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Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature: Negativity, Ontology, and the Rehabilitation of the Possible

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation develops an account of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature, and demonstrates the importance of nature and the concept of negativity for his phenomenological ontology. For Merleau-Ponty, nature is the unreflected, "that which carries us" (*N* 4); it cannot be unequivocally conceived as an object or pure extension. The first part of the dissertation frames Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature in relation to his critical engagement with Kant, Schelling, and Husserl, all of whom are working within, or at the margins of, the modern philosophical tradition instituted by Descartes. Merleau-Ponty identifies two irreducible ideas of nature in each of these philosophies, a 'doubleness' that destabilizes and renders ambiguous the concept of nature as object. This dissertation contends that this ambiguity intensifies in Husserl's philosophy; Husserlian phenomenology allows Merleau-Ponty to develop a 'chiasmic' or binocular ontology. Furthermore, this section also traces the concept of negativity as it emerges in the work of these three thinkers.

Secondly, the dissertation demonstrates the importance and continuing relevance of Merleau-Ponty's critique of the sciences and the objectivist ontology on which it relies. According to Merleau-Ponty, modern science has begun to critique its own classical foundations, and hence serves as an important corrective to Cartesian ontology. This section focuses on the 1942 text *The Structure of Behavior* and the 1956-1960 *Nature* course, and demonstrates how the earlier emphasis on perceptual consciousness gives way to the notion of Being as interrogation. Importantly, it is in the *Nature* course that Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of 'natural negativity,' which will be central to his ontology. This section puts forth the argument that the concept of negativity informs Merleau-Ponty's critique of the actualism of both mechanism/causalism and finalism/idealism, thereby allowing him to develop a philosophy of life as emergence. Consequently, the critique of actualism allows him to formulate or envisage a 'new' notion of the possible.

Finally, the third section focuses on the human body as understood within the philosophy of nature. This section draws on Merleau-Ponty's later works and returns to his critical reading of Husserl in order to emphasize the importance of the principle of negativity and the philosophy of nature for his ontology or concept of flesh. For Merleau-Ponty, a philosophy of nature cannot be articulated without an account of the perceiving body. This section concludes with a discussion of constitutive negativity – as opposed to 'nothingness' or void – with regard to perception as well as organic development. This final section thus informs and deepens the preceding two, and argues that the concept of negativity allows Merleau-Ponty to overcome the vertigo of Cartesian ontology and 'rehabilitate' a notion of the possible. This rehabilitation of possibility and the 'savageness' of nature results in a phenomenological ontology that moves beyond metaphysical dualism, and which is capable of conceiving the radical openness and inexhaustibility of the world in which we live.

DECLARATION

This is to certify that

1. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the Preface,

2. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

3. The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

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INTRODUCTION

MERLEAU-PONTY'S CHIASMIC ONTOLOGY AND THE 'REHABILITATION' OF NATURE

[The Cartesian concept of nature] obliges every being, under pain of being nothing, to exist completely without hiatus, and with no hidden possibilities.

-Merleau-Ponty[1]

There is the truth of Descartes, but on condition that one reads it between the lines.

-Merleau-Ponty[2]

§1. Framing the Question of Nature

If philosophy begins in wonder at and before the mystery of the world, then philosophy never ceases to begin. As he writes in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, for Merleau-Ponty the insurmountable mystery of existence and of reason is essential, such that "there can be no question of dissolving it through some 'solution.'"[3] That is, philosophy must be a "*standing in wonder* before the world" (*PhP* lxxvii), a standing in "perpetual astonishment"[4] that amounts to an unyielding refusal to "hide the mystery of existence," as Pierre Hadot writes.[5] Philosophy is therefore interrogation, the ceaseless questioning of the inexhaustible depth of the world, a depth I do not constitute and which I find already there. Nature is, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, "our soil [*sol*] – not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us."[6]

How is it that I find myself within an already meaningful world? How can I think nature if I find it always already there, if I find myself within and intertwined with the very 'thing' I seek to understand? If we find nature already there, then this already there-ness is integral to the very meaning of nature for us. Thought is therefore led to

[1] *Éloge de la Philosophie, Lecon inaugurale faite au Collége de France, Le jeudi 15 janvier 1953,* trans. J. Wild and J. M. Edie as *In Praise of Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 137. Hereafter abbreviated *IPP*. See Appendix A for a complete list of abbreviations.
[2] *Le Visible et l'invisible, suivi de notes de travail*, trans. A. Lingis as *The Visible and the Invisible, followed by Working Notes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 188. Hereafter *VI.*
[3] *Phénoménologie de la perception*, trans. D. Landes as *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), lxxxv. Hereafter *PhP.*
[4] Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 165.
[5] Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, trans. M. Chase (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press, 2006), 310.
[6] *La Nature, notes cours du Collège de France*, trans. R. Vallier as *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 4. Hereafter *N.*

think that which precedes and *exceeds* it: the unreflected. It is radically precluded from beginning from where it would like to begin. Nature is irrecusably obscure and profoundly disorienting for reflective consciousness, and yet it continues to provoke, solicit, and invite reflection. For Merleau-Ponty, we must interrogate, rather than abolish, philosophy's relation to the unreflected or non-philosophy. We must confront the contingency of existence, the "universe of living paradoxes" (*IPP* 176) or the mystery of Being in its very inexplicability.[7] Being exceeds and cannot be equated with being-known: this is what has been occluded in the scientific and modern philosophical thought of nature. It is this equation of Being with thought that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology resists.

At the outset of the first *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty declares, in a formulation that goes to the heart of his ontology: "Nature is an enigmatic object, an object that is not an object at all" (*N* 4).[8] For Merleau-Ponty, nature has never been conceived unambiguously as an object and therefore in accordance with mechanism. Nature as an object of thought is not the nature we experience; the meaning of nature exceeds the concept of it.[9] If nature is not an object, then the question of nature cannot be reduced to the "problem of the science of Nature," and consequently cannot be 'resolved' by the operations of science (*N* 203). The question of nature is fundamentally philosophical.[10] For Merleau-Ponty, the scientific meaning of nature is a *meaning*, a certain "ontology in the broader context of the relation with the most primordial Being" (*N* 206). Science naturalizes its concept of nature, such that it becomes immediately equated with reality. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to nature will critique the scientific concept and challenge its claim to universality by re-situating it within the horizon of Being. Accordingly, Ted Toadvine insists that the question ought to be 'renewed' despite the "rising public consciousness of the fragility of the natural environment."[11]

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[7] As Martin Heidegger puts it, we must not eradicate the concealment of Being, but rather allow nature, "in all the purity of its essence" the very hiddenness [κρύπτεσθαι] that belongs to it ("On the Essence and Concept of Φύσις," 230).

[8] The *Nature* lectures were not prepared for publication by Merleau-Ponty, and the first two courses in the text are based on student notes (see the translator's introduction). Unfortunately, then, the reader of the *Nature* Course Notes has considerable interpretative latitude. The dissertation therefore draws on various other translated working notes and published texts of Merleau-Ponty's in an attempt to minimize this interpretative issue.

[9] The disavowal of the experience of nature is not "just one disavowal among others." It is not a simple forgetting, but the fantasy of seeing without being seen, the institution of "what is proper to man," as Derrida has so compellingly shown (*The Animal That Therefore I Am,* 14).

[10] As Bannon writes, that nature is a historical and cultural concept "does not necessarily undermine the independence of the natural world," in which "human beings are but one participant" (*From Mastery to Mystery*, 16). Furthermore, natural science cannot exhaustively explain "all we know about the natural world," for "we bring to scientific work a rich pre-scientific understanding of nature which informs and conditions it" (Compton, "Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Nature," 66).

[11] Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 3.

He argues that the "specifically philosophical dimension of our relationship with nature" has been obscured, a result of the positivist legacy and subsequent "collapse" of the philosophy of nature into philosophy of science.[12] Furthermore, as Toadvine cogently argues, the term 'environment' operates on the basis of a certain unexamined understanding of the natural world, one that "implies an artificial division between nature and humans and encourages us to view nature as a collection of things rather than in terms of mutually constitutive relationships."[13] For Merleau-Ponty, nature is neither an object nor the sum of appearances, and there is no rupture between animality and humanity, no bifurcation of subject and object. As such, his philosophy of nature is at once a critique of Cartesian philosophy. Nature must be thought by a being that is in and of nature. How, then, may we approach nature without 'denaturing' it?

Emphasizing the intentional structure of experience, phenomenology attends to the perceived thing in its manner of givenness and is hence well-suited to the task of interrogating non-philosophy or nature as the unreflected. It is, as Morris writes, a "radical empiricism," as it "seeks to root the standard of the empirical in what is empirically given."[14] As Toadvine puts it, "in its effort to describe and understand the *nature of experience*, phenomenology is inevitably led to investigate the *experience of nature*."[15] Importantly, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology eschews both empiricism (realism) and intellectualism (rationalism). Empiricism is right to focus on the givens of experience or sense impressions, but in doing so downplays the active role of the perceiving subject and sees in nature only "a sum of stimuli and qualities" (*PhP* 26). Empiricism is unable to think the 'sense' of the cultural and natural world as anything other than "accidental" (*PhP* 25). If we return to the phenomena, however, we find not a "multitude of impressions" but "a whole already pregnant with an irreducible sense," an "immanent sense bursting forth from a constellation of givens" (*PhP* 23). Rationalist philosophies of consciousness, on the other hand, posit an active subject that constitutes the world that it experiences. For Merleau-Ponty, this is to forget the perceiving body and the finite existence from which philosophy must begin, and the contingency it must think. It is to posit an intellect that believes it can cut its tie to the world in order to have the world, and hence forgets that "it is not I who makes myself think any more than it is

[12] ibid., 5.
[13] ibid., 6.
[14] David Morris, "From the Nature of Meaning to a Phenomenological Refiguring of Nature," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 72 (2013): 324.
[15] Toadvine, *Nature*, 8.

I who makes my heart beat" (*VI* 221).[16] In this sense, both approaches offer an impoverished account of experience and of nature, and function on the basis of a forgetting of the originary carnal adherence in the 'flesh' of the world. For Merleau-Ponty, we must return to our experience of the world, the pregiven life-world that both empiricism and intellectualism presuppose, and on which they ultimately draw for their validity.[17]

Importantly, both approaches presuppose a "bifurcation of reality"[18] that we may trace back to René Descartes. As he argues in his last published text, "Eye and Mind," both "our science and our philosophy are two faithful and unfaithful offshoots of Cartesianism, two monsters born of its dismemberment."[19] Accordingly, this dissertation frames Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology and the 'rehabilitation' of nature in terms of the rationalist tradition instituted by Descartes, the horizon that philosophy and the sciences are still working within today, whether critically or otherwise. Indeed, phenomenology itself is defined by this horizon. This clarifies the 'stakes,' as it were, of the question of nature: it is not a unique theme among others. The 'rehabilitation' of nature is not merely the reinvigoration of an idea that has been concealed, or the restoration of 'nature' as a question worthy of philosophical consideration. It leads to an overcoming of Cartesian ontology.

§2. The Ambiguous Thought of Nature in Descartes: Object and Existent

According to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes 'doubles' nature. The interiority of nature "takes refuge in God" as infinite productivity, and natural being "becomes product, pure exteriority" (*N* 9). External nature now amounts to the "realization of a rationality that is in God" (*N* 10). This is the ontology of the object. Emptied of interiority, productivity, and inherent meaningfulness, Nature is rendered mechanical and ultimately dependent on an 'artificialism.'[20] Indeed, as the term 'mechanism' itself suggests, as Canguilhem reminds us, [21] nature conceived as such implies a dependence on something that would

[16] As David Morris writes, "one is neither a wholly active knower nor a wholly passive ignoramus." Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology shows that "one is always *learning*, that is, actively seeking only by being passive to what one seeks" ("Reversibility and *Ereignis*," 135).
[17] See *PhP* 30.
[18] M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 6. See chapter 1 for a comprehensive account of the Cartesian origin of empiricism and intellectualism.
[19] *L'Œil et l'esprit*, trans. M. B. Smith as "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds. T. Toadvine and L. Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 366-367. Hereafter *EM*.
[20] *N* 10, *EM* 352.
[21] Georges Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, trans. S. Geroulanos and D. Ginsburg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 63.

animate or produce it.[22] In other words, the origin and interiority of nature "now resides in God who is the artisan of the machine," as Leonard Lawlor writes. [23] From the point of view of the infinite, there is an "internal harmony of the World," a coherent and foreseeable cosmic totality, and a "complete adequation of the World and of the possible" (*N* 9, 10). To reduce nature to pure extension (mechanism) is ultimately the same as defining it in terms of its conformity to a concept (finalism). In the last analysis, both mechanism and finalism affirm an actualist notion of nature and the world.

However, the Cartesian idea of infinitized nature can be developed in another way: the ontology of the existent, to which natural inclination corresponds. On Merleau-Ponty's reading, the Cartesian idea of nature "results from the priority given to the infinite over the finite," and the concept "will enter into crisis as soon as this priority is put into question" (*N* 13). What Merleau-Ponty seeks is an overcoming of the Cartesian "positive infinite"[24] through a reversal of this priority, which is also a reinstatement of the openness of "existential eternity."[25]

a. Natural Light: The Ontology of the Object

In his attempt to inaugurate a "new idea of universal philosophy,"[26] Descartes carries out a radical critique of objective knowledge. Through the submission of the perceptions of the world to radical doubt, Descartes aims to provide an indubitable foundation for philosophy. This leads to the plane of essences or to the pure "inspection of the mind": to pure extension and the indubitability of the thinking thing, or the *cogito.*[27] Objectivist ontology is therefore grounded in the belief that we can 'purify' our contact with Being and discern "what is solid, what resists understanding" (*N* 126). For Descartes, my conception of God as infinite in reality – as "*actually* infinite in such a high degree"[28] – is known by natural light, even if I cannot fully comprehend infinite perfection. Nature now becomes "intelligible extension"; as such, it is "indefinitely divisible," with each

[22] As Heidegger points out, this artificialist notion subsists in the modern idea of the organism, "according to which 'growing things' are interpreted as artifacts that make themselves" ("On the Essence," 194).
[23] Leonard Lawlor, "The Principle of Nature," *Human Studies* 29 (2006): 257.
[24] See Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, trans. R. McCleary as *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 149. Hereafter *S.*
[25] *VI* 187, 267; "Reading Notes on Gurwitsch," 187.
[26] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 73. Hereafter abbreviated *C.*
[27] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. L. J. Lafleur (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960), 30-31.
[28] ibid., 45, italics added.

part being "nothing other than its alterity in relation to others" (*N* 126). Nature is *partes extra partes*, spread out in front of mind. That is to say, extension is both full and empty: "it is only what it is" (*N* 126). Nature, conceived "in the image of God," becomes "wholly actual," and there is no longer a "realm of 'possible' being" (*N* 10, 126). Nature is "a being that is all that it is able to be, absolute positivity, essence itself, else it would not have been able to be" (*N* 13).

In the ontology of the object there is no potency, autoproduction, or 'savageness' of Nature: it cannot be "other than what it is" (*N* 126-127). Nature is incapable of the 'not' – it *cannot* not be – and is hence incapable of lack or contingency. It is simultaneously transparent and solid, for it is both graspable by the pure understanding and "absolute density," for it does not "detail itself" (*N* 127). Accordingly, there is no hiddenness or negativity of nature. This objectivist conception persists in the positivist notion that non-human animal beings *lack* lack or the finitude and contingency that mark the human, and are therefore beings governed by necessity. Hence Merleau-Ponty contends that the Cartesian notion of nature as extension "obliges every being, under pain of being nothing, to exist completely without hiatus, and with no hidden possibilities" (*IPP* 137). There is no hesitation, passivity, latency, weakness, or negativity in nature, and its possibilities are actualist or determinable in advance. This concept of nature implies its total knowability and is therefore in harmony with, or inherently predisposed to, the possibility of science and technological mastery. As we will see in the chapters that follow, Merleau-Ponty's 'rehabilitation' of the possible must be thought beyond the 'actualist' possible, and hence makes possibility 'possible' again.

