thickness: sensation is an interplay between the thickness of the body and the thickness of the sensible things.³ The body is for itself a sensible thickness, a deepening of the sensible – and not an objective thing. What Merleau-Ponty shows by the parallel between tactile experience and the visual experience is that there is not only a relation of the body to itself in touching, but also in vision. The body is a "*sensible for itself*."⁴

I have introduced the problem of the self-relation in earlier chapters. In Chapter Two I explicated the problem that Gassendi presents to Descartes: how can anything act on itself? According to Gassendi, if an eye "sees other things but does not see itself"⁵ and "nothing acts on itself,"⁶ then, in a similar manner, how can Descartes claim in the *Second Meditation* that the mind knows itself better than anything else? The question here is about the general structure of the self-relation. Descartes states that we do not know our thought by reflective knowledge, but by "internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge."⁷ Reflective knowledge of the self would lead to an infinite regress, and thus there must be a direct or immediate relation of the self with itself. Descartes does not describe the self-relation as *immediate*; it is only gradually in Cartesian tradition that the immediacy becomes a presupposition of the self-awareness of the subject.

What Merleau-Ponty means by the "*sensible for itself*" is neither the reflective objectification of the self nor an immediate self-awareness. In Chapter One I argued that in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty articulates the Cartesian duality as a contradiction between distinction and union, and reformulates it as the paradoxical relation of adherence and distance, through which we can also understand the self-relation. In Chapter Three I showed that in his later working notes Merleau-Ponty, nevertheless, expresses his discontent with his earlier approach: in *Phenomenology of Perception* he does not manage to explicate the ontological structure of the paradoxical self-relation, and remains partially attached to the philosophy of consciousness. I also explained that he begins *The Visible and the Invisible* by explicating the paradox of experience, which he al-

¹ VI, 189/144.

² VI, 178/135.

³ VI, 178/135.

⁴ VI, 178/135.

⁵ AT VII, 268/CSM II, 187.

⁶ AT VII, 292/CSM II, 203.

⁷ AT VII, 423/CSM II, 285.

ready showed in his early work. It is clear, therefore, that the problem of the self-relation also has a central place in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the “*sensible for itself*” does not mean the absurdity of a “color that sees itself, surface that touches itself.”¹ The relation of the sensible with itself is not a coincidence of sensible qualities, but necessarily implicates difference, fission, divergence of the sensible texture. Merleau-Ponty states that the “*sensible for itself*” is a paradox:

[It is] set of colors and surfaces inhabited by a touch, a vision, hence an *exemplar sensible*, which offers to him who inhabits it and senses it the wherewithal to sense everything that resembles himself on the outside, such that, caught up in the tissue of the things, it draws it entirely to itself, incorporates it, and, with the same movement, communicates to the things upon which it closes over that identity without superposition, that difference without contradiction, that divergence between the within and the without that constitutes its natal secret.²

The divergence which Merleau-Ponty describes here is not a relation between reflective consciousness and its object, or a “knowing subject” and its object. The sentient, in Merleau-Ponty’s approach, is not a constituting consciousness.³ The “flesh of the visible” does not mean that the world is “covered over with all our own projections, leaving aside what it can be under the human mask.”⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, the “constitutive paradox already lies in every visible.”⁵ Connection and difference are already within every being as thickness and depth: a visible is “a quality pregnant with a texture, the surface of a depth.”⁶ The sensible is not opened by a “knowing subject,” a “subject of *survol*,” but only by a body which is a “sensible sentient” and has its own thickness and depth.⁷

According to Merleau-Ponty, the attempt to formulate the concepts in a new way is necessary in order “to avoid the classical impasses.”⁸ Let me examine this idea, as I find it crucial in the context of my work: I claim that these “classical impasses” are the two sides of the Cartesian duality, the “Cartesian monsters,” the Cartesian positions of the reflective pure mind, the reflective

¹ VI, 178/135. In Chapter Two I argued that Plato and Aristotle approach the problem of self-knowledge as a question of a sense which senses itself. Both argue that since vision is of color then in order to see itself vision should have a color (*Charmides*, 167e-169a; *Peri psyches*, 425b18-26). Plato’s discussion leads to aporia, but he nevertheless supposes that there is a sense which senses itself in order to continue the dialogue (*Charmides*, 169d). Aristotle indicates, in a similar way as Descartes later, that we must “assume a sense which is aware of itself,” or otherwise we end in an infinite regress (*Peri psyches*, 425b11-17). Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly refer to Plato and Aristotle here, but it is nevertheless crucial that he rejects the conception of a sense which senses itself as a contact of the sensible qualities with themselves.

² VI, 178-179/135-136.

³ In Chapter One I showed that Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea of constituting consciousness already in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

⁴ VI, 179/136.

⁵ VI, 179/136.

⁶ VI, 17/136.

⁷ VI, 179-180/136-137.

⁸ VI, 180/137.

cogito and the union of mind and body as an unreflected *cogito*.¹ Merleau-Ponty states: “we do not have to honor the difficulties that they [the new concepts] may present when confronted with a *cogito*, which itself has to be re-examined.”² From the point of view of the classical *cogito*, what Merleau-Ponty is elaborating is *contradictory*: connection and difference must be affirmed together, at the same time. Allow me to recall here that Descartes writes to Elizabeth that the distinction and the union cannot be understood at the same time, as that would be a contradiction.³

Yet, as I argued in Chapter One, Merleau-Ponty shows in *Phenomenology of Perception* that Descartes does not manage to escape the contradiction, and on the contrary, “perhaps Descartes’ philosophy consists in embracing this contradiction.”⁴ I have argued that Merleau-Ponty’s idea is not to evade the Cartesian contradiction between the distinction and the union, but to formulate it as a paradoxical relation. Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he shows that both positions condition each other: the tacit *cogito* is the condition for the spoken *cogito*, but the tacit *cogito* can be explicated only through the spoken *cogito*.⁵ Merleau-Ponty does not “rationalize” the Cartesian situation, as he argues that, for example, Spinoza, Brunschvicg,⁶ and also Gueroult do.⁷ He attempts to re-think exactly the *contradiction* of Descartes in order to show that if we do not begin philosophy from the point of view of the distinction of the reflective consciousness, then the lived union of the mind and body does not present a contradictory other position but is another “part” of the “total” situation as the double reference of the texture. Merleau-Ponty states in his working notes:

Descartes’s these on the distinction of the soul and the body and on their union cannot be exposed on the plane of the understanding, and justified together by a continuous movement of thought. They can be affirmed together only if one takes them with their *implication (sous-entendu)* – – In the order of implication, the search for the essence and the search for existence are not opposed [...]⁸

Merleau-Ponty shows that we need a completely new ontological point of view in order to solve the Cartesian dilemma. He describes his plan: “The second part of the book [...] with my description of the visible as in-visible, must lead in the third to a confrontation with the Cartesian ontology [...]”⁹ Merleau-Ponty elaborates, in contrast to the purely self-transparent and self-coinciding “order of the reasons,”¹⁰ his idea of the “order of implication:”¹¹ the difference implies the connection, the visible implies the invisible.

¹ See Chapter 3.1.

² VI, 180/137.

³ AT III, 693/CED, 70.

⁴ PP, 52–53/49.

⁵ See Chapter 1.2.

⁶ See Chapter 2.

⁷ See chapters 3.1 and 5.1.

⁸ VI, 252/198–199.

⁹ VI, 295–296/242.

¹⁰ VI, 220/166.

¹¹ VI, 117/85; 252/199.

Merleau-Ponty states in his working notes that the two “sides” of a being can be understood as a positive side and a negative side.¹ Our hand as “touching is never exactly the touched.”² There is a divergence already between the sentient and the sensible, not only after the separation of the pure thought from the pure matter. Yet, my hand as touching and my hand as touched are not entirely distinct: they do not belong to the orders of two distinct substances, as if when my hand is touching it would be in the service of the mind-substance, and when it is touched it would be merely an extended body-substance. According to Merleau-Ponty, the Cartesian situation must be elaborated in a new way which allows for “a mind-body, mind-mind communication.”³ The “distinction” between mind and body must be understood through the structure of flesh: *mind and body are not two separate substances, but differentiations of the sensible texture*. Merleau-Ponty argues that the “double reference” of the body means that the body participates in the sensible things, as “it is of them,” and “detaches itself from them” as it senses them, and that “each calls for the other,” that these “two leaves or two layers” implicate each other.⁴

In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty explicates the relation between mind and body. First, and as already explicated, “there is no more cause to pose the problem of the relations between the *soul* and the *body* as between two positive substances.”⁵ Second, the “bond between the soul and the body is not a parallelism.”⁶ There are not two different fields of phenomena which would be identified only theoretically. Third, “nor is it absolute opacity of an institution that reconnects by the efficacy of decision two orders each of which would suffice to itself.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty argues that the mind and the body necessitate each other.

Merleau-Ponty explicates the relation between mind and body as the “integration-differentiation” of perception, through which our “incarnation [is] no longer a ‘difficulty,’ a fault in the clear diamond of philosophy.”⁸ The point of view of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is not a consciousness which asks from itself, how is it possible to have a body and how should it be determined: the point of view is our experience, where we are bodily connected to the world, and of which we are also conscious. The Cartesian problem of the relations between mind and body is formulated from the point of view of the pure consciousness: for the philosophy of consciousness, the withdrawing character of experience, the obscurity of the union of mind and body, remains an unsolved problem. From the Cartesian perspective we can either live “in” our body as the union or we can think “on” it from the point of view of the consciousness.

¹ VI, 278/225.

² VI, 254/307.

³ VI, 295–296/242.

⁴ VI, 181/137.

⁵ VI, 285–286/232.

⁶ VI, 286/232.

⁷ VI, 286/232.

⁸ VI, 287/233.

The answer to the problem is not to *unite* the two substances.¹ Merleau-Ponty does not introduce to the field of embodied experience a supposition of the immediate coincidence, which in the philosophy of consciousness is the definition of the pure mind. On the contrary, it is exactly through the transcendence, through the ignorance, divergence, and withdrawing character of the perceptual experience that Merleau-Ponty understands the relation of the mind and body. Merleau-Ponty states:

My position in the problem of the “return to the immediate” to be defined [...]. The key is in this idea that perception qua wild perception is of itself ignorance of itself, imperception, tends of itself to see itself as an *act* and to forget itself as latent intentionality, as *being at* [...].²

The mind is not an “invisible person” in a visible body. Merleau-Ponty states: “The other’s visible is my invisible; my visible is the other’s invisible; this formula (that of Sartre) is not to be retained.”³ According to Merleau-Ponty, “‘thought’ (*cogitatio*) is not an invisible contact of the self with self” but “it lives outside of this intimacy with oneself, *in front of us*, not in us.”⁴ The invisible which Merleau-Ponty describes as the invisible of the visible is latency, a relation to the past, a temporal thickness of experience – an “emblem” or “element” of being, an invisible “hinge” which connects the seer and the visible. According to Merleau-Ponty, the relation between mind and body “is to be understood as the bond between the convex and the concave, between the solid vault and the hollow it forms.”⁵ The mind and the body are, in a similar manner as the touching and the touchable, the seer and the visible, of the same texture which forms a “negative side” converging with a “positive side.” Merleau-Ponty states: “the soul is the hollow of the body, the body is the distention of the soul.”⁶ There is an adherence, a connection of the differentiating texture which forms the “two sides:”

The unicity of the visible world, and, by encroachment, the invisible world, such as it presents itself in the rediscovery of the vertical Being, is the solution of the problem of the “relations between the soul and the body.”⁷

In the chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty explicates that, in fact, there are not “two layers” in the sense of “the order of the ‘object’” and “the order of the ‘subject’,”⁸ or “what in the past we called objective body and phenomenal body.”⁹ In a certain sense, the idea of “two layers” or two sides of

¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, the texture of difference and connection, the flesh, “is not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable by itself” (VI, 185/140).

² VI, 266–267/212–213.

³ VI, 269/216.

⁴ VI, 287/234.

⁵ VI, 286/232.

⁶ VI, 286/233.

⁷ VI, 286–287/233.

⁸ VI, 181/137.

⁹ VI, 180/136.

the body is still attached to the philosophy of reflection:¹ the idea of the two sides retains the idea of an immediate self-awareness of the reflection and an objectification of the reflected. Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues that the “double reference” must be understood as a texture which differentiates from itself. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body “is Visibility sometimes wandering and sometimes reassembled.”² The body is a part of the visibility, “a certain visible” which “turns back upon the whole of the visible.”³ The visibility in itself is neither in the body nor in the world, but in between.

What Merleau-Ponty means by *the seer is of the visible* is not only that the seeing body is also a visible body: he means that there is a deeper relation between them, that the seer and the visible are of the same texture, and that the seer does not possess the visible without being possessed by it. According to Merleau-Ponty, the idea of the chiasm is that “every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is *inscribed* in the same being that it takes hold of.”⁴ Merleau-Ponty explicates a kind of mirroring⁵ of the visible, that the vision is not in us but rather in the visible, that “it becomes impossible to distinguish between who sees and who is seen.”⁶ The flesh is, according to Merleau-Ponty, “a mirror phenomenon and the mirror is an extension of my relation with my body.”⁷

There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself *surrounded* by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact – as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them.⁸

There are two diverging “sides” of the mirror which, again, are of the common texture, of the visibility. Merleau-Ponty describes them as two senses of narcissism, referring to the myth of Narcissus who falls in love with his own reflection in the water. First, the active sense of the narcissism of vision: the seer sees him- or herself in the visible, in the mirror of the visible. The visible is governed by our own depth, our memory, our ideas, and our articulation. The world is

¹ VI, 181-182/138.

² VI, 181/137-138.

³ VI, 183/139.

⁴ VI, 319/266.

⁵ The mirror does not mean that vision is “reflection” in the philosophical sense of the word: the relation which Merleau-Ponty formulates is not between an immediate awareness and a representation. First, the vision is not an immediate which has a representation of itself, as the visible through the mirror. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty explicates that the vision is the mirror, a fold in the texture of the world: “It is through the world first that I am seen or thought” (VI, 328/274). Second, here the mirror is a structural element, not only within vision, but also in touching, hearing, thinking.

⁶ OE, 32/129.

⁷ VI, 309/255.

⁸ VI, 183/139.

what we see. Second, the passive and “more profound sense” of narcissism: to be seen by the visible, to become what we see. The seer becomes possessed by the depth of the visible, overrun by the latent content of the visible which he or she does not possess. We are what we see in the world. Merleau-Ponty describes this second sense of narcissism, the “enigma of vision,”¹ in the following way:

[T]he vision he [the seer] exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity – which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism [sic.]: not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh, and one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it.²

According to Merleau-Ponty, the seer and a visible something are “two mirrors facing one another:” the visibility is not “localized” in the seer, nor in the visible, but it is the “double reference” between two depths facing one another, two movements of transcending, two withdrawing views, two temporalities, and two thicknesses. Merleau-Ponty refers here to the strange experience of painters, that the things look at the painter, which he also describes in *Eye and Mind* as a switching of the roles between the painter and the visible.³ In the previous part of this chapter, I showed that painting as the interrogation of the visible, of the *institution* of the visible, shows that rather than seeing the visible, we see “according to, or with it.”⁴

The difficulty in Merleau-Ponty’s idea is that he describes the ontological structure through an experience which is not normally seen, which figures in every vision but which comes forth in painters’ interrogation of visibility. At the beginning of *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty states: “It is at the same time true that the world is *what we see* and that, nonetheless, we must learn to see it [...]”⁵ The invisible of the visible, the structure of the visible, is not something immediately given, a self-evident and explicit idea. In this chapter I have explicated how Merleau-Ponty analyses various conceptions of the “invisible:” in Husserl’s phenomenological free variation the invariant is not immediately given but must be seen through the variation, and the original institution of a sense is sedimented and must be reactivated through these sediments; in Freud’s conception of the screen memory, the unconscious associative relations are not immediately given but nevertheless articulate themselves through memories; in Heidegger’s idea of the verbal essence, being comes forth in cer-

¹ OE, 51/135; 54/136.

² VI, 183/139.

³ OE, 31/129.

⁴ OE, 23/126.

⁵ VI, 18/4.

tain sensible aspect of a being; and in Bergson's concept of the pure memory we can repeat the memory only by an effort of differentiation.

The visible is not material in the classical sense, "brought into being by the things factually existing and acting on my factual body," because then there would be no depth and differentiation, but only mechanical repetition. The visibility is not "spiritual" either, a representation of the mind, because "a mind could not be captured by its own representations," as it would govern the visible and not be possessed by its depth and temporal thickness.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the visible is a texture which connects and differentiates: the flesh. The structure, the texture, the flesh is itself an invisible – the invisible armature of the visible which connects as an "element," as a "general thing:" it is "midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being."¹ It is, therefore, not a fact, but "adherent to *location* and to the *now*," an institution of the past, "what makes the fact be a fact," and "what makes the facts have meaning."² The flesh is the "mirror" in which both the seer and the visible are "together caught up."³ The mirror is a "screen" which shows the visible and the seer for him- or herself, but which is itself invisible, un-touchable, and unconscious: "Here [...] there is no vision without the screen [...]."⁴ The "screen that masks" the visible cannot be lifted.⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, here are the consequences of taking seriously the paradoxical field of vision, and not remaining in the Cartesian ontology:

And it is, to be sure, possible to refrain from doing so and to move on, but we would simply find again, confused, indistinct, non-clarified, scraps of this ontology of the visible mixed up with all our theories of knowledge, and in particular with those that serve, desultorily, as vehicles of science.⁶

According to Merleau-Ponty, it is possible to re-enter the contradiction of Cartesian ontology, which borrows its "natural light" from the vision but condemns the vision to obscurity and confusion. But if, instead, one continues with the interrogation of the vision, these consequences will expand: "this domain, one rapidly realizes, is unlimited."⁷ Merleau-Ponty's ontology is not a regional ontology, limited to the visible: not only the relations between subject and object must be redefined, but the concept of the "self" must be also re-thought, and its relation to the "other."

In Merleau-Ponty's articulation of the "double reference," the sentient is not a mind and the sensed is not a material thing:⁸ this, according to Merleau-Ponty, would be a return to the duality between the reflecting and the reflected,

¹ VI, 184/139.

² VI, 184/140.

³ VI, 184/140.

⁴ VI, 196/150.

⁵ VI, 196/150.

⁶ VI, 185/140.

⁷ VI, 185/140.

⁸ VI, 183–184/139.

between the subject and its object.¹ The relation between the sentient and the sensed is not an immediate coincidence of the two. In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty explicates that the touched and the touching “do not coincide in the body: the touching is never exactly the touched.”² The touchable “side” of the body and the touching “side” of the body are, of course, connected – otherwise, there would be no touch. But the connection is not a positivity, it is not in the body or in the consciousness. According to Merleau-Ponty, the connection is in the “*untouchable*.”³ Merleau-Ponty explicates this in his working notes:

The negativity that inhabits the touch (and which I must not minimize: it is because of it that the body is not an empirical fact, that it has an ontological signification), the untouchable of the touch, the invisible of vision, the unconscious of consciousness (its central *punctum caecum*, that blindness that makes it consciousness i.e. an indirect and *inverted* grasp of all things) is the *other side* or the *reverse* (or the other dimensionality) of sensible Being; one cannot say that it is *there*, although there would assuredly be points where it *is not*.⁴

According to Merleau-Ponty, there is negativity within touching – the untouchable depth of the touchable. The connection of the touching and the touchable is, therefore, an untouchable *hinge* in between the two. The untouchable connection of the divergent “sides” of touching is not “localized” in a positively given place, on the touchable “surface” of the body.⁵ Merleau-Ponty relates his approach to Husserl’s analysis of the lived body: “the flesh, the *Leib*, is not a sum of *self-touchings* (of ‘tactile sensations’).”⁶ Yet, according to Merleau-Ponty, there is “*non-difference*” of the corporeal self in relation to itself, or otherwise the “corporeal schema would not be a *schema*.”⁷ The relation of the self with itself is a mirror-relation: it is a doubling up of the body with itself, “a fission that already takes place in the touch (duality of the touching and the touched) and which, with the mirror (Narcissus) is only more profound adhesion to Self.”⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty it is this mirroring which forms what we call the “self.” In *Eye and Mind* he writes:

It is a self, not by transparency, like thought, which never thinks anything except by assimilating it, constituting it, transforming it into thought – but a self by confusion, narcissism, inherence of the seer in the seen, the toucher in the touched, the feeler in the felt – a self, then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future...⁹

¹ VI, 308/254.

² VI, 307/254.

³ VI, 308/254.

⁴ VI, 308–309/255.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty states in another working note about locality: “The mind is neither here, nor here, nor here. ... And yet it is ‘attached,’ ‘bound,’ it *is not without bonds* [...] as my locality for myself is the point that all the vanishing lines of my landscape designate to me, and which is itself *invisible*.” (VI, 275/222.)

⁶ VI, 309/255.

⁷ VI, 309/255.

⁸ VI, 309/256. On body schema see Chapter 1.6.

⁹ OE, 18–19/124.

The “self,” the invisible *hinge* that we are, the untouchable *connection* which diverges to different touches and different visions already in our own experience, cannot be, according to Merleau-Ponty, a “consciousness of” which would unite all visions and touches into its objects.¹ Experience should not be understood as the bifurcation of the subject and the object, but as “overlapping and fission, identity and difference” which “brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own.”² According to Merleau-Ponty, it is not true that the colors given to the other are for me completely inaccessible. If we are not two pure consciousnesses, the invisible is not a possession of our private life. Merleau-Ponty writes about the untouchable:

That of the other which I will never touch. But what I will never touch, he does not touch either, no privilege of oneself over the other here, it is therefore not the *consciousness* that is the untouchable.³

What Merleau-Ponty means by the invisible and the untouchable is, therefore, not a privately hidden field of experience, but something which we share with the others. The empathy with others, the “coupling,” is not a “surpassing accomplished by oneself.”⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, “what is proper to the visible is [...] to be the surface of an inexhaustible depth: this is what makes it able to be open to visions other than our own.”⁵ Yet, this connection between us also entails divergence. Our vision and the vision of the other also intertwine and differentiate, like “two mirrors facing one another:” according to Merleau-Ponty, “my body can include elements drawn from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them; man is a mirror for man.”⁶

The structure of connection and difference exists not only between the sentient and the sensible, as differentiation of the texture of sensibility, but also between us and others. In the following part of this chapter, I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the flesh of expression and language: the sensible ideas that possess our thought.