As Merleau-Ponty claims, the notion of intelligible extension is attained by a "philosophy of the understanding" for it involves the critical attitude I take "in front of my experience: I want to purify it" (*N* 127). However, such a philosophy is irreducibly ambiguous. As noted above, human thought cannot completely comprehend the infinite. Merleau-Ponty calls this aspect of the ontology of the object Descartes' "essentialism," because it maintains the idea that "extension is not the term of the unveiling of the essence of the world" since "there still remains within it an element that thought cannot assimilate" (*N* 126). In other words, God is the "truly infinite object" in which there is no hiatus between what we think and what truly *is* – but this means that "God alone can

be posited as the truly objective object" (*N* 126).[29] Finite thought is necessarily marked by potential errancy. On the one hand, natural light or the pure understanding teaches us objective reality. What I understand by virtue of natural light is necessarily true. On the other hand, we are now forced to concede that "only those things that I cannot understand are true" (*N* 17), for my lack of understanding is the acknowledgement of God. This philosophy is constantly open to doubt because it "affirms both the distance of thought from the things" – because I cannot attain infinite understanding – and that "the things are dependent on my thought" (*N* 127). Moreover, this ambiguity is conditioned by Descartes' rationalism and remains ultimately consistent with it. It is natural light that reveals the essence of nature (the ontology of the object) as well as the infinity and reality of God, and it is the perfection of God that first teaches me that my comprehension is limited. As Descartes writes, "the light of nature teaches us that deception must always be the result of some deficiency," and since God cannot deceive me (for then he would not be God),[30] it must be the human being that errs. This leads us to the 'second' idea of nature in Descartes: the ontology of the existent, revealed through natural inclination.

b. Natural Inclination: The Ontology of the Existent

In the latter half of the *Meditations*, Descartes addresses the "subject's relation to realized extension," as opposed to intelligible extension. As Merleau-Ponty contends, "nature resists"; the "objective conception of Being leaves a residue," and this residue is the body understood as "a nature at work within us" (*N* 83). Descartes maintains that "natural inclination impels us to believe the existence of an exterior world, of my body" (*N* 16). That is, in accordance with natural inclination we find ourselves in a world of concrete realities and not "correlates of thought," a "reality that cannot be understood by pure mind" (*N* 16). Without relinquishing the ontology of the object, Descartes therefore "upheld the facticity of nature and thus legitimated another perspective on this existent nature than that of pure understanding" (*IPP* 138). This perspective is accessible "through the vital relation" with the natural body and "teaches us what the understanding cannot teach us" (*N* 129). It is therefore a furtive knowledge, an opaque or obscure understanding. According to the pure understanding "the sensible appears as

[29] For Descartes the idea of the finite is secondary in regards to the infinite; "there is more reality in infinite substance" (ibid., 44).
[30] ibid., 50-51.

privation" (*N* 16), it is an obstacle or hindrance to the attainment of objective knowledge. Now in the sixth *Meditation,* Descartes writes:

> Nature also teaches me by these feelings of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on that I am not only residing in my body, as a pilot in his ship, but furthermore, that I am intimately connected with it, and that [the mixture is] so blended, as it were, that [something like] a single whole is produced.[31]

This blending of the soul and body will prove to be intractable for Descartes, and is "the problem with which Merleau-Ponty himself grapples."[32] As Merleau-Ponty points out, there is a double nature of the human: nature in the 'large' sense, as "pure understanding and all that it conceives," and this second, 'narrow' sense of the soul-body composite which is aligned with the existing world (*N* 16, 128). Descartes authorizes natural inclination as a "sufficient motive of evidence" since "the inseparability of me and my body is not illusory" (*N* 128). Yet this leaves us with a problem: how can the human body be a machine, a body like all other physical bodies? How can the soul be extended? In objectivist ontology, the body must be pure extension; yet when I say "I am my body," I find that my body is neither solely spiritual nor physical extension (*N* 16). What the composite demands is the "real" intertwining of body and soul: "a mixture, a contamination," and "a new being that is neither spirit nor beast" (*N* 18). This demand implies that "neither mechanism nor finalism are adequate to nature," as Lawlor writes.[33] If I am my body, then there must be something of my soul in the body. Yet this intertwining is "repugnant to the idea of real extension" (*N* 19). However, if the body is merely "destined to serve as an instrument of my soul," then the body remains an object and a unity only for thought (*N* 19). For Merleau-Ponty, Descartes thus ends up with "a simple juxtaposition" as opposed to a "real mixture" (*N* 20).

This 'narrow' or second sense of nature takes us back to the notion of God as infinite. What we must find is an order that would "rejoin these two philosophies," but this order is "ungraspable from the point of view of the human" (*N* 129). As a result, this impossibility of thinking *both* the separation and union of the composite is the contradiction that is "constitutive of the human" (*N* 129). This impossibility, however, is a possibility for God. We therefore return to God as the "metaphysical place of coherence," the place "where I cannot place myself by definition, because I am human"

[31] ibid., 76.
[32] Lawlor, "Principle of," 258.
[33] ibid.

(*N* 205-206). This means that "this body that I am is never the body that I think, and it is only for God that they are bodies in the same sense" (*N* 205-206). As Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology*, Descartes' solution is "not to take human thought in its factual condition as its own guarantor, but to support it by a thought that possesses itself absolutely" (47). However, if God is incomprehensible - and this incomprehensibility is a rational and formal necessity – then this means "we cannot install ourselves in God in order to think our contradictions" (*N* 130). In other words, we are "led back to our thought according to human being" (*N* 130). Descartes' rationalism is fundamentally ambiguous: I cannot 'install' myself in God, I cannot 'think' my own contradiction, but yet I find myself in a world of realities or things that I *can* know. Descartes allows for natural inclination, or experiential knowledge, and this "teaches us what the understanding cannot teach us" (*N* 129). Moreover, since this knowledge is also natural, "experience cannot teach us anything that might be contrary to understanding" (*IPP* 138). For Merleau-Ponty, Descartes legitimates a concept of aseity that is "the apperception of an existence which precedes all truth of essence; and this is a sign indicating that the first truth could never be erased" (*N* 130).

§3. Ontological Diplopia: The Vertigo of Cartesian Ontology

The two senses of nature in Descartes produce a kind of 'zigzagging' or ineliminable ambiguity between existence and essence. As Merleau-Ponty argues, "in a sense God is and the world is nothing," because nature is pure extension and the "for-us is only an appearance" - and appearances can deceive (*N* 134). Yet "in another sense, God is obscure, and only the world is clear" (*N* 134), since God is incomprehensible *de jure* and because realized extension or natural inclination nonetheless leads me to knowledge of the actual world in which I live. This 'cycle' between what Merleau-Ponty calls a 'positivist' and a 'negativist' thought characterizes Western ontology and informs the "extraordinary confusion in the modern ideas of nature, man, and God" (*IPP* 158). The 'positivist' thought is discernible in the ontology of the object, according to which "being exists, God exists by definition, if there has to be some thing, it could only be this world and this nature here, nothingness has no properties" (*IPP* 157-158). As we have just seen, nature is a necessary, full, or positive being. The 'negativist' thought is aligned with the ontology of the existent, in which "the first truth is that of a doubt, what is certain first of all is a locus between being and nothingness, the model of infinity is my liberty, this world here is a pure fact" (*IPP* 157-158). Philosophy is thus

marked by the "double certitude" that "being exists, that appearances are only a manifestation and a restriction of being," and that appearances "are the canon of everything that we can understand by 'being,'" such that it is being in-itself that "appears as an ungraspable phantom" (*IPP* 158). Appearances are a 'restriction' of reality and may be deceptive (in fact, the possibility of deception is a formal possibility), yet appearances are all I can know of being, for I am a finite being. Furthermore, as a soul-body composite or "a locus between being and nothingness," my existence is a locus conceivable only by God. This is what we may call the vertigo of Cartesian ontology.

These two thoughts are ultimately irreconcilable, but neither can they be thought apart from one another; neither position can eliminate or fuse with the other, and yet each "invites the other" in its very exclusion of the other (*IPP* 158). For Merleau-Ponty, philosophy must acknowledge and reflect on this phenomenon, "rather than merely suffering it and occupying alternatively two ontological positions" (*IPP* 158). As Renaud Barbaras writes, "such is the difficulty that the study of nature involves: one cannot stop at the duality, and yet there is no possible synthesis."[34] Again, this ambiguity of the Cartesian concept of nature cannot be understood apart from the notion of the infinite as the place of "metaphysical coherence" or the "keystone" that "makes the Whole stay together" (*N* 134). Nature thus belongs to an "ontological complex" and is assuredly not a "separate power of being" (*IPP* 157-158, *N* 204). Rather, as the preceding emphasis on the infinite and the rigor of the Cartesian commitment to rationalism has demonstrated, the theme of modern philosophy is the bifurcation which is in truth a "*nexus*, the *vinculum* 'Nature' – 'Man' – 'God'" (*N* 204). In this sense, to treat nature as a philosophically distinct theme is to misunderstand it. The term 'Cartesian ontology' thus refers to both the ontology of the object and of the existent, *and* the tension between the two, which presupposes the infinite. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy addresses this vertigo and attempts to overcome it, not through negation or synthesis but through a description of this "labyrinth of first philosophy" and the formulation of a new ontology "which reveals in being itself an overlap or movement" (*IPP* 158-159). As Lawlor writes, this "mixturism" – of invisible and the visible, of body and soul, positive and negative - that characterizes Merleau-Ponty's thought is one

[34] Renaud Barbaras, "Merleau-Ponty and Nature," *Research in Phenomenology* 31, no. 1 (2001): 31.

that Merleau-Ponty already finds – in the form of a composite or 'simple juxtaposition' - in Descartes' philosophy.[35]

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty argues we can identify an "ontological diplopia" in modern philosophy, which "we cannot expect to bring to a rational reduction and which leaves us with one sole alternative of wholly embracing it" (*IPP* 158). As Part I of this dissertation will demonstrate, this idea of the necessity of 'embracing' ontological diplopia or the 'strabism' of nature characterizes Merleau-Ponty's engagement with the history of philosophy. The term *diplopia* derives from the Greek *διπλοῦς* ("double") and *ὤψ* ("eye"), and indicates 'double-vision,' whereby the seer perceives two images instead of a single one. Similarly, *strabismus* is a term for the misalignment of the eyes, whereby the two eyes do not point in the same direction at the same time, and hence see two different images. In typical binocular vision, on the other hand, there is an overlapping or crossing of visual fields, and this *chiasm* or intertwining results in effective depth perception. The term *chiasma*, first introduced in the 1951 lecture "Man and Adversity," is a reference to Paul Valéry.[36] As Toadvine explains, it refers to an intersubjective "crossing of glances," and demonstrates how each "self-enclosed" point of view forms "a relation of co-existence before the one world onto which they both open."[37] *Chiasma* is hence an anatomical term, referring to "the X formed where the optic nerves cross at the base of the brain," which allow for a crossing of images.[38]

Individuals with diplopia or strabismus typically lack depth perception or stereopsis. This relation between diplopia and depth perception is notable, for as Part III of the dissertation will discuss, Merleau-Ponty's principle of negativity – as precisely this 'negative' that inheres 'in' the chiasm, which is hence not 'nothing,' for it simultaneously prevents fusion and maintains separation – amounts to a rehabilitation of depth as a primordial dimension. A philosophy that would embrace ontological diplopia would hence be 'binocular' (*N* 134); it would overcome this double vision or vertigo by 'seeing' the contradiction as a *whole*. As Toadvine succinctly puts it, a 'binocular ontology' pursues "a synopsis rather than a synthesis."[39] It entails seeing double or seeing two *and* not-two, or seeing 'one' through difference, a reversibility that overcomes but does not dissolve difference. Indeed, the shift from a strabism to a

[35] Leonard Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 72.
[36] See *S* 231-232.
[37] Ted Toadvine, "The Reconversion of Silence and Speech," *Tijdfschrift voor Filosofie* 70 (2008): 472.
[38] Toadvine, "Reconversion," 472; *Nature*, 110-112.
[39] Toadvine, *Nature*, 111, 117.

binocular philosophy does not simply involve the synthesis of two seemingly imcompossible, pre-existing perspectives. Rather, binocular vision "affirms the pregiven unity of the world, which it assumes rather than discovers."[40] We must move from an anatomical notion of chiasm to an ontological, Heraclitean one: 'chiasme' or chiasmus.[41] A concept of difference or negativity is thus central to Merleau-Ponty's ontology, as the discussion below will demonstrate. It is negativity or the 'blind spot' in vision, the crossing or chiasm, which conditions our openness to the world and overcomes Cartesian dualism. Negativity is how the two – or double vision – can be not-two without contradiction, but due to carnal adherence, which is the ground that sustains and subtends all 'logical' contradiction and incompossibility. That is, it is the 'tie' or hinge, the (non)place of the intertwining that sustains the paradox of the X and hence depth. Importantly, negativity is a principle *in* Being: it is a constitutive, operative negative principle that cannot appear 'as such,' but is nonetheless to be revealed in the very "fabric" (*N* 176) or tissue of the world. However, it is not nothingness, a determinate lack or absence, ontological void, logical gap, or emptiness 'in' a thing or in the present. Moreover, it is not negation, since it does not necessarily entail activity on the part of a subject. It is a 'hollow' or divergence that conditions and sustains fusion and separation, unity and non-coincidence – and hence ontological entanglement and continual differentiation. Binocular vision *requires* negativity, for the latter is how it is capable of seeing the 'whole' as opposed to two separate, distinct perspectives. Binocular philosophy sees *with* the unthought, sees in accordance with negativity – and hence cannot eradicate it. In short, negativity is the principle of differentiation that the intertwining or chiasmic ontology presupposes.

As such, it would be somewhat reductive or misleading to attempt to dissolve Cartesian dualism without attending to the ground that subtends and sustains it. Indeed, Lawlor calls Cartesianism "large rationalism,"[42] as it secretly relies on a whole or a "positive infinite," which "every partial being directly or indirectly presupposes" (*S* 149). All attempts to dissolve dualism by reconciling the two terms as if they are

[40] ibid., 111.
[41] Merleau-Ponty adopts this term after February 1960, as Toadvine writes. *Chiasme* refers to the relation formed "when two clauses display an inverted parallel structure," thus naming a mutual becoming and relation of reversibility ("Reconversion," 472). This rhetorical figure is of course employed by Heraclitus. See for example Fr. 10: "Things taken together are wholes and not wholes, something which is being brought together and brought apart, which is in tune and out of tune; out of all things there comes a unity, and out of a unity all things" (Kirk, Raven and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 190). See also Graham, *Explaining the Cosmos*, Ch. 6.
[42] Lawlor, *Implications*, 110. In Spinozism, on the other hand, the finite "no longer relate to the infinite God as defects or lacks but rather are contained in God 'analytically'" (112). Spinozism thus amounts to a "pure positivism."

originarily separate or ultimately *separable* terms therefore remain invested in what they attempt to surpass. Merleau-Ponty's binocular philosophy proceeds by the rediscovery of the ground, the "carnal experience of the sensible"[43] or the "domain of an 'originary presence' (*Urpräsenz*)" which lies "at the root and in the depths of Cartesian nature" (*IPP* 151). We must, as Barbaras writes, "rediscover the soil in which the necessity of this philosophical alternation is grounded, a soil that can only be located deeper than each of the terms."[44] This ground will no longer be the "positive infinite" (*S* 149) and the bifurcation to which it gives rise; it must be the "unveiling of Being as that which they [beings] define, that which places them together on the side of what is not nothing" (*N* 206).

Binocular ontology must therefore be a "concrete philosophy" (*S* 157) since Being is to be defined by *existence.* It is a "philosophy of perspective and a philosophy of vertical Being" (*N* 206), a 'mixturism' or chiasmic ontology that 'translates'[45] or overcomes bifurcated ontology. Merleau-Ponty insists on the primacy of concrete experience; we must take seriously the fact that the world is not in front of us, that we are in and of the world, "sunk in corporeity." Indeed, from the phenomenological point of view, Cartesian vision *cannot see,* for it is not the vision of an existent, corporeal being. The objectivist thought of nature can never be *in* nature, for it has no body, place, perspective, and no position in the world from which to see.[46] What Descartes fails to see, then, "is that the primordial vision that one must indeed come to cannot be the *thought of seeing,*" and "we know no vision but that by a composite substance" (*VI* 210).

§4. Chiasmic Ontology: Overcoming as Rehabilitation

This 'mixturism' that Merleau-Ponty seeks is already introduced – obliquely - in Descartes. This is why Merleau-Ponty remarks that "there is the truth of Descartes, but on condition that one reads it between the lines" (*VI* 188). Descartes' philosophy gestures toward its overcoming, for it "happens to map out at the same time the program

[43] *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds. T. Toadvine and L. Lawlor (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2007), 433. Hereafter *MPR*.
[44] Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. T. Toadvine and L. Lawlor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 84.
[45] Lawlor, *Implications*, 110. Lawlor writes of Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the "translation of the idea of God as the positive infinite into a kind of infinite finitude." The term 'translation' indicates a transformation within, or at the margins of, the horizon of Cartesian rationalism – and not a rupture with or negation of the latter.
[46] This is a thought that "ranges over all of abstract space," a kind of thinking Morris calls "transportable" ("Place of Animal Being," 198).

for a philosophy which was to take as its principal theme the cohesion of the very orders he distinguishes" (*S* 132). Indeed, even those philosophies that reject major rationalism "reject it in the name of the same exigency which gave it life" (*S* 151). As M.C. Dillon argues, for Merleau-Ponty, Descartes searches for certainty at the expense of truth.[47] In other words, while the *cogito* may form the indubitable foundation for knowledge, as that which withstands radical doubt, Descartes does not go *to the ground* of the 'I think.' Accordingly, Descartes' attempt to think the body as a mixture, "as a means of contact with an In-itself and For-itself," is unintelligible or "unthinkable."[48] According to Merleau-Ponty, "we have to reverse the problem, starting from the carnal experience of the sensible," and "consider objective space and thought as a hollow in this carnal experience."[49] This is to study "the 'vertical' Descartes soul and body," the Descartes "who lives in the world after having methodically explored it," the Descartes "who always knew that he thought, with a knowing that is ultimate" (*VI* 272-273). For Merleau-Ponty, "it is not *because* I think being that I am certain of existing, but rather the certainty that I have of my thoughts derives from their actual existence" (*PhP* 402).

As such, there is only a 'quasi-failure' or enigma of Cartesian ontology, a strabism that Descartes installs or introduces indirectly, but which is never annihilated. This diplopia guarantees the fecundity and generativity of his thought. For Merleau-Ponty, the philosophical task is to interrogate this enigma, to comprehend without disentanglement. To 'read between the lines' is hence to attend to the horizon of Cartesian thought, and the horizon includes "gaps" and "ellipses," divergences and variation (*IP* 130). It includes the unthought. Merleau-Ponty's 'ethic' of reading thus attempts to take seriously the paradoxes and tensions that emerge in the history of modern philosophy, and 'overcoming' such insurmountable difficulties by comprehending them *as* paradoxical. In the last analysis, they must be brought 'down to earth,' as it were, to what he calls brute or wild Being.[50] Reading between the lines, then, is to grasp the unthought or what is expressed in its very withdrawal or absence. It is a 'truth' that must be indirectly or obliquely (re)discovered. As Merleau-Ponty writes, to comprehend involves apprehension "by coexistence, laterally, *by the style*" (*VI* 188). The truth of Descartes must therefore be interpreted or brought to expression; lateral

[47] Dillon, *Ontology*, 10.
[48] *MPR* 433.
[49] ibid.
[50] *MPR* 421.

apprehension through 'reading' thus demands a creative engagement with, and through, the 'living' history of modern philosophy.

Finally, insofar as Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature amounts to an 'overcoming' of Cartesian ontology, it ultimately goes 'beyond' nature as a demarcatable realm. As the dissertation will demonstrate, the problematization of nature necessarily leads to an interrogation of those concepts that rely on it: subject, consciousness, freedom, history, culture, and body. As such, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology cannot be understood apart from the concept of nature. The thesis employs the term 'overcoming' in order to develop a reading of Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology as moving beyond logical contradiction or impossibility, the positivism of the classical sciences, and the Cartesian 'dilemma' between being and nothingness, *through* comprehension or description and not by announcing its 'falsity.' That is, overcoming names the transformation of an ontological diplopia into a binocular philosophy, "just as our gaze takes over monocular images to make a single vision out of them" (*IPP* 158). As Husserl argues, objectivistic philosophy and its so-called 'scientific' character amounts to a "naiveté," and philosophy must proceed through a "proper return to the naiveté of life – but in a reflection which rises above this naiveté" (*C* 59). In other words, a rehabilitation cannot be a simple return. This reflection that 'rises above' must understand this naiveté, and not eliminate it. Modern philosophy is founded by a rationalism that gives rise to a dualism that reason itself unravels, complicates, or 'uproots.' It is established on the basis of a "*deeply hidden sense*" (*C* 74) that necessarily disrupts it, a foundation that continually invites doubt or interrogation. Phenomenology as radical reflection is best understood as an archaeology, "a dis-covery or an ex-humation of what is buried, which is to say, perceptual, original, brute experience."[51] As the dissertation will argue, Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology is precisely a 'rehabilitation' of nature, for it overcomes the objectivist notion of necessary being and hence allows for possibility and hesitation in Being, and it overcomes the "represented" or positive infinite, allowing us to conceive the infinite openness of the life-world. This leads to a philosophy of life as emergence, of organic development as incalculable and creative possibility, and an affirmation or preservation of the inexhaustible depth of nature and the world. As such, this overcoming is an infinite philosophical task, one that involves both activity (critique

[51] Robert Vallier, "Institution: The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's 1954 Course at the Collège de France," *Chiasmi International* 7 (2005): 283.

and comprehension) and passivity (in the sense of experience or 'suffering' – to be overcome), for it demands an unwavering "*standing in wonder* before the world" (*PhP* lxxvii).

§5. Summary of Chapters

Part I: Toward a Binocular Philosophy: Nature and its Ambiguities[52]

Part I of the dissertation develops an account of Merleau-Ponty's critique of the concept of Nature in Kant, Schelling and Husserl. Merleau-Ponty's critique unfolds by identifying the ambiguity in each philosopher's thought of Nature. In each, the rigorous attempt to think nature in accordance with the ontology of the object – and hence amenable to the sciences – reveals a second sense of nature that remains tenaciously incongruous with the first. This second idea is derived from the truth that experience or the use of life teaches, and is hence compatible with, and a necessary result of, the Cartesian quest for certainty and the emphasis on the primacy of consciousness. Moreover, there is a generativity of negativity conceived as the 'unthought,' or the hinge that both ties *and* separates – and hence maintains - the 'doubled' concept of nature found in each philosophy. As such, we ought to think of the 'first' and 'second' ideas of Nature as part of an ontological complex, such that the first and second must be conceptualized as 'doubles' and not in terms of logical order. We must think the *contradiction* and not the *alternative*, insofar as the latter implies mutual exclusion and a choice between concrete, determinable possibles. Furthermore, this contradiction or paradox must be understood as constitutive, as what gives rise to ontological diplopia *and* the possibility of its overcoming.

The first chapter addresses Merleau-Ponty's critique of the Kantian concept of nature. There is a 'double meaning' of Kant's Copernican revolution: an anthropological meaning, and the absolutism of the subject. The first idea, formulated in the first *Critique*, holds that nature is the sum of appearances and that all causality in nature is lawful and physicalistic. Nature is hence conceivable in accordance with mechanism, and is opposed to freedom. Kant therefore fails to advance beyond the Cartesian ontology of the object. However, Kant also installs an excessiveness or unknowability at the core of nature, in the notion of the thing-in-itself. Moreover, in the third *Critique* Kant contends that experience also leads us to think of living beings in

[52] See Appendix B for a chart of Part I of the dissertation.

accordance with teleology, and not wholly in terms of mechanism. The bifurcation between nature and freedom continues, and will allow Kant to posit the human being (as *noumenon*) as the final end of nature. While maintaining the humanist thought of nature, Kant interiorizes the organism. However, this judgment changes nothing with regard to cognition; what our experience of nature demonstrates is the human faculty of judgment and not any real interiority on behalf of the organism. This does not foreclose the possibility, however, that God or intellectual intuition is capable of thinking the convergence of teleology and mechanism. Kant can neither affirm nor deny negativity, and is hence forced to maintain or keep open the possibility of the unconditioned, the supersensible, or a 'beyond' of reason. The Kantian humanist concept of nature is rent by an ambiguity that justifies and conditions its consistency.

In chapter 2, "The Philosophy of Nature as Ontology: Nature as Barbaric Principle in Schelling," the focus shifts to the importance of Schelling's Romantic-Idealism and *Naturphilosophie* for Merleau-Ponty's concept of Nature. The chapter begins with a discussion of Schelling's philosophy of nature and the identity philosophy. It then analyzes the notion of Nature as a "barbaric principle" or unassailable remainder in Schelling's later works. While Kant introduces the idea of the natural object as organism, Schelling understands nature as a whole organismically. Schelling also introduces the problem of genesis and passivity, and reinstates the productivity of nature (*naturans*); this indicates a departure from the ontology of the object found in Kant. Unlike Kant, who attempts a resolution of the ambiguity of nature in the idea of the supersensible, for Schelling there is no ultimate resolution but this ambiguity is a source of anguish. Furthermore, while negativity in Kant is epistemological and tied to an anthropology, for Schelling negativity is ontological and takes on the problem of temporality. The barbarous source that Schelling writes of in the later works is a kind of origin that cannot be recuperated. Thus what resists – the unreflected – is not an object, and its resistance is not a matter of logic: it is not a 'problem' as such, but rather names a questioning or a task. For Schelling, Nature does not have the solidity of a ground understood as a 'thing'; rather, it is a depth, a groundless ground, *Urgrund* and *Abgrund*. Drawing on Schelling, Merleau-Ponty will claim that phenomenology must confront this dimension that "cannot remain outside"; if this exteriority cannot be assimilated or 'resolved,' then this confrontation remains an infinite task.

The dissertation then moves from the impossible task of grounding the Kantian philosophical system, or of attaining the Schellingian Absolute, to the infinite task of Husserlian phenomenology. Chapter 3 addresses Merleau-Ponty's critical reading of the strabism of Nature in Husserl. According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl oscillates between the thought of nature as the sphere of 'mere' or 'pure things' and nature as the "totality of objects that can be given as primally present."[53] Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty stresses the necessity of returning to the life-world and the natural attitude, such that the question of nature also becomes historical and cultural. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology is a radical 'resumption' of Husserlian phenomenology, for it proclaims the incompletion in principle of the reduction, of things, and of the visible world – by drawing on Husserl with "productive faithlessness."[54] Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl's attempt to achieve a "radical reflection," and this entails an archaeology of the unreflected. Transcendental philosophy must become concrete philosophy, a philosophy of existence; the two-world thesis must be understood as a possibility that inheres in the world, the one sole Earth. Merleau-Ponty's ontology is to be situated at the limits of phenomenology, and it is important to note that in Husserl's phenomenology we find an intensification of the strabism of Nature, an intensification 'inward,' as it were - toward an overlapping or encroachment. Of course, overlapping is precisely what is needed in order to transform diplopia or strabismus into binocular vision. It is what is required in order to perceive depth, dimensionality, or what Merleau-Ponty calls 'vertical Being,' as opposed to the 'flatness' of Cartesian ontology. Indeed, in Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl, we can discover the germinal thought of a new ontology: Husserl allows Merleau-Ponty to conceive the "inherence of the self-in-the-world or of the world-in-the-self, what Husserl calls the *Ineinander*" (*IPP* 176). Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology can be understood as a taking up of the Husserlian philosophical task of "describing, outside of the logic and vocabulary at hand, the universe of living paradoxes" (*IPP* 176). As the dissertation will argue, this inaugurates a perceptual logic, one that allows us to discern "a certain vocabulary of life" (*N* 265) that cannot be grasped by objectivist ontology.

Part II: Natural Negativity and Possibility

[53] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Phenomenological Investigations of Constitution*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 171. Hereafter *I2*.
[54] Marc Richir, "The Meaning of Phenomenology in *The Visible and the Invisible*," *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 71.

Part II focuses on the inscrutability of living being and Nature in purely mechanistic, actualist, or finalist terms. It therefore continues the preceding critique of objectivist ontology but now with a focus on the findings and assumptions of classical and modern physics and biology. It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty is assuredly not anti-science; science is experience in its most 'regulated' form and is "a certain (reduced) ontology in the broader context of the relation with the most primordial Being" (*N* 87, 206). Philosophy must comprehend the very rationality of science, for it is a "particular case of the *logos* of the perceptual world."[55] Moreover, according to Merleau-Ponty, the difficulties and findings of modern science necessitate the surpassing of objectivist ontology. That is, science has begun to critique its own classical foundations by raising "the question of the meaning of its own truth" (*IPP* 159). Through a critical engagement with the sciences, Merleau-Ponty develops the concept of natural negativity. Living being is to be understood as interrogative and dimensional. Furthermore, the concept of natural negativity allows for a novel conception of possibility beyond 'possibilism' or a determinate, abstract possible.

Chapter 4 addresses the philosophical significance of the shift from classical to modern science, and focuses on Merleau-Ponty's first major text, *The Structure of Behavior*. This text attends to the relation between nature and consciousness, and develops a philosophical case for the primacy of perception. It provides an extensive critique of classical reflex theory in order to repudiate the ontology of the object, as well as the purported ability of intellectualism and empiricism to adequately account for living being. As the modern sciences demonstrate, there is no 'pure' encounter between object and observer, for such an observer would not be situated in the world and would survey the things from above. Knowledge production is activity, and experimentation is anthropomorphic. The difficulties of modern science illustrate the shortcomings of objectivist ontology insofar as the pure 'object' is abstract and ideal, and hence cannot be interacted with concretely. The very methodology of science contributes to the creation of the natural thing, the object it attempts to understand. Hence, as Husserl argues, science is discovery-concealment.

The following two chapters address the second *Nature* course, in which Merleau-Ponty deepens his critique of reflex theory and objectivist ontology. The concept of

[55] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Institution-La Passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)*, trans. L. Lawlor and H. Massey as *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 129. Hereafter abbreviated *IP*.

natural negativity is introduced, a concept central to the attempt to conceive of an idea of form or *Gestalt* capable of accounting for existence and essence. In chapter 5, "The Unfurling of the Animal: The *Umwelt* and the Theme of Animal Melody," the work and influence of Jakob von Uexküll with regard to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of animal life is analyzed. This chapter accounts for the importance of the idea of the *Umwelt*, but also addresses Uexküll's problematic Kantianism – exemplified in the idea of harmony - and Merleau-Ponty's critical adjustment of the biologist's work. The concept of the *Umwelt* introduces the idea of 'environment' or milieu into the analysis of the organism, with the caveat that this so-called 'environment' is not completely deterministic, for it refers to the dynamic, meaningful relation between the organism and its world. Drawing on Uexküll, Merleau-Ponty describes the development of the organism in terms of negativity and as a realization of a theme *through* historical variation. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the idea of melody – and not harmony – with regard to organic development.

Chapter 6 turns to the philosophical significance of the scientific studies conducted by Coghill, Gesell, Russell, Portmann, and Lorenz, and expands on the concept of natural negativity. In the latter half of the chapter, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of Nature is framed as a critique of 'actualism,' and is situated between Darwinism and Idealism. The chapter ends with a discussion of the resonance between Merleau-Ponty's analyses in the late 1950s and contemporary theoretical biology; in both, natural negativity gives rise to a rehabilitated notion of futurity or of the 'possible' – a possible radically unknowable, unforeseeable, indeterminate, and open.

Part III: Nature and Phenomenological Ontology

A philosophy of nature necessarily involves an understanding of the sensible body. As such, Part III focuses on the account of the human body given in the third *Nature* course. This section demonstrates the importance of the principle of negativity and the philosophy of nature for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology or notion of flesh. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty's overcoming of metaphysical dualism and the rehabilitation of the possible pertains not only to the 'realm' of nature but to the life-world, the "total field" that encompasses nature and history. Indeed, the three parts of the dissertation are continuous with, deepen, and inform each other.

Chapter 7, "Brute Being: Nature and Flesh," develops an account of the human body as the intertwining of humanity and animality, and not as a departure from nature.

A philosophy of nature cannot be articulated without an account of the perceiving body, and an account of perception as divergence requires a conception of nature as the visible world. This analysis will bring us to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology. For Merleau-Ponty, the human body is irremediably "caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future."[56] It is a "remarkable variant" or generality, and its status as a "sensible sentient" only points to humanity insofar as humanity is understood as "a horizon of Being" (*VI* 237). The chapter concludes with a discussion of flesh and Merleau-Ponty's 'new' ontology as Being in latency or Being at a distance.

The final chapter addresses the principle of negativity as found in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of Nature and his account of perception, and distinguishes it from the idea of nothingness, lack and negation. The principle of negativity is discernible in the relation of reversibility between touching and touched, and between the visible and the invisible. Negativity is not an "ontological void" or the 'nothingness' that renders coincidence impossible. Rather, negativity is what conditions the imminence and elusiveness of coincidence; it is the delay, distance, or difference that conditions my belonging to the flesh of the world. Negativity is constitutive; it allows for identity within difference, the latency or unconcealedness of Being. Furthermore, it is the 'hinge' or 'between' that tethers the transcendental and empirical, or what Merleau-Ponty calls the vertical (ideal) and horizontal (causal) orders, hence allowing for a philosophy of life as dimensionality, the advent of a field reliant upon but irreducible to either order.

The dissertation ends with a focus on the importance of the concept of negativity for Merleau-Ponty's ontology, and contends that it allows him to undertake a 'rehabilitation of the possible.' It is the concept of negativity that allows us to conceive of Nature as infinite depth and concealment, as a kind of barbarous 'power' that conditions the realm of the 'possible' (as more than a set of determinate possibles), a future 'larger' than any particular future, and a negativity 'deeper' than the negative conceived in positivist terms (as lack or nothingness). This rehabilitation of the possible – as the overcoming of Cartesian ontology – reopens, as it were, the infinite openness of the *Umwelt*. The dissertation therefore returns to the problem of Cartesian rationalism and the positive infinite that 'secretly' animates it. Insofar as the principle of negativity radically undermines Cartesian ontology, this 'return' to the human body as 'real

[56] Leonard Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 147.

mixture' in Part III of the dissertation prompts a reappraisal of the status of the beginning – the Cartesian and Kantian knowing subject – that we began with, as it were. Hence, we must not understand openness as the projection of a subject, but as the "gathering into itself the *Unendlichkeit* of Cartesian being."[57] That is to say, this 'rehabilitated' infinity is one that radically precedes and "exceeds us," for the "objectified Infinity" of Cartesian being is ultimately dependent on the inexhaustibility and openness of the natural and historical world.

[57] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Notes and Comments on Aron Gurwitsch's *The Field of Consciousness*," trans. E. Locey and T. Toadvine, *Husserl Studies* 17 (2001): 187.

PART I: *TOWARD A BINOCULAR PHILOSOPHY: NATURE AND ITS AMBIGUITIES*

chapter 1

THE NATURE OF THOUGHT AND THE THOUGHT OF NATURE: MERLEAU-PONTY'S CRITIQUE OF KANT

If the animal is nothing more than a machine, and the same holds for the whole of nature, why is so much human effort expended in order to reduce them to that?

- Georges Canguilhem[1]

[Kant's] system is not derived from experience, but rather, set up for it.

- Martin Heidegger[2]

Introduction: Kant's Impoverished Thought of Nature

For Merleau-Ponty, humanism in Descartes is "a task in the midst of a luminous, intelligible world" while in Kantian philosophy humanism appears at its center (*N* 21).[3] Kantian philosophy makes "Being rest on man," such that "we can no longer start from the notion of Being" as it is 'empty' in itself (*N* 21). This is the 'first,' anthropological meaning of Kant's Copernican revolution: nature becomes nature 'for us.' This meaning *relativizes* nature, and it follows from the structure of human thought outlined in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Merleau-Ponty, Kant is right to say that perception is "polarized" toward the object, but in going straight to "complete objectivity" he disregards the perceptual world or the "pre-scientific experience" that he must pass over "in silence because he makes use of its results" (*PhP* 228, 315). Nature in Kantian thought becomes the object of sense, the "sum of all appearances" and the "simple correlate of perception"; it is an idea that has lost "all its savageness" (*N* 23). For Merleau-Ponty – as well as for Hegel and Schelling, as we will see in the following chapter – this is an impoverished concept of nature. The second and interrelated meaning of nature derives from the absolutism of the subject, and it follows from the anthropological meaning; indeed, "if there are only human phenomena, then consequently there is nothing else as a term of reference" (*N* 22). Relativized nature

[1] Canguilhem, *Knowledge*, 63.
[2] *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. J. Stambaugh (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), 39.
[3] This is also how Prigogine and Stengers characterize Kant's Copernican Revolution: "Now the subject itself is at the center, imposing its laws, and the world perceived speaks the language of that subject" (*Order Out of Chaos*, 87).

gives rise to nature as representation, the construct of the human subject as absolute. For Kant, "the phenomenon is not something merely apparent," and it is a necessary aspect of theoretical cognition that "I carry within myself the possibility of an 'object' as a term of reference" (*N* 22). This object becomes "the only one that may have a meaning for me" (*N* 22) and hence approaches Cartesian necessary being. However, while "human representation becomes synonymous with Being," this does not abrogate the first meaning of nature, since "transcendental relativism cannot cut itself off from a reference with which all knowledge begins" (*N* 22).

The Kantian thought of nature is irremediably marked by negativity or ambiguity. That is, Kant limits human reason, but this restriction necessarily contains a reference to what lies beyond it, which is strictly unknowable for us. In other words, Kantian epistemological negativity is neither lack nor opacity, but *limitation*: it names an excessiveness necessarily inscribed in the idea of nature as the sum of appearances, a reference to a beyond that cannot be affirmed or denied. There is, as Merleau-Ponty writes, "a non-knowledge or lacuna in the constitution of my knowledge" (*N* 37). Kantian negativity is installed in the very application of a limit to reason and hence cannot be eradicated. As such, it continually invites reason to overstep itself. In this sense, we can discern in Kantian negativity a precursor of the ontological notion of nature as the unreflected that we will later find in Schelling and Merleau-Ponty: the excessiveness of nature accounts in part for the seduction and resistance, the push and pull, of the experience of nature as that which reason cannot completely encompass.