4.5 The Invisible of the Visible

The divergence between the touching and the touchable, between the seer and the visible, which Merleau-Ponty describes in the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” is not a distinction between consciousness, “I think that,” and an object constituted by consciousness.⁷ Before we make a judgement on our perception, we perceive, and we are pos-

¹ VI, 186/141.

² VI, 187/142.

³ VI, 307/254.

⁴ VI, 189/143.

⁵ VI, 188–189/143.

⁶ OE, 34/130.

⁷ VI, 186/141.

essed by the perceived. The world opens up to us because we are of the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that the divergence between the sentient and the sensible is not exactly that of the two “sides” of the body either, between subjective and objective sides of the body, between the embodied subjectivity and the body as an object.¹ The idea of the body-subject and its objective side would retain the structure of reflective philosophy between the reflection and the reflected, which would, once again, suggest to us the supposition of an immediate self-relation in order to avoid the infinite regress.² The concept of the body-subject puts too much weight on the sentient, and the concept of the body-object puts too little weight on the sensible. Merleau-Ponty argues that we need to reject the subject-object relation as the model for the ontological structure; instead, the ontological structure must be defined through “overlapping and fission, identity and difference.”³

The seer is of the visible and the touching is of the touchable – not only in the sense that they have a sensible “side,” but in a deeper sense: they are differentiations of a common sensible texture, the flesh. The touch and the vision are not governed by touching and seeing. The touchable and the visible attract touching and seeing, according to Merleau-Ponty, even to the point that “we no longer know which sees and which is seen.”⁴ The divergence between the seer and the visible is between two “total parts” of the texture of visibility: they are two folds⁵ of the flesh which form “two mirrors facing one another.”⁶ The thickness of the flesh, in which the seer is “caught up,”⁷ brings itself forth as an “element,” as a “*general thing*” which gives a “style” to the visible in our experience.⁸ Merleau-Ponty gives examples of colors, yellow and red: a color has “an ontological function, it becomes apt to represent all things.”⁹ In the working notes, Merleau-Ponty states: “the things are structures, frameworks, the stars of our life: not before us, laid out as perspective spectacles, but gravitating about us.”¹⁰

In this chapter, I have explicated how Merleau-Ponty approaches the invisible of the visible, the “element” of the flesh, through Husserl’s idea of the institution, Heidegger’s idea of verbal essence, Bergson’s idea of differentiation of the memory, and Freud’s idea of unconscious associations. I have shown that according to Merleau-Ponty the seer and the visible are differentiations of their adhesion to the flesh, that the visible and the seer relate in the invisible depth of the visibility as a “double reference.” Merleau-Ponty does not limit his idea of the ontological structure of connection and difference only to the sensible experience, but shows that expression, language, and thought can also be ap-

¹ VI, 180–182/136–138.

² See Chapter Two.

³ VI, 187/142.

⁴ VI, 183/139.

⁵ VI, 192/146.

⁶ VI, 183/139.

⁷ VI, 183/139.

⁸ VI, 184/139.

⁹ VI, 271/217.

¹⁰ VI, 273/220.

proached within it. His idea is not that, for example, language is *grounded* on the sensible, mute experience, but that the silence is within language, that language and the sensible texture are intertwined because language expresses *something*. Language has a thickness and a depth: it is instituted.¹ The invisible of the visible comes forth in expression, in language, and in thinking.² In a similar manner, as the seer is possessed by the visible, it is that “language has us and that it is not we who have language.”³ In the following, I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the reversibility or double reference within sensible essences and expression.

In the chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty refers to the “paradox of expression:”⁴ when expression attempts to express what is not yet expressed, the mute being, it not only expresses it but transforms it into expressed. There is a connection and difference between expression and the expressed: “between sound and meaning, speech and what it means to say, there is still the relation of reversibility, and no question of priority, since the exchange of words is exactly the differentiation of which the thought is the integral.”⁵ Expression also has its thickness and depth: the silence of expression – something in the expression which remains unexpressed. There is the invisible of expression, language, and thought. Merleau-Ponty states in his working notes: “[T]he invisible structure can be understood only through its relation to logos, to speech – – The invisible meaning is the inner framework of speech.”⁶

According to Merleau-Ponty, our experiences have a coherence which is not contradictory with the differentiation. He presents a question of a “center,” of the unity of experience:

[W]e are asking precisely what is that central vision that joins the scattered visions, that unique touch that governs the whole tactile life of my body as a unit, that *I think* that must be able to accompany all our experiences. We are proceeding toward the center, we are seeking to comprehend how there is a center, what the unity consists of, we are not saying that it is a sum or a result; and if we make the thought appear upon an infrastructure of vision, this is only in virtue of the uncontested evidence that one must see or feel in some way in order to think, that every thought known to us occurs to a flesh.⁷

The “I think” occurs to a flesh and the visible things appear to a visible body. Merleau-Ponty states that this does not allow us to suggest an “empiricist genesis of thought.”⁸ The “center” of the visions is not a positive being: “the ‘visibles’ themselves, in the last analysis, they too are only centered on a nucleus of absence.”⁹ According to Merleau-Ponty, “this central cavity of the visible which

¹ VI, 230/176.

² VI, 277/224.

³ VI, 247/194.

⁴ VI, 189/144.

⁵ VI, 190n*/145n5.

⁶ VI, 277/224.

⁷ VI, 191/145–146.

⁸ VI, 191/145.

⁹ VI, 283/229.

is my vision" defines "a vision in general and a constant style of visibility from which I cannot detach myself."¹ Our relation to our vision remains open: "everything comes to pass [...] as though the visible body remained incomplete, gaping open; as though the physiology of vision did not succeed in closing the nervous functioning in upon itself."² Through the openness of our flesh, we may also find our way to objectification, and the flesh becomes a "formative medium of the object and the subject."³ Yet, the flesh of vision as an absence, as a *hollow*, is not the "in-itself," neither subject nor object – it cannot be understood within the Cartesian ontological duality:

We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit – for then it would be the union of contradictories – but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being.⁴

The flesh is not a thinking subject, the pure mind, which objectifies its body. The flesh is not the body upon which the mind is based, and which escapes from the mind's grasp. It is not a contradiction of distinction and union.⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, to "designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire."⁶ Merleau-Ponty does not explicate his concept of the element by any references to the pre-Socratic philosophers. Nevertheless, it is clear that "the old term" not only represents the persistence and generality of the elemental nature, but also to its dynamic productivity. Robert Vallier explicates Merleau-Ponty's notion through his reading of Plato's *Timaeus*: the element means "a continual movement of differentiation, an on-going inscription of difference that enables [...] all things."⁷ There is union and separation, connection and differentiation of the elemental.⁸

In the working notes published with *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty refers to Gaston Bachelard's conception of the elements: Merleau-Ponty states that, for him, being and the imaginary are not "objects" and "entities" in the sense that Sartre understands them, but "elements" in the sense that Bachelard defines them.⁹ Bachelard "psychoanalyses" elements in the imagi-

¹ VI, 192/146.

² VI, 193/147. Merleau-Ponty refers here to his early work *The Structure of Behavior*. It would be interesting to explicate the ontological structure also on the level of the "nervous functioning," organic life, and matter, investigated in the early work. I will leave this aside here.

³ VI, 193/147.

⁴ VI, 193–194/147.

⁵ See Chapter One.

⁶ VI, 184/139.

⁷ Vallier 2009, 147.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly refer to any pre-Socratic philosophers in this context but let me add that in the conception of the four elements by Empedocles (c. 490 – c. 430 BC) there is a dynamic movement of union and separation between the elements: love connects the elements and strife differentiates them, but by bringing together, love also divides the elements from themselves, and by differentiation, strife creates everything else (Burnet 1920, 166).

⁹ VI, 320/267.

nary sense in order “to found a metaphysics of the imagination.”¹ According to Bachelard, the elements are not experimental in the sense of modern chemistry, but imaginary in the sense of alchemy: they show the “archetypes of the unconscious.”² Yet, the elemental is not immaterial or unreal: on the contrary, the poetic reverie which plumbs the oneiric dimension of the elemental reveals the deepening of the material reality. Bachelard states that “imagination is not [...] the faculty that forms the images of the reality; it is the faculty that forms the images which go beyond the reality, which *sing* the reality.”³ Rather than being about forms, imagination is about materiality.⁴ It follows the elemental materiality and its images. “Material imagination” shows the vision which is “adhesion to the invisible.”⁵ Before we begin to reflect and contemplate, we dream: “Before being a conscious spectacle, every scenery is an oneiric experience.”⁶

According to Merleau-Ponty, the “elements” of the imaginary are “not objects, but fields, subdued being, non-thetic being, being before being – and moreover involving their auto-inscription [...] not a *coincidence*, but dehiscence that knows itself as such.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty states:

Perception is not first a perception of *things*, but a perception of *elements* (water, air...) of *rays of the world*, of things which are dimensions, which are worlds, I slip on these “elements” and here I am in the *world*, I slip from the “subjective” to Being.⁸

Merleau-Ponty refers to Bachelard’s idea that “each sense has its own imaginary.”⁹ Every sense has its dimension which becomes a total part, an element of being, a ray of the world, a deepening of the vision. According to Merleau-Ponty, the imaginary “gives vision that which clothes it within, the imaginary texture of the real.”¹⁰ Before opening to an objectified world of knowledge, our vision opens the “oneiric universe of carnal essences.”¹¹

In the chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty explicates that the inability to coincide with our own experience and with our own body, the “slip away,” the “shift,” the “spread” between our two hands, is not a failure.¹² Accordingly, the “metamorphosis of the one experience into the other,” the “hinge between them,” remains “irremediably hidden from me,” but that does not mean that this “invisible” or “untouchable” is nothing, that it is empty.¹³

¹ Bachelard 1994, xviii. On Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Bachelard see Saint Aubert 2004, 255–270. See also Mazis 2016, 255–269.

² Bachelard 1963, 57. Translation by JH.

³ Bachelard 1974, 23. Translation by JH.

⁴ Bachelard 1974, 26.

⁵ Bachelard 1974, 24. Translation by JH.

⁶ Bachelard 1974, 6. Translation by JH.

⁷ VI, 320/267.

⁸ VI, 271/218.

⁹ VI, 298/245.

¹⁰ OE, 24/126.

¹¹ OE, 35/130.

¹² VI, 194/148.

¹³ VI, 194–195/148.

[T]his hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another. [...] [T]he primary visibility, that of the *quale* and of the things, does not come without a second visibility, that of the lines of force and dimensions, the massive flesh without a rarefied flesh, the momentary body without a glorified body.¹

Every visible thing has an invisible depth, which is not only an abyss but the productivity of sense: the imaginary and elemental depth. Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl's distinction between external and internal horizons. In *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl states that the external horizon is about "objects toward which I am not now actually turned but toward which I can turn at any time and which I can anticipate [...]."² The internal horizon is "the complex of characteristics not yet perceived, associated with every real thing offering itself to experience."³ According to Merleau-Ponty, the external horizon is something "which everybody knows."⁴ It is the visible which we can see whenever we want, for example, a side of the table that is actually hidden, but which we can see if we move our body. The internal horizon is "that darkness stuffed with visibility of which their surface is but the limit," which is "a new type of being, a being of porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included with it."⁵ It is the invisible of the visible which cannot be made visible as such, but which is the "interior armature" of the visible, which the visible "manifests and which it conceals."⁶

Merleau-Ponty explicates the invisible of the visible by a reference to Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*. According to Merleau-Ponty, no one "has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible, in describing an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth."⁷ In the first volume of the work *Swann's Way*, Proust describes how Charles Swann reflects on a sonata by Vinteuil, and especially on the "little phrase" of the song which, every time Swann hears it, arouses the affection of love which he feels towards Odette de Crécy. Or rather, the little phrase supplemented Odette's affection to Swann, which he feels lacking: the sonata gives the love "its own mysterious essence."⁸ The little phrase becomes the emblem of love, and music is the element of love. Proust writes:

It was the charms of an intimate sadness that it sought to imitate, to re-create, and their very essence, for all that it consists in being incommunicable and in appearing trivial to everyone except him who experiences them, had been captured and made visible by the little phrase. So much so that it caused their value to be

¹ VI, 195/148.

² EU, 28/33.

³ EU, 30/35.

⁴ VI, 195/148.

⁵ VI, 195/148-149.

⁶ VI, 195/149.

⁷ VI, 195/149.

⁸ Proust 2000, 89/330.

acknowledged, their divine sweetness savoured, by all those same onlookers, if they were at all musical – who then would fail to recognize them in real life, in every individual love that came into being beneath their eyes. Doubtless the form in which it had codified those charms could not be resolved into rational discourse. But ever since, more than a year before, discovering to him many of the riches of his own soul, the love of music had, for a time at least, been born in him, Swann had regarded musical motifs as actual ideas, of another world, of another order, ideas veiled in shadow, unknown, impenetrable to the human mind, but none the less perfectly distinct from one another, unequal among themselves in value and significance.¹

According to Merleau-Ponty, Proust shows that “literature, music, the passions, but also the experience of the visible world are – no less than is the science of Lavoisier and Ampère – the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas.”² Nevertheless, the invisible cannot be reduced to pure ideality and separated from the sensible where it imposes itself. The “unknown ‘forces’ and ‘laws’” which the visible covers cannot become present without the “screen” of the visible.³ According to Merleau-Ponty, “there is no vision without the screen: the ideas we are speaking of would not be better known to us if we had no body and no sensibility; it is then that they would be inaccessible to us.”⁴ In the course *Institution in Personal and Public History* Merleau-Ponty analyses the little phrase: “At this extreme point, love resembles the ideas for which the writer searches (and which, like those of music and painting, are not isolatable, separable from [the] sensible material).”⁵

As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty the texture of the sensible, the sensible material, is not a flat being but a being of depth, “porosity, pregnancy.”⁶ The ideality and essentiality within the sensible material, the invisible of the visible, is not immaterial and abstract: “they could not be given to us *as ideas* except in a carnal experience.”⁷ The “carnal experience” is the experience of depth, of distance and withdrawing, not an experience of coincidence, of plain and simple actual givenness. According to Merleau-Ponty, the ideas “owe their authority, their fascinating, indestructible power, precisely to the fact that they are in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart.”⁸ Here the “transparency” is not contrary to the thickness and opacity: it is the imposingness of the ideas, the evidence of an idea as an impossibility to not think according to it.⁹ The carnal experience does not only give us an “occasion to think them.”¹⁰

In a similar manner that the touch of our left hand withdraws from the touch of our right hand, and our body as touching and our body as touched do

¹ Proust 2000, 215–216/477–478.

² VI, 196/149. Proust 2000, 219/481.

³ VI, 196/149–150.

⁴ VI, 196/150.

⁵ IP, 67/31.

⁶ VI, 195/149.

⁷ VI, 197/150.

⁸ VI, 197/150.

⁹ VI, 274–275/221.

¹⁰ VI, 197/150.

not coincide but are connected in the untouchable,¹ our attempt to take a hold of the sensible idea does not succeed as “it retreats the measure that we approach,” and yet this “retreat” shows our inevitable connection with it in the invisible of the visible texture.² We can, of course, explicate and analyze the sensible ideas, but the “explication does not give us the idea itself; it is but a second version of it, a more manageable derivative.”³ Merleau-Ponty refers to Proust, who describes the withdrawing of the ideas. Let me quote the passage:

When, after that first evening at the Verdurins', he had had the little phrase played over to him again, and had sought to disentangle from his confused impressions how it was that, like a perfume or a caress, it swept over and enveloped him, he had observed that it was to the closeness of the intervals between the five notes which composed it and to the constant repetition of two of them that was due that impression of a frigid and withdrawn sweetness; but in reality he knew that he was basing this conclusion not upon the phrase itself, but merely upon certain equivalents, substituted (for his mind's convenience) for the mysterious entity of which he had become aware, before ever he knew the Verdurins, at that earlier party when for the first time he had heard the sonata played.⁴

Swann analyses how the little phrase is formed in musical notation, but he knows that the essence of the little phrase, “the mysterious entity,” cannot be approached by understanding its notational composition. The essence is instituted “between the five notes.”⁵ The essence is not a positive something, it is not the five notes themselves, and yet it is attached to them. The essence of the little phrase can be approached only as a certain absence within the sensible experience:

He knew that the very memory of the piano falsified still further the perspective in which he saw the elements of music, that the field open to the musician is not a miserable stave of seven notes, but an immeasurable keyboard (still almost entirely unknown) on which, here and there only, separated by the thick darkness of its unexplored tracts, some few among the millions of keys of tenderness, of passion, of courage, of serenity, which compose it, each one differing from all the rest as one universe differs from another, have been discovered by a few great artists who do us the service, when they awaken in us the emotion corresponding to the theme they have discovered, of showing us what richness, what variety lies hidden, unknown to us, in that vast, unfathomed and forbidding night of our soul which we take to be an impenetrable void.⁶

The depth of the sensible opens to the “night of our soul,” to the “nocturnal reality of the soul,” as Merleau-Ponty states in his lecture course “L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui.”⁷ The sensible idea is within the depth of the sensible, but only approachable through the sensible. The fascination of the idea comes from the invisible: the musical idea is not in the sound, not in the

¹ VI, 307/254.

² VI, 197/150. See VI, 199/152.

³ VI, 197/150.

⁴ Proust 2000, 216/478.

⁵ VI, 198/151.

⁶ Proust 2000, 216–217/478.

⁷ NC, 195. Translation by JH. See Chapter 5.1.

note, but it comes from the depth behind or between the sounds and the notes.¹ The sensible idea comes from the “inexhaustible depth,”² from the “immemorial depth,”³ from the “immeasurable keyboard (still almost entirely unknown).”⁴ Merleau-Ponty states:

As the secret blackness of the milk, of which Valéry spoke, is accessible only through its whiteness, the idea of light or the musical idea doubles up the lights and sounds from beneath, is their other side or their depth. Their carnal texture presents to us what is absent from all flesh; it is a furrow that traces itself out magically under our eyes without a tracer, a certain hollow, a certain interior, a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing [...].⁵

The negative dimension of the invisible, which is “not nothing,” but the fecundity and pregnancy of the visible, is “the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being.”⁶ Merleau-Ponty describes that the invisible of the visible is opened by the first initiative experience, not as “the positing of a content” but as “the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated.”⁷ As I argued above, it is this passivity of experience which Merleau-Ponty describes with Husserl’s idea of the *institution*, as an interrogation of a dimension. Merleau-Ponty writes in his working notes:

The soul always thinks: this is in it a property of its state, it cannot not think because a *field* has been opened in which *something* or the *absence* of something is always inscribed. This is not an *activity* of the soul, nor a production of thoughts in the plural, and I am not even the author of that hollow that forms within me by the passage from the present to the retention, it is not I who makes myself think any more than it is I who makes my heart beat. From there leave the philosophy of *Erlebnisse* and pass to the philosophy of our *Urstiftung*.⁸

The weight of the past takes us in its possession: “We do not possess the musical or sensible ideas, precisely because they are negativity or absence circumscribed; they possess us.”⁹ Merleau-Ponty describes how the musician who plays the sonata does not produce it, but is at its service, and the “sonata sings through him.”¹⁰ The invisible idea does not remain in the past, but becomes articulated in the present by the performer: it is a “possibility that is not the shadow of the actual but is its principle.”¹¹

¹ VI, 198/151.

² VI, 188/143.

³ OE, 86/147.

⁴ Proust 2000, 216/478.

⁵ VI, 197–198/150–151. According to Sartre and Bachelard, the expression “secret blackness of the milk” is from Jacques Audiberti (1899–1965) (EN, 647/601; Bachelard 1982, 23).

⁶ VI, 198/151.

⁷ VI, 198/151.

⁸ VI, 274–275/221.

⁹ VI, 198–199/151.

¹⁰ VI, 199/151.

¹¹ VI, 199/152.

There is, according to Merleau-Ponty, “a cohesion without concept,” “an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions.”¹ Merleau-Ponty discusses “sensible ideality” through the literary expression by Proust, but what he is aiming at is a general structure of being: “once we have entered this strange domain, one does not see how there could be any question of *leaving* it.”² The structure of connection and difference not only applies to the field of sensible experience, but also to the field of the “ideas of the intellect.”³ Merleau-Ponty writes in his working notes:

Universality of our world, not according to its “content” (we are far from knowing it entirely), not as recorded fact (the “perceived”) but according to its configuration, its ontological structure which envelops every possible and which every possible leads back to.⁴

Merleau-Ponty is not describing a certain content of experience – Swann’s love for example – or a certain idea of the experience – Swann’s analysis of the little phrase – but the structure of experience and thought: the invisible as a *principle*, which gives the style for the experience and for the thought. The thought is already within the sensible experience: “the ‘pure’ ideality already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body.”⁵ I showed in the previous part of this chapter that Merleau-Ponty re-formulates the Cartesian relation between mind and body through his conception of the flesh as a texture or dimension of connection and difference: “the soul is the hollow of the body, the body is the distention of the soul.”⁶ Merleau-Ponty states:

[T]he immediate and dualist distinction between the visible and the invisible, between extension and thought, being impugned, not that extension be thought or thought extension, but because they are the obverse and the reverse of one another, and the one forever behind the other [...].⁷

The sensible experience of the union of mind and body is not only a condition for the pure thought, a withdrawing obscurity which must be supposed but which we can leave behind, a body become an idea, but instead, the mind thinks only through the obscure dimension, its clarity is completely rooted in obscurity which is not nothing. According to Merleau-Ponty:

[T]he ‘pure’ ideality [...] derives from the fundamental mystery of those notions ‘without equivalent,’ as Proust calls them, that lead their shadowy life in the night of the mind only because they have been divined at the junctures of the visible world.⁸

¹ VI, 199/152.

² VI, 199/152.

³ Proust 2000, 217/479. VI, 199/152.

⁴ VI, 282/229.

⁵ VI, 200/152.

⁶ VI, 286/233.

⁷ VI, 200/152.

⁸ VI, 200/152–153.

According to Merleau-Ponty, “the pure ideality is itself not without flesh,” but thought is not only within the flesh of the body: there is an emancipation from the flesh of the body to the flesh of language.¹ Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a “conquering, active, creative language,” an “operative language,” which brings forth the invisible idea “between signs and signified, sound and meaning,” in a similar way as the musical idea comes forth between “the ‘little phrase’ and the five notes found in it afterwards.”² The already acquired meanings, “musical notation and grammar and linguistics and the ‘ideas of the intelligence’,” form the visible texture in which something new can be expressed: they are the sedimentation of the institution, the connecting tissue which enables the reactivation and differentiation of the institution, and which “make the mathematician go straight to entities no one has yet seen, make the *operative* language and algorithm make use of a second visibility, and make ideas be the other side of language and calculus.”³ According to Merleau-Ponty, in a similar way as the little phrase “possesses the violinist,” the instituted ideas “haunt” our thoughts and “they remain beyond the words,” just as the little phrase “remains beyond the notes.”⁴ The invisible ideas, the instituted senses, cannot be rendered visible, cannot be completely reactivated, because “they are that certain divergence, that never-finished differentiation, that openness to be reopened.”⁵

As the vision is possessed by the visible, the expression is possessed by the sense: the vision is inscribed in the visible, and the expression is inscribed in the linguistic sense. There is a reference back to itself in the structure of the flesh: a dehiscence of the visible to itself and a dehiscence of the language to itself. According to Merleau-Ponty, “the operative Word is the obscure region whence comes the instituted light, as the muted reflection of the body upon itself is what we call natural light.”⁶ It is no longer a question of a reflective return to the unreflected, and the withdrawing of the unreflected from the reflection, but a reversibility in which the invisible remains within the vision and the silence remains within the linguistic expression. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty states that the “ontological framework” of the body already includes the “possibilities of the language.”⁷

The “wild being” is not outside of the language which brings it forth as a “wild meaning.”⁸ Merleau-Ponty refers, once again, to Husserl’s idea that the beginning of philosophy “is the [...] still dumb [...] experience, which now must be made to utter its own sense [...].”⁹ Merleau-Ponty connects Husserl’s idea to a poem, “La Pythie,” by Paul Valéry (1871–1945): “in a sense [...] language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of

¹ VI, 200/153.

² VI, 201/153.

³ VI, 201/153.

⁴ VI, 201/153.

⁵ VI, 201/153.

⁶ VI, 202/154.

⁷ VI, 203/155.

⁸ VI, 203/155.

⁹ Hua 1, 77/38.

the things, the waves, and the forests.”¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, there is no dialectical synthesis between sensible experience and language: “they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth.”²

4.6 Wild Being

In the chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty offers only some preliminary considerations and formulations. His plan was to give more specific insight into the relations between the sensible and language: “We shall have to follow more closely this transition from the mute world to the speaking world.”³ Merleau-Ponty did not have time to properly explicate his idea of the relation between nature and *logos*, “the *wild (sauvage)* principle of Logos:” “It is this wild or brute being that intervenes at all levels to overcome the problems of the classical ontology [...]”⁴ Nevertheless, “The Intertwining – The Chiasm” and the working notes give us a picture of what kind of ideas Merleau-Ponty was elaborating. The vertical or wild being is involved at every level as a presence of an absence, a proximity of a distance, a connection of a difference.

In the following, I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the vertical or wild being, although it is clear that the possibility of misinterpretation increases when reading Merleau-Ponty’s last remarks and sketches. Moreover, even if Merleau-Ponty’s final drafts are fragmentary and incomplete, they also have a great density of ideas, and I will not attempt to clarify them exhaustively: I will only follow one possible line of interpretation, based on the point of view of the history of Cartesian philosophy.

At the end of the chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty states that the “ultimate truth” is the reversibility. In his working notes, he shows that the reversible “double reference” of connection and difference exists not only within a certain dimension and its relation to itself, but also between different dimensions. In a similar manner as a sensible – the yellow color in Merleau-Ponty’s example – can become a “total part” and open up a deepening dimension which can present the world, a linguistic expression can open up the texture of language as a total part. Merleau-Ponty explicates in his working notes:

¹ VI, 203–204/155. In the lecture “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui,” Merleau-Ponty makes the same juxtaposition between Husserl and Valéry’s poem (NC, 186–187). Valéry writes: “Honneur des Hommes, Saint LANGAGE, / Discours prophétique et paré, / Belles chaînes en qui s’engage / Le dieu dans le chair égaré, / Illumination, largesse! / Voici parler une Sagesse / Et sonner cette auguste Voix / Qui se connaît quand elle sonne / N’être plus la voix de personne / Tant que des ondes et des bois!” (Valéry 1976, 82.)

² VI, 204/155.

³ VI, 202/154. In the last working note published with *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty plans the book: “My plan: I The visible / II Nature / III Logos” (VI, 328/274).

⁴ VI, 264/211.

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. It is thus that the parts overlap (transparency), that the present does not stop at the limits of the visible (behind my back).¹

There is a dehiscence of the different dimensions one to another: the dimensions overlap, intertwine with each other. According to Merleau-Ponty: "It is in the universal structure 'world' – encroachment of everything upon everything, a being by promiscuity – that is found the reservoir whence proceeds this new absolute life."² In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty plans to explicate "a new type of intelligibility" through the "vertical being."³ It is "a meaning of Being absolutely different from the 'represented,' that is, as the vertical Being which none of the 'representations' exhaust and which all 'reach,' the wild Being."⁴ The "vertical being" is "the past that adheres to the present,"⁵ the "indestructible" past.⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, when considered through verticality, we cannot separate affection and reason, because they both have the same structure: "promiscuity with Being and the world."⁷ The vertical being is the being of depth, the invisible of the visible; it is not beyond our corporeal affectivity or language, but within them.

Merleau-Ponty uses the terms "vertical being," "wild being," and "brute being" in an analogous manner. These expressions designate the "progressive" and "incomplete" character of our relation to being.⁸ The productivity of a "wild being" is not "natural productivity" limited to "external" nature but it is also within language, expression and thought – within our "internal" nature. Nature is not contrary to language: according to Merleau-Ponty, "everything is cultural in us [...] and everything is natural in us [...]."⁹ There is "pregnancy," "productivity" and "fecundity" in our relation to being: "a power to break forth."¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty states:

It is a question of that *λόγος* that pronounces itself silently in each sensible thing, inasmuch as it varies around a certain type of message, which we can have an idea of only through our carnal participation in its sense, only by espousing by our body its manner of "signifying" – or of that *λόγος* uttered whose internal structure sublimates our carnal relation with the world.¹¹

According to Merleau-Ponty, our relation with being is not "perception as cognition of an object," but "vision [...] which sees itself within us, as poetry redis-

¹ VI, 271/218.

² VI, 287/234.

³ VI, 322/268.

⁴ VI, 306/253.

⁵ VI, 297/244.

⁶ VI, 296/243.

⁷ VI, 292/239.

⁸ VI, 232/178.

⁹ VI, 307/253.

¹⁰ VI, 262/208.

¹¹ VI, 261/208.

covers what articulates itself within us, unbeknown to us.”¹ Moreover, “every painting, every action, every human enterprise is a crystallization of time, a cipher of transcendence [...] a certain sampling of the Being in indivision, a certain manner of modulating time and space.”² There is a double relation to being: connection and difference, adhesion and differentiation. According to Merleau-Ponty, being “appears as containing everything that will ever be said, and yet leaving us to create it.”³

There is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a “negative infinity” of being which is not limitlessness, but openness.⁴ Merleau-Ponty argues that the problem of the Cartesian notion of infinity is that it is positive: even if Descartes supposes a radical contingency and the absolute omnipotence of God, it is “congealed or given to a thought that possesses it at least enough to be able to prove it.”⁵ For Merleau-Ponty, infinity is “what exceeds us,” that is, “[m]eaning or reason which *are* contingency.”⁶ It is infinity in the sense that the invisible within our experience is never exhausted, and our expression of it remains incomplete: “Infinity of the *Lebenswelt* and not infinity of idealization.”⁷

To be clear, even though Merleau-Ponty considers the Cartesian idea of infinite God, as well as the Schellingean idea of God – which are within the history of Christianity – his intention is, nevertheless, not theological.⁸ Moreover,

¹ VI, 261/208.

² VI, 262/208.

³ VI, 224/170. Merleau-Ponty uses ancient Greek terms and states: “it is the *λόγος ἐνδιάθετος* which calls for the *λόγος προφορικός*” (VI, 224/170). Plutarch (c. CE 46 – CE 120) states about the difference of these two forms of speech: “But the statement that there are two kinds of speech, one residing in the mind, the gift of Hermes the Leader, and the other residing in the utterance, merely an attendant and instrument, is threadbare [...]” (*Moralia*, 777B). See also Dupond 2000, 286; Slatman 2003, 137.

⁴ VI, 223/169.

⁵ VI, 223/169.

⁶ VI, 223/169.

⁷ VI, 223/169.

⁸ Nevertheless, a more specific study on the relation between Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and Christianity would be needed. In his article “Faith and Good Faith,” he criticizes Catholicism as a social phenomenon and its turn away from the visible things to the inner truth (SNS, 307–308/173). Bernard Flynn refers to that article and argues: “There is no [...] theological problematic in Merleau-Ponty’s work. He never retracted his critique of Christian faith [...]” (Flynn 2013, 282.) Glen Mazis brings forth other, later texts where Merleau-Ponty considers the relation between his philosophy and Christianity (Mazis 2016, 161–162). In “The Primacy of Perception,” Merleau-Ponty states: “My viewpoint differs from the Christian viewpoint to the extent that the Christian believes in another side of things where the ‘*renversement du pour au contre*’ takes place. In my view this ‘reversal’ takes place before our eyes. And perhaps some Christians would agree that the other side of things must already be visible in the environment in which we live.” (Prp, 72/27.) In the article “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty states: “[T]he Christian God wants nothing to do with a vertical relation of subordination. [...] Claudel goes so far as to say that God is not above but beneath us – meaning that we do not find Him as a suprasensible idea, but as another ourselves which dwells in and authenticates our darkness. Transcendence no longer hangs over man: he becomes, strangely, its privileged bearer.” (S, 114/71.) As Mazis points out, Merleau-Ponty returns to these Christian themes in the very last working note included in *The Visible and the Invisible*: “My plan: I The visible / II Nature / III Logos / must be presented without any compromise with *humanism*, nor moreover with *naturalism*, nor finally with *theology* – – Precisely what has to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures – which was Spinoza’s division. / Hence we do not begin *ad homine* as Descartes (the 1st part is not ‘reflection’) we

Merleau-Ponty states that even if modern science rejects the “hypothesis of God,” there remains an idea of absolute truth within science.¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, the “concept of Nature, such as it is often allowed by scientists, belongs to a conception that is entirely theological in its infrastructure.”² Merleau-Ponty opposes his conception of being to the idea of positive infinity, being in-itself, “being as Object,” the “objectified Infinity,” of which “the being of science is itself a part or an aspect.”³ Here, I will leave aside the question of the possibilities of Merleau-Ponty’s new ontology in relation to the sciences, but let me recall that Merleau-Ponty argues that it is also within contemporary science that we can find a “possibility of another ontology.”⁴

Merleau-Ponty regards it as necessary to explicate his new ontology in opposition to the Cartesian conception of infinity and God: the unconditioned condition of all truth that is incomprehensible to us.⁵ In Descartes’ conception, the ultimate truth of God not only guarantees the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions, but also sustains our union with the body.⁶ In Cartesian ontology, God is the ultimate answer for the question of the relations between mind and body, between distinction and union. It is, finally, God that redeems the Cartesian ontology of not being contradictory. In his letter to Elizabeth, where he touches on the problem of the contradiction between the union and the distinction, Descartes asserts that even though it is necessary to “once in a lifetime” understand the “principles of metaphysics, since they are what gives us the knowledge of God and of our soul,” it can be, nevertheless, “very harmful to occupy one’s intellect frequently in meditating upon them,” and thus it is enough “to content oneself with keeping in one’s memory and one’s belief the conclusions which one has once drawn from them.”⁷ In Descartes’ view, it is not possible for the human mind to consider at the same time how there are two domains of evidence, the distinction of mind and body and the union of mind and body, because this would be contradictory.⁸ The ultimate truth of our condition is God, and God is unconditioned, absolute, omnipotent, and therefore also contingent. In Cartesian philosophy, God forms the ground for all our knowledge, but is incomprehensible to us. Descartes does not regard it as pos-

do not take Nature in the sense of the Scholastics (the 2d part is not Nature in itself, a philosophy of Nature, but a description of the man-animality *intertwining*) and we do not take Logos and truth in the sense of the Word (the Part III is neither logic, nor teleology of consciousness, but a study of the language that has man) [...] It will be much closer to that of Marx [...]” (VI, 328/274–275.) Thus, Merleau-Ponty explicitly distances himself from Christianity, but he also shows that he is well aware that some of his conceptions have a Christian connotation.

¹ N, 123/88. See Chapter 1.5.

² N, 123/88.

³ VI, 230/176.

⁴ N, 359, translation by JH. See Chapter 3.1.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty states in his working notes: “For me the infinity of Being that one can speak of is *operative*, militant finitude: the openness of the *Umwelt* – – I am against finitude in the empirical sense, a factual existence that *has limits*, and this is why I am for metaphysics.” (VI, 305/251.)

⁶ See Chapter One.

⁷ AT III, 695/CSM-K, 228.

⁸ AT III, 693/CED, 70.

sible to explicate the unconditioned condition, except in terms of perfection: it is necessary that God must exist, because “existence is one of the perfections.”¹ God is thus the supposition of the absolutely “in-itself,” the purely ideal and perfect being.

Yet, there is another relation to God in Descartes’ philosophy: our “natural inclinations,” which are “taught by nature” and which must contain “some truth,” because “if nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God.”² According to Merleau-Ponty, for Descartes “this natural productivity appears as the very productivity of God.”³ There is, in this sense, an *indirect* relation to the productivity of God in the experience of the union of mind and body, which remains obscure for the intellect. Nevertheless, here we come back to Descartes’ argument according to which it would be contradictory to conceive of the union and the distinction at the same time. Moreover, Descartes writes to Elizabeth that a more thorough explication of the union “might have been harmful” for the argument of their distinction.⁴ Descartes, thus, indicates the possibility to understand a relation between *natura naturans*, “natural production,” and *natura naturata*, “objective nature,” but quickly turns away from it. Let me quote Merleau-Ponty’s *Eye and Mind*:

We have to go to these lengths to find in Descartes something like a metaphysics of depth. For we are not present at the birth of this Truth; God’s being is for us an abyss. An anxious trembling quickly mastered; for Descartes it is just as futile to plumb that abyss as it is to think the space of the soul and the depth of the visible. Our very position, he would say, disqualifies us from looking into such things. That is the secret of Cartesian equilibrium: a metaphysics which gives us definitive reasons to leave off doing metaphysics, which validates our self-evidence while limiting it, which opens up our thinking without rending it.⁵

In his later works, Merleau-Ponty finds in the philosophy of Schelling an elaboration of “the abyssal Being that Descartes opened up and so quickly closed again.”⁶ In the article on Husserl, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” he states: “What resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the ‘barbarous’ principle Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it.”⁷ In his working notes published with *The Visible and the*

¹ AT VII, 67/CSM II, 46.

² AT VII, 80/CSM II, 56. See Chapter 1.6.

³ N, 169/125.

⁴ AT III, 665/CSM-K, 218.

⁵ OE, 55–56/137.

⁶ OE, 58/138.

⁷ S, 290/178. Translation modified by JH. In his article, “Naturalized Phenomenology,” Zahavi attempts to find support for his claim that the imminent relation between natural sciences and phenomenology should lead to a “modest” naturalization of phenomenology, from Merleau-Ponty’s reference to Schelling’s barbaric principle (Zahavi 2010, 11). Without taking any stance in the topic of Zahavi’s article, his reference to Merleau-Ponty’s statement in “The Philosopher and His Shadow” about the “‘barbarous’ source” of Schelling which “resists phenomenology within us” does not support naturalism, because “natural being” does not refer here to empirical nature but to the “primal nature” described by Schelling, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a “principle older than God itself” (NC, 57, transla-

Invisible, Merleau-Ponty also refers to the “indestructible, the barbaric Principle,” an idea of Schelling.¹ Let me explicate Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Schelling’s philosophy.

In the lecture course *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty gives a reading of Schelling’s philosophy of nature. Between the philosophies of Descartes and Schelling, Kant is the central figure. Merleau-Ponty states: “In Descartes, humanism appeared as a task in the midst of a luminous intelligible world. In Kant, on the other hand, humanism appears at the center: it is the human subject who carries Being.”² According to Merleau-Ponty, Kant’s famous Copernican revolution in philosophy has two meanings. First, being is understood only in correlation to human consciousness, as a mere representation, which has the result that nature “loses all its savageness.”³ Second, the subject becomes absolute, a power to construct, and nature is known as the construction of the consciousness.⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, “Kant’s entire philosophy is an effort to unify these two meanings.”⁵ Merleau-Ponty argues that Kant opposes nature and human being: the human “brings Nature to completion by making it emerge in an order that is not its own, by making it pass into another order.”⁶ Merleau-Ponty concludes that even though for Kant, “Nature is no longer constructed by God, but by human Reason,” Kant does not completely abandon the Cartesian idea of nature.⁷

In Kant’s philosophy, the ultimate being of God becomes negative: “If one must conceive God, then he must appear with the character of nonbeing or of the abyss [...]”⁸ Merleau-Ponty refers to “The Impossibility of a Cosmological Proof for the Existence of God” in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*:

The unconditioned necessity, which we need so indispensably as the ultimate sustainer of all things, is for human reason the true abyss. Even eternity [...] does not make such a dizzying impression on the mind; for eternity only measures the duration of things, but it does not sustain that duration. One cannot resist the thought of it, but one also cannot bear it that a being that we represent to ourselves as the highest among all possible beings might, as it were, say to itself: “I am from eternity to eternity, outside me is nothing except what is something merely through my will; but whence then am I?” Here everything gives way beneath us, and the greatest perfection as well as the smallest, hovers without support before speculative reason, for which it would cost nothing to let the one as much as the other disappear without the least obstacle.⁹

tion by JH). Schelling writes in his essay *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*: “It [the ground] is *nature* – in God, a being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct, from him” (Schelling 2006, 27).

¹ VI, 321/267.

² N, 40/21.

³ N, 42/23.

⁴ N, 42/23.

⁵ N, 43/23.

⁶ N, 47/26.

⁷ N, 59/36.

⁸ N, 59–60/37.

⁹ Kant 1998, 574. Cf. N, 59/36.

Whereas for Kant the lacuna of the reason is merely for human knowledge, and not for God itself, for Schelling it is the "definition of God."¹ Kant, in a certain sense, answers the problem in the same way as Descartes did: even if we humans do not know the ultimate truth, it must be that God knows everything in order to sustain our being.² In contrast, for Schelling, as he writes in *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, there is something in God that is both inseparable and distinct from God:

This ground of his existence, which God has in himself, is not God considered absolutely, that is, in so far as he exists; for it is only the ground of his existence. It [the ground] is *nature* - in God, a being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct, from him.³

Merleau-Ponty argues that in Schelling's philosophy the infinite is not understood as an essence, but as existence: "The idea of the infinite is no longer one of these ideas that we are able to think, no longer an idea at the summit of a hierarchy of beings."⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, there is a "fecund contradiction" between the finite and the infinite, as the finite "cannot be drawn analytically from the infinite."⁵ The relation between the infinite and the finite, the "relation of *naturans* and *naturata* is no longer a *one-way* relation."⁶ The infinite, *natura naturans*, is the abyss (*Abgrund*) which calls for the finite which it produces, *natura naturata*, but which is "not a dead effect."⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, Schelling's concept of nature is "both passive and active, product and productivity, but a productivity that always needs to produce something else."⁸

Merleau-Ponty refers to Schelling's concept of "erste Natur," which is nature not only before all reflection but even before God's creation of the world. Merleau-Ponty states, referring to Karl Löwith's interpretation of Schelling's philosophy: "Nature is neither God nor World."⁹ According to Merleau-Ponty,

¹ N, 60/37.

² See N, 60/37.

³ Schelling 2006, 27.

⁴ N, 60-61/37.

⁵ N, 61/37. Schelling states in the third version of *The Ages of the World*: "We grasp that the first existence is the contradiction itself and, inversely, that the first actuality can only persist in contradiction. All life must pass through the fire of contradiction. Contradiction is the power mechanism and what is innermost of life. From this it follows that, as an old book says, all deeds under the sun are full of trouble and everything languishes in toil, yet does not become tired, and all forces incessantly struggle against each other. Were there only unity and everything were in peace, then, forsooth, nothing would want to stir itself and everything would sink into listlessness." (Schelling 2000, 90.) Jason Wirth states in his introduction to the English translation: "[T]he system of freedom is a contradiction and that, rather than being an argument against the system, is the secret to its vitality. The system of freedom is the lucid in relationship to the dark, the ruly in relationship to the unruly, identity in relationship to difference." (Schelling 2000, xxi.)