Indeed, the noumenon or the thing in itself is a boundary concept necessarily inscribed in Kantian philosophy – it functions as a limitation of the speculative use of reason, and it allows for the possibility of freedom. Kant attempts to unify these two meanings of nature in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which seeks not to revise theoretical philosophy but to unify cognition and practical philosophy. In it, we find that experience also leads us to conceive of the organism as endowed with interiority, as self-organizing and self-productive, and hence inconceivable in terms of mechanism alone. This marks an important shift. In effect, Kant attempts to conceive of natural productivity or *natura naturans* – and so "Nature becomes richer" (*N* 23) - but this is a human construct. For Merleau-Ponty, while Kant thinks Nature "cavalierly as a correlation of subject to object" in the first *Critique*, in the third the "solidarity of the constructed with the given" is loosened (*N* 83, 24). However, finite thought is incapable

of thinking the convergence of teleology and mechanism, although this does not foreclose the possibility that an intellectual intuition would be able to attain it. Again, Kant can neither affirm nor deny the negativity he introduces, and thus his philosophy includes a reference to an impossible possible or radical unknowability. Negativity is unwittingly conceded, for Kant's humanism depends on it: nature as lawful regularity is absolutely distinct from freedom, and this will eventually allow him to claim that the human being is the 'final end' of nature. Finalism is hence introduced into nature: the human subject as moral being *is* the completion or transcendence of the nature that it constructs.

The intention of this chapter is to provide an account of Merleau-Ponty's critique of the doubled thought of nature in Kant, to demonstrate what is at stake in Kant's humanist concept of nature, and to outline Kant's introduction of the idea of epistemological negativity, or the excessiveness of nature.

§1. The Anthropological Meaning of Nature: Nature for Us

Kant starts with experience or the realm of givenness as the basis for a theory of knowledge. Following Descartes, he commences from the standpoint of consciousness. Yet he denounces both the empiricist notion of mind as a blank slate that simply reflects the pre-existing world and which conforms to objects found therein, and the rationalist assumption that pure *a priori* knowledge of the world as it is in itself is attainable without recourse to experience. Rather, as he argues in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we encounter appearances or objects of sensible intuition, but these are not to be equated with objects as things in themselves. Against the idea of the sensible object as the source of *a priori* knowledge to which our cognition should conform, Kant claims we would "get farther with the problems of metaphysics" by assuming that "we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them" (*CPR* Preface B, xviii).[4] Kant can thus be understood as an anti-realist, but his brand of anti-realism is grounded in, and made possible by, an anthropological account of cognition. As one commentator explains, for Kant "the object of knowledge is understood not as something already fully determined and available for empirical assimilation; rather it is only by means of

[4] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). References to the first *Critique* will abide by customary practice and include a reference to either the 1781 edition (A) or the second edition (B) published in 1787. Where both A and B pages are referenced, the passage appears in both editions. Citations to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* will include the abbreviation *CJ* as is customary, followed by page number(s) as found in the P. Guyer and E. Matthews translation.

the subject that it is first determined what the object is."[5] As such, all human cognition is "cognition through concepts, not intuitive but discursive" (A68/B93). Kant must then demonstrate how it is that we can have knowledge of the objects that we experience, knowledge that is *a priori* and therefore not acquired through experience itself.[6] Accordingly, the fundamental concern of the first *Critique* is to formulate a response to the question: "How are synthetic judgments *a priori* possible" (*CPR*, Introduction VI, B19)? How are we able to make *a priori*, non-empirical judgments regarding knowledge and the world without recourse to experience?

a. The Transcendental Aesthetic

What Kant seeks to uncover are the necessary formal conditions for the very possibility of experience: the principles of *a priori* sensibility and those of the understanding. These make up the "two stems of human cognition" (*CPR* Intro. A16/B30). As outlined in the transcendental aesthetic or the "science of all principles of *a priori* sensibility" (A22/B36), the formal conditions with regard to sensibility are time and space. As the "pure forms of all sensible intuition" (A37/B54), these forms pertain strictly to human sensibility, in relation to which, and only in relation to which, they are valid or meaningful. As such, Merleau-Ponty contends that for Kant, Being can only appear "as a contingent particularity of "human constitution" (*N* 21). As Kant argues, if we were to "remove our own subject or even only the subjective constitution of the senses," then "all relations of objects in space and time, indeed space and time themselves would disappear" (A42/B59). However, human cognition is synthetic and requires both sensibility – as the "reception of representations" – and the understanding, as the "faculty for cognizing an object by means of those representations" (A51/B75).

The sensibly intuited object must be subsumed under general *a priori* categories or universal concepts in order for it to be experienced. For Kant, all experience is always already on the way to intellection. Intuitions alone do not yield knowledge, although they are indispensable for the constitution of the latter. As Kant famously argues, "without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding

[5] Dieter Wandschneider, "The Philosophy of Nature of Kant, Schelling and Hegel," in *The Routledge Companion to Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Dean Moyar (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 66.
[6] As Michael Friedman explains, Kant adapts the metaphysical ideas inherited from the Leibnizian tradition, within "the essentially new scientific context wrought by Newton" (*Kant and the Exact Sciences*, xiii). In Kant's critical period, "metaphysics no longer describes an underlying monadic realm of simple substances"; rather, metaphysical concepts are now "to be *applied* to the phenomenal world in space and time as the conditions for the possibility of experience" (37).

none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (A51/B75). However, akin to the critique levelled against Descartes outlined earlier, while Kant was right to commence from experience, he does not recognize that the very givenness of the world means "we are not required to invest the world, *a priori*, with conditions without which it could not be thought" (*PhP* 228). According to Merleau-Ponty, "Kant already showed that the *a priori* is not knowable prior to experience" (*PhP* 229). Indeed, how can I obtain knowledge of the *a priori* if I do not first experience the world? For Merleau-Ponty, Kant fails to follow through with his own program insofar as he defines "our powers of knowledge through our factual condition" and yet fails to "place every conceivable being against the background of this factual world" (*PhP* 229). In fact, once Kant takes experience or "the opening onto our factual world" as the beginning of knowledge, what we find is an irremediable intertwining between *a priori* and *a posteriori* truths (*PhP* 229). Merleau-Ponty is in agreement with Kant's claim – contra the empiricist standpoint – that in order to experience anything at all, a manifold of intuitions must already be organized in some sense. Yet Kant passes over "the phenomenon of the body and the phenomenon of the thing," for he assumes the "plenitude of objectivity" (*PhP* 317, 228). What must be accounted for is the object in its *appearing* to a perceptual consciousness. Consequently, we must attend to the perspectival givenness of the thing, the passive-active orientation of my gaze, and the properties of the thing as it appears – and this prior to the introduction of the 'apparent,' 'illusory' and the 'true.' Indeed, such judgments, characteristic of objective thought, can only be carried out after "the union of the subject and the world" (*PhP* 334) has been severed. Kant's emphasis on the primacy of experience ought to lead to an interrogation of existence as the intertwining of the 'empirical' or factual and the *a priori*, for existence is historically situated and always already finds itself within a world.

b. The Unity of Consciousness

We have seen that theoretical cognition relies on both sensible intuition and the understanding; Kant must now account for the unity of consciousness as the "condition that precedes all experience and makes the latter itself possible" (A107). The transcendental apperception is the ground of "the unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of our intuitions," and "of the concepts of objects in general"

(A107). As Dillon explains, "intuitions are discrete and, for finite beings, lack coherence" – and it is precisely coherence or synthesis that knowledge requires.[7] Furthermore, "this synthesis must be governed by rules; otherwise, experience would be chaotic because recognition would be impossible."[8] In order for me to have experience, it follows that I must be a subject that endures and that combines "a manifold of given representations in one consciousness" (B134). Furthermore, it must be possible "for me to represent the identity of the consciousness" (B134). However, *representing* the identity of consciousness does not amount to self-intuition, which is nonetheless presupposed as that which unifies this manifold. This is why Merleau-Ponty claims that in the Kantian formulation "there is not a coincidence of myself with myself"; rather, "what I take hold of is only an *Erscheinung* [phenomenon]. I can grasp the unity of the I only through its productions" (*N* 22). As Gaston Berger writes, Kant's subject is "only a formal condition" of knowledge and hence not experienced but conceded.[9] The 'I' is transcendental and as such grounds the possibility of experience but cannot be given in experience. This will be a central problem for German Idealism. There inheres a persisting tension in the very constitution of the Kantian constituting subject: activity (synthesis) gives rise to the recognition of a fundamental passivity (I do not coincide with myself) and yet, at the same time, there is passivity in the face of an activity that is not properly one's own. For Merleau-Ponty, the Kantian unity of consciousness is rather the "formal expression of a fundamental contingency: the fact that we are in the world" (*PhP* 229).

c. Nature as an Object

For Kant, the unity of consciousness necessarily corresponds to the transcendental object, since the "original and necessary consciousness of the identity of oneself" is simultaneously the determination of "an object for their intuition" (A108). As Merleau-Ponty explains, it is a formally necessary aspect of theoretical cognition that "I carry within myself the possibility of an 'object' as a term of reference" (*N* 22). In order for there to be experience of empirical objects – that is, in order for there to be 'objective reality' - these objects must abide by *a priori* rules. This is a version of the Cartesian notion of extension or nature as necessary being. This is why Merleau-Ponty says Kant

[7] M.C. Dillon, "Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty," *Kant-Studien* 78, no. 1 (1987): 405.
[8] ibid.
[9] Gaston Berger, *The* Cogito *in Husserl's Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 101.

thinks Nature "cavalierly as a correlation of subject to object" (*N* 83). There is no potential gap or discrepancy in this correlation - nature as object is completely determined, and abides by mechanistic, causal laws. For Merleau-Ponty, however, nature cannot be merely an "object for a consciousness" (*IPP* 196).

Moreover, the transcendental apperception must also abide by the *a priori* rules that govern appearances. These *a priori* conditions, as universal and necessary, must be considered a law. Kant concludes: "all appearances therefore stand in a thoroughgoing connection according to necessary laws, and hence in a transcendental affinity, of which the empirical affinity is the mere consequence" (A114). As such, Kant accomplishes the aim of his Copernican Revolution: the abandonment of the realist or empiricist assumption that cognition must conform to existent objects, and the foundation, instead, of the possibility of the *a priori* cognition of objects. The anthropological meaning of nature thus necessarily relegates the empirical to the realm of 'lesser being.' As Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology*, for Kant "appearance as appearance is incomprehensible" (315). Nature never appears in its appearing. The appearance of a thing is immediately placed in the "objective system" or rendered meaningful under "a law or a rule for the unfolding of phenomena" (*PhP* 315). As such, nature is the 'sum' of all appearances; yet this means that nature is precisely not an appearance in the *phenomenological* sense, for the Kantian object must already be objectivized, as it were, in order for it to be experienced.

On Merleau-Ponty's reading, this 'empties' the notion of Being, insofar as Kant makes "Being rest on man" (*N* 21). In Kant's philosophy, "Being has meaning only when particularized by a sensible intuition" (*N* 21). Consequently, nature, which is for Kant "not a thing in itself but merely a multitude of representations of the mind," must "direct itself according to our subjective ground of apperception" (A114). Moreover, we 'find' nature in the "order and regularity" of appearances, but "we would not be able to find it there if we, or the nature of our mind, had not originally put it there," as Kant argues (A125-A126). Hence, the only nature that we can know is one conditioned by the necessary *a priori* conditions of human reason. In order for nature to be an object of experience and the sum of appearances, it must abide by the laws of transcendental apperception; it must be – and is *exhausted* in – the object as revealed by mind. As such, as Merleau-Ponty contends, "we can only speak of a nature that is nature for us" (*IPP* 139). In short, nature as a totality is "an objective system of physico-mathematical

relationships construed by the subjectively necessary apperception of space and time and the categories of pure reason."[10] Nature is mathematized and conceivable in accordance with mechanism or causalism. There is hence a harmony or compatibility between Kant's metaphysics and his model of cognition, and his understanding of physics, which is dominated by a certain reading of Newton: matter is "divisible to infinity"[11] and governed by the laws of motion and universal gravitation.[12] For Kant, it is the metaphysics of nature that grounds the possibility of natural science, understood as "a rational doctrine of nature,"[13] and not vice versa. Yet in his rapid passing over of the sensible, we may argue from a phenomenological point of view that Kant is dominated in advance by the Newtonian conception of matter as passive, indivisible, impenetrable, and governed by the law of gravity as the universal property of the material universe. Mathematized or formalized nature and the structure of human reason cannot be thought apart. As Guyer and Wood write, "there is a sense in which certitude about the principles of science is possible only because of human autonomy."[14] Indeed, for Kant,

> The understanding is thus not merely a faculty for making rules through the comparison of the appearances; it is itself the legislation for nature, i.e., without understanding there would not be any nature at all, i.e., synthetic unity of the manifold of appearances in accordance with rules (A127).

As the sum of appearances and lawful regularity, Nature is equated with the thought of nature. That which appears – and nature is the sum of appearances - must necessarily "agree with the form of sensible intuition *a priori*" (B164). However, this means that laws "exist only relative to the subject in which the appearances inhere, insofar as it has understanding, as appearances do not exist in themselves," but only exist "relative to the same [sensible] being" (B164). This relativism introduces negativity.

§2. Negativity: The Thing in Itself and the Finitude of Human Thought

The significance of the understanding as legislative is such that, as Kant concedes, it would not be incorrect to assert that "the understanding is itself the source of the laws of

[10] Andreas Weber and Francisco J. Varela, "Life after Kant: Natural Purposes and the Autopoetic Foundations of Biological Individuality," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1 (2002): 104.
[11] Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, ed. M Friedman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 40.
[12] Bréhier quoted in Berger, *The* Cogito, 98-99. Thus neither biology nor chemistry can attain true knowledge; at most, chemistry is a "systematic art" (Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 7).
[13] Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 4.
[14] Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason*, 21.

nature, and thus of the formal unity of nature" (A128). However, of the "lawfulness of things in themselves" we cannot know. Now since the categories do not originate in sensibility, yet can only be of empirical use, they cannot legitimately function apart from intuition. However, because they can be formally considered apart from sensible intuition, we are led to think of an object – the *noumenon* - that arises in the understanding alone. Indeed, if we consider sensibility to pertain only to appearances and not things in themselves, and if this results in the notion of phenomena (the beings of sense), then we necessarily oppose this to non-sensible objects. The noumenon is hence "a thing that is not to be thought of as an object of the senses but rather as a thing in itself (solely through a pure understanding)," and acts as a boundary concept, insofar as it limits "the objective validity of sensible cognition" (A254/B310).

However, we are barred from insight into the possibility of the noumenon because the "domain outside of the sphere of appearances is empty (for us)" (A255/B310). This 'emptiness' is not a simple absence or 'nothing,' however. For Kant, sensible intuition "is the only one possible for us; but we also could not prove that yet another kind of intuition is possible" (A252). Thus Schelling will argue that the thing in itself is problematic; it is "an impossible hybrid, for to the extent to which it is a *thing* (object) it is not itself, and if it is in itself it is not a thing."[15] Taken to its limit, one could say that for Kant there is no object, for on the one hand we have objects that we conceive through reason but which we may never approach, and on the other hand, we have objects whose objectivity cannot be secured for they are the construct of a subject.[16] Furthermore, if the thing in itself is the "intelligible ground of our ideas,"[17] then this ground ought to be the ultimate concern of philosophy.[18] Yet, in attempting to approach this ground, we find that it is not simply unknown, but no-thing - a thing that is not a thing. Kant leaves the ground and source of knowledge relegated to a domain to which we have no access. As Coole argues, this "unknowable alterity" implies an "ontological generativity," despite Kant's denial or negation of negativity.[19]

[15] The Munich lectures, published as *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. A. Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102.
[16] As F. H. Jacobi argued in the wake of the first *Critique*, we are led to posit an object that would be the cause of sense impressions, but to this object we have no access. Yet without the presupposition that objects *do* make impressions on the senses, Jacobi writes, "I could not find my way into the system, whereas with it I could not stay there" ("On Transcendental Idealism," 172).
[17] Schelling, *Munich Lectures*, 102, 110.
[18] As Schulze argues, in Kant's philosophy, the mind or the subject is the source of knowledge, but "the subject cannot belong to the domain of objects knowable by us" (*Aenesidemus*, 122-3). For Schulze, Kant leaves the problem of the origin of mind unaddressed – "we never experience how representations *arise* in us" (*Aenesidemus*, 128).
[19] Diana H. Coole, *Negativity and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 39.

We can only understand the noumenon in a positive sense by conceptualizing it as "an object of a non-sensible intuition," which is to "assume a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition" (B307). However, the possibility of intellectual intuition is a "possibility of which we cannot in the least represent" (A256/B312). We are thus bound to the negative use of the concept; it names the 'unavoidable' and ineradicable problem "of whether there may not be objects entirely exempt from the intuition of our sensibility" (A288/B344). As Coole argues, this negativity is one that "the logic of Kant's epistemology must summon yet deny"; the status of the noumenon is "genuinely undecidable" within Kant's system.[20] Kant leaves open the possibility of a non-sensible intuition in relation to which the noumenon may constitute a meaningful object. Hence the noumenon is beyond possibility, but not impossible as such. We never grasp the things in themselves, and can only have cognition of appearances. Yet it is reason that leads us to think that which we are radically incapable of thinking. It is through the understanding that we are led to a necessary zone of non-knowledge, to the obscure thought of an object absolutely unknowable, and to a non-human intuition.[21]

Accordingly, any idea of nature beyond that of lawful regularity and the sum of appearances cannot be given to theoretical cognition. The idea of nature in itself is fundamentally unknowable – or more precisely, the only concept we can attain is one in which nature is necessarily unknowable. As Guyer and Wood claim, human understanding "is the true lawgiver of nature."[22] As noted earlier, nature conceived in the rationalist tradition appears particularly amenable to the sciences, and this is the case because both rely on objectivist ontology. Nature can only be known by representational thought, and can only be an object that resonates with the human subject; for Merleau-Ponty this means that "nature remains the object which Descartes had in mind, it is an object constructed by us" (*IPP* 139). However, the solidity of nature here is tenuous because of the epistemological negativity Kant introduces. On the one hand, nature as object must be completely given, since it is the only object that we can know. On the other hand, an irrefutable excess of nature over the natural thing of experience subsists as non-determinable and unknowable.