⁶ N, 61/37.

⁷ N, 61/38.

⁸ N, 61/38. Here, we can suggest that there is a connection between Merleau-Ponty's concept of institution and his reading of Schelling.

⁹ N, 61/38. Löwith writes: "Nature itself is not God and also not world; it only belongs to the necessary nature of God and to the precondition of the world" (Löwith 1997, 148).

there is a “double movement”¹ of nature, “expansion and contraction, which Löwith compared to respiration.”² Nature “produces nothing definitive;” it is endless productivity.³ Merleau-Ponty states:

What inspires this idea of *erste Natur* in Schelling is the opposition to reflexive philosophies for which Being is contemporary with reflection, the feeling that Being is anterior to all reflection on Being and that reflection comes second. [...] We could speak, in Schelling, about a priority of existence over essence.⁴

There is nature and existence before all reason. According to Merleau-Ponty, “*erste Natur* is the most ancient element.”⁵ He refers to Löwith’s description of the primordial nature as an “abyss of the past.”⁶ It is nature “which always remains present in us and in all things.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty quotes Löwith:

The basic material of all life and existence, [...] is the terrible: a blind power and force, a barbaric principle that can be overcome but can never be eliminated, and that is “the foundation of all greatness and beauty.”⁸

Löwith refers to Schelling’s third version of *The Ages of the World*: “along with the darkness, [...] all might and that [...] barbaric principle that, when overcome but not annihilated, is the foundation of all greatness and beauty.”⁹ According to Merleau-Ponty, the “barbaric principle” is the “fundamental stuff (*étouffe*) of all life,” the “pre-being,” which is already there: “This excess of Being over the consciousness of Being is what Schelling wants to think in all its rigor.”¹⁰ It is a “destructive and savage but nevertheless necessary force.”¹¹ The barbaric principle designates the primordial ground (*Urgrund*) which is the “non-ground” (*Ungrund*):¹² it is “unruliness” or “anarchy” (*Regellose*). It is always before un-

¹ I have argued in this chapter that Merleau-Ponty describes the ontological structure as a “double reference” of connection and difference, two movements which imply each other.

² N, 61/38. Löwith writes: “If nature were to come to a halt at its first stage, there would be nothing more than an eternal exhaling and inhaling, a constant alternation of coming into being and passing away, of spreading itself out and going back into itself, and external drive to be, without real existence – that is, without constancy, stability, and self-consciousness” (Löwith 1997, 148). In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty states: “There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted” (OE, 31–32/129).

³ N, 61/38.

⁴ N, 61/38.

⁵ N, 61/38. Let me recall that in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty defines the flesh as an element (VI, 184/139).

⁶ Löwith 1997, 146; N, 61/38. In Löwith’s expression “abyss of the past” we can hear an echo of “a past which has never been a present” in *Phenomenology of Perception* (PP, 280/282) and the “immemorial depth” in *Eye and Mind* (OE, 86/147).

⁷ N, 61–62/38. Here we find the idea that Merleau-Ponty designates as “vertical past” and “vertical being” in the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*: “the past that adheres to the present” (VI, 297/244) and “‘vertical’ being is by definition progressive, incomplete” (VI, 232/178).

⁸ Löwith 1997, 149; N, 62/38.

⁹ Schelling 2000, 106.

¹⁰ N, 62/38.

¹¹ N, 62/38.

¹² Schelling 2006, 68.

derstanding, and withdraws from understanding. Schelling writes in *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*:

After the eternal act of self-revelation, everything in the world is, as we see it now, rule, order and form; but anarchy still lies in the ground, as if it could break through once again, and nowhere does it appear as if order and form were what is original but rather as if initial anarchy had been brought to order. This is the incomprehensible base of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground. The understanding is born in the genuine sense from that which is without understanding. Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance.¹

For Descartes, the natural productivity remains *incomprehensible*, because it is God's work and we cannot understand it. Schelling states: "The entire new European philosophy since its beginning (with Descartes) has the common defect that nature is not available for it and that it lacks a living ground."² According to Merleau-Ponty, Schelling "wanted to live and to feel" this "natural production," which for Kant is only a "dream."³ Natural productivity cannot be thought of as an essence, because then we would have an external relation to it.⁴ It must be approached from within. Merleau-Ponty explicates: "It is in my own nature that I find the originary state of the interior of things. [...] [W]hat we call the I and what we call a living being have a common root in pre-objective Being."⁵ Our relation with the pre-objective being is "not the projection of consciousness on everything, but rather a participation of my own life in everything, and vice versa."⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, we find "relations of *sympathy*, a sort of indivision, a sort of an internal life of things, which no longer means magical knowledge," but "rather that of an internal articulation among perceived things."⁷ Schelling's philosophy is about the "non-known," "unconscious" (*Ungewusst*); it is a "phenomenology of prereflexive Being."⁸

According to Merleau-Ponty, Schelling's idea of "intellectual intuition" is that consciousness recognizes itself in what is already organized in the unconscious.⁹ There is a "process of ordering itself" in nature, already before conscious understanding.¹⁰ Nature knows itself by itself; we can know nature because we are of it. Merleau-Ponty finds in Schelling something similar, that he calls the double reference of verticality: things become conscious of themselves in us because we are of these things, and reciprocally we are "the becoming-

¹ Schelling 2006, 29.

² Schelling 2006, 26.

³ N, 62/39. Merleau-Ponty takes the quote of Schelling from Karl Jaspers' work *Schelling*, published 1955.

⁴ N, 63/39.

⁵ N, 64/40.

⁶ N, 64/40.

⁷ N, 65/41. I referred above to Merleau-Ponty's idea of "a certain sampling of the Being in indivision" (VI, 262/208).

⁸ N, 66/41.

⁹ N, 67/42.

¹⁰ N, 68/43.

conscious of things.”¹ He refers to Schelling’s term “*Mitwissenschaft*,” that Schelling describes as “a very ancient doctrine that like is recognized by like.”² Nature is known by natural beings: “By the nature in us, we can know Nature; and reciprocally it is from ourselves that living beings and even space speak to us,” Merleau-Ponty states.³ It is in a human being that the productivity of nature becomes conscious: human consciousness “carries traces of all that Nature has been.”⁴

There is at the same time connection to nature because we are of nature, and a difference from nature because the “anarchy” of primordial nature withdraws from us and we assist in the productivity of nature, in its differentiation from the darkness to the light of understanding. If we want to return to the absolute, to the “Night,”⁵ we must let go of the conscious “I”: “The intuition is sleep, ‘ek-stasis,’ as Schelling says, and it is distinguished quite poorly from a state of unconsciousness.”⁶ Yet, this “sleep” of intuition which would go to the eternal, indivisible, and concentrated time would be deadly for us. Intuition remains a “blind contact,” and reflection is needed in order to explicate it.⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, “Schelling’s philosophy is ‘reflection on what is not reflection’.”⁸

For Schelling, art is the realization of the natural within us. Philosophy too must seek a language “close to poetry.”⁹ Nevertheless, philosophy should not be confused with art, as philosophy seeks to describe the arrangement, the structure of nature: “the philosopher looks to express the world, the artist seeks to create it.”¹⁰ “Nature starts from the unknowable and finishes consciously,”¹¹ but “art starts from certain conscious thoughts,”¹² from certain ideas, and loses these express ideas or extends them to the unconsciousness, and brings forth the invisible force of the unconsciousness with a visible expression. According to Merleau-Ponty, Schelling regards art as a “reconciliation” between the consciousness and the unconscious: “Everything happens as if thinking were a natural thing.”¹³ Yet, there is a remainder which remains hidden, as Merleau-Ponty states:

¹ N, 68/43.

² Schelling 2006, 10.

³ N, 267/206.

⁴ N, 69/44.

⁵ Hegel criticizes Schelling’s idea in the Preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “Absolute as the night in which [...] all cows are black” (Hegel 1977, 9). See N, 74–75/48.

⁶ N, 70/45.

⁷ N, 71/45.

⁸ N, 71/45. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty formulates his idea of phenomenological reflection in a similar manner: “Reflection is truly reflection only if it is not carried outside itself, only if it knows itself as reflection-on-an-unreflective-experience, and consequently as a change in structure of our existence” (PP, 76/72).

⁹ N, 71/45.

¹⁰ N, 72/46.

¹¹ N, 71/45.

¹² N, 71/45.

¹³ N, 71/46.

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.¹

According to Merleau-Ponty, Schelling seeks for the relation between nature and philosophy: it is a circle between intuition and reflection, but it is not a vicious circle.² The absolute is not in front of us, but instead we are “in the middle of the absolute.”³ The “*life within Nature*” is continuous pregnancy, productivity, and differentiation: the absolute must also “leave itself and make itself into the World.”⁴ Schelling defines the “positive philosophy” as a philosophy which takes into account the “barbaric principle,” nature as a “weight” that is “never annihilated, even when it is overcome.”⁵ Merleau-Ponty states:

Schelling’s philosophy seeks to restore a kind of non-division between us and Nature considered as an organism [...]. But it admits that this non-division is inevitably broken by reflection and that the concern is to “reestablish” this unity. [...] We must retrieve at a higher level what had been lived organically, must pass from the pre-dialectical to the meta-dialectical, must pass from what Schelling calls “negative philosophy,” which is the dialectical feeling of this dismemberment of reflection from the non-known, to what he calls “positive philosophy.”⁶

Let me finally return to the “abyssal Being that Descartes opened up and so quickly closed again.”⁷ Descartes does not explicate his idea of the union of mind and body, and the “indirect” relation to the natural productivity within it, in similar terms as Schelling. As Merleau-Ponty writes in *Eye and Mind*, Des-

¹ N, 76–77/50.

² In the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty defines philosophy as “this circularity, this intentional implication in a circle” (VI, 231/177).

³ N, 73/47. In his working notes Merleau-Ponty describes verticality as “this new absolute life” (VI, 287/234).

⁴ N, 73/47.

⁵ N, 77/50.

⁶ N, 72/46–47. Schelling criticizes Hegel’s philosophical system as a negative philosophy: a positive philosophy recognizes that there always remains a remainder outside of the system of philosophy. A negative philosophy presupposes what it cannot incorporate into its system, the unconditioned existence which it cannot grasp. Yet, this existence can only be approached posteriorly; it is unconditioned, ungrounded and immemorial. In his work *The Conspiracy of Life*, Jason Wirth explicates: “For Schelling, a positive philosophy has always left something outside of itself, some kind of untamable and barbarian remainder. This remainder leaves even the most successful accounts fundamentally incomplete. Hence, Schelling was to claim that Hegel ‘completely threw himself into the methodological discussion in such a way that he thereby completely forgot the questions which lay outside it.’ ‘What’ lives outside the system, outside the logic, is precisely the question for Schelling. In the 1827 lectures on the *System of the Ages of the World*, Schelling argued that ‘everything is only the work of time and we do not know the absolutely true, but rather just what the time in which we are ensconced allows. We begin to conceive that the eternal truths are nothing but propositions abstracted from their contemporary situation. Basically there are no eternal truths in the sense that we formerly wanted to describe them.’ Not even the elastic truth of spirit’s dialectical self-recognition would escape the simultaneous structures and strictures of time.” (Wirth 2003, 16–17.)

⁷ OE, 58/138.

cartes did not want to “plumb that abyss” which he, nevertheless, had opened.¹ For a human mind which, according to Descartes, is “something intermediate between God and nothingness,” nothingness is as incomprehensible as God: it is the cause of our non-truth, error, and evil.² It is not possible for a human mind to understand the relation between God and nothingness, because God is the ultimately perfect being and cannot contain nothingness, which is a defect.³ In Schelling’s philosophy, it is exactly this nothingness, the primordial ground that is non-ground and evil,⁴ the “barbaric principle,” that philosophy must take into account.⁵

Yet, through Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, we can find a structural similarity between the philosophies of Schelling and Descartes. For Descartes, the union of mind and body is an obscure and confused life which the pure intellect cannot exhaust: “the ‘vertical’ Descartes soul and body, and not that of the *intuitus mentis*.”⁶ Merleau-Ponty brings forth the contradictory character of the relation between the distinct pure mind and the union of mind and body: even if the pure mind finds only obscurity in the union, the mind is, nevertheless, based on the lived experience of the union.⁷ The Cartesian contradiction culminates in Malebranche’s philosophy: we see all ideas in God but we are only shadows to ourselves, we do not have an idea of our own mind.⁸ Then, in Bergson’s philosophy, the shadowy weight of the past becomes the attraction of philosophy: intuition returns to the indifferent pure memory in order to differentiate it in expression.⁹ Merleau-Ponty finds a similar, “fecund” contradiction in Bergson’s philosophy as in Schelling.¹⁰

¹ OE, 56/137.

² AT VII, 54/CSM II, 38.

³ See Chapter 1.4.

⁴ Schelling states: “For evil is surely nothing other than the primal ground (*Urgrund*) of existence to the extent this ground strives toward actuality in created beings and therefore is in fact only the higher potency of the ground active in nature. But, just as the latter is forever only ground, without being itself, precisely on this account evil can never become real and serves only as ground so that the good, developing out of the ground on its own strength, may be through its ground independent and separate from God who has and recognizes himself in this good which, as such (as independent), is in *him*.” (Schelling 2006, 44.)

⁵ Let me recall what Merleau-Ponty states in “The Philosopher and His Shadow:” “What resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the ‘barbarous’ principle Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it” (S, 290/178. Translation modified by JH).

⁶ VI, 326/273.

⁷ See Chapter 1.6.

⁸ See Chapter 2.2.

⁹ See Chapter 2.4 and Chapter 4.2.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty explicates the relation between Schelling and Bergson: “Bergson, who probably did not know Schelling’s work, but who had read Ravaisson, who was himself steeped in Schelling’s thought, takes up the same idea [of natural production] when, in *Creative Evolution*, he marks his hostility to both mechanism and finalism equally. For him, as for Schelling, to conceive Nature on a mechanistic model is a waste of time.” (N, 63/39.) And again: “God exerts his powers in us: in one sense, all is interior to us, in another sense we are in the Absolute (cf. Bergson)” (N, 74/48). Finally, Merleau-Ponty states: “Bergson’s philosophy is related to Schelling’s because the whole of Bergson is in the idea of a unity as something that goes without saying and is primordial. [...] By this intuition of a primordial ground, philosophy is a *Naturphilosophie*.” (N, 80/53.) According to Merleau-Ponty, “Berg-

According to Patrick Burke, Schelling was working on an ontology of the visible and the invisible, and wrote in *Ideas Toward a Philosophy of Nature* that “nature must be visible spirit, and spirit invisible nature.”¹ For Schelling, it is a matter of art, as he writes in *System of Transcendental Idealism*: “[T]he *inexhaustible depth* which the true artist, though he works with the greatest presence of mind, puts into his work involuntarily and which neither he nor anyone else is able to penetrate completely.”² As we have seen above, in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty also writes of the inexhaustible depth of the visible³ – of the invisible which “retreats in the measure that we approach.”⁴ According to Susanna Lindberg, we can read Merleau-Ponty’s “philosophy of ‘flesh’ as a critical repetition of *Naturphilosophie*” by Schelling.⁵ Nevertheless, it is clear, as Lindberg states, that in contrast to Schelling, Merleau-Ponty is not describing the “divine thought” of the world.⁶

In this chapter, I have argued that according to Merleau-Ponty our relation to being is connection and difference, proximity and distance. Yet, Merleau-Ponty argues in his working notes that his ontology is not mere “anthropologism: by studying the 2 leaves we ought to find the structure of being.”⁷ The double reference of connection and difference defines not only our relation to being, but also the structure of being. Nevertheless, according to Merleau-Ponty, being can be grasped only *indirectly*: the vertical or wild being brings itself forth only as the invisible of the visible.⁸ Through our experience and expression of the experience, we find the “wild being” that “resists phenomenology within us,”⁹ which is not attained as an intentional act of consciousness but as an “intentionality within being.”¹⁰

In a working note dated November 1960 and titled “Nature,” Merleau-Ponty refers to Schelling’s concept of the “barbaric principle.” Merleau-Ponty refers to Hegel’s idea of nature and quotes Lucien Herr’s article on Hegel. The same quote can be found in the course *Nature*, where Merleau-Ponty explicates the difference between Hegel’s and Schelling’s ideas of nature: “Hegel denies

son thus posits consciously a paradox inherent to perception: Being is anterior to perception, and this primordial Being is conceivable only in relation to perception” (N, 83/55).

¹ Burke 1999, 184.

² Burke 1999, 194.

³ VI, 188/143.

⁴ VI, 197/150.

⁵ Lindberg 2010, 191. Lindberg argues: “[I]n *Le visible et l’invisible*, Merleau-Ponty incorporates a number of the main features of Schelling’s conception of nature in his own thought of the ‘flesh of the world’. Both interpret the elemental ground of being as *living nature*. Both assert that only a certain *retreating of consciousness* can reveal it. Both seek a thought that goes beyond mere objectifying reflexion, by seeking a moment ‘before’ the division into subject and object, a moment in which the I and the world are the same or interpenetrate one another.” (Lindberg 2010, 200.)

⁶ Lindberg 2010, 203

⁷ VI, 317/264.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty states: “The negativity [...], the unconscious of consciousness (its central *punctum caecum*, that blindness that makes it consciousness i.e. an indirect and *inverted* grasp of all things) is the *other side* or the *reverse* (or the other dimensionality) of sensible Being [...]” (VI, 308–309/255).

⁹ S, 290/178.

¹⁰ VI, 298/244.

nature all efficacy of its own. For him, 'Nature is there from the first day' (Lucien Herr), whereas Schelling allows thinking of Nature as having a life."¹ Nature is not something left behind. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is not a "myth of the original indivision and coincidence as *return*."² Nature is primeval (*Urtümlich*) and primal (*Ursprünglich*), but it "is not of long ago," it is "there today."³ Merleau-Ponty states that the "sensible, Nature, transcend the past present distinction, realize from within a passage one into the other."⁴ The past is in the present as the invisible of the visible: it is the "indestructible, the barbaric Principle."⁵

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty does not explicate the wild being as something completely incomprehensible or "anarchical," and even less as evil and terrible. The invisible, the untouchable, and the unconscious is "*a hollow and not a void*, not absolute non-being with respect to Being that would be plenitude and hard core."⁶ The relation between mind and body is within the sensible experience, not in God or in nothingness.

In this chapter, I have shown that Merleau-Ponty analyses our relation to being in different levels, as a relation to depth: there is a kind of "natural productivity" of the flesh, the invisible of the visible, which possesses our vision, our touch, and our thought. To be clear, flesh is neither being of God nor an abyss of nothingness: it is "negativity that is not nothing."⁷ The invisible is the fecundity of institution which can be approached in different dimensions. It is an ontological structure of connection and difference between the past and the present, between ourselves and others, between our body touching and our body touched.

¹ N, 76/49.

² VI, 320/267. Merleau-Ponty states in the chapter "Interrogation and Intuition:" "The 'originating' is not of one sole type, it is not all behind us; the restoration of the true past, of the pre-existence is not all of philosophy; the lived experience is not flat, without depth, without dimension, it is not an opaque stratum with which we would have to merge. The appeal to the originating goes in several directions: the originating breaks up, and philosophy must accompany this break-up, this non-coincidence, this differentiation." (VI, 165/124.)

³ VI, 320/267.

⁴ VI, 321/267.

⁵ VI, 321/267. In this working note, Merleau-Ponty also connects the same idea to Bergson's philosophy, psychoanalysis, and his own concept of the flesh.

⁶ VI, 286/233.

⁷ VI, 198/151.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS

Descartes's theses on the distinction of the soul and the body and on their union cannot be exposed on the plane of the understanding, and justified together by a continuous movement of thought. They can be affirmed together only if one takes them with their *implication* - In the order of implication, the search for the essence and the search for existence are not opposed, are the same thing.¹

In previous chapters, I have argued that Descartes and the tradition of Cartesian philosophy form an important motivation for Merleau-Ponty's philosophical work. The central question that Merleau-Ponty inherits from Descartes concerns the relation between the distinction and the union of mind and body. There are passages in Descartes' writings that support the mutual exclusion of these two points of view, especially in his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth, as when he writes: "each of them can be understood only by themselves,"² and that it would be contradictory "to conceive them as one single thing and at the same time to conceive them as two."³ Thus understood, both of these conceptions or "primitive notions" have their own clarity: the clear and distinct evidence of the judgments of the pure mind, on the one hand, and the clear but confused evidence of sensations and practical life, on the other. As Descartes writes, "the union of the soul and the body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses."⁴ The Cartesian duality thus consists of the problem that the pure mind does not know what the union knows, and the union does not know what the pure mind knows.

In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty calls this situation the "Cartesian equilibrium,"⁵ a balance between two fields of evidence that should not be confused. He argues that in modern science and philosophy this equilibrium has been lost: there is a split between science and philosophy, between coincidence with pure

¹ VI, 252/198-199.

² AT III, 666/CSM-K, 218.

³ AT III, 693/CED, 70.

⁴ AT III, 691-692/CSM-K, 227.

⁵ OE, 56/137.

intellect and coincidence with embodied existence as “two faithful and unfaithful offshoots of Cartesianism, two monsters born of its dismemberment.”¹ What Merleau-Ponty is looking for is neither of these two exclusions and purifications, nor the contradictory duality of the “Cartesian equilibrium,” but a new kind of “balance [...] between our models and the obscurity of the ‘there is’.”²

Merleau-Ponty’s solution to the problem of the Cartesian duality is the “‘destruction’ of the objectivist ontology of the Cartesians”³ on the one hand, and an “ontological rehabilitation of the sensible”⁴ on the other. He reformulates both “sides” or positions of the Cartesian duality through the new “ontological structure which envelops every possible and which every possible leads back to.”⁵ The divergency between the mind and the body – between our ideas and sensible experience – is understood as differentiation of the ontological texture which, at the same time, connects these two polarities with its temporal thickness that Merleau-Ponty also calls the vertical being. He states: “the rediscovery of the vertical Being, is the solution of the problem of the ‘relations between the soul and the body’.”⁶ Verticality means the deepening of the present to the past, the invisible of the visible, the negativity within our relation to the world, to others, and to ourselves: all proximity implies distance. According to Merleau-Ponty, “[i]t is this negative that makes possible the *vertical* world, the union of the impossibles.”⁷ In Merleau-Ponty’s view negativity is not nothing but the implication and the institution of a dimension: “every dimension is of the hidden.”⁸ The distinction of the mind, its distance from the body, implies its union with the body: “the soul is the hollow of the body, the body is the distention of the soul.”⁹ This is what I demonstrated in Chapter Four.

Understood in this way the *cogito* is not a substance, but openness to the dimensionality of being. In his last lecture “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui” Merleau-Ponty states: “[r]es cogitans is not a substantialist construction, but a way to say that this openness to... something is not a zero of being.”¹⁰ In this lecture he provides a new reading of Descartes’ *Meditations*, and defines the *cogito* as a “vertical *cogito*.” Merleau-Ponty shows that the *ego cogito* is not pure light without shadows, and that, instead, we have to take account of the “change of the sense of natural light” in *Meditations*: the clarity of natural light must be understood through a temporal dimension and ignorance of itself.¹¹ In this chapter I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s final reading of Descartes which finds from his writings traces that open up the possibility of the new ontology.

¹ OE, 58/138. See Chapter 3.1.

² OE, 56/137.

³ VI, 237/183.

⁴ S, 271/167.

⁵ VI, 282/229.

⁶ VI, 286–287/233.

⁷ VI, 281/228.

⁸ VI, 272/219.

⁹ VI, 286/233.

¹⁰ NC, 251. All translations of “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui” by JH.

¹¹ NC, 244.

Finally, I will discuss Merleau-Ponty's concept of freedom: the ontological structure of connection and difference allows us to reformulate the paradoxical situation of being caught in history and the possibility of changing history. In *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Adventures of the Dialectic* Merleau-Ponty criticizes Sartre's idea of absolute freedom. He relates Sartre's approach to the Cartesian concept of freedom: Sartre attempts to claim the absolute contingency and creativity of the Cartesian idea of God. Merleau-Ponty, instead, approaches human freedom from the point of view of temporal thickness. I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's idea of institution is central to his understanding of artistic expression and political action that both repeat and differentiate their historical situation; our bonds with the world are our means to change the world.

5.1 Ego and *Cogito*

Merleau-Ponty interprets Descartes most notably in opposition to the interpretations of Léon Brunschvicg and Martial Gueroult. In Merleau-Ponty's early works, Brunschvicg represents the interpretation that gives primacy to the pure mind. After the publication of Gueroult's *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons* in 1953, Merleau-Ponty starts to contrast his own reading with that of Gueroult. Gueroult shared Brunschvicg's intellectualist or rationalist point of view on Descartes, and dedicated his work to Brunschvicg, who was his teacher. The very last lectures that Merleau-Ponty gave before his death, "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui," discussed Cartesian philosophy and explicitly argued against Gueroult's interpretation of Descartes.

In the preface of *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*, Gueroult introduced his method of the history of philosophy. In his view, the changing generations with their different views of the major works of philosophy leave these *monumental* works intact in their cores.¹ It is the unchangeable and objective structure of the work, the monument, that must be analyzed, according to Gueroult. Thus, it is not from any subjective standpoint, or from any partial position whatsoever, that one should interpret Descartes.² One must take seriously when Descartes, in the preface of *Meditations*, writes that one should read his work according to "the proper order of [...] arguments and connection between them."³ It is this purely rational "order of reasons" that we need to explicate, according to Gueroult.⁴ The proofs are structurally connected and not only partial topics.⁵

¹ Gueroult 1953a, 9/xvii.

² Gueroult 1953a, 10-11/xviii-xix.

³ AT VII, 9/CSM II, 8.

⁴ Gueroult 1953a, 12/xx.

⁵ Gueroult 1953a, 12-13/xix-xx.

In the lecture course *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty defines the “monumental sense” as sedimented thought.¹ It is the written that Husserl explicates as necessary for the historical institution in “The Origin of Geometry,”² the passive element of the institution. In the previous chapter, I argued that sedimentation not only means persistence, but also forgetfulness. The reactivated thought is differentiated thought: it is not only the *same* sense but also a *new* sense, with a new expression.³ In the working notes included in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty argues that the “Freudian idea of the unconscious and the past as ‘indestructible,’ as ‘intemporal’ [...] is, in reality, the ‘monumental’ life, *Stiftung*, initiation.”⁴ In Merleau-Ponty’s view, “monumentality” includes forgetfulness and differentiation.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty takes critical distance from Gueroult’s approach to the history of philosophy and to Descartes’ works. In this context, Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl’s idea of “history-*Dichtung*” stemming from *Crisis*, that is, history as “poetic invention.”⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, the objective history of philosophy also presupposes expression and philosophizing activity. Philosophy as history-poetry is not coincidence with history, but modification of history.⁶ Merleau-Ponty states: “I clarify my philosophical project by recourse to Descartes and Leibniz, and that project alone will permit knowing what history is.”⁷ The philosophical project and the explication of history cannot be separated, but form “intentional implication in a circle.”⁸

The circle between philosophy and history brings forth the unthought of the history of philosophy: when reading philosophy, we must not only take account of the “manifest or frontal meaning” but also the “lateral implications” of the text.⁹ According to Merleau-Ponty, “Gueroult’s method presupposes philosophical immanence, presupposes a Descartes who is the absolute possessor of all his thoughts, and of [philosophy] closed in upon itself.”¹⁰ In Merleau-Ponty’s view, Descartes’ philosophy cannot be approached through a supposition of a self-coincidence of Descartes with his own thought.¹¹ The history of philosophy must be understood through the unthought that is “‘deep’ present,” temporal thickness of the present, “‘vertical’ thought.”¹² In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty states:

The history of philosophy that would have to be made (alongside of Gueroult’s) is the history of implication. For example: Descartes’s theses on the distinction of the soul and the body and on their union cannot be exposed on the plane of the

¹ HLP, 70/58.

² Hua6, 371–372/360–361.

³ See Chapter 4.3.

⁴ VI, 296/243.

⁵ Hua6, 512/394.

⁶ VI, 231n*/177n*.

⁷ VI, 231/177.

⁸ VI, 231/177.

⁹ HLP, -/5.

¹⁰ HLP, 15/14.

¹¹ S, 212/131.

¹² HLP, 15/15.

understanding, and justified together by a continuous movement of thought [i.e. the order of the reasons]. They can be affirmed together only if one takes them with their *implication*.¹

In his lecture *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the impasses in Gueroult's attempt to solve the contradiction in Descartes' philosophy between the mind-body distinction and the mind-body union.² For Gueroult, these two notions have different, yet clear certainties. The question then becomes, does philosophy split into two? According to Merleau-Ponty, *ego cogito* and *lumen naturale* cannot be understood in reference to the purely rational immediacy of the self with the self, but can only be understood by thinking with their implication, that is, the fact that "I exist before I know what I am."³ The opening of thinking happens before we explicitly pose the problem of reflection: *ego*, according to Merleau-Ponty, is not immediate, but is *ignorant*. The ignorance is one of the central ideas that Merleau-Ponty explicates in his lectures "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui." Let me next study these lectures in detail.

In the lecture, Merleau-Ponty contrasts Cartesian ontology with "contemporary ontology," which he explicates through arts and literature. Merleau-Ponty shows that arts and literature offer an ontology which is more advanced than the one of "official" philosophy, which still follows the principles of Cartesian ontology. Yet, he proceeds to demonstrate that even Descartes' own writings include traces of an ontology that would be more fruitful than the official or canonical form of Cartesian ontology.

Merleau-Ponty begins his discussion of Descartes in these lectures from a point of view that is familiar from his works, i.e. by criticizing the Cartesian conception of vision: "The model of the vision is contact - Light deprived of its distance, of its transcendence - vision [is] survey from above (*survol*), not openness to..."⁴ The clear and distinct evidence of the judgments of the pure mind is usually taken to be an immediate contact without distance. The light of the intuitive mind, the "natural light," is the immanence of truth guaranteed by the validation by God. In this Cartesian frame, ordinary perception by the eyes, and likewise the visions of paintings as Descartes gives an example of engravings in his *Optics*, do not resemble the things in the world but only provide signs and indications for the mind to decode and to interpret. The vision, or the "It seems that I see" (*videre videor*), opens onto the world only from a point of view outside the world. The vision is an immediate coincidence of the *ego cogito* with itself - not a relation to the transcendent world.⁵ Merleau-Ponty contrasts such Cartesianism with the "ontology of painting," for which vision is not outside of the visible world but "communication with Being," and "openness to..., always incomplete, to do."⁶

¹ VI, 252/198-199.

² See Chapter 3.1.

³ NC, 250.

⁴ NC, 177.

⁵ NC, 177-183.

⁶ NC, 182.

In a similar manner, Merleau-Ponty opposes the “universal language” of Cartesian philosophy with the language of poetry, as the “speech of the things.” Here he refers to a poem, “La Pythie,” by Valéry.¹ Modern literature forms “a new relation with Being,” he argues.² Merleau-Ponty explores this alternative further by discussing Proust’s discussion of musical ideas. He refers to the same passage of *In Search of Lost Time* as in *The Visible and the Invisible*: the musical ideas within the “night of our soul.” He opposes these latent ideas to the intellectual ideas:

*Musical ideas first opposed to intellectual ideas, veiled in shadow, opaque to intelligence (to the light). They have an “obscure surface,” yet resistant in their own way: distinct; unequal in value and significance. [...] consistent, “differentiated,” explicit; [...] “entities” which found their intellectual equivalents (“puny divergence between the five notes that composed the little phrase”); “keys” of tenderness, passion, courage, and serenity; “themes” – pre-existing in us [...]; latent in us even when we did not think about them.*³

These ideas are obscure to the intelligence, but they are nevertheless fully distinct and explicit in the sensuous experience of music. Merleau-Ponty asks: “Is it not a general conception of ideas?”⁴ He answers that this alternative conception of ideas applies, at least, to the sensible world, that gives “notions without equivalent.” By this he means that these sensible ideas cannot be exhausted by intellectual explications, descriptions, and models. Merleau-Ponty substitutes the term “intellectual” for the term “visible,” and argues that within the intellectually acquired visible notions there is an invisible dimension, “symbolic matrixes,” which are “the invisible structure or framework of the visible.”⁵ He calls this dimension *cogitatio caeca*, blind, confused, or secret thinking – the “nocturnal reality of the soul [...] which is not nothing – but which has a need to ‘attire’ itself in the visible.”⁶

Merleau-Ponty juxtaposes the Proustian idea of the “night of the soul” with the Cartesian notion of sensible ideas: he argues that there are sensible ideas that are obscure to the intelligence but nevertheless have their own clarity in the framework of sensible experience. These ideas are therefore *both* clear and distinct *and* obscure and confused. One possible Cartesian solution is that there must be two separate fields of evidence and two “philosophies,” since Descartes makes the separation between the pure mind and the union of mind and body: the mutual exclusion of two different evidences.

The Proustian “night” is temporal, it comes from the past, and “Time is always lost (*perdu*).”⁷ The lost past, which feels more real than the present, is recreated and regained (*retrouvé*) in the present; the absence of the past reassembles and creates the present. According to Merleau-Ponty, “Time [...] be-

¹ NC, 187. See also, VI, 203–204/155. See Chapter 4.5.

² NC, 188.

³ NC, 193.

⁴ NC, 193.

⁵ NC, 194–195.

⁶ NC, 195.

⁷ NC, 197.

comes something else than succession: pyramid of 'simultaneity'."¹ Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly mention here Husserl's idea of institution, or Bergson's concept of pure memory, but both are close to his idea of the "lost past": "an experience that remembers an impossible past, anticipates an impossible future, that emerges from Being or that will incorporate itself into Being, that 'is of it' but is not it, and therefore is not a coincidence [...]"² Or, as he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, "a past which has never been a present."³ This past is also what Merleau-Ponty calls "vertical being;" it is the absence, the negative which is not nothing, but is exactly the temporal thickness of the present, the depth of the sensible, the blind spot of consciousness, a structural non-present that every being has.⁴ In this ontological structure, the invisible is the past and the visible is the present – the past, the nocturnal and lost reality institutes the present, gives it its dimensionality and shadow, and therefore also its "light," the meaningfulness of the present experience. The past is a "past-shadow," vertical visibility, an invisible presence of the inscribed past, "flesh become an essence."⁵

In the lecture "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui," Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes' texts an idea of verticality: "[T]he 'vertical' Descartes soul and body [...] the evidence of [...] spontaneous thought [...] more clear than all constitution and which he counts on," as he writes in one of his working notes.⁶ The "vertical *cogito*," the spontaneous thought, is, in Merleau-Ponty's reading, the necessity of "natural inclination" for the "natural light."⁷ This *cogitation caeca*, the secret thought, is what Merleau-Ponty is searching for in Descartes' texts: "the Descartes of before and after the order of reasons, the Descartes of the Cogito before the Cogito, who always knew that he thought, with a knowing that is ultimate and has no need of elucidation."⁸ As Merleau-Ponty writes in a working note for *The Visible and the Invisible*: we need to "ask what the evidence of this spontaneous thought consists of."⁹

Merleau-Ponty provides an alternative account of the duality of light and sentiment that Descartes presents, diverting from the interpretation offered by Gueroult. Even though he sees that "the 'sensual man' justified by the *Sixth Meditation* refutes the purification of the first two *Meditations*,"¹⁰ the light of Cartesian reflection, according to him, "is not a simple elimination of the shadow."¹¹ *Cogito* thinks before it knows its nature as thinking. Thus, the question is what is this *cogito* before *cogito*, this knowing and thinking before thought. Here Merleau-Ponty refers to Malebranche, who emphasizes that he does not doubt

¹ NC, 197.

² VI, 163–164/122–123.

³ PP, 280/282.

⁴ See VI, 278/225.

⁵ NC, 202.

⁶ VI, 326/273.

⁷ NC, 222.

⁸ VI, 326/273.

⁹ VI, 326/273.

¹⁰ NC, 225.

¹¹ NC, 241.

his existence and claims that we are only shadows to ourselves, and that the light that illuminates us is not our own. Merleau-Ponty then asks: "But is it [the light] really mine for Descartes?"¹

For Merleau-Ponty, this discussion about light and shadow concerns most importantly the status of the pre-reflective. The pre-reflective self is not given to itself as an object, or as an idea of the self but before all explication. Merleau-Ponty refers to Descartes' unfinished and posthumously published dialogue *The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light*, in which Descartes states that there is "that awareness or internal testimony which everyone experiences within himself."² If we doubt, we have an experience of doubt, and therefore we know doubt by experiencing before we think about it. According to Merleau-Ponty, "[t]here is a non-doubt of the doubt, an unconcealment of doubt to itself, of thought to itself, and of existence to itself, and what one calls *Ego* is this unconcealment."³ There is, therefore, before the idea and knowledge of the doubt, a pre-reflective "primary doubt" which is the doubt that can concern everything else but not itself.

In Descartes' dialogue, Eudoxus asks if Polyander "has ever been *ignorant* of what doubt or thought or existence is," and Polyander responds: "I have never doubted what doubt is, though I only began to recognize it, or rather to give attention to it, when Epistemon tried to cast doubt on it."⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, the primordial *ego* should not be assumed to contain the answers to the problems of reflection before these questions have been raised by a reflective subject: What is our relation to this primordial *ego*? How do we know it? The primordial *ego* is not an *immediate self* that would halt the infinite regress put in motion by reflection, it is not a purely positive fundament or ground of all thought. On the contrary, as Merleau-Ponty points out, "it is *ignorance* of these questions."⁵ The pre-reflective self, which, according to Descartes' Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections, "we cannot in fact fail to have,"⁶ is not an idea of subjectivity or an object of knowledge, but the openness of experience. It is not a visible or a possible visible, but the invisible, "pure transcendence, without an ontic mask" and "the 'visibles' [...] are only centered on a nucleus of absence."⁷ Merleau-Ponty argues that the self is ignorance of the self, that the body as touching and the body as touched do not coincide:

Nor, therefore, is it to reach *oneself*, it is on the contrary to escape *oneself*, to be ignorant of *oneself*, the self in question is by divergence (*d'écart*), is *Unverborghenheit* [unconcealment] of the *Verborghen* [concealed] as such, which consequently does not cease to be hidden or latent.⁸

¹ NC, 235.

² AT X, 524/CSM II, 418.

³ NC, 247.

⁴ AT X, 524–525/CSM II, 418. Emphasis by JH.

⁵ NC, 248.

⁶ AT VII, 422/CSM II, 285.

⁷ VI, 282–283/229.

⁸ VI, 303/249.

The escape from the self, the dehiscence that is the opening of experience, is our relation to being, and it is never a coincidence. Therefore, our pre-reflective relation to our being and to our thought is not a coincidence, not an immediate awareness of ourselves, but, on the contrary, is openness to something else, the divergence or differentiation of the ontological texture. It is, as Merleau-Ponty writes, "presence to the Self that is *absence from the self*, a contact with Self through divergence (*écart*) with regard to Self."¹

Descartes argues that the pre-reflective "inner awareness" is "innate in all men."² It is thus, as Merleau-Ponty points out, not an idealization or an outcome of philosophical reflection, but something which we cannot lack in so far as we think and exist. It is, according to Merleau-Ponty, an "experience that I am inalienable to myself."³ Inalienable – which is not to say immediate: it is before the question raised by reflection, meditation, and alienation. It is: "*ego sum, ego existo*" – "I am, I exist" – which is, as Descartes writes in the *Second Meditation*, necessarily true if I say it or think about it.⁴ It is a trust in experience, the "perceptual faith" that believes in what it sees. Even if it doubts that what it sees is really what it sees, it nevertheless cannot cease to see what it sees,⁵ – and analogously as a doubt, it does not doubt that it doubts.

I am – but what am I? "I exist before I know what I am," writes Merleau-Ponty.⁶ If I think about what I am, my essence is thought, and yet this essence is not thought in general. Descartes writes to Arnauld:

It depends on the mind itself whether it produces this or that particular act of thinking, but not that it is a thinking thing; just as it depends on a flame, as an efficient cause, whether it turns to this side or that, but not that it is an extended thing. So by "thought" I do not mean some universal which includes all modes of thinking, but a particular nature, which takes on those modes, just as extension is a nature which takes on all shapes.⁷

The *cogito* is an "active essence," *Wesen* in Heideggerian sense, writes Merleau-Ponty: it inclines me to think, but not to think this or that. It is, in this sense, an "[o]penness which is not a simple gap, *nichtiges Nichts*, which is not free to stay gaping, even though it is free to think this or that: even nothing transforms itself into something: thought."⁸ Merleau-Ponty seems to criticize Heidegger's interpretation of Descartes here, while claiming that "[r]es cogitans is not a substantialist construction, but a way to say that this openness to... something is not a zero of being."⁹ Merleau-Ponty's relation to Heidegger's philosophy is

¹ VI, 246/192. Translation modified by JH. In the English translation by Alphonso Lingis the French original "presence à Soi qui est *absence de soi*" has incorrectly become negative "a Self-presence that is not an *absence from oneself*."

² AT VII, 422/CSM II, 285.

³ NC, 249.

⁴ AT VII, 25/CSM II, 17.

⁵ NC, 255.

⁶ NC, 250.

⁷ AT V, 221/CSM-K, 357.

⁸ NC, 251.

⁹ NC, 251. I do not think that this statement means that Merleau-Ponty overlooks Descartes' philosophy of substantiality, but that what he elaborates as the "unthought" of Descartes'

complicated, as he refers to some of Heidegger's notions, but nevertheless keeps a critical distance and does not thoroughly explicate his interpretation. I will briefly compare Heidegger's reading of Descartes to Merleau-Ponty's reading, but let me continue with Merleau-Ponty's lectures on Descartes first.

Merleau-Ponty calls "vertical *cogito*" the pre-reflective *cogito*, the existing self, *ego sum*, and says that it is not "light without any shadow."¹ Descartes defines the essence of the *ego* as *cogito*, but this is not a simple exclusion of all embodiment. The "thing that thinks" is "[a] thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions."² There is, according to Merleau-Ponty, ambiguity in Descartes' philosophy: it is not only that I judge and determine by the mind what I thought I saw with my eyes, but also conversely, the visible thing, the appearance, remains the same in *cogito*. If we think that we see, it is nevertheless the same thing that we were seeing all the time. This means that the union of mind and body is still present in the distinction.³ Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes a "profound modification of the *natural light*"⁴ according to which "the universe of the *cogitation* is not idealism but beginning (*avènement*) of a dimension of experience."⁵ The primordial *cogito* cannot be designated positively, because it is not a *being*, some-thing, an object, but openness to all beings. And it cannot be designated negatively, because it is not pure nothingness, "*nichtiges Nichts*," as Merleau-Ponty writes, referring once again to Heidegger, because it is free to think this or that but not free to be nothing.⁶ The *cogito* is the "openness always to be remade," and yet it is "continuous."⁷

Merleau-Ponty argues that there is continuity, temporal thickness, in the *cogito*. He refers to Descartes' conversation with Frans Burman.⁸ It consists of the notes that Burman made of their conversations when he met Descartes at his home in 1648. Burman refers to Descartes' statement in the Fourth Replies of *Mediatitons*: "The fact that there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware, seems to me to be self-evident."⁹ He asks how this is possible, since to be aware is to think, and this would require another thought directed at the first one, and therefore it would not be thinking about the same thought as a moment ago. According to Burman, it would fol-

philosophy does not exhaust itself in the substantialism: as he writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*, "[t]he flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance" (VI, 184/139) and "is not the union or compound of two substances" (VI, 185/140). The flesh is the ontological texture of both the distinction and the union, in which this relation is not contradictory and can be understood as implications (VI, 252/199).