[20] ibid., 30, 34.
[21] As Coole claims, Kant must maintain the separation between epistemological and ontological negativity (*Negativity*, 35). Kant will insist – not without difficulty – on epistemological or logical negativity, while Schelling, as we will see, attempts to conceive ontological negativity.
[22] Guyer and Wood, "Introduction," 21.

It is important to note that Kant is invested in this excessiveness of nature as much as he disavows the possibility of attaining any knowledge of the outside or 'beyond' of reason. This is because nature for him must be strictly opposed to freedom, and this is only possible if appearances are not equated with things in themselves. Kant demonstrates this in the third antinomy, in which he tries to conceive the *coexistence* of nature - as lawful regularity - and freedom, which is by definition contrary to causalism. Now if there is no freedom, there would be an interminable causal series of events and hence "never a first beginning, and thus no completeness of the series" (A446/B474). Yet freedom contradicts the laws of nature, for it is not an event with a determined *a priori*. Freedom and nature can only coexist if appearances are not equated with things in themselves, for this allows an "intelligible cause" to be placed outside the series of empirical conditions, while leaving its effects in the latter. The effect of the intelligible cause "can therefore be regarded as free in regard to its intelligible cause," but, in regard to appearances, can be seen to abide by the necessity of natural laws (A537/B565). For Kant, it is the human being that both abides by empirical laws and constitutes an intelligible cause. This 'frees' the faculty of reason from subjection to empirical conditions.

Human freedom is hence possible on account of a fundamental and necessary unknowability. The sensible leads us to the non-sensible, and the empirically conditioned leads us to the unconditioned, which is "for human reason the true abyss" (A613/B461). However, as we discover in the first *Critique*, there is no bridge between the conditioned and unconditioned, or the sensible and supersensible. The use of theoretical cognition alone cannot bridge the gap between nature and freedom: this is the task of the faculty of judgment.

§3. The Second Meaning of Nature: The Human Subject as Absolute

The 'first' meaning of Kant's humanist thought of nature is anthropological: nature is reduced to the object of the senses or the sum of appearances. Nature is nature 'for us.' Yet in establishing the finitude of human thought, Kant is led to posit a zone of non-knowledge. This inaugurates the idea of the human subject as constituting. The consequence of this, for Merleau-Ponty, is the absolutism of the subject. That is, "if there are only human phenomena, then consequently there is nothing else as a term of

reference" (*N* 22). The first meaning of the Copernican revolution gives rise to the second, and the relativism of nature is 'overturned':

> From the moment that the object is only what I perceive there is no risk of skeptical doubt insofar as it is understood that this object is the only one that may have a meaning for me and that it is coextensive with all that we may call truth and Being. My subjectivity appears as a power of ordering, a capacity to give laws, to posit the idea of a world to which I can refer throughout my own duration (*N* 22).

Human subjectivity thus appears to grant itself its own frame of reference, as well as both the 'capacity' to give laws and the legitimacy to do so. As Merleau-Ponty argues, "human being is a facticity that gives itself validity de jure" (*N* 22). Kant's humanism thus results in the re-installation of the Absolute, "in which the Absolute is thought of no longer as substance, but as subject" (*N* 22). Not only does the human subject 'carry' Being, but since the subject is "the power to construct," the meaning of Being becomes "synonymous' with human representation (*N* 22). The subject is now capable of constructing a nature that it has legislative power over. As Deleuze contends:

> The first thing that the Copernican Revolution teaches us is that it is we who are giving the orders. There is here an inversion of the ancient conception of Wisdom: the sage was defined partly by his own submission, partly by his 'final' accord with Nature. Kant sets up the critical image in opposition to wisdom: we are the legislators of Nature.[23]

We cannot 'find' meaning as it can never precede us – there is no passivity or weakness in nature, as was the case in Cartesian ontology. In this way, Nature becomes not only "something about which we cannot say anything except through our senses," but also something that is constructed (*N* 23). For Merleau-Ponty, it is these two meanings of 'nature' – nature as object of sense, and nature as constructed, corresponding to the Absolutism of the subject – that "Kant's entire philosophy is an effort to unify" (*N* 23). However, the noumenal realm or the supersensible is central to both meanings; as Merleau-Ponty contends, "on every side, there is something fortuitous that we cannot know" (*N* 23). Again, the thing in itself points to a 'beyond' which cannot be grasped by finite intellect, but which can be thought of as an impossible possible. Yet the anthropological assertion that we can only cognize an object as it appears in our experience and not as a thing in itself easily lends itself to the

[23] Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1984), 14.

idea that "in knowing the 'thing' as it only appears to us, *we do not know it at all.*"[24] This impoverished concept of nature necessarily contains a reference to the unknown because it is representationalist. As Merleau-Ponty claims, for Kant, nature is no longer constructed by God (as in the Cartesian formulation), but rather by human Reason. In order to ground this claim, and hence "unify" the two meanings of nature, Kant must demonstrate how the gap between nature (theoretical cognition) and freedom (reason) may be traversed. Accordingly, there can be no mixture between freedom and nature; as we find in the third *Critique,* Kant requires the bifurcation of nature and freedom in order to bridge them.

a. The Problem of Forms of Nature: The "Happy Accident"

As the first *Critique* establishes, we are able to have cognition of the laws of nature because of the transcendental – and thus general - laws provided by the understanding. However, the latter do not provide us with empirical laws. Empirical laws concern the reflecting power of judgment, which seeks a universal that would subsume a given particularity. In the third *Critique*, Kant recognizes "an infinite multiplicity of empirical laws," and "heterogeneity of forms of nature, which belong to particular experience" (*CJ,* First Intro. II, 9). Indeed, there are a "manifold of forms in nature" that are "left undetermined by those laws that the pure understanding gives *a priori*" (*CJ,* Intro. IV, 67). This leads him to posit a transcendental concept or legislative principle of reflecting judgment: the purposiveness of nature. In order for us to make judgments concerning the forms of nature, we must assume that "its arrangement conforms to our faculty for subsuming the particular given laws under more general ones" (*CJ,* First Intro. II, 8), even if this assumption cannot be verified. It is a strictly regulative principle that yields no theoretical cognition (i.e. no claims regarding the purposiveness of nature in itself), but guides how natural objects ought to be judged. As such, the principle of reflecting judgment is 'subjective.' Yet, as Joan Steigerwald explains, this subjectivity "does not undermine its necessity," for it constitutes "a maxim necessary for the investigation of living organisms."[25] The faculty of judgment allows us to depart from what is merely given in experience, and therefore to specify or classify natural forms. For Kant, Nature

[24] George Di Giovanni, "The Facts of Consciousness," in *Between Kant and Hegel* (Cambridge and Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 6.
[25] Joan Steigerwald, "Natural Purposes and the Reflecting Power of Judgment: The Problem of the Organism in Kant's Critical Philosophy," *European Romantic Review* 21, no. 3 (2010): 295.

constitutes a unity and its empirical laws a system: nature is intelligible to mind. Indeed, this is a necessary precondition for natural science and scientific thought.

We must presuppose the unity of the empirical laws of nature if we are to make any judgments about nature at all. This presupposition cannot be proven but rather expresses "the unique way in which we must proceed in reflection on the objects of nature" (*CJ*, Intro. V, 71). Kant famously describes this agreement between the systematic unity of nature and human cognition as a "happy accident" (*CJ*, Intro. V, 71, 72). Indeed, for him "Nature specifies its general laws into empirical ones, in accordance with the form of a logical system, in behalf of the power of judgment" (*CJ*, First Intro. V, 19). Due to this conformism, however, what one 'discovers' as a result of the reflecting faculty of judgment are properties that rely on and correspond to human cognition. As Merleau-Ponty explains, for Kant "the procedure of thought rests on the conviction of being able to use analogy," and hence "finality does not belong to natural beings, but we must think it in regard to them" (*N* 25, 24). In short, Kant's 'happy accident' expresses the accord or agreement between "our tendencies" and the phenomena; however, this means that judgment "remains subjective, but this subjectivity is that of every human being" (*N* 24). This subjectivity is universal – hence the 'absolutism' of the human subject. Purposiveness is the principle according to which we judge or reflect on a given object, and can in no way be said to inhere in the object itself. Again, Kant introduces an (epistemological) excessiveness of nature: experience leads us to posit an excess in the "norms of organization" which "cannot derive from the mechanical laws of nature."[26]

b. The Organism: Kant's Interiorization of Natural Being

For Kant, a product constitutes a purposive form if the "end is the object of a concept insofar as the latter is regarded as the cause of the former (the real ground of its possibility)" (*CJ* 105). There are two necessary conditions for judging something to be a natural end: the thing must be self-generating or self-productive (requiring no external cause) and self-organizing. All the parts of a natural product must be "reciprocally the cause and effect" of the whole; it must "contain in itself and its internal possibility a relation to ends" (*CJ* 245). For Kant, it is only in "living organized beings" that we may "acknowledge a finality, for a living being is both its own cause and effect" (*N* 25).

[26] Philippe Huneman, "From the *Critique of Judgment* to the Hermeneutics of Nature," *Continental Philosophy Review* 39 (2006): 6.

Consequently, in contrast to a machine, the natural product possesses a "self-propagating formative power, which cannot be explained through the capacity for movement alone (that is, mechanism)" (*CJ* 246). This formative power means that "natural beings have their causality within themselves" and hence contain "their own legality [*Gesetzmässigkeit*]," according to Merleau-Ponty (*N* 25). In other words, finality demands interiority. This marks a clear departure from the concept of nature in the first *Critique*. We now find that mechanism is insufficient to explain the unity of nature:

> For it is quite certain that we can never adequately come to know the organized beings and their internal possibility in accordance with merely mechanical principles of nature…this is so certain that we can boldly say that it would be absurd for humans even to make such an attempt or to hope that there may yet arise a Newton who could make comprehensible even the generation of a blade of grass according to natural laws that no intention has ordered; rather, we must absolutely deny this insight to human beings (*CJ* 270-271).

Yet, as Beiser points out, teleology "does not abrogate the mechanical, whose laws remain in force as much as ever; but it does see the mechanical as a limiting case of the organic."[27] The living organism is thus "an end of nature," and for Kant provides "natural science with the basis for a teleology" (*CJ* 247). However, what the introduction of finality with regard to the living organism does is provide an idea of Nature as "dispersed [*zerstreute*] finality" since it cannot be unified (*N* 26). According to Merleau-Ponty, at this stage Nature is:

> a demonology full of supranatural forces, not one of which is supernatural…But, on the other hand, there is never a mode of finalist production. There is no animated matter, because all matter is inert, and if one understands by finality a potency that acts on Nature, either it is already organized, and hence a problem results from it, or it is not organized. It is inextricable (*N* 236).

This difficulty arises from Kant's commitment to Newtonian science, as mentioned earlier, and the challenge of accounting for living organisms within the framework offered by it.[28] We cannot account for the possibility and generation of living organisms on the basis of the forces of matter alone, for the natural product is *already* organized and possesses a formative power. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty points out

[27] Frederick C. Beiser, "Kant and *Naturphilosophie*," in *The Kantian Legacy in Nineteenth-Century Science*, eds. M. Friedman and A. Nordmann (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 12.
[28] For an account of the development of Kant's philosophy in the context of ongoing scientific debates, see Ginsborg, "Kant's Biological Teleology and its Philosophical Significance," in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. G. Bird (UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010).

above, there is no supernatural force in Kant's idea of Nature either – that is, there is no recourse to theology. Kant's 'natural teleology' therefore presents a difficulty that Merleau-Ponty claims is insurmountable, at least for us.

We experience organisms as forms with interiority; such a possibility could not have arisen in the first *Critique*. In the third *Critique*, Kant asserts that the experience of nature forces us to consider it as more than simply an object. Indeed, as Morris claims, organisms both "invite reason to overstep its limit" and "limit reason's overstepping," such that they "at once invite and *rule* comprehension."[29] We can therefore say that Kant succumbs to the same "pressure of the actual world" that Descartes responds to in the latter half of the *Meditations,* as Lawlor argues.[30] However, as Merleau-Ponty notes, there is no mode of finalist production (i.e. how is the living organism produced in the series of conditions?) since matter itself cannot be animated. Kant introduces finality in order to address the inadequacy of the mechanistic causality, but this finality is 'dispersed' or incapable of being unified in the absence of a final end or overarching principle imposed on nature as a systematic whole. For Merleau-Ponty, in order for Kant "to give a true meaning to finality, we must come back to human being" (*N* 26). In this sense, what Kant grants to nature in the third *Critique* amounts to a preparation for the human subject as freedom, as the moral being that transcends nature.

c. Mechanism and Teleology: The Problem of Two Causalities

As Guyer explains, human reason is such that once we postulate the notion of organisms "as systematically organized products of design, it then becomes irresistible for us to conceive of nature as a whole as a systematic organization with an end."[31] This is because once "we have discovered in nature a capacity for bringing forth products that can only be conceived by us in accordance with the concept of final causes," we are led beyond the realm of sense (*CJ* 252). Teleology leads to the supersensible insofar as it demands a thought of the final end of nature as a unified system, as well as the notion of an intentionally acting first cause. The teleological power of judgment generates an antinomy: on the one hand "all generation of material things and their forms" must be

[29] David Morris, "The Place of the Organism in Kantian Philosophy," in *Reading Kant's Geography*, eds. S. Elden and E. Mendieta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 176.
[30] Lawlor, *Implications*, 111.
[31] Paul Guyer, "The Unity of Nature and Freedom: Kant's Conception of the System of Philosophy," in *The Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel*, ed. S. Sedgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36.

judged in accordance with mechanism, while on the other, the judgment of certain natural products require "an entirely different law of causality, namely that of final causes" (*CJ* 258).

Drawing on the distinction between constitutive (determining) and legislative (reflecting) principles, Kant resolves this antinomy by adopting a viewpoint from which both maxims may be true. As a legislative principle of judgment, teleology does not contradict mechanistic causality. Now, the convergence of mechanism and teleology is absolutely inaccessible from the standpoint of human reason. It must be left undetermined whether or not there subsists "in the inner ground of nature itself, which is unknown to us, physical-mechanical connection and connection to ends" that may be unified "in a single principle" (*CJ* 260). We are radically precluded from this inner ground, or from the sufficient principle of nature. The concept of purposiveness only serves as a 'guideline' for inquiry. Since the concept of a natural end does not derive from the understanding – and therefore finds no place in theoretical philosophy – it necessarily involves an element of contingency. Therefore, natural products as ends are thought of in relation to intentionality or a necessary first cause. This is why Kant claims, "teleology cannot find a complete answer for its inquiries except in a theology" (*CJ* 269).

For Kant, the inquiry into "an intentional causality of a highest cause" that results from the teleological power of judgment leads to undecidability; more precisely, the inquiry can only end as unending: in the impossibility of a decision. Due to the nature of human reason, "we absolutely cannot base the possibility of those natural ends on anything except an intelligent being" (*CJ* 271) – but we can neither confirm nor deny this proposition. This leads us back to the problem of negativity. The convergence of mechanism and teleology is posited in the idea of an intelligent and "intentionally acting being as a world-cause" (*CJ* 271). As such, the solution to the antinomy between mechanism/causality and finality/teleology, according to Merleau-Ponty, "is in the limitation of human understanding, nothing being affirmed in Being" (*N* 25). However, according to Merleau-Ponty we are now faced with a kind of object that is neither a thing in itself nor bound solely to the laws of appearances. The living being is no longer the "object created according to the principles of the subject," as we saw in the first *Critique*, but is granted an interiority that is opaque to finite intellect and which can only be understood by "bastard representations" (*N* 83). This means that the solution to

the antinomy in the third *Critique* compels us to "think another foundation of Nature, circumscribing the phenomena around an *intellectus archetypes*, who will see the manifold from the inside" (*N* 25). For Merleau-Ponty,

> in order to give all its value to the solution of the antinomy, one must not remain on an agnostic plane, but rather consider as thinkable an architectonic in which this kind of break between causality and finality would not exist, such that both are overcome in a productive thought beyond human understanding (*N* 25).

In order for Kant to derive all 'value' from the antinomy found in the third *Critique*, we must consider a non-human understanding as "thinkable"; in this sense, the 'thinkable' in the third *Critique* is more demanding than that found in the first. Kant needs to *base* the "special character of our (human) understanding with regard to the power of judgment" (*CJ* 275) on a non-human understanding or intellectual intuition. Indeed, it is only possible to "conceive of the possibility of such an agreement of the things of nature with the power of judgment" if we "at the same time conceive of another understanding" (*CJ* 276).

§4. The 'Abyss' of Human Reason: Ineradicable Negativity

Importantly, human reason is contingent not simply because it is synthetic, but because it nonetheless aims to attain the unconditioned, which is "for human reason the true abyss" (A613/B461). The thought of the unconditioned is necessary – even *natural*. The problem of intellectual intuition is, in other words, the problem of the unconditioned, an (im)possible yet necessary idea. As Coole argues, Kant effectively "provokes the very negativity he wants to negate," for in his very attempt to postulate "limits that would exile negativity" he "simultaneously engenders it."[32] The insufficiency of mechanism, or lawfulness without intentionality, thus demands we venture beyond theoretical cognition, and this leads us to the concept of purposiveness as a principle of the faculty of judgment. Yet teleology demands we move beyond nature to non-natural causality. For Kant, "the principle which is to make possible the unifiability of both in the judging of nature in accordance with them must be placed in what lies outside of both": the supersensible (*CJ* 281). Again, Kant goes to great lengths to stress the radical impossibility of affirming and/or denying the unconditioned. Furthermore, if the teleological power of judgment leads us to the notion of the unconditioned and

[32] Coole, *Negativity*, 39, 34.

intelligent first cause, it must also lead us to seek a final end. However, we cannot find in nature "any being that can claim the privilege of being the final end of creation" (*CJ* 294). This is because a natural thing cannot be a final end; a natural thing cannot signal the end of creation *precisely because it is natural*.