¹ NC, 254.

² AT VII, 28/CSM II, 19; cf. Heinämaa 2003.

³ NC, 255.

⁴ NC, 256.

⁵ NC, 261.

⁶ NC, 258–259.

⁷ NC, 260.

⁸ The reliability of this conversation has been questioned, but, as Tad Schmaltz argues, it is a helpful text in order to understand Descartes' concepts of extension (Schmaltz 2009, 114). There is not for Descartes, as we can read in his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth, only the bodily extension, but also "the extension of the thought" (AT III, 694/CSM-K, 228).

⁹ AT VII, 246/CSM II, 171.

low that we cannot be aware that we *are* thinking (in the present), but only that we *were* thinking (in the past).

It is important to note that, as a solution to this problem, Descartes does not here suggest pre-reflective awareness, as he does in his Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections, or any kind of immediate self-awareness. Instead, he insists that there can be a reflective thought while we are still thinking about the first thought; that is, we can have simultaneously a thought on something and second thought on the first one. According to him, "the soul is capable of thinking of more than one thing at the same time, and of continuing with a particular thought which it has."¹ Descartes contends that it is possible to think more than one thing at the same time, although not a very large number of things. He gives an example: he is aware and thinking that he is talking and that he is eating, and these thoughts occur at the same time. This is possible because thoughts are continuous, they have a duration: "it is false that thought occurs instantaneously; for all my acts take up time, and I can be said to be continuing and carrying on with the same thought during a period of time."²

Merleau-Ponty concludes from Descartes' conversation with Burman that there is temporality, a "presence of the past," within the *cogito*.³ The "modification of the natural light," the experiential dimension of the *cogito*, means that "the continuous thought becomes an essential character of the natural light that is no longer a completely given nature, but a nature which produces and reproduces itself."⁴ The conclusion is that the *cogito* is not a "simple nature." According to Merleau-Ponty, this conflicts with Gueroult's "order of the reasons," because as such the *cogito* would not anymore be evident and the consciousness would not be "pure." What Merleau-Ponty sees here is a "third dimension beyond the simple and the complex, the one and the multiple, the pure and the impure."⁵ The *cogito* is, therefore, not evident as purely distinct, but has the "certainty of the presentation, of apparition to..."⁶ The openness of the *cogito* has a temporal thickness,⁷ and this is before all ideas: Descartes' statement that if I exist now, it will be always true that I have existed,⁸ does not make the *cogito* atemporal, but on the contrary refers to its vertical temporality.⁹

On this basis, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Gueroult for taking the *cogito* as an "absolute" and as a "simple nature."¹⁰ The problem with such a view is that this would make the *cogito* an idea outside of time, an eternal idea that the pure

¹ AT V, 149/CSM-K, 335.

² AT V, 148/CSM-K, 335.

³ NC, 263.

⁴ NC, 263.

⁵ NC, 256.

⁶ NC, 266.

⁷ See PP, 456/465.

⁸ AT VII, 36/CSM II, 25.

⁹ NC, 265.

¹⁰ Cf. Gueroult 1953a, 52/28. In the *Regulae*, Descartes explains that the "main secret of his method" is to separate between the absolute simple things which are "independent, a cause, simple, universal, single, equal, similar, straight" and relative complex things which are "dependent, an effect, composite, particular, unequal, dissimilar, oblique" (AT X, 381/CSM I, 21. Cf. also Cottingham 1993, 156–157.)

mind constantly thinks. Against such interpretations, Merleau-Ponty argues that Descartes' *cogito* is temporal: as Descartes writes, once the *cogito* has been uttered or exposed, nothing can undo it as something that has been.¹ For Merleau-Ponty, this does not make the *cogito* a permanent and unchangeable idea but a past which is present vertically. In Merleau-Ponty's view, for Gueroult the *cogito* is a coincidence of the thinking mind and absolute certainty, intellectual necessity.² Merleau-Ponty rejects this view: the *cogito* is fundamentally operative, functional, a "vertical *cogito*," and this operative vertical *cogito* is the condition of all knowledge about the *cogito*, the *cogito* as an idea, the "horizontal *cogito*."³

In Merleau-Ponty's last prepared lecture notes, which he never presented, he concludes: "the natural light [...] enlightens [...] the mixture of itself and the obscurity."⁴ Thus, Merleau-Ponty refutes Gueroult's conception of "two purities," the purity of the natural light, of the intellect, on the one hand, and purity of the sensitivity on the other. He argues how Descartes' idea of the *cogito* can be understood as the ontological structure: it is an "open field of thoughts..."⁵

Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes two aspects of the ontological structure: the thickness or depth of experience and thought, and the blindness or ignorance of the self. On these grounds, Descartes did not establish an "order of the reasons" beyond the carnal texture; not pure consciousness as the self-coincidence that forms its purely immanent certainty, as Gueroult maintains.⁶ Merleau-Ponty rejects Gueroult's interpretation of Descartes according to which there is an "exact coincidence between my thought and existence - reduced to the existence of the subject," a knowledge that "relates immediately to a given intellectual existence."⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, we do not find in Descartes' texts the idea of an intellectual "certainty of my certainty" that Gueroult

¹ AT VII, 36/CSM II, 25.

² NC, 260.

³ NC, 243-244.

⁴ NC, 267.

⁵ NC, 266.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty's critique of Gueroult is interesting in the contemporary discussion on Descartes, because it has some similarities with the reading by Jean-Luc Marion. Marion argues that Gueroult's reading of Descartes is "canonical." Thus, we can also see Merleau-Ponty's reading as a reaction to the "canonical" interpretation of Descartes. In line with Merleau-Ponty, Marion argues that a "reflexive awareness of the *cogito*" is something that Gueroult makes up himself. Also, Marion doubts that Descartes ever writes about the representation of myself to myself, which is important for Gueroult's interpretation (Marion 2007, 9). Marion does not refer to Merleau-Ponty, but he criticizes Gueroult in a very similar manner: "These derivative additions result in transforming what Descartes understands as an exhibition of the ego, and thus as a pure eruption into appearance, into a reflection of self on self and so an equation $I = I$ " (Marion 2007, 10). Marion, like Merleau-Ponty before him, sees an important difference between the formulas in *Discourse on the Method* (*cogito, ergo sum*) and in *Meditations* (*ego sum, ego existo*) (Marion 2007, 12). *Ego sum* is not argument or reasoning, it is an opening, a dehiscence of my being. Marion suggests that it opens up a different philosophy than the formula based on deduction of the being from the fact of thought: "challenged by an other, the ego is itself only by an other than itself" (Marion 2007, 27). Ego does not have a possession of its own being - it is other for itself: as Descartes writes, "I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this 'I' is, that now necessarily exists" (AT VII, 25/CSM II, 17).

⁷ Gueroult 1953a, 50-51/27.

claims to find in them.¹ Descartes explicitly states in his Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections, that the certitude of existence is not reflective but pre-reflective: "It is quite sufficient that we should know it by that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge."² Pre-reflective existence is not, for Merleau-Ponty, an immediate ground of subjectivity to which we could return. Descartes' *ego cogito* is not a stable fundament of existence wherein we could reside. In the Introduction to *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

As for the source of thoughts itself, we now know that to find it we must seek beneath statements, and especially the famous statement of Descartes. Its logical truth ("in order to think one must exist") and its signification as a statement betray it as a matter of principle. For they relate to an object of thought at the moment when access must be found to the thinker and his inborn cohesion, for which the established meanings of things and ideas are only the cue. Descartes' spoken word is the gesture which reveals in each of us that thinking thought to be discovered; it is the "Open Sesame" of fundamental thought. "Fundamental" because it is not borne by anything, but not fundamental as if with it one reached a foundation upon which one ought to base oneself and stay. As a matter of principle, fundamental thought is bottomless. It is, if you wish, an abyss. This means that it is never *with* itself, that we find it next to or setting out from things thought, that it is an opening out – the other invisible extremity of the axis which connects us to ideas and things.³

The verticality of the openness does not consist of a "fundament" which would be the ground of being to which we must return, but it is the differentiation and institution of time, language, and experience. It is this depth of the ontological structure that Merleau-Ponty also finds in Descartes' work: as he writes in *Eye and Mind*, "[w]e have to go to these lengths to find in Descartes something like a metaphysics of depth."⁴ The openness is not something which we only find after having once in a lifetime started again from the foundations, as Descartes writes at the beginning of *Meditations*: it is already there before any philosophical conception – and to seek to express it, "it insists on being sought, not 'once in a lifetime' but all through life."⁵ We cannot lack it, and yet we are blind to it, and therefore we have to learn to see it.

According to Merleau-Ponty, in Descartes' philosophy, on the one hand, God is the ultimate truth which sustains our lights and our obscurities, and on the other hand, God is incomprehensible, unfathomable, and an abyss to us.⁶ I exist, but I do not have an idea of my existence; my existence is sustained by God, but God is incomprehensible to me. There are shadows within the natural light: Merleau-Ponty finds in Descartes' philosophy a parallel with the Malebranchian idea according to which the light is not our own, and we are only shadows to ourselves.⁷ Merleau-Ponty explores this "invisibility" within a

¹ Gueroult 1953a, 51/27. NC, 260.

² AT VII, 422/CSM II, 285.

³ S, 38/21.

⁴ OE, 55–56/137.

⁵ OE, 64/140.

⁶ OE, 55–56/137.

⁷ NC, 235. See Chapter 2.2.

Cartesian framework which does not exhaust itself in the “Cartesian equilibrium,” or the duality of coincidence with the idea and coincidence with the existence. There is, according to him, a “domain of contact with oneself and with the world which Descartes reserved for a blind but irreducible experience.”¹ Thus, in his final lectures on Descartes and ontology, Merleau-Ponty shows that we can find a kind of hidden ontology in Descartes.

As I have mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty makes some references to Heidegger’s philosophy, especially in his later lectures and working notes: he takes up some of Heidegger’s central notions, and yet remains critical towards his philosophy.² Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Heidegger’s thought is complex, and I will not attempt to analyze it exhaustively here. However, I think that, as in the case of Husserl’s philosophy,³ it is also possible to gain an insight into the relation of Merleau-Ponty’s and Heidegger’s philosophies through a comparison of their interpretations of Descartes.⁴ Furthermore, I think that after the analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s lecture “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui” is the right place to do so, as in this course he argues that “[r]es cogitans is not a substantialist construction, but a way to say that this openness to... something is not a zero of being.”⁵

The Heideggerian “destruction” (*Destruktion*) is not only critique but also a reappropriation, and its aim, according to Heidegger, is to “stake out the positive possibilities of the tradition.”⁶ We can see that in his two-phased plan of *Being and Time*, Heidegger was to complete the destruction of the history of ontology through Aristotle, Kant, and Descartes in the second part, which he did not publish. The problem remains, as Jacques Taminiaux states:

We know that the nonpublished part of *Sein und Zeit* was to be devoted to the deconstruction (*Destruktion*) of the history of ontology. Such a *Destruktion* was to bear on three essential thinkers. Two of these became the objects of a Heideggerian reappropriation: Kant and Aristotle. The third was to be Descartes. It is hard to conceive how Heidegger who understood this *Destruktion* as deconstruction and reappropriation in the case of the first two, could have contemplated a demolition pure and simple in the case of the third.⁷

Nevertheless, Taminiaux points out that the positive reappropriation of Descartes is hardly to be found in Heidegger’s *oeuvre*. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger only mentions “the second stage of destruction” when he writes about Descartes:

With the *cogito sum* Descartes claims to prepare a new and secure foundation for philosophy. But what he leaves undetermined in this “radical” beginning is the

¹ OE, 57/135.

² See Chapter 3.3.

³ See Chapter 3.2.

⁴ In this respect, it is interesting that when, in their correspondence, Hannah Arendt asks Heidegger about his opinion on Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger himself refers to Merleau-Ponty’s innate French Cartesianism (Arendt & Heidegger 1998, 226).

⁵ NC, 251.

⁶ Heidegger 1996, 20.

⁷ Taminiaux 1991, 173.

manner of being of the *res cogitans*, more precisely, *the meaning of being of the "sum."* Working out the tacit ontological foundations of the *cogito sum* will constitute the second stage of the destructuring of, and the path back into, the history of ontology. The interpretation will demonstrate not only that Descartes had to neglect the question of being altogether but also why he held the opinion that the absolute "certainty" of the *cogito* exempted him from the question of the meaning of the being of this being.¹

Heidegger's interpretation of Descartes remains merely a critique of the position of *res cogitans*, which, according to him, does not open up the *sum*, the being, but only conceals it. Heidegger explicates that Descartes' concept leans on medieval ontology's term *ens creatum*, the created being, which for its part relates to ancient Greek "determination of the meaning of being as *parousia* or *ousia*, which ontologically and temporally means 'presence'."² I am not able to go here into Heidegger's analysis of this history here, and I only want to point out that according to Heidegger, "Descartes leaves the meaning of being contained in the idea of substantiality and the character of 'universality' of this meaning unexplained."³

Contrasted to Heidegger's interpretation, Merleau-Ponty finds something completely different in Descartes: he states that *res cogitans* is not a substantialist idea, but an openness of being which is not nothing.⁴ Therefore, not only does Merleau-Ponty make an interpretation of Descartes' philosophy that reaches further than Heidegger's interpretation, but also the differences in their views on Descartes indicate that there might be a significant difference between their understanding of ontology in general. In Merleau-Ponty's view, Descartes' *cogito* does not mean a simple objectifying thought: it cannot fully objectify itself, it stays open, and therefore substantialism is not a complete understanding of the *cogito*. Yet, in Merleau-Ponty's conception, the *cogito* is not a simple coincidence and contact with being. Merleau-Ponty defines the ignorance of *cogito* regarding its own being not as "inauthentic" in contrast to "authentic," but as a feature necessitated by its indirectness, non-coincidence, and withdrawal.

We can now see that Merleau-Ponty also finds in Descartes' works the possibility for the new ontology, and that his interpretation does not consist merely of a "'destruction' of the objectivist ontology of the Cartesians."⁵ In a certain sense he criticizes Heidegger's philosophy through Descartes' philosophy.⁶ Therefore, in the lecture "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie

¹ Heidegger 1996, 21.

² Heidegger 1996, 22.

³ Heidegger 1996, 87.

⁴ Marion argues that the positions that Husserl and Heidegger attack in their critiques of Descartes' philosophy reflect only very approximately what Descartes literally proposes, and thus their critiques of Descartes' substantialism miss their target (Marion 2018, 341–343). Barbaras claims that in contrast to Husserl and Heidegger, only Merleau-Ponty has perceived the phenomenological truth of Descartes' concept of the *cogito* (Barbaras 2018, 11–12). According to Barbaras, both Husserl and Heidegger support the substantialist interpretation of Descartes' philosophy, whereas Merleau-Ponty discovers the *cogito* before all objectivation, the lived *cogito* (Barbaras 2018, 19).

⁵ VI, 237/183.

⁶ In "Everywhere and Nowhere" Merleau-Ponty explicitly states against Heidegger that we cannot ignore the Cartesian *cogito* and the "discovery of subjectivity:" [O]nce introduced

d'aujourd'hui," we can see what Merleau-Ponty means by his concept of history as institution and re-institution at work: it is repetition, which is at the same time differentiation and the tracing out of new possibilities, the changing of the world through history.

5.2 Action and Freedom

In the following, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of artistic expression, political action, and freedom also relate to his idea of the new ontological structure. Moreover, Descartes' philosophy is involved in these discussions as well. We may start by asking: Why does Descartes have such a central place in Merleau-Ponty's writing on the arts, especially in *Eye and Mind*, and, conversely, why do the arts have such central place in his lectures on Descartes and ontology, "L'ontologie cartésienne et l'ontologie d'aujourd'hui"? Moreover, we should wonder why Merleau-Ponty connects his accounts of political thinking to his philosophical writings by publishing them together, for example in *Signs*? I would like to suggest that Merleau-Ponty's writings on the arts and politics are not mere appendices to his main philosophical approach, or applications of it, but are parts of his account of the manifestation of the ontological texture, the flesh of the world: arts and politics bring forth the necessity for the new ontology.

According to Merleau-Ponty, "if we look further back into the past, if we ask ourselves what philosophy can be today, we shall see that the philosophy of God-like survey was only an episode – and that it is over."¹ It is important to look back to the history of philosophy, but we always do it from the point of view of our present – and the question is how to understand our present, not only in order to judge it but also in order to change the world. We must not try to adhere to philosophical universalism and "survol." According to Merleau-Ponty, our time is a "time of non-philosophy,"² that is, a time which does not adhere to metaphysical truths – for example, Descartes' distinction of mind and body – but finds its source of inspiration from the lived experience, which for the traditional philosophy was non-philosophical.³ Merleau-Ponty does not use

into philosophy, 'subjective' thinking no longer allows itself to be ignored. Even if philosophy finally eliminates it, it will never again be what it was before this kind of thinking. [...] [S]ubjective thinking is one of the solids that philosophy will have to digest. Or let us say that once 'infected' by certain ways of thinking, philosophy can no longer annul them but must cure itself of them by inventing better ones. The same philosopher [Heidegger] who now regrets Parmenides and would like to give us back our relationships to Being such as they were prior to self-consciousness owes his idea of and taste for primordial ontology to this self-consciousness. There are some ideas which make it impossible for us to return to a time prior to their existence, even and especially if we have moved beyond them, and subjectivity is one of them." (S, 250–251/154.)

¹ S, 26/14.

² NC, 38. Translation by JH.

³ Hugh Silverman explicates Merleau-Ponty's term "non-philosophy" in the following way: "For Merleau-Ponty, non-philosophy is experience, the living of the everyday, the primor-

“non-philosophy” as a negative term; it is not a pure and simple negation of philosophy, but something that, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, is the source of philosophy. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty suggests that instead of restoring rationalism or empiricism or some other form of totalizing thinking, “[p]hilosophy finds help in poetry, art, etc., and in a much more direct relation to them, it gets reborn and reinterprets its proper metaphysical past – which is not past.”¹ The arts demonstrate that ideality does not consist of perfectly permanent and immutable universal essences, but of changing and variable universalities, that is, institutions:² there is not only continuity but also forgetfulness and transformations. Political action and thinking, as a search for possibilities for change, manifest the character of our freedom: we are neither slaves nor masters of history, and all our actions happen in the temporal texture of history, in which we participate and which we can change. Merleau-Ponty believes that philosophy is not contrary to these “non-philosophical” enterprises. Therefore, his thinking on the arts on the one hand, and on politics on the other, is also an interrogation of philosophy.

Arts and politics demonstrate the necessity to conceptualize the texture of transformations. The ontological structure that Merleau-Ponty describes is not about transparent ideality, but about the thickness of ideas and phenomenality. The depth of the texture of ideality, which Merleau-Ponty calls the invisible, prevents immediate coincidence with an idea, but also brings forth the weight of the past on the one hand, and the dynamic character of meaningfulness on the other hand. The distancing and differentiation of the institution and past means that, at the same time, we stay connected to the past *and* leave it behind.³ Therefore, philosophy is not a project of reaching a truth above the textures of embodiment and temporality; on the contrary, it is participation in these textures, and development of the true within them. This is how, according to Merleau-Ponty, we should also understand Descartes:

Since Descartes has on at least one occasion treated philosophy as meditation, we should not understand it as a movement of the spirit toward an external and immobile truth but as the transformation of thought’s own certitudes and its own truth through the action of thought itself.⁴

The repetition of ideas is always also differentiation. This is what philosophy and the arts share as expressions of lived relations with the world: they are transformations, re-institutions of the past. It is a paradoxical movement in which a return is also leaving, as Merleau-Ponty often states, referring to Hegelian logic. According to Merleau-Ponty, “[t]oday’s painting can only forget the

dial interrogation of what is visible, audible, expressible, interpretable [...] as they give shape to the philosophical enterprise that interrogates things” (Silverman 1988, 5).

¹ NC, 39. Translation by JH.

² See Chapter 4.3.

³ On Merleau-Ponty’s idea of institution and political action, see Revault d’Allonnes 2001, 105–109.

⁴ PM, 131/93.

past.”¹ Paradoxically, a work of art renews works already done but, at the same time, it denies them. A work of art does not “contain” all the past works of art but, nevertheless, is indebted to them; it distances itself from them, and is, for its part, replaced (and at the same not replaced) by forthcoming works of art. It is taking part in the historical texture and having a blind spot within this texture, which is exactly the possibility of transformation, the invisible of the visible.

Arts are an effort to express the becoming and emerging of the world, how it becomes the world, and by doing so they allow us to see the world. This, their capacity to make us see, is not a question of self-evidence and the obvious: the world they allow us to see is not something we already see, but the formation of the world. It is not a question of satisfying the public by presenting something that is already familiar. A work of art transforms and challenges the “normal” and the prosaic in order to express the world. It is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a “*coherent deformation*.”² With respect to past institutions, there is not only consolidation – becoming more and more universal – but also decay, fading, leaping, and variation. In a sense, art is variation of chosen details, working with details, in a way that reminds of the eidetic variation³ of phenomenology, but with the opposite ambitions: not to find the “same,” the identical, but to alter, to differ, to deform in order to bring forth the world as “possible,” as something else and “new.” It is this “deformation” which is necessary in showing us the world. In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

What is irreplaceable in the work of art – what makes it not just a pleasant occasion but a voice of the spirit whose analogue is found in all productive philosophical or political thought – is that it contains, better than ideas, *matrices of ideas*. A work of art provides us with symbols whose meaning we shall never finish developing. Precisely because it comes to dwell in the world in which it makes us at home though we do not have the key to it, the work of art teaches us to see and makes us think as no analytic work can, because in the analysis of an object we cannot find anything other than what we have put into it.