For Kant the human being is "the sole being on earth who has reason, and thus a capacity to set voluntary ends of himself" (*CJ* 298). Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty asserts that "finality's true country is the interior of human being: as *Endzweck*, as a 'final goal' of Nature, insofar as it is not Nature but pure rootless freedom" (*N* 26). As Kant writes in the first *Critique*, the human being has an "empirical character, just like all other natural things," but is *also* an "intelligent object," because the human being "knows himself also through pure apperception" (A547/B575). The human being is both natural and free, or conditioned and unconditioned, in the sense that the human is a moral being that is capable of "setting himself ends at all and (independent of nature in his determination of ends) using nature as a means" (*CJ* 299). This is why Kant writes that the sole type of being that can constitute a final end of creation is the human being "considered as noumenon: the only natural being in which we can nevertheless cognize, on the basis of its own constitution, a supersensible faculty (freedom)" (*CJ* 302). It is the freedom of human, moral being that achieves the final end of Nature "by removing human being from natural causality" (*N* 26). The human being is both phenomenal nature and capable of possible voluntary and hence unconditional action. As Guyer explains, "in order to make the idea of a purpose for nature determinate, we need to introduce an end that has unconditional value," and "the only candidate for this is humanity itself."[33] For Kant, it is the human being as noumenon that installs a 'causal' link between the intelligible realm and phenomenal nature. In other words, the human being belongs to nature *as* a free being. The unity of nature and freedom, and the accord between the faculties, is thus achieved by Kant's humanist idea:

> Human being is *antiphysis* [*Freiheit*] and completes Nature by opposing itself to it. It brings Nature to completion by making it emerge in an order that is not its own, by making it pass into another order…Human being reintroduced the concept of finalized Nature (*N* 26).

§5. Conclusion

[33] Paul Guyer, Editor's Introduction to *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, by Immanuel Kant (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xxxviii.

The nature of human thought informs, relies on, and conditions the thought of nature – which in turn sustains Kant's humanism. For Kant, there is "nothing unconditioned in the order of Being" (*N* 37), in the sense that the unconditioned is aligned with reason and not with nature. Nature is ultimately opposed to freedom; for Kant there can be no mixture. There is no 'savageness,' nothing 'barbarous' in nature for Kant. The bifurcation between nature and freedom is necessary, as it leads to the installation of the human (as universal, moral being) as the sole worldly being capable of going 'beyond' nature. The finitude of human thought is the condition of possibility for the human being as the final end of nature. Man must be radically ignorant – it is what man cannot know that opens on to the idea of man as capable of free action. The human is capable of freedom insofar as he belongs to nature – that is, insofar as he belongs in a mode of non-belonging. For Schelling, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, as we shall see, the possibility of attaining knowledge of nature as an object already presupposes freedom, prompting a reappraisal of the solidity of objectivist ontology.

By introducing the notion of inner purposiveness to address the inadequacy of mechanism to explain the organism, Kant opens up the concept of nature. As Merleau-Ponty claims, "Nature becomes richer" (*N* 23). To be sure, Kant's discussion of the organism in the third *Critique* signals a departure from the objectivist concept of nature as governed by necessity, derived from a pure understanding and presided over by rational laws. As Huneman contends, the first *Critique* conceives of nature in a physicalistic and scientifically intelligible sense, while the third *Critique* points to "the excess of the *meaning* of nature upon the *lawful regularity* of nature."[34] The interiorization of the natural object, however, has no bearing on theoretical cognition and pertains only to reflecting judgment. The possibility of a convergence of teleology and mechanism, or nature and freedom, is reserved for an intellectual intuition – a possibility reason is led to think, but which can be neither proven nor disproven. In short, Kant's thought of nature also leads to the unconditioned or the abyss of human reason. The Kantian "double meaning" of nature thus introduces epistemological negativity. According to Merleau-Ponty, this means that Kant leaves open the possibility that "in the in-itself, God may respond to the question," and indeed "the existence of my freedom is even the symbol of such a possibility" (*N* 37). Accordingly,

[34] Huneman, "From the *Critique*," 7. According to Huneman, Kant's third *Critique* thus "allows *a hermeneutics of nature as an autonomous philosophical discourse* which is different from the scientific one."

Merleau-Ponty contends that "by way of morality, Kant lets the old ontology subsist" (*N* 37).

In Descartes, we can identify a strabism or insurmountable ambiguity between infinite extension (objectivist ontology) and realized extension (ontology of the existent); we find juxtaposition and not 'real mixture.' God, however, is the positive infinite or the 'keystone' that maintains this juxtaposition. Kant interiorizes the natural object, but this only gestures beyond Cartesian ontology; for Kant, nature is lawful regularity or the sum of appearances, although we ought to think of certain natural products in accordance with teleology. This effectively maintains a bifurcation between nature and freedom. The realm in which this division would be 'resolved' is ultimately deferred or rendered undecidable for human thought: the supersensible, or the unconditioned.

chapter 2

THE PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE AS ONTOLOGY: NATURE AS BARBARIC PRINCIPLE IN SCHELLING

Although the spirit may be extremely reasonable,
it is not immaculate; a very ancient savage
principle is awake in it.
-Vladimir Jankélévitch[1]

…there is still in the world something other and
something more than mere reason.
-F.W.J. Schelling[2]

Introduction: The Search for a Living Ground

F.W.J. Schelling will seek to 'complete' the Kantian system by approaching the unconditioned or the abyss of reason. For him, nature is not the sum of all appearances but an organic and dynamic whole animated by a "universal duplicity of principles."[3] The excessiveness of nature is no longer epistemological but ontological; for Schelling "it is not, therefore that we know Nature as *a priori*, but Nature is *a priori*" (*FO* 198). To think nature is henceforth to understand nature as dynamic, as becoming or productivity, rather than as an absolutely given object in front of me. For Schelling, there is no nature – even inorganic nature – that may be adequately thought by theoretical cognition (mechanism).[4] That is, Schelling problematizes the Kantian distinction between reflecting and determining judgments, or constitutive and legislative principles. For him, nature is an organic whole, and the organism (or natural product) a *limitation* of the pure productivity of nature. As Merleau-Ponty writes, Schelling "wants to think this blind production" that for Kant was only a 'dream' (*N* 39).

Schelling consistently denounces rationalist thought for failing to adequately think life and nature. In *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*,[5] he claims: "The entire new European philosophy since its beginning (with Descartes) has

[1] Quoted in S. Lindberg, "On the Night of the Elementary Imaginary," *Research in Phenomenology* 41 (2011): 170.
[2] Quoted in J.M. Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 16.
[3] F.W.J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. K.R. Peterson (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 197. Hereafter *FO*.
[4] Schelling is a difficult figure to situate; on the one hand, he was deemed "too rational for the Romantics" and "too romantic for the Rationalists," as Peterson points out. Moreover, he has been overshadowed by his Tübingen roommates Hegel and Hölderlin (Introduction to the *First Outline*, xii).
[5] F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. J. Love and J. Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006). Hereafter *F*.

the common defect that nature is not available for it and that it lacks a living ground" (26). Descartes "lacerated the world into body and spirit,"[6] and tore apart "matter and mind, thereby destroying the great general organism of life."[7] Like Merleau-Ponty, Schelling argues that the unity between matter and mind in Descartes is "not of nature but of combination."[8] Accordingly, there can be no mixture, no dynamism of matter, and no account of becoming with regard to the physical world. As he puts it, for Descartes "it seemed possible that something could be *absolutely* dead, i.e., something dead in which life never was, therefore something originally dead, an outside without any inside."[9] Objectivist ontology manufactures a death beyond death. For both Merleau-Ponty and Schelling, there is no possibility or productivity inherent in Cartesian extension.[10] Yet it was also Descartes who "gave philosophy its first orientation to subjectivity,"[11] an orientation renewed by Kant. However, instead of seeking "that which was First *in itself*," Descartes "contented himself with what was First to anyone, including *myself,*"[12] an error Kant also commits, exemplified in the absolutism of the human subject.[13] For Schelling, as Matthews explains, the 'contempt' for nature was "initiated by Descartes, formulated by Kant, and perfected by Fichte."[14]

On Merleau-Ponty's reading, Schelling seeks a "phenomenology of prereflexive Being" (*N* 41). Nature "disorients" and "baffles" reflexive thought, for it "presents itself always as already there before us," as primordial being "which is not yet the subject-being nor the object-being" (*IPP* 133). In other words, we must conceive of primordial nature or *erste Natur* in its ontological anteriority and resistance to reflective consciousness. Merleau-Ponty will read Schelling, along with Husserl, as a kind of ally in the tradition of the philosophy of consciousness, for he rigorously attends to the difficulty of thinking nature (or the unreflected) in its very revelation by and through reflection.

This chapter will first situate Schelling within post-Kantian philosophy. It will identify two ideas of nature; the first will be the philosophy of nature as it appears in

[6] F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World (Fragment) from the Handwritten Remains, Third Version (c. 1815)*, trans. J. M. Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 105. Hereafter *AW*.
[7] *Munich Lectures*, 60.
[8] ibid.
[9] ibid., 57.
[10] Schelling also denounces Spinoza for failing to account for freedom and the subjective, insofar as the latter is subsumed by the infinite. Both philosophies are 'lifeless.' See *AW* 105, *F* 20.
[11] I/5 274, quoted in Bruce Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 2.
[12] *Munich Lectures*, 60-61.
[13] Accordingly, the problem of the other is not posed in Descartes and Kant, although both philosophies beg the question of intersubjectivity.
[14] Matthews, *Organic Form*, 2.

Schelling's early period, inclusive of his transcendental idealism.[15] In *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, Schelling formulates the problem that inaugurates philosophy: "How a world outside us, how a Nature and with it experience, is possible."[16] In the early works, Schelling contends that the problem of Nature external to us must be resolved" by establishing "the absolute identity of Mind in us and Nature outside us" (*IPN* 42). For Schelling, this would complete Kant's impossible task: the grounding of system. However, the notion of resolution via identity is gradually abandoned and replaced by the notion of overcoming without annihilation. This shift is discernible in the *Freedom* essay and unambiguously articulated in *The Ages of the World.* This second idea of nature is one in which nature is recast as an obstinate and barbaric principle that renders system impossible. Merleau-Ponty refers to this notion of *erste Natur* as a barbarous principle in several of his later works; in one instance he explicitly claims that Schelling's problem of Nature as primordial being is "our problem" (*IPP* 133-134). The central philosophical question is now reframed: how can philosophy think that which resists thought? How can a philosophy of existence confront Nature as a barbarian principle and insuperable remainder that, as remainder, must remain – *as* insurmountable and non-assimilable - in order for philosophy to be a *living* philosophy, a philosophy worthy of its name? With the remainder, there can be no totality or system; without it, there can be no living philosophy. With it, idealism is 'tormented'[17] and 'anguished'[18] or impossibility – but this is also what makes living philosophy possible. Existence can only be thought by a thought that is inadequate to Being. This constitutes the strabism or vertigo of Schelling's philosophy of nature.[19]

§1. From Impoverishment to Annihilation: Kant and Fichte

In the Schelling lectures, Heidegger argues that Kant's philosophy constitutes the "presupposition and at the same time, the motive, for 'system' becoming the decisive

[15] For an account of the stages of Schelling's philosophy, see: Bowie's Introduction to *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*; Snow's Introduction to *Schelling and the End of Idealism;* Peterson's Introduction to *First Outline*; Wirth's Introduction to *The Ages of the World*; Rajan, "The Abyss of the Past."
[16] F.W.J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10. Hereafter *IPN*.
[17] David Farrell Krell, *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 49.
[18] Hadot, *Veil*, 302-303.
[19] As Tilliette writes, Schelling was often "thought of as a pliable reed, ready to shift with the slightest wind" ("The Problem of Metaphysics," 251). However, the problem of Nature, life and existence remain consistent concerns. We may identify two different meanings of nature in Schelling's work, but both arise from his incessant search for a 'living ground' of philosophy.

goal and requirement" of German Idealism.[20] Indeed, Schelling claims that followers of Kant would have "comprehended the letter but not the spirit of their teacher" if they failed to come to the conclusion that the first *Critique* "cannot possibly be the way of philosophy as a science."[21] Any transgression, therefore, on the part of Schelling in the attempt to establish a *system* of transcendental idealism may be interpreted as a kind of faithfulness. For Schelling, the central problematic of the first *Critique*, namely "How did we ever come to judge synthetically?" is "a problem concerning the essential and common point of *all* philosophy,"[22] for it leads to the problem of the absolute and the question of genesis. For Schelling, the question of synthesis itself *presupposes* an absolute and originary unity. He then reformulates the Kantian question as follows: "How do I ever come to egress from the absolute, and to progress toward an opposite?"[23] In doing so, he brings Kant's transcendental problematic very close to the Spinozist "riddle of the world" – that is, "the question of how the absolute could come out of itself and oppose itself to a world."[24]

For Schelling and the post-Kantian idealist J.G. Fichte,[25] it is in the realm of practical philosophy that an ultimate principle must be found in order to establish a philosophical science; indeed, the 'spirit' of the Kantian project, as it were, demands it. In fact, Kant himself writes that "one is compelled, against one's will, to look beyond the sensible and to seek the unifying point of all our faculties *a priori* in the supersensible: because no other way remains to make reason self-consistent" (*CJ* 217). This is why Fichte interprets Kant's philosophy as "a philosophical propaedeutic to science, rather than scientific cognition *per se*,"[26] for it requires 'completion' by a "single first principle."[27] Fichte's attempt to ground the system leads him to unify theoretical and practical philosophy by positing the Ego as the very "self-positing of Reason." For Fichte, intellectual intuition "is at the foundation of all possible

[20] Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise,* 38-39.
[21] F.W.J. Schelling, *"*Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy or On the Unconditional in Human Knowledge," trans. F. Marti, in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 65.
[22] "Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism," trans. F. Marti, in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 164.
[23] ibid.
[24] ibid., 173-174.
[25] On the influence of Fichte on the early work of Schelling see Fincham, "Schelling's Subversion"; Nassar, "Spinoza in Schelling's Early Conception of Intellectual Intuition"; Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, Ch. 9.
[26] Nectarios Limnatis, "Fichte and the Problem of Logic," in *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism*, eds. D. Breazeale and T. Rockmore (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010), 24.
[27] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre* or, of So-called 'Philosophy," trans. D. Breazeale in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 101.

experience"[28] since it is the transcendental condition of possibility for any kind of knowing whatsoever. The Fichtean I must be absolute activity, for it cannot be limited by an object; in short, it must be absolute, immediate self-relation.[29] The facticity of consciousness demonstrates that the active self-positing of the I must have already taken place. As such, the immediate certainty and unity of the I must be presupposed. However, how can the self be absolute and 'have' or experience nature?

Fichte's speculative philosophy must demonstrate how the I maintains its identity not in spite of, but through difference or limitation. It must be able to return to itself in absolute expression. In positing the not-I, however, the I "posits itself as united with what is opposed to itself."[30] For Hegel, Fichte's philosophy "evolves into a system" and in so doing "passes over into the chain of finite [acts and objects] of consciousness from which it never reconstructs itself again as identity and true infinity."[31] In short, Fichte's pure I "takes on the form of something conditioned by an objective infinity."[32] However, if the I is absolute it cannot be conditioned by the not-I. For Hegel and Schelling, Fichtean nature is thus "something essentially determined and lifeless," for it becomes merely "the objective side of self-limitation."[33] Nature amounts to the formalized and objective condition for the self-determination of the I. Hegel therefore declares that Fichte reduces nature to "the dead shell of objectivity,"[34] and Schelling accuses Fichte of "the blindest contempt for all nature."[35]

While Kant recognizes the non-eliminable excessiveness of nature, for Fichte the object is no longer marked by ambiguity. In the last analysis, according to Löwith, "subjectivity is itself always determinative of the natural external world," such that "everything that 'is' is a possible object of my consciousness, for the object *is* an object only insofar as it faces *me*."[36] For both Merleau-Ponty and Hegel, Kant's concept of

[28] Henry S. Harris, Introduction to *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, by G.W.F. Hegel (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), 11. For Fichte, knowledge does proceed "from *an affection,* but not affection *by an object*" (Rockmore, "Fichte, German Idealism and the Thing in Itself," 17).
[29] According to Steigerwald, "Fichte played with the double meaning of the word *Seyn*, as both the noun 'being' and the verb 'to be' or logical copula 'is,' to express the identity of the self's being and the activity of thought in self-positing ("The Dynamics of Reason," 122).
[30] Limnatis, "Fichte," 34.
[31] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy,* trans. H.S. Harris and W. Cerf. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), 81.
[32] ibid.
[33] ibid., 139. Hegel thus characterizes the principle of Fichte's system as a "subjective Subject-Object" (81).
[34] ibid., 141.
[35] Quoted in Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 146.
[36] ibid., 144. In the Berlin lectures Schelling claims, "in the last analysis there was more objectivity in Kant's critique than in Fichte's *Doctrine of Science*" (*The Ground of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures,* 107).

nature is impoverished.[37] With Fichte, however, impoverishment gives way to annihilation – literally, to make into nothing – or obliteration via objectification.[38] For Schelling, "it is as if Fichte perceived no distinctions at all in the external world"; Nature for Fichte "disappears in the abstract concept of the non-I," or "the completely empty object."[39] As Schelling writes, for the Fichtean absolute I "there is no object *whatsoever*." [40] As Hegel explains, "Fichte comes closer than Kant to managing the antithesis of nature and freedom and exhibiting nature as an absolute effect and as dead,"[41] precisely because Fichte does not require the intervention or "detour" of non-human intellectual intuition in order to determine nature. The excessiveness in the Kantian concept is eclipsed. With Kant, nature is always on the way to intellection; for Fichte, nature *is* intellection. Nature is wholly exhausted in the not-I, completely determined by human intellect, and is therefore *nothing*. [42] All it is, is what it *must* be, according to the idea. In Fichte we no longer have a strabism between ontology and existent. The Fichtean self-positing of the I thus fails to escape the problem of securing the objectivity of the world; as a 'lifeless' realm, nature is formalized and annihilated. [43] Fichte's account results in a tilted or asymmetrical principle of identity: the not-I is nothing but the mirror for the reflection of the I. For Schelling, on the other hand, the concept of nature is necessary precisely *as* something not determined by consciousness. We may understand him as responding to the question Merleau-Ponty will later formulate: how "there is *for-us* an *in-itself*" (*PhP* 74).