What is hazardous in literary communication, or ambiguous and irreducible to a single theme in all the great works of art, is not a provisional weakness of literature which we could hope to overcome. It is the price we must pay to have a conquering language which, instead of limiting itself to pronouncing what we already know, introduces us to new experiences and to perspectives that can never be ours, so that in the end language destroys our prejudices.⁴

Arts, politics, and philosophy express and illuminate – and by doing so – re-institute the way we see the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, the task of philosophy is to learn to see the world again.⁵ We must learn to see the world in order to change it. This is what philosophy shares not only with arts but also with political thought. According to Merleau-Ponty, “[d]espite appearances,

¹ PM, 140/99.

² PM, 128/91; S, 126/78.

³ See Chapter 4.1.

⁴ PM, 126–127/90; S, 125/77.

⁵ PP, XVI/XXIII; VI, 18/4.

political thought is of the same order.”¹ Political thought also has its blind spots and temporal thickness.²

Myriam Revault d’Allonnes explains that Merleau-Ponty does not derive his reflections on politics from his ontology. These reflections are not secondary, according to her, since Merleau-Ponty does not have a “first philosophy.”³ Merleau-Ponty writes at the beginning of his *Adventures of the Dialectic*: “[W]e would be unduly rigorous if we were to wait for perfectly elaborated principles before speaking philosophically of politics.”⁴ It is not by elaborating a complete philosophical system that we can interpret and comment on arts and politics. But we can form philosophical concepts through which we can approach the texture of artistic expression and political action. One of the most central concepts for Merleau-Ponty in the context of politics is the concept of incompleteness. He argues that it is the incompleteness of the cultural world that opens up the possibility of change, contingency, and freedom.⁵ In the last chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, “Freedom,” Merleau-Ponty writes:

What then is freedom? To be born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities. But this analysis is still abstract, for we exist in both ways *at once*. There is, therefore, never determinism and never absolute choice, I am never a thing and never bare consciousness.⁶

It is these two positions, historical determinism (objectivism) and absolute choice (subjectivism), that Merleau-Ponty renounces in his article on communism and Sartre’s non-communist commitment to communism, entitled “Sartre and Ultrabolshevism.” Extreme objectivism,⁷ the position that reduces everything to a historical dialectic in-itself, and the extreme subjectivism of Sartre, which makes history “the immediate result of our volitions,”⁸ both have in common, according to Merleau-Ponty, the idea that social reality can be completely grasped by the means of rational thinking. For objectivism, the social is modified by a historical process that we can grasp in the form of the dialectic of history, and for subjectivism, the social is created by acts of pure decisions. Merleau-Ponty writes: “The philosophy of pure object and the philosophy of pure subject are equally terroristic, but they agree only about consequences.”⁹

¹ PM, 159/112.

² See Plot 2014, 17.

³ Revault d’Allonnes 2001, 40.

⁴ AD, 9/3.

⁵ Revault d’Allonnes writes: “Merleau-Ponty, comme Ricœur après lui, se pose la question d’une histoire compréhensible – susceptible d’unification – et ouverte en même temps à l’imprévisible, c’est-à-dire à la contingence. Une tel souci de l’histoire n’oblitére pas la politique: bien au contraire, il est inseparable d’une redécouverte voire d’une reinvention de la politique et de l’action.” (Revault d’Allonnes 2001, 109–110.)

⁶ PP, 517/527.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty refers to “communist philosophers” in general, and Georg Lukács (1885–1971) in particular (AD, 139/97). I will not concentrate on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of communism here.

⁸ AD, 139/97–98.

⁹ AD, 139/98.

The “consequence” to which Merleau-Ponty refers here is communism, and yet according to his reading Sartre is not interested in the historical meaning of communism – or in the future of communism – but merely in finding a historical meaning for his own project.¹

Both objectivism and subjectivism presuppose that we are in the possession of history. For objectivism, it is a universal history, “a completed history, which, therefore, is the picture of all that humanity *will have been*” and through which “we have before our eyes *all that was possible*.”² There is only one rational history, and everything else is impossible. According to Merleau-Ponty, history appears so only “for an absolute mind contemplating a dead humanity.”³ Yet, in truth, “[n]o one who writes or makes history is in this position: they all have a past and a future, that is to say, they *continue*.”⁴ The past is never completely passed, and the future is not an unavoidable necessity that we can predict in the present. We have an incomplete grasp of the past, and our future is uncertain, and it is for these reasons that our decisions “orient things within the realm of the probable.”⁵ History, according to Merleau-Ponty, can be only understood “within a framework of possibilities.”⁶ Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he wrote:

What makes me a proletarian is not the economic system or society considered as systems of impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me and experience them; nor is it an intellectual operation devoid of motive, but my way of being in the world within this institutional framework.⁷

History does not mean a completely determined necessity, but institutions that leave open new possibilities. The possibilities of transformation and reinstitution, nevertheless, do not mean that we can do away with the past. Even if, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, an institution requires someone, a subject, to carry it on, it is not a purely subjective decision. We are neither completely passive nor completely active – the relation between passivity and activity is not oppositional, that is, not mutually exclusive. We are not only “things” – material bodies in the Cartesian sense – nor are we pure consciousnesses. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty criticizes Sartre’s conception of “complete freedom,” and in “Sartre and Ultrabolshevism” he calls it the conception of “pure action.”

In Chapter Three, I followed Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Sartre’s dialectic of being and nothingness: for Sartre, our consciousness is not a thing (being-in-itself) but pure nothingness (being-for-itself).⁸ According to him, if we believe ourselves to be *something*, we deceive ourselves. Sartre calls “bad faith”

¹ AD, 269/194.

² AD, 186n1/133 note 70.

³ AD, 186n1/133 note 70.

⁴ AD, 186n1/133 note 70.

⁵ AD, 186n1/133 note 70.

⁶ AD, 186n1/133 note 70.

⁷ PP, 506/515.

⁸ See Chapter 3.4.

the attitude according to which “I am what I am and I cannot do anything about it.” On the contrary, Sartre argues, as I am not a thing, but nothing, my freedom is complete.¹ According to Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, there is no human nature, and “man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.”²

Merleau-Ponty interprets Sartre thus: our nature “consists in having no nature,” and therefore “nothing can pass from us to the world, since we are nothing.”³ Complete freedom turns out to be impotent, because it makes insignificant all the effects of our decisions, choices, and actions:

A freedom which has no need to be exercised because it is already acquired could not commit itself in this way: it knows that the following instant will find it, come what may, just as free and just as indeterminate. The very notion of freedom demands that our decision should plunge into the future, that something should have been *done* by it, that the subsequent instant should benefit from its predecessor and, though not necessitated, should be at least required by it. If freedom is doing, it is necessary that what it does should not be immediately undone by a new freedom.⁴

The idea of “complete freedom” makes freedom impossible: if our action completely wipes away the past, it will be itself erased by a future action, and therefore it cannot have any real effect, and is not action or freedom. How could the Sartrean idea of freedom liberate us from self-deception and be a commitment before all mankind, as Sartre claims it to be? If my commitment *now* must exclude what I think I *was*, and if my future commitment will require me to commit as exclusively and absolutely as I do now, then in my complete commitment *now* I cannot commit to anything that *was* or *will be*. This is a freedom, commitment, and responsibility that does away with itself “immediately:” I am completely responsible for my actions – and not only to myself but to all mankind⁵ – only if I can completely renounce responsibility for my action.⁶

For Merleau-Ponty, by the same measure as freedom is not absolute, the change brought about by action is not absolute either. The *new* is a repetition and differentiation of the past, and yet it is not of *the same*. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in his lecture “The Problem of Passivity,” we are not passive in the sense that our past would explain us entirely, and yet we are not free in the sense that we would create the sense of our past *ex nihilo*.⁷ The consciousness which “decides to consider itself immediately and without reserve [...] is the narcissistic consciousness.”⁸ We do not create our reality out of nothing, which would be the freedom of the Cartesian God – combined with the idea of the immediate *cogito* by Sartre.

¹ PP, 497/505.

² Sartre 2007, 22.

³ PP, 499/507.

⁴ PP, 499/508.

⁵ Sartre 2007, 24–25.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty writes about the an-nihilating character of pure action: “Ultimately, pure action is either suicide or murder” (AD, 166/118).

⁷ IP, 160/119

⁸ IP, 191/144.

When we decide that “we can change everything” or that “nothing can be changed,” we assume too much in both cases: we are not in the possession of history, our comprehension and possibility to act are incomplete, and in this incompleteness and contingency lies our possibility to change the world. There is a certain agreement between the position of extreme subjectivism and that of extreme objectivism: if we state that we can change everything or if we state we can change nothing, we neglect the concrete task of thinking of the means needed for change, and this includes the possible, the depth of history, the invisible of the visible, the non-instituted within the instituted. Our freedom is in the fact that institutions cannot be emptied out: instead, they call for re-institution. Revolution, which is itself an institution, is not “the end of history” and “not even the surpassing of the institution, institution of the non-instituted,” but re-institution.¹

Merleau-Ponty, in contrast to Sartre, maintains that freedom does not renounce the past, but that “one instant must be able to commit its successors.”² He does not contest that there is an “instant” of decision and a “power to interrupt,” but he argues that these moments are not atomized or separated but continuous: “choice presupposes a prior commitment” and “it must have a *field*, which means that there must be for it special possibilities, or realities which tend to cling to being.”³ Freedom, therefore, is based on institutions: something is already instituted, and the previous institutions open up the field of possibilities upon which we can act and which we can re-institute. Freedom does not cut our ties from history or from the past. In “Sartre and Ultrabolshevism,” Merleau-Ponty contrasts Sartre to Marx:

For Marx there was, and for Sartre there is not, a coming-to-be of meaning in institutions. History is no longer for Sartre, as it was for Marx, a mixed milieu, neither things nor persons, where intentions are absorbed and transformed and where they decay but are sometimes also reborn and exacerbated, tied to one another and multiplied through one another; history is made of criminal intentions or virtuous intentions and, for the rest, of acceptances which have the value of acts.⁴

History, then, cannot be possessed entirely in its full meaning, since its meaning is not fixed or settled: “History is not the unfolding of a ready-made truth [...]”⁵ We have to “put it in perspective,” read it, interpret it, work it out. The depth of time is not an obstacle, condemning us to complete ignorance and forgetfulness: it is also the possibility of the new as a re-institution, a differentiation and a change of history. The new changes the past. Yet, the differentiation of history is not without ties to material things and events – what we have is not only imaginary history.⁶ Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, a possibility of history be-

¹ IP, 46/14.

² PP, 499/508.

³ PP, 500/509.

⁴ AD, 175/124.

⁵ AD, 213/153.

⁶ AD, 270–271/195.

comes expressed as something “probable:”¹ “the decision that, in a field of action opening onto the future, and with the uncertainties which that implies, orients things within the realm of the probable in a direction desired by us and permitted by them.”²

What is crucial here is that Merleau-Ponty also finds in Sartre’s reasoning about history “a movement of thought which is the Cartesian movement.”³ According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre sees history as an object facing consciousness: in Sartre’s understanding, history can only be understood in relation to and with respect to consciousness as *thought*. In this view, it is through the immediacy and self-coincidence of the *cogito* that we judge history. Merleau-Ponty responds to this Sartrean view with the statement: “It is the *cogito* which gives to violence its Sartrean nuance.”⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre “unites the phantasm of total knowledge with that of pure action” and, he adds, “[s]uch is the naivete and hoax of narcissism.”⁵ In order to grasp the core of Merleau-Ponty’s critique here, it is necessary to look into the Cartesian background of Sartre’s theory of human action and freedom.

In his article on Cartesian freedom, “La liberté cartésienne,” Sartre criticizes the Cartesian custom in French philosophy of understanding freedom as independent thinking, as an act of judgment, and not as creative production.⁶ According to Sartre, autonomic thought and creative production are two different types of freedom, both firmly established in Descartes’ philosophy:⁷ the first applies to human freedom and the second to God.

In the *Fourth Meditation*, Descartes explains that understanding is finite in men, but infinite in God, whereas the will or the freedom of choice is infinite in both, in the strict sense that “the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something.”⁸ Moreover, the ability to act or not to act is necessary for doubt, i.e. for remaining *indifferent* – which demonstrates that we are not determined to action by what we think we know. Yet, indifference may not always depend on the will, but can also be due to the finiteness of our understanding and knowledge: if we do not know what is good and what is bad, our choice between different options is indifferent. Therefore, with respect to knowledge, indifference means narrowing our freedom, whereas with respect to the will, indifference is the condition of our freedom.⁹

For Descartes, there is the infinite truth of God – which is what God wills and could change if God wanted it to be otherwise – and there is the finite truth which the human mind can know clearly and distinctly. According to Descartes, our mistakes are due to our actions on the basis of what we do not understand

¹ AD, 270/194.

² AD, 186n1/133 note 70.

³ AD, 221/159.

⁴ AD, 222/159.

⁵ AD, 246–247/177.

⁶ Sartre 1947, 383.

⁷ Sartre 1947, 385.

⁸ AT VII, 57/CSM II, 40. See AD, 271/195.

⁹ AT VII, 57–58/CSM II, 40.

but what we, nevertheless, will.¹ For God, it is possible to will that 1 plus 2 does not equal 3, but as far as human understanding is concerned, stating “1 plus 2 does not equal 3” would be an obvious error.² This has implications to ethics: a human being can decide and can act according to what he or she knows to be good, but also against it, and thus a human being is not determined to act according to what he or she knows to be good. If this were the case, there would not be human freedom.³ Yet, God does not act according to or against good or bad, because he creates them and acts prior to them.

Sartre emphasizes that Descartes establishes a state of equality between all human beings through his conception of free will: the will is equally infinite in all men.⁴ All men are free to say “yes” or “no” regardless of their knowledge or social status. In the same way as we could not lack an *ego cogito* in so far as we think and exist as thinking, we could not lack free will in so far as we choose and decide. Nevertheless, Sartre argues that such a freedom does not in any way imply a power to do what we will: it is only our ability to will what we should.⁵ According to him, this kind of freedom is negative: it only allows us to change our way of thinking, but not to change the world – it is a kind of moral *epochē*, as he writes.⁶

According to Sartre’s interpretation of Descartes, even if we can take a theoretical distance from what we understand clearly and distinctly as good, we are nevertheless determined by it: if we understand something as evidently good, then there is no way to change it. Descartes’ concept of human freedom is, therefore, a necessity to affirm what we see clearly and distinctly as good.⁷ Sartre quotes the *Fourth Meditation*, where Descartes states that “the more I incline in one direction [...] the freer is my choice.”⁸ According to Sartre, if we do not create our values they exist *a priori*, and if we can know them, how could we not act according to them?⁹

Yet, Sartre goes further in his interpretation of Descartes’ concept of freedom, and states that the only possibility to escape from the predetermination of God is nothingness (*Néant*), evil (*Mal*), and error.¹⁰ Thus, Sartre also finds the philosophy of nothingness in Descartes: “God, who is the infinite plenitude of being, cannot conceive or regulate nothingness.”¹¹ In doubting we can negate all existence, and this is our liberty in its fullness. Sartre finds the preconception of Hegelian negativity in Descartes’ idea of freedom.¹² He writes:

¹ AT VII, 58/CSM II, 40.

² AT V, 224/CSM-K, 358–359.

³ AT IV, 173/CSM-K, 245.

⁴ Sartre 1947, 387–388.

⁵ Sartre 1947, 388.

⁶ Sartre 1947, 389.

⁷ Sartre 1947, 392.

⁸ AT VII, 57–58/CSM II, 40.

⁹ Sartre 1947, 396.

¹⁰ Sartre 1947, 396.

¹¹ Sartre 1947, 396. Translation by JH.

¹² Sartre 1947, 397.

[N]o one before Descartes had put accent on the bond between free will and negativity; no one had shown that human freedom does not originate from human being as he is, as a plenum of existence among others in a world without lacuna, but, on the contrary, as he *is not*, as he is finite, limited.¹

Despite his emphasis on Descartes' concept of freedom, Sartre does not believe that Descartes goes far enough in his definition of human freedom, since for Descartes human freedom is not creative and cannot form any original ideas, and since non-being is comprehended only as a lack, as an error, as something to be avoided, and as something that must lead to the affirmation of being: it is a negation of negation – a negation of negativity of the doubt and a move to the positivity of affirmation.² In Descartes' conception, only God has the freedom to create, as his understanding and will are equally infinite: "In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something, he knows it, and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true."³ In Sartre's view, this absolute autonomy and production of something absolutely new cannot be contained in the anterior institution of the world.⁴ It is the ability to create our own values that Sartre wants to add to human freedom, in a Nietzschean fashion. He writes: "Two centuries – of the crisis of Faith, of the crisis of Science – was needed for man to reclaim this creative freedom that Descartes attached to God [...]."⁵

Sartre's idea is that what Descartes regards as God's freedom should, in fact, be human freedom. Nevertheless, Descartes has different definitions of freedom which Sartre does not take into account. In his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth, Descartes gives a more practical concept of human freedom than the ability to affirm or deny. As Lilli Alanen has demonstrated, this correspondence has a kind of therapeutic tone, and Descartes applies his philosophical concept and principles to solve problems of human life.⁶ While advising the young princess, Descartes states that Elizabeth is free to heal herself, as he claims he had done in his own youth.⁷ Thus, Descartes believes that his concept of human freedom is not only relevant to theoretical life but also to practical life, since our thoughts have the capacity to direct our bodies.⁸

Moreover, Nicolas Grimaldi has argued that Sartre's reading has some gaps, and does not give full merit to Descartes' description of human freedom.⁹ One thing, in particular, deserves attention here: Sartre does not discuss Descartes' letter to Mesland dated February 9th 1645, in which Descartes explains

¹ Sartre 1947, 398. Translation by JH.

² Sartre 1947, 398–400.

³ AT I, 149/CSM-K, 24.

⁴ Sartre 1947, 405.

⁵ Sartre 1947, 407. Translation by JH.

⁶ Alanen 2004, 213.

⁷ AT IV, 220–221/CSM-K, 250–251.

⁸ Elizabeth asks Descartes also to explicate his maxims concerning "civil life" – that is political life – as she finds experience more useful than reason in this field (AT IV, 406/CED, 134). Descartes refuses to further analyze the matter but completely agrees with Elizabeth (AT IV, 412/CSM-K, 288).

⁹ Grimaldi 1988, 63–93.

that his concept of “indifference” can be understood as meaning merely negatively the lack of any reason to choose between this or that, but can also be taken to mean a positive ability to choose between two contraries. Human freedom is thus, according to Descartes, not merely the ability to affirm what is evident, but also the possibility to resist and to demonstrate the freedom:

[W]hen a very evident reason moves us in one direction, although morally speaking we can hardly move in the contrary direction, absolutely speaking we can. For it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing.¹

Furthermore, there is a contradiction – or paradox – in Descartes’ concept of freedom that Elizabeth points out. Elizabeth, in a letter to Descartes dated November 30th 1645, writes that it is hard to understand “how the independence of our will is no less contrary to the idea we have of God than its dependence is to its freedom.”² How can men be free if God decides about and knows about everything, and moreover, how can God be absolutely free if humans are also free? Elizabeth regards Descartes’ conception of freedom as contradictory: we are both determined and free.

Étienne Gilson points out that in Descartes’ conception there is a contradiction between finity and infinity.³ Gilson, who studies Descartes’ ideas with respect to their background in scholasticism, notes that Descartes’ answer to this problem, which is his first and his last, “exceeds infinitely the limited comprehension of man.”⁴ Descartes affirms that in his view human freedom is “both dependent and free.”⁵ He describes this by an analogue: a king has forbidden duels, and he knows that there are two men who have such a quarrel that they will fight if they meet, regardless of his prohibition. The king orders these two men to proceed in such a way that their paths will cross, but their fight will be voluntary and free because the decision is theirs. The king in the story is analogous, of course, to God, who is omnipotent but nevertheless allows men to have free decisions.⁶ Descartes, thus, does not see that there is a contradiction between God’s omnipotence and human freedom.

Descartes’ philosophy involves a distinction between the infinite knowledge and freedom of God on the one hand, and the finite knowledge and freedom of human beings on the other hand. We are not able to know the infinite truth of God, and therefore we have to abide by our finite truth: “[B]ecause nobody except God knows everything perfectly, we have to content ourselves with knowing the truths most useful to us.”⁷ Even if we cannot know the ultimate truth, we can construe our own finite science and knowledge. We are free

¹ AT IV, 173/CSM-K, 245.

² AT IV, 336/CED, 127.

³ Gilson 2008, 389.

⁴ Gilson 2008, 389.

⁵ AT IV, 352–353/CSM-K, 282.

⁶ AT IV, 353–354/CSM-K, 282.

⁷ AT IV, 291/CSM-K, 265.

in our cognitive finiteness, because infinite knowledge is incomprehensible to us in its own right.

Let me finally come back to Merleau-Ponty and his concept of freedom. There is an important agreement between Merleau-Ponty and Descartes here: both philosophers argue that we are both determined and free. Although history certainly does not determinate us in the same way in Merleau-Ponty's account as God's omnipotence determines us in Descartes' philosophy, we are, according to Merleau-Ponty, nevertheless situated within history: "I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest."¹ Our freedom must be understood not without the others, the social, the historical, the institutional, but exactly through them.