§2. Schelling's Early Philosophy of Nature

The primacy of nature for Schelling can be understood as a consequence of what Sturma declares Schelling's "fundamental thesis": the contention that "subjectivity can never become transparent to itself as long as it remains within the immanence of reflection."[44]

[37] See Hegel, *Difference*, 164.
[38] Quoted in Matthews, *Organic Form*, 2.
[39] *Munich Lectures*, 107.
[40] Schelling, *Hegel: The Letters*, 32-33. This also causes problems for the determination of finite consciousness. The Fichtean I is everything insofar as it is absolute, but this also means that the absolute is nothing for finite consciousness. As Hölderlin writes, "no consciousness is conceivable in the absolute *I*, as an absolute *I* I have no consciousness, and insofar as I have no consciousness I am (for myself) nothing, therefore the absolute *I* is (for me) nothing" (*Essays and Letters*, 48).
[41] *Difference*, 143-144.
[42] Fichte's Subject-Object turns into a subjective Subject-Object for Hegel, because Fichte's Subject-Object "does not succeed in suspending this subjectivity and positing itself objectively" (*Difference*, 155).
[43] As Grant argues, Fichte is the first philosophy of absolute antiphysics, insofar as he isolates the practical domain from physics, "sundering freedom and mechanical necessity into two worlds" (*On an Artificial Earth*, 82).
[44] Dieter Sturma, "The Nature of Subjectivity: The Critical and Systematic Function of Schelling's Philosophy of Nature," in *The Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy*, ed. S. Sedgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 218.

A philosophy of nature must provide a way of rupturing the "immanent circularity of subjectivity" in order to establish an "*actual* relation" and thus objectivity.[45] For Schelling, it is not consciousness but the unconditional principle that must be Absolute. As just noted, Schelling poses the problem of genesis, and this radically transforms the Kantian question, insofar as the focus shifts from the 'whatness' of knowledge to the facticity or 'thatness' of thought and experience itself. Kantian philosophy need not prove the latter - *that* something exists - since it is already presupposed in theoretical cognition. In Kantian thought, therefore, experience is merely an "escort"[46] of reason. Rather, what Schelling wants to address is "how a world outside us, how a Nature and with it experience, is possible" (*IPN* 10).[47] Nature, however, is not an object that can be frontally approached. How, then, can I attain knowledge of Nature, which is not simply an object but which I find outside of myself, and which *precedes* reflexive consciousness?

a. The Problem of Beginning: Genesis and the Unreflected

In *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, Schelling writes:

> as soon as man sets himself in opposition to the external world…the first step to philosophy has been taken. With that separation, reflection first begins; he separates from now on what Nature had always united, separates the object from the intuition, the concept from the image, finally (in that he becomes his own *object*) himself from himself. But this separation is only *means*, not *end*. For the essence of man is action (10).

The problem of nature is no longer simply epistemological but ontological. Reflective consciousness finds itself separate(d) from nature, but this separation is only possible because the essence of man is freedom – indeed, it is man who 'sets himself' in opposition, who separates what had been united. This separation or free de-cision, however, precedes consciousness: it is always already past. For Schelling, to ask the question of nature – the question that inaugurates philosophy – already implies freedom. This also means that a philosophy of nature must be able to account for the being that asks the question of nature. The *Naturphilosophie* is therefore an account of the pre-history of reflective consciousness.

[45] ibid., 219. Italics added.
[46] Schelling, *Berlin Lectures*, 131.
[47] As Matthews writes, "that there is a world at all, and that this world has precisely this vibrant explosion of life in all of its ongoing differentiation, communicates to Schelling a truth of existence that precedes the application of reason's web of order and necessity" ("Introduction," 2).

The subject *becomes* conscious – which is also to say that being is ecstatic insofar as the "I am" expresses "the coming-to-itself of itself."[48] Consciousness no longer constitutes a true beginning; to be conscious is always already to find oneself within a world. Activity is at once passivity, for the moment "I am *conscious* of myself" I find the world "as already being-there"; accordingly, "the *already conscious* I cannot possibly produce the world."[49] Nature is experienced as always already given. This also means that Nature is not an object posited by consciousness. Consciousness finds itself both within the world and separate(d) from it, neither absolute nor free. The first is not first, but this does not mean that it is unnecessary. On the contrary, passivity and the unconscious is the necessary condition of the possibility of reflective consciousness and theoretical knowledge – yet it is only through the latter that the former can be approached. Clearly, this makes thematic the problem of beginning: we must begin from and with existence, which is already marked by difference and distance, and which is therefore 'late.' In other words, we cannot begin at the beginning. Access to the absolute is barred, always already undone by non-knowledge. As Peter Warnek contends, the standpoint of reflection can only constitute a beginning "as the original *negation* of what is not separated; and in thus reflecting upon itself reflection does not even know itself as the beginning that it is."[50]

Philosophy is therefore anamnesis,[51] and it must account for the pre-history of the I; it must (re)unite being and thought, the given and the constructed. In short, we could say that for Schelling Being can be thought only by a thought that already finds itself *in* Being – he adopts the perspective of existent being or realized extension. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* thus forms the necessary counterpart to transcendental philosophy, since it is only through the identity of subject and object that the absolute can be approached. As Daniel Breazeale explains, "rather than viewing nature merely as the 'other' of consciousness, Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* seeks to interpret it as an analogon of the same: to treat nature as 'visible spirit' and spirit as 'invisible nature.'[52] The way to the absolute must commence from experience – and what this already

[48] Schelling, *Munich Lectures*, 109.
[49] ibid.
[50] Peter Warnek, "The Experience of Freedom at the Limits of Reflection in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology," *Chiasmi International* 15 (2013): 413-414.
[51] There is a three-fold task of philosophy for Schelling: with regard to reflective consciousness, philosophy is diagnostic and therapeutic. With regard to the pre-reflective, philosophy is anamnesis. As we shall see, with regard to nature, philosophy is interpretative, tasked with deciphering.
[52] Daniel Breazeale, "Fichte and Schelling: The Jena Period," in *The Age of German Idealism*, eds. K. M. Higgins and R. C. Solomon (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 166.

demonstrates is that reflective consciousness obscures the unity that precedes it and, at least in Kant and Fichte, fails to interrogate its very own presuppositions. In Schelling's view, the 'standpoint of reflection' is hence artificial and, if maintained, "becomes a spiritual sickness," for it prevents thought from being able to "grasp life and the living adequately."[53] This is why Walter Schulz argues that Schelling "does not begin with a philosophy that reflects critically on the possibility of knowing [for finite consciousness]" but "presses toward an ultimate unity which, as the whole, contains everything."[54]

b. Nature and the Natural Object

The essence of the organism itself (as in-itself and as purposive) cannot be sought by critical philosophy; natural objects are to be understood according to mechanism alone, although we are (legitimately) led to judge them according to teleology. For Schelling, the organic precedes the mechanical as its precondition.[55] That is, insofar as nature as productivity is primary, mechanism is *secondary*, the "derivative motion of that which is solely primitive and original" (*FO* 196). In other words, Schelling follows Kant's account of the organism in the third *Critique*, but introduces a 'real' interiority, no longer requiring the authorization, as it were, of the 'as if' or the 'happy accident.' Nature is not simply the sum of all appearances, but an organic and dynamic whole that persists and is animated by a "universal duplicity of principles" (*FO* 197). Schelling effectively renders Kant's reflecting judgment a *constitutive* principle and in so doing implements a shift from epistemological to ontological negativity. As such, Schelling asserts, "it is not, therefore, that we know Nature as *a priori*, but Nature is *a priori*; that is, everything individual in it is predetermined by the whole" (*FO* 198-199). In other words, for Schelling *natura naturata* (natural object) and *natura naturans* (productivity) are mutually necessary. How is such a science of Nature to proceed?

According to Schelling, the natural object can only have finite subsistence through constant reproduction. For Schelling "the product is originally nothing but a mere point, a mere limit, and it is only through Nature's battling against this point that it is, so to

[53] Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 69. Schelling will later claim that Hegel's philosophy, characterized as 'intoxicated' by concepts, is marred by this "malady" (70). The essence of man, for example, would remain "the same even if there were no people at all on the earth" (*Berlin Lectures*, 129-130).
[54] Quoted in Hans Michael Baumgartner, "The Unconditioned in Knowing: I – Identity – Freedom," in *The Emergence of German Idealism*, eds. M. Baur and D. Dahlstrom (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 246.
[55] "On the World-Soul," trans. I. H. Grant, *Collapse: Journal of Philosophical Research and Development* 6 (2010): 69.

speak, raised to a full sphere, to a product" (*FO* 205-206). The product is the limitation or inhibition of the absolute productivity of nature. In *The First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, he uses the example of a whirlpool to illustrate this point:

> a stream; it is *pure identity*; where it meets resistance, a whirlpool is formed; this whirlpool is not an abiding thing, but something that vanishes at every moment, and every moment springs up anew (*FO* 206).

The whirlpool, as a natural product, cannot be infinite. Rather, it arises as a consequence of a limitation of Nature as 'pure identity' or productivity. However, Schelling argues that the natural product is also not, strictly speaking, finite. It only *appears* so. Speculative physics has, strictly speaking, no object at all: it pertains to the dynamical and "aims generally at the inner clockwork and what is *nonobjective* in Nature" (*FO* 196). Indeed, the very appearance of the product relies on "the force of the whole of Nature" that "surges into it" (*FO* 206). The natural product "must therefore be at once infinite and finite; it must be only seemingly finite, but in infinite *development*" (*FO* 206). This surging of Nature at every moment thus underlies the phenomenal temporality of the product. Permanence is only possible by virtue of the infinite activity and productivity of Nature. While limitation is formally secondary, it is the only way in which Nature can phenomenally appear – that is, can exist. This means that "neither pure productivity nor pure product can ever exist" in Nature (*FO* 213). What Schelling attempts to demonstrate is how Nature "can be inhibited at each individual stage of its formation, without its ceasing to be productive, *or how, by diremption itself, the permanence of the productivity is secured*" (*FO* 214). In other words, the *First Outline* is a deduction from the highest principle – Nature as absolute productivity - to the organization of nature as a system of forces articulated in stages. A philosophy of nature must show how productivity comes to "materialize" itself while retaining its infinite activity – in short, how a natural product *becomes*.

The *First Outline* begins with the unconditioned in Nature, which, as a principle of being, "manifests itself in each natural object" but is not a predicate of being (*FO* 13). The forms of nature will then appear as deviations or "various stages of development of one and the same absolute organism" (*FO* 28). In other words, in a move that further distances him from Descartes, Kant, and Fichte, Schelling collapses the distinction between the organic and anorganic: nature as a whole is to be understood as an organism. To conceive of nature as a whole dissolves the Kantian antithesis

between mechanism and organism, or causalism and finalism. Consequently, we must speak of the organism in a way that differs from the Critical conception –it is no longer the self-productive, autonomous and ultimately unknowable object we find in Kant, but rather a temporal product achieved by a specific proportion of active forces.[56] Schelling concludes that there is "one universal dualism which runs throughout the whole of Nature" (*FO* 179). The same principle acts in the amphibian that acts in so-called higher animals; what differs is the particular 'stage' of the appearance. This allows Schelling to claim that "the plant is what the animal is, and the lower animal is what the higher is" (*FO* 149). Nature is to be understood as an organic whole and thus a unity that conditions the tremendous diversity of natural forms. Difference relies on a unity that precedes and sustains it.

c. The Original Diremption

What cause, however, "*brought forth the first duplicity* (of which all other opposites are the progeny) *out of the universal identity of Nature*" (*FO* 10)? For Schelling, the universal dualism of Nature demonstrates that "productivity must be *primarily* limited" (*FO* 218). This means, however, that this limitation "must be furnished by *an opposition arising in productivity itself*" (*FO* 219). In this sense, Schelling is led to discover "that *the absolute is heterogeneous even before anything is 'thrown' at it,*" as Krell succinctly puts it.[57] If Nature is pure identity, then this heterogeneity must strive toward "indifference" and not identity per se. Moreover, in order for original duplicity to endure – and it must, for absolute indifference would amount to the annihilation of productivity and constitute a kind of Cartesian death – this striving must be infinite. Indeed, for Schelling this very resistance or "continual *prevention of the attainment of indifference*" is life (*FO* 229).[58] Life is therefore an opening within and an expression of Nature, an opening conditioned by a universal duplicity of forces and thus irreducibly marked by conflict. Moreover, the striving towards indifference therefore already recalls a transcendental past – Nature as pure identity.

The original diremption of nature has significant consequences for the Schellingian notion of the Absolute. According to Merleau-Ponty, in contrast to the Spinoza and Descartes, for Schelling the infinite loses its priority over the finite, for

[56] For an account of the "dire forces" of Nature implied by Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, see Krell, *Contagion*.
[57] Krell, *Contagion*, 88.
[58] As Wirth explains, the life of *natura naturans* that Schelling was seeking was "*the life of life* itself, the life that grants the living its life and death" (*Conspiracy*, 94).

"the relation between the finite and the infinite is not such that we can put them in a linear order" (*N* 37). Moreover, for Schelling the finite is not negation, and therefore "cannot be drawn analytically from the infinite" (*N* 37). As we have seen, the infinite requires the finite in order to be; the Absolute needs the world. Furthermore, nature strives for indifference or non-division, but insofar as this striving is infinite it must also resist or inhibit itself. Nature must be both passive and active: it can only be active insofar as it is passive – that is, insofar as it is *incapable* of a return to pure identity. There is a kind of hesitation or impotence in nature, and this is precisely what we *cannot* find in Cartesian ontology. Merleau-Ponty thus argues that Nature is "a producer that is not all-powerful, which does not succeed in ending its production: it is a rotary movement that produces nothing definitive" (*N* 38). As such, natural productivity *is* by what Merleau-Ponty aptly calls "an internal scission, the result of a fecund contradiction" (*N* 37). Nature is rent from itself in order to become itself, but this becoming also constitutes a loss. It is the whole that in order to persevere, must strive for indifference – but in this very striving maintains the duplicity that is to be overcome. Put another way, Nature as absolute productivity must inhibit itself *absolutely*. This is the 'fecund contradiction' that defines the Schellingian notion of Nature as a living organism, and insofar as this is a contradiction that arises out of Nature itself, Nature is to be understood – against Kant, Descartes, Fichte and Spinoza – as *both* necessity and freedom.

§3. The Demands of System: Nature in *System of Transcendental Idealism*

We have seen that reflection constitutes a separation from "what Nature had always united" (*IPN* 10), that the "*already conscious* I cannot possibly produce the world,"[59] and that philosophy is therefore anamnesis. In the *Ideas,* Schelling even invokes the notion of a 'philosophical state of nature' in which "man was still at one with himself and the world about him" (10). Why, then, does man oppose himself to a world outside of himself? Schelling claims that man 'forsakes' this initial, atemporal condition because the essence of spirit is freedom. Yet reflection itself is not the goal – that is, it does not constitute an end – but rather a necessary 'initial' condition. Indeed, spirit "must abandon itself to the uncertain fate of its own powers, in order one day to return, as victor and by its own merit, to that position in which, unaware of itself, it spent the

[59] Schelling, *Munich Lectures*, 109.

childhood of its reason" (*IPN* 10). Spirit therefore finds itself thrown or abandoned by its own powers, so that a 'return' with a difference may one day be possible. Paradoxically, the 'first' step is thus an act of distancing, and once taken becomes that which the human seeks to reverse. Desire is always already double, as it were, for the desire to know itself or to be conscious of itself (entailing separation) is at once the desire to return to a primordial unity. To know is to discover loss, to become conscious is to bear the rupture that is its 'price.' Progression is irreducibly marked and animated by a yearning or nostalgia without a proper object. Consciousness strives to return to a 'childhood' in which it lacked awareness of itself – we must understand childhood here as lacking lack – and therefore its progression is also a tracing back to a past that has never been present for it. This past, therefore, is transcendental. Breazeale thus characterizes Schelling's Romantic philosophy as one of "speculative salvation, inspired, above all, by a deep longing to restore a presumably lost unity or harmony."[60] What then, is this progression of consciousness, and how is Nature to be understood in light of it?

a. Schelling's Real-Idealism

For Schelling, systematic science requires the twofold unity of being and thought, objective and subjective, and the finite and the infinite. The *System of Transcendental Idealism* is Schelling's attempt at a philosophical construction of the ideal and will therefore account for the move from pure self-consciousness to objectivity or nature. In it, he formulates what he deems the 'highest task' of transcendental philosophy: to answer the question "*how can we think both of presentations as conforming to objects, and objects as conforming to presentations?*"[61] Schelling asserts that this 'highest task' involves establishing the "*predetermined harmony*" (*ST* 12) of ideal and real. Schelling claims to have developed a philosophical science that avoids the difficulties encountered by both dogmatism and what he terms "improper idealism." Both positions commence from an already-complete(d) consciousness and therefore struggle to accommodate exteriority and to develop a robust theory of reality. The Schellingian system is an attempt to reconcile realism and idealism by defining the highest system as a fulfilment of *both*.

[60] Breazeale, "Fichte and Schelling," 171.
[61] F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. P. Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 11. Hereafter *ST*.