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty writes, in reference to Sartre: "I can no longer pretend to be a nihilation (*néant*), and to choose myself continually out of nothing at all."² For him, it is a highly problematic and eventually untenable option to try to overcome the Cartesian conception of freedom by taking up the position that it assigns to God, i.e. the ability to create something out of nothing: to have the creative freedom of God is to be in a complete state of indifference and contingency, which is impossible to us.

In "Sartre and Ultraboshevism," Merleau-Ponty shows that the problems of Sartre's concept of freedom and action depend on his understanding of the nature of *cogito*: the immediate and pure appearing "of myself to myself."³ The idea of an immediate coincidence of the self with itself creates an illusion of total self-possession and freedom. For Merleau-Ponty, this is the myth of total knowledge.⁴ In this respect, and it is not surprising, there is an analogy between the idea of an immediate self-coinciding self and the idea of God as complete freedom. Therefore, in a similar manner as philosophy must discard the illusion of the immediate coincidence of the self with the self in order to understand the openness of the field of experience, political thinking must also renounce the idea of "'pure action,' which is a myth (and a myth of the spectator consciousness)" – and "perhaps it is then that one has the best chance of changing the world."⁵

All of our actions and freedom happen in "the thickness of a field of existence;" also, "my presentation to myself takes place" in this field.⁶ Our mind does not create the world or constitute its sense out of nothing, but we are "always directly or indirectly tuned in on the world and in cycle with history."⁷ We are never outside or beyond the world, but always within the differentiations of the meaningful. Our action is possible only within the texture of possibilities which is the world and history. Freedom is, therefore, not only

¹ PP, 515/525.

² PP, 515/525.

³ AD, 276/199.

⁴ AD, 246/177.

⁵ AD, 279/200–201.

⁶ AD, 276/199.

⁷ AD, 276/199.

my freedom, but necessarily implies the freedom of others within the texture of the world in which we all participate.

Sartre's concept of absolute freedom has consequences for the intersubjective field, as our supposedly complete freedom to nihilate and create implies that we are in continuous conflict with one another.¹ Merleau-Ponty turns around this Sartrean concept of freedom: if my commitment is a commitment to all men, surely I cannot will my freedom without "willing freedom *for all*."² And if I am free to decide against the other's decision, he or she must also be free to decide against my decision; if I can nihilate the other, he or she can also nihilate me; if I can contest the other, he or she can likewise contest me. In this sense, it is evident that we are not completely free, but are limited by one another. Contrary to Sartre's exposition, we are interdependent in such a way that my possible violence against the other is countered by his or her possible violence against me: "The evil that I do I do to myself, and in struggling against others I struggle equally against myself."³

According to Merleau-Ponty, the other is not a complete nihilation which is set against my complete nihilation: we are not two completely closed and incomparable for-itselfs constituting the in-itself or the world out of nothing in a mutually excluding and threatening manner.⁴ Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion that our relations with others are confrontations between absolutely self-coinciding and self-dependent subjects. We share a common field of thought, action, and expression: the historical, instituted, social world. The common field is differentiation of several dimensions. Merleau-Ponty describes the subject and the other not as two images side by side, but as "two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces."⁵ The other is presentation of the unrepresentable, an invisible within the visible that I see of him or her. This does not imply that what she sees I do not see, and what I see she does not.⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, "Being is this strange encroachment [...] junction at a distance."⁷ We are not two consciousnesses set one against the other, head-to-head, two subjectivities that merely objectify one another. On the contrary, we have a "strange encroachment," a kind of insertion into each other which neither of us governs - a sharing of the invisible, a divergence which connects, proximity

¹ Sartre, in his play *No Exit*, famously concludes: "Hell is - other people!" (Sartre 1989, 45).

² PP, 520/530.

³ S, 344/212.

⁴ VI, 114/82.

⁵ VI, 183/139. VI, 114-115/82-83. Merleau-Ponty writes in *Eye and Mind*: "The mirror's phantom draws my flesh into the outer world, and at the same time the invisible of my body can invest its psychic energy in the other bodies I see. Hence my body can include elements drawn from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them; man is a mirror for man. Mirrors are instruments of a universal magic that converts things into spectacle, spectacle into things, myself into another, and another into myself." (OE, 33-34/129-130.)

⁶ VI, 269/216.

⁷ VI, 269/216.

and distance. We share the world, but it also separates us: our junction is disjunction.¹

As I showed in Chapter Four, the other is untouchable and invisible to me, but also for himself, in the same way as I am for myself: “the other which [...] I will never touch, he does not touch either, no privilege of oneself over the other here [...].”² Merleau-Ponty understands the self as an other:³ in my self-touching, there is not only my touching body and my touchable body, but my bodily touching necessarily involves an untouchable dimension. Merleau-Ponty calls the *flesh* this dynamic structure of visibility and invisibility, touchability and untouchability.⁴ The untouchable, the invisible, is not only a secret side which could be uttered, but the texture of history and the world that I share with others. The passive within us is intertwined with our activity, and these two “sides” cannot be completely separated. Merleau-Ponty states in his working notes: “[E]ven freedom has its generality, is understood as generality: activity is no longer *the contrary* of passivity.”⁵

Merleau-Ponty renounces the idea of the constituting-constituted subject and moves towards the instituting-instituted subject.⁶ We are not pure consciousnesses that would constitute the universal meaning of the world, but transitive fields that transform the meaningful and, therefore, also transform the relations between ourselves and others. Freedom can be understood within the ontological structure of connection and difference. We are neither absolutely free nor completely determined, but we are “tied” or connected, which also means that we have the power to change, to differentiate. Freedom is inscribed in the “flesh of the world:” it can be understood only as temporal, within the instituted field of personal and social history. Therefore, freedom becomes a dimension which is “total” only as “partial,” which is within the linguistic expression as well as within the contingency of natural productivity. Freedom is the possibility for a vertical relation, “extended into the past, existential eternity, savage mind (*esprit sauvage*).”⁷ Freedom is within the *interrogation* of a dimension, and every dimension is deepening, incomplete, and of the invisible. According to Merleau-Ponty, “the truth is this beyond the truth, this depth where there are still *several relationships* to be considered.”⁸

¹ VI, 281/228.

² VI, 307/254.

³ VI, 308/254.

⁴ VI, 308/254–255.

⁵ VI, 322–323/269.

⁶ IP, 35/6; 37/8; 123/76. See Chapter 4.3.

⁷ VI, 229/175.

⁸ VI, 291/237.

CONCLUSION

This work, as a study of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Descartes' philosophy, had the goal of explicating the structural problems of the Cartesian ontology and explaining how the new ontological structure that Merleau-Ponty introduces in his later philosophy solves these problems. By focusing on the structural aspects of Cartesian philosophy I was able to clarify and articulate why Merleau-Ponty regards an ontological transition as necessary: it is not only Descartes' concepts of the pure mind and the union of mind and body that are problematic, but specifically the dual and contradictory relation that they establish between two ontological accounts.

By analyzing Merleau-Ponty's works, I have argued that the dual structure of distinction and union informs several dualities in modern philosophy: the duality between consciousness and body, between reflection and the unreflected, between objectification and experience, between ideality and existence. The whole framework of our relations with the world is included within the boundaries of this conceptualization, not merely some aspects of it. I have demonstrated that in Merleau-Ponty's analysis the dual structure of Cartesian philosophy leads to contradictions that prevent us from understanding the relation between, for example, natural productivity and thought. The problem of the duality is not limited to Descartes' explicit account of the contradiction of distinction and union: it prevents us from conceiving the relation between our ideas and being.

In Descartes' philosophy, the relation between the clarity of our thought and the obscurity of our experience is incomprehensible, an abyss of our knowledge, an excess of the rational system – it is created and sustained by God that infinitely exceeds our finite intelligence. We must limit ourselves either to intelligible ideas or to lived experience, but we cannot understand the relation between them. This conceptualization forms what Merleau-Ponty calls the two "Cartesian monsters:" the idea of being in-itself, of reality as an object, and the idea of lived experience as immediate coincidence with the existent world. The depth of being is, thus, excluded from philosophy. I have demonstrated that in his later philosophy Merleau-Ponty attempts to formulate a new kind of bal-

ance that allows the paradoxicality of the relations between essence and existence, thought and body, language and nature.

In this work, my main goal was to explicate Merleau-Ponty's idea of the new ontological structure as a solution to the dualities of Cartesian philosophy, in its different forms, starting with Descartes' work and the solutions offered by his followers and ranging to Husserl's phenomenology. I have argued that Merleau-Ponty does not reject Descartes' philosophy as such, but sees it necessary to develop a new conceptualization of dual relations. To be clear, he does not reject, for example, the concepts of the reflection and the unreflected, but reformulates their relation as a non-contradiction. Reflection is *of* the unreflected. Reflection is a continuation of the same movement that the unreflected manifests, and that withdraws into the transcendence, to the temporal thickness of reflection. Reflection is differentiation of the unreflected. Therefore, an "object" of our perception, or of our thought, is never only an object, a plain and simple presence in front of our consciousness, but involves a depth-dimension that opens onto the world as a whole complex of relations.

I have offered an explication of Merleau-Ponty's idea of the ontological structure as a structure of connection and difference: the sentient is *of* the sensible, which differentiates from itself and forms a self-relation only through divergence. It is through this ontological structure that Merleau-Ponty articulates the solution to the problem of the relations between mind and body, distinction and union, as differentiations of their common texture.

SUMMARY

Varhaisessa *Phénoménologie de la perception* -teoksessa Merleau-Ponty tuo esiin Descartesin filosofiaa hallitsevan ristiriitaisuuden mielen ja ruumin liiton ja niiden erottelun välillä. Ongelmana ei ole vain immateriaalisen ja materiaalisen substanssin välinen suhde vaan kyse on kahdesta evidenssin alueesta, jotka eivät ole Descartesin mukaan ajateltavissa yhdessä: Jumala takaa sekä selvät ja tarkat puhtaan ymmärryksen ideat, että ymmärrykselle hämärän mutta käytännön elämässä selvän ruumiillisen kokemuksen. Jumala on kuitenkin Descartesin mukaan inhimilliselle ymmärrykselle käsittämätön. Mielen ja ruumin eron ja yhteyden välinen suhde jää käsittämättömäksi, koska ihminen ei ole Descartesin mukaan kykenevä ajattelemaan samaan aikaan näitä yhdessä ja ilman ristiriitaa. Näin Descartesin filosofia perustuu ei-filosofisen elämän torjumiselle, mutta samalla ristiriitaisesti se ei tule toimeen ilman ei-filosofista, ruumiillista elämää, joka on filosofisen ajattelun pysyvä lähtökohta.

Tutkimuksessani osoitan, että yhteyden ja eron rakenteellinen suhde on Merleau-Pontyn filosofian keskeisimpiä kysymyksiä ja että tähän kysymykseen kytkeytyy myös hänen Descartes-tulkintansa. Myöhemmissä *La Nature* -luennoissaan Merleau-Ponty hahmottaa mielen ja ruumiin yhteyttä ja eroa kahtena erillisenä ontologiana: kartesiolainen filosofia jakautuu kahtia, yhtäältä puhtaan ideaalisen ja objektiivisen ontologiaan ja toisaalta eksistenssin ja eletyn kokemuksen ontologiaan. *L'Œil et l'Esprit* -teoksessa Merleau-Ponty väittää, että "kartesiolainen tasapaino" näiden kahden ontologian välillä on lopullisesti menetetty ja on etsittävä uutta ontologista tasapainoa, suhdetta eksistenssin ja ideaalisen, ruumiin ja mielen välillä. Merleau-Ponty pyrkii ajattelemaan uudella tavalla sitä, mitä kartesiolainen filosofia piti käsittämättömänä ja jonka se jätti Jumalan asiaksi. Kyse ei kuitenkaan voi olla pelkästään perinteen hylkäämisestä vaan sen muuttamisesta, historiallisten käsitysten instituoimisesta eli asettamisesta uudella tavalla.

Phénoménologie de la perception -teoksessa Merleau-Ponty muotoilee uudelleen kartesiolaisen filosofian ristiriitaisen duaalisuuden reflektion paradoksin: reflektio pohjautuu aina refleктоimattomalle kokemukselle, mutta reflektio ei koskaan saa lopullista otetta refleктоimattomasta; refleктоimaton vetäytyy reflektion otteesta. Artikkelissaan "Le philosophe et son ombre" Merleau-Ponty liittää tämän käsityksen reflektiosta myös Husserlin fenomenologiaan: tietoisuusfilosofiana alkanut fenomenologia tuo esiin sen, mikä jää vääjäämättä tietoisuuden ulkopuolelle.

Myöhemmissä ajattelussaan Merleau-Ponty kehittää uutta ontologiaa ratkaisuna perinteisen filosofian ongelmiin. Keskeneneräiseksi jääneessä ja postuumisti julkaistussa *Le visible et l'invisible* -teoksessa hän selvittää ideaalisen ja faktisen välistä suhdetta ja kehittää ajatusta, jonka mukaan yhteys ja ero eivät ole toisensa ulossulkevia ja ristiriidassa keskenään. Merleau-Ponty osoittaa, että ruumiin ja mielen suhde voidaan ajatella rakenteena tai tekstuurina, joka on suhteessa itseensä erityytymisen kautta: kyse ei ole puhtaasta erosta eikä välittömästä yhteensattumisesta vaan rakenteellisesta tiheydestä ja syvyydestä.

tä. Uusi ontologinen rakenne auttaa ymmärtämään miten jokainen ulottuvuus avaa ajallisen syvyyden ja on keskeneräinen, avoin uusille mahdollisuuksille.

Yhteyden ja eron ontologinen rakenne ei ole irrallaan yhtäältä siitä, miten Merleau-Ponty ajattelee taiteellista ilmaisua, ja toisaalta siitä, miten hän käsittää poliittisen toiminnan. Taideteos tai poliittinen toiminta, ollessaan valankumouksellisia ja radikaaleja, pyrkivät molemmat luomaan jotain uutta ja muuttamaan vallitsevia olosuhteita. Historiallisen muutoksen mahdollisuus on kuitenkin aina suhteessa historian tiheyteen ja syvyyteen: vapaus ja muutos ovat historiallisen instituution samanaikaista toistoa ja eriytymistä.

Tutkimuksen ensimmäisessä luvussa selvitän systemaattisesti Merleau-Pontyn Descartes-tulkintaa *Phénoménologie de la perception* -teoksessa. Luku on jäsennetty temaattisesti Descartesin *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* -teoksen kuuden mietiskelyn mukaan, jotta voin osoittaa mitä kysymyksiä ja käsitteitä Merleau-Ponty tulkinnassaan painottaa. Descartes-tulkinnan rinnalla eksplikoin Merleau-Pontyn käsitystä Husserlin fenomenologiasta, joka muodostaa keskeisen tutkimusmetodin *Phénoménologie de la perception* -teoksessa. Tuon esiin Merleau-Pontyn fenomenologia-tulkinnan kartesiolaisen motivaation: hän tematisoi Husserlin eletyn ruumiin käsitteen kautta kartesiolaisen mielen ja ruumiin liiton ajatuksen. Merleau-Ponty liittyy kysymyksen tietoisuuden ja ruumiin suhteesta Descartesin filosofian kaksinaisuuteen: osoitan kuinka Merleau-Ponty muotoilee uudelleen Descartesin filosofian ristiriidan mielen ja ruumiin yhteyden ja eron välillä paradoksaalisena suhteena, joka on merkittävä myös hänen myöhäisfilosofiansa kannalta.

Toisessa luvussa selvitän miten Merleau-Ponty lähestyy Descartesin jälkeistä filosofista perinnettä. Esiin nousee erityisesti kysymys itse-suhteesta: Descartes argumentoi, että ajattelu tuntee itsensä reflektiota edeltävällä ”sisäisellä tietoisuudella,” koska reflektiivinen tieto reflektiosta itsestään ajautuisi äärettömään regressioon. Tätä seuraten Malebranche, Maine de Biran ja Bergson määrittävät itse-suhteen esi-reflektiivisenä sisäisenä tunteena tai intuitiiona. Yhteyden lisäksi nämä kartesiolaiset filosofit painottavat kuitenkin myös eriytymistä ja vetäytyvyyttä: Malebranche osoittaa kuinka meillä ei ole omaa mieltämme koskevaa ideaa, Maine de Biranin filosofiassa itse-tietoisuus on prosessi eikä pelkkä välitön yhteensattuminen ja Bergsonille idean artikulaatio edellyttää eriytymistä ja toistoa. Osoitan, että kartesiolainen traditio muodostaa Merleau-Pontyn filosofian historiallisen taustan.

Kolmannessa luvussa analysoin Merleau-Pontyn käsitystä kartesiolaisen ontologian kaksinaisuudesta. *La Nature* -luennoissa Merleau-Ponty osoittaa, että puhtaan mielen näkökulma johtaa objektivistiseen ontologiaan ja mielen ja ruumiin liitto puolestaan eksistoivan ontologiaan. Merleau-Ponty väittää, että tämä duaalisuus löytyy myös Husserlin fenomenologiasta, jossa konstituoivan tietoisuuden ja eletyn kokemuksen välinen suhde oli eksplisiittinen kysymys. Eksplikoin myös Merleau-Pontyn *Le visible et l'invisible* -teoksen mukana julkaistuissa työmuistiinpanoissa esittämää itsekritiikkiä *Phénoménologie de la perception* -teoksestaan: aikaisempi teos jäi hänen mukaansa osittain kiinni

tietoisuusfilosofiseen lähtökohtaan ja tarvitsee ontologista eksplikointia. Merleau-Ponty aloittaa *Le visible et l'invisible* -teoksen selvittämällä sitä paradoksaalista kaksinaisuutta, jonka hän *Phénoménologie de la perception* -teoksessa toi esiin ja jonka ongelmalliset muotoilut hän liittää erityisesti kartesiolaiseen tietoisuusfilosofiaan. Analysoin myös kuinka *Le visible et l'invisible* -teoksen toisessa luvussa Merleau-Ponty kritisoi paradoksaalisen yhteyden ja eron ongelmallista muotoilua Sartren dialektisessa filosofiassa.

Neljännessä luvussa selvitan systemaattisesti Merleau-Pontyn käsitystä uudesta ontologisesta rakenteesta. Eksplikoin miten Merleau-Ponty siirtyy kartesiolaisen ontologian ristiriitaisesta kaksinaisuudesta ajatukseen läheisyydestä ja etäisyydestä, yhteydestä ja erosta, jotka eivät sulje toisiaan ulos vaan ovat toistensa edellytyksiä ja sisältävät toisensa eli implikoivat toisensa. Tämä ”implikaatioiden järjestys” syrjäyttää Descartesin filosofian ”rationaalisten perusteiden järjestyksen”, ja tämän kautta Merleau-Ponty näyttää miten olemuksellisuus sisältyy aina aistittavaan kokemukseen ja miten olemukset on tavoitettavissa vain aistittavassa kokemuksessa. Samalla aistittava kokemus laajenee ajalliseksi ulottuvuudeksi, jota Merleau-Ponty hahmottaa useiden ajattelijoiden kehittämien käsitteiden avulla: hän viittaa Husserlin eideettiseen variointiin, Freudin peitemuistoon, Heideggerin verbaaliseen olemuksellisuuteen, Bergsonin puhtaaseen muistiin, Proustin aistittaviin olemuksiin, Bachelardin elementteihin ja Schellingin barbaariseen periaatteeseen. Osoitan, että erityisen keskeinen on Merleau-Pontyn tulkinta Husserlin instituution ajatuksesta: näkyvän näkymätön olemuksellisuus ja saumakohta kytkee meidät historiaan ja toisiin ihmisiin. Samalla tämä menneisyyden vertikaalinen läsnäoleminen on vääjäämättä myös unohtamista, etäännyttämistä ja eriytymisen liikettä. Osoitan, että Merleau-Ponty hahmottaa yhteyden ja eron ontologista rakennetta ratkaisuna kartesiolaisen filosofian ristitaisen kaksinaisuuden ongelmaan.

Viidennessä ja viimeisessä luvussa lisään Merleau-Pontyn viimeisen luennon, ”L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie d’aujourd’hui”, tarjoaman näkökulman Descartesin filosofiaan. Merleau-Ponty tuo esiin, että Descartes ei torjunut ajallisuuden näkökulmaa vaan hän hahmotti myös *cogiton* kestoja ja ajallisuutta, jota Merleau-Ponty kutsuu luennoissaan vertikaaliseksi *cogitoksi*. Lopuksi selvitan Merleau-Pontyn vapaus-käsitystä ja sen suhdetta yhteyden ja eron ontologiseen rakenteeseen. Osoitan, että Merleau-Pontyn ontologia ei ole irrallaan yhtäältä hänen politiikan filosofiastaan eikä toisaalta hänen taidetta koskevasta ajattelustaan.

Tutkimukseni näyttää miten Merleau-Pontyn filosofian kautta voidaan ymmärtää historiallista muutosta – olipa kyse sitten henkilökohtaisesta historiasta tai ihmistenvälisestä kulttuurihistoriasta. Historian hahmottuu syvyysulottuvuutena, jossa pysyvyys edellyttää unohtamista ja muutosta. Samalla tutkimukseni osoittaa, että tämän yhtenevän ja eriävän rakenteen kautta voidaan ajatella ideaalisen ja materiaalisen, käsitteellisen ja ruumiillisen välisiä suhteita: kyse ei ole palautuvuudesta ja välittömästä samuudesta eikä myöskään absoluuttisesta erosta, erillisistä substansseista, vaan kääntyvyys-

destä, tekstuurin tai kudoksen eriytymisestä, tihenemisestä ja syvenemisestä. Esitän tutkimuksessani, että erityisesti Merleau-Pontyn myöhäisajattelua voidaan ymmärtää suhteessa kartesiolaiseen filosofiaan, tulkintana Descartesin filosofiasta.

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