He posits an identity between the forces in Nature and those that animate the progression of spirit – a 'harmony' necessary for the construction of a real-idealist system. This postulated harmony is to be understood as follows: there is conscious and free activity, which is the ideal or subjective. There is also unconsciously productive activity which produces the world or nature; this is the real or objective. For Schelling, there is an identity between the two productive activities insofar as both are "one in principle" (*ST* 12). Now if it can be demonstrated that it is the same productive activity that subsists in free action and in bringing forth the world, then the task of transcendental philosophy will be met. However, the progression of spirit relies on the positing of an unconscious, unknown region beyond or 'behind' consciousness. Both natural and unconscious productivity cannot phenomenally appear in the world; the moment the I becomes conscious, it is split from the realm of the infinite. Yet unconscious productivity is the condition through which consciousness becomes itself and finds objects outside of itself. What Schelling seeks is the "eternal unknown" or the "*absolutely identical principle*, which is already divided in the first act of consciousness" (*ST* 208-209). For him, Nature shares this principle which, in the self, "already undergoes division in the primary act of self-consciousness" (*ST* 217).

b. From Intellectual to Aesthetic Intuition: The Possibility of the Revelation of Nature

We have seen Schelling's philosophy of nature culminate in the original diremption that allows duality to emerge from pure identity. Similarly, what Schelling seeks in the *System* is an explanation of how the ultimate ground or Absolute "becomes an object to the *self itself*" (*ST* 217). This brings us back to the notion of intellectual intuition as the organ of philosophy, and which knows itself non-objectively. Since it "has as its object neither the objective nor the subjective, but the absolute identical" (*ST* 229), it can nowise appear in the world and cannot be objectivized. Intellectual intuition can, however, become objective in aesthetic intuition. Art exhibits the ultimate ground and "divines the unconscious and active force behind things."[62] Nature comes close to art, but while both are the becoming-finite of the infinite, Nature can never display the Absolute in itself. Similarly, transcendental philosophy interrogates reflective consciousness and delves into a "prehuman domain of the coexistence of things prior to the inspection of knowledge" (*N* 46), but it cannot present or 'depict' this domain. For

[62] Michael Vater, Introduction to *System of Transcendental Idealism* by F.W.J. Schelling, xxix.

Schelling, art is "the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy," for it is capable of expressing "what philosophy cannot depict in external form, namely the unconscious element in acting and producing, and its original identity with the conscious" (*ST* 231).[63] As Merleau-Ponty states, "the philosophy of Nature needs a language that can take up Nature in its least human aspect, and which thereby would be close to poetry" (*N* 45). This leads us to the third task of a philosophy, a task that pushes philosophy beyond itself: philosophy as deciphering what it discovers. Schelling writes:

> What we speak of as nature is a poem lying pent in a mysterious and wonderful script. Yet the riddle could reveal itself, were we to recognize in it the odyssey of the spirit, which, marvellously deluded, seeks itself, and in seeking flies from itself; for through the world of sense there glimmers…the land of fantasy, of which we are in search (*ST* 232).

The transcendental idealist system draws to a close by pointing toward that which it cannot encapsulate. It is important to note here that the riddle of nature is deemed in a sense decipherable through aesthetic intuition – in other words, its potential revelation is to be correlated with the progressive history of spirit. For spirit to know itself is thus also to decipher nature and bring it to expression. Art is a 'gateway' that grants access to that which lies opaque in Nature. The art product must therefore be an object that is not an object, that is, the presentation (it cannot be re-presentation) of the unity of concept and intuition. The revelation of Nature can only be achieved by spirit, but spirit is caught up in a deception of its own making. This is the case because between the unconscious activities of Nature and the conscious activities of consciousness there is an identity in principle. Schelling finds a correlation between the forces active in Nature and those found in the epochs of consciousness; this correlation points to an identity that establishes transcendental idealism and the philosophy of nature as mutually necessary sciences. Thus there is a sense in which the history of consciousness, while originating in a separation which results in 'marvelous delusion,' *ought* to culminate in the interpretation of Nature that would fulfil it and for the first time permit it to reflect on itself (for revelation is here equated with the becoming-object of ground). Indeed, Schelling's transcendental idealism entails that Being be equated with being-presentable or capable of revelation – even if this revelation is not accomplished by thought and requires intuition of a higher order. At this point, Schelling strives toward an asymptotic adequation between Being and thought that Merleau-Ponty would reject. Merleau-

[63] As Merleau-Ponty asserts, we must understand 'document' here as "objectivation" (*N* 45).

Ponty, conjuring the image of childhood we encountered earlier, succinctly describes the relation set up between man and nature:

> We are the parents of a Nature of which we are also the children. It is in human being that things become conscious by themselves, but the relation is reciprocal: human being is also the becoming-conscious of things. Nature leads, by a series of disequilibria, toward the realization of human being, which in turn becomes the dialectical term of it (*N* 43).

Man produces the Nature of which man is also the product. There is a curious reciprocity here: both Nature and the self are simultaneously subject and object, productivity and product. The human being can never cease being the product of nature, but it is only in the human being that the process of nature becomes conscious. As Merleau-Ponty explains, the self always tends to make itself an object, which means that "it is necessary to go against Nature in order to attain intuition" (*N* 52) – and therefore man is always already separated from nature – but what this intuition aims at is the identity of conscious and unconscious activity, the congruence of subjective and objective, in short, non-division now made *conscious*. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty continues, "meaning exists only by way of the human subject: the real itself is found integrated in the ideal world" (*N* 43). Tilliette succinctly expresses what is at stake here: "the explicit parallel drawn between nature and the I always serves to win back the resources of the philosophy of nature for the unconscious I."[64] The human subject is the only being that, as originally free, can separate itself from Nature in order to bring Nature itself to reflection. In this specific sense, Schelling remains Kantian.

History, for Schelling, is therefore "a progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the absolute" (*ST* 211). Since the so-called 'agent' of history – that is, self-consciousness – has a "paradoxical and dark side, a hidden ground," that is "hidden from reason,"[65] history is marked by a history that precedes it, and which can only be a memory. At this point, however, Schelling's invocation of the unconscious, the non-rational, and nature is still to be understood in terms of the demands set by the transcendental idealist system he is constructing, as the possibility of the revelation of nature implies. We will now turn to the shift that occurs in his later works wherein Nature explicitly becomes what he terms a 'barbarian principle.'

§4. From Nature as Organism to Nature as Barbarian Principle

[64] Tilliette, "Problem of," 260.
[65] Vater, "Introduction," xxx.

Earlier, it was mentioned that Merleau-Ponty at one point explicitly aligns his philosophy of Nature with Schelling's. Let us examine this more closely:

> If we are not to be resigned to saying that a world from which consciousness is cut off is nothing at all, then in some way we must recognize that primordial being…which in every respect baffles reflection. From this primordial being to us, there is no derivation, nor any break…As Schelling has remarked, there is in nature something which makes it such that it would impose itself upon God himself as an independent condition of his operation. Such is our problem (*IPP* 133-134).

The I never completely transcends nature, nor does nature produce once and for all. What Schelling's philosophy provides is a way of thinking a *participation* that is not rooted in reflection and which precedes the latter: we must think "not the projection of consciousness on everything, but a participation of my life in everything and vice versa" (*N* 40). Thus Merleau-Ponty asserts that the "ultimate fact" is that "there is no independent point of view on the Absolute" (*N* 47, *IP* 129). Nature is not a whole in the sense of a totality that would precede its 'parts,' because it requires facticity. Even the Absolute must "leave itself and make itself into the World" (*N* 47). As such, primordial being cannot be conceived in accordance with mechanism *or* finalism, for both posits a totality that is transparent – that is, wholly determined in the case of mechanism, or determinable in the case of finalism, wherein events would unfold in accordance with an idea.[66] In this sense, both mechanism and finalism are actualist, and both foreclose the dimension of the possible. We will return to Merleau-Ponty's critique of actualism in chapter 5.

The 'problem' that Merleau-Ponty identifies in Schelling, the problem that is also 'ours,' pertains to the concept of nature in Schelling's later works. There is 'something' in nature that appears to necessarily "impose itself" not only on the realm of living beings but on God himself. We will now turn to Schelling's discussion of Nature as ground or as an "indivisible remainder" in the *Freedom* essay. At this point, Schelling still maintains that the understanding can "unfold the unity that is unconsciously but necessarily immanent in nature as in a seed" (*F* 30), and hence that the idealist system can ultimately be established. However, in *The Ages of the World*, nature becomes a groundless ground which must be 'overcome.' System is to be understood no longer in terms of the identity of ideal and real, but in terms of ground and existence. How are we to think of Nature as ground – the ground, even, of God?

[66] This is why Merleau-Ponty contends that "Nature is treated by Hegel as a phenomenon of refuse," and is rendered 'impotent,' insofar as the latter treats the concrete as "repulsive to the Concept" (*N* 49).

a. "The Indivisible Remainder": Nature as Ground

In the *Freedom* essay Schelling continues to maintain that subjective idealism, as a "partial system," requires a philosophy of nature. Idealism must demonstrate "that everything real (nature, the world of things) has activity, life and freedom as its ground" (*F* 22). This accords with the analyses found in the *Naturphilosophie.* However, Schelling here recognizes that the failure of idealism to adequately think Nature also means that it inadequately thinks freedom, for it can only offer a "merely formal" or "general" concept of it (*F* 23). His later texts therefore display a deepening of his commitment to articulating a living philosophy that would be at once the highest realism and the highest idealism; idealism must "make itself real" and take on "flesh and blood" (*F* 26). The idea of Nature as ground will be central to his investigation.

There can be nothing prior to or outside of God; he must therefore have "the ground of his existence in himself" (*F* 27). By 'ground,' Schelling is not referring to a logical presupposition – ground must be thought of as "something real [*reell*] and actual [*wirklich*]" (*F* 27). Now this ground of God's existence – which is not God "considered absolutely" – is nature (*F* 27). Schelling thinks Nature here as "everything that lies beyond the absolute Being of absolute identity" (*F* 28); we can thus already see that it is difference, non-being, or potency. Nature is "in God, a being indeed inseparable, yet still distinct from him" (*F* 27). How is it possible to think this mutual becoming of Nature and God without being forced to relinquish the latter? The relation between nature as ground and God must be understood dialectically.[67] We must conceive of a distinction within God between nature, which serves as the ground of his existence and of things, and "the truly originating God who is still completely in his ground, the God as he has not yet emerged from himself to himself."[68] Nature as inner ground precedes God's existence, but the ground requires God's existence in order to be. This is why Schelling writes of "the yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself," which is the "first stirring of divine existence" (*F* 28, 30).

Alongside this "dark ground" there is "an inner, reflexive representation" generated in God through which "God sees himself in an exact image of himself" (*F* 30). This clarity or vision, only possible because God himself "is begotten from

[67] Schelling employs the image of the opposition of gravity and light to explicate this point. The concept of gravity thus takes on a metaphysical sense. See Lindberg, "Night," 170.
[68] Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise,* 117.

himself," is why Schelling writes that God "dwells in pure light," while man will strive for it (*F* 29). Through this "representation" God is "realized [*verwirklicht*], although only in himself" (*F* 30). The dark ground is therefore the condition through which God can reveal himself to himself and thus come to be – that is, to exist. Furthermore, this representation, which is revelation, "is at the same time the understanding – the *Word* – of this yearning and the eternal spirit" (*F* 30). It is only after this act of self-revelation that "everything in the world is, as we see it now, rule, order and form," as it is only now that the understanding becomes "freely creating" (*F* 29). The understanding then proceeds to unfold the immanent unity in nature which can only be articulated via division. The understanding is therefore "the light placed in primordial nature" as the "eternal ground for the existence of God" (*F* 30-1), or, as Heidegger puts it, the "faculty of clearing."[69] As such, nature as ground must remain; there is something in nature that cannot be brought to light precisely in order for there to be light.

For Schelling, all natural beings therefore contain "a dual principle in itself" (*F* 31). The first principle is thus light-ing or elevation, and is associated with the ideal. However, this separation "involves only an inner transmutation or transfiguration of the initial principle of darkness into the light" (*F* 31). The second principle (which is not truly 'second') is thus dark. This means that "the understanding is born in the genuine sense from that which is without understanding" (*F* 29). Nature as ground is therefore:

> the incomprehensible base of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but remains eternally in the ground…Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance (*F* 29).

In the earlier works, Schelling posits the identity of ideal and real, and conceives of Nature as an organic whole. Nature was understood as visible spirit, operating on the basis of potencies that also subsist in the progression of spirit. The idea of nature as an indivisible remainder that can nowise be assimilated or rendered visible differs significantly from the earlier conceptualization. Being is now to be understood in terms of ground and existence; nature is radically incapable of being thought, for it cannot be subsumed or brought to existence. This necessarily renders Schelling's idealism anguished insofar as it remains committed to system as an absolute science. Indeed, nature as the necessary dark ground of all existence is not to be understood as a product

[69] ibid.

or thing, or as a logical presupposition. All real or living existence,[70] as temporal and hence emergent, necessarily contain this remainder. Furthermore, Nature as ground must be a non-eliminable remainder, even for God. Schelling insists that we must think God's real existence, which entails, as Heidegger claims, that we think the becoming of God himself. In order for God to exist, there must be something that stands as a condition of becoming, but this ground cannot be outside of God. It follows that God may not "abolish the condition because he would otherwise have to abolish himself" (*F* 62). Schelling insists on the unassailable character of this dark principle for *all* life, including that of God's:

> Man never gains control over the condition, although in evil he strives to do so; it is only lent to him…This is the sadness that clings to all finite life: and, even if there is in God at least a relatively independent condition, there is a source of sadness in him…Hence, the veil of dejection that is spread over all nature, the deep indestructible melancholy of all life (*F* 62-63).

Schelling's Romanticism is clear: in the *Naturphilosophie* and the *Freedom* essay, we can discern a melancholic desire for a lost, primordial unity. This desire for non-division can be characterized as a nostalgic yearning for a transcendental past which has never been present. In the *Freedom* essay, Schelling conceives of nature as non-being or ground, as that which gives rise to, and in fact sustains, life as continual struggle. Nature as a dark remainder cannot be eradicated; there must be something that *remains in the ground* in order to ensure a living foundation and therefore futurity. This radical independence of nature as ground is a source of melancholy, for it constitutes an ineradicable condition that prohibits life from rising "to full actuality." Moreover, since it is opposed to light or the ideal principle, it resists conceptualization, communicability and thought. Nature is the simultaneous ground-ing and withdrawal, it is that which cannot be properly revealed or thought, but is the non-being that gives rise to the real, to the very *appearing of being*.

b. The Impossibility of System

As Heidegger explains, in the *Freedom* essay "it is not yet clearly evident to Schelling that precisely positing the jointure of Being as the unity of ground and existence makes

[70] There is a continuity and hierarchy of beings: the division of forces increases in proportion to the transfiguration of darkness into light. Individual will only appears in man, for "in man there is the whole power of the dark principle and at the same time the whole strength of the light," the "deepest abyss and the loftiest sky" (*F* 32). Man is the only natural being capable of evil, for the possibility of evil arises with the possibility of the good (the possibility of acting in accordance with the harmony or balance of forces in man).

a jointure of Being as system impossible."[71] Schelling is still pursuing the Absolute as that which would guarantee and secure "the unity of beings as a whole," as Heidegger puts it.[72] However, in the *The Ages of the World*, Schelling acknowledges the "paradoxical character of the system." [73] In the *Freedom* essay we saw that thought is radically incapable of thinking the very ground that gives rise to it; the finitude of thought thus arises out of Nature's resistance or contraction, its remaining hidden. [74] For Schelling, "the system of freedom is a contradiction and that, rather than being an argument against the system, is the secret to its vitality."[75] Indeed, "all life must pass through the fire of contradiction (*AW* 90)," for it is this contradiction that gives rise to, and in fact maintains, actuality. System and freedom thus remain in tension; as Jason Wirth puts it, "the representability of the whole remains in constant tension with its nonrepresentable ground."[76] Schelling's investigation of freedom and nature thus results in a system that, as a *living* whole, resists thought and thus cannot be complete. We therefore find a notion of history that always already implies a Nature that precedes it but which cannot be inscribed or archived, objectified or communicated. Nature is therefore not only a transcendental but an *abyssal* past. As such, in *The Ages* Schelling attempts to provide a history of spirit that is *at once* a history of nature, an account of God's emergence (which is simultaneously that of Nature's).[77]

Schelling characterizes nature as "unknowing," and which harbors "the recollection of all things, of their original relationships, of their becoming, of their meaning" (*AW* xxxvi). Philosophical knowledge is "the striving toward *anamnesis*" (*AW* xxvii) and constitutes a kind of memory. It therefore presupposes a pre-reflexive life that forgets itself in order to become a self-consciousness that is capable of memory. For Schelling, the human is the only creature that can "trace the long trail of developments from the present back into the deepest night of the past" (*AW* xxxv). The human being must remember what is known (the past), and must narrate it (bring it into the world), for "the human soul is conscientious [*Mitwissenschaft*] of creation,"[78] it is

[71] Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise,* 161.
[72] ibid.
[73] Jason M. Wirth, Introduction to *The Ages of the World,* by F.W.J. Schelling, xxiv.
[74] In the first version of *The Ages of the World*, Schelling concedes that the system is "not presentable," and that "this entire knowledge is only in a continuous and never ceasing generation [*Erzeugung*] so that it can never become a dead possession." Quoted in Wirth, "Introduction," xxvi.
[75] ibid., xxi.
[76] ibid., xxvii.
[77] As is well known, *The Ages* was intended as a tripartite whole comprised of three 'books' (on the past, the present, and the future); Schelling, however, never moved beyond the past, re-writing the first book several times and never publishing a completed text.
[78] As Wirth and Bowie point out, the term *Mitwissenschaft* refers to a joint knowing or knowledge, a con-science.

"created out of the source of things and the same as it" (*AW* xxxv-xxxvi). As Merleau-Ponty writes, the human being is thus "the *Mitwissenschaft* of Creation" and "carries traces of all that Nature has been, it is the recapitulation and the contemporary of creation" (*N* 44). Schelling's thought of the human thus differs significantly from that found in Kant – for the former, the human being is a "microcosm," for the latter "an empty freedom, or an *antiphysis*" (*N* 44). Schellingian freedom is a freedom prefigured by Nature, unlike Kantian freedom, which defines itself against a nature it has itself defined.

Remarkably, Nature is now "a 'barbarous' principle which can be transcended, but will never be as though it had never existed, and can never be considered secondary even in relation to God" (*IPP* 143). Nature is now relegated to a 'deeper' past; it is not the transcendental past in which man was not yet separate, the past that would secure a basis for the progression of spirit and hence for idealism. Rather, it is a ground that must remain eternally in the ground, for it is the source and condition of existence. Absolutely resistant to the understanding, this deep past is inexhaustible in principle. Jankélévitch captures this temporal dimension succinctly when he characterizes nature as not only a remainder but also a *reminder* or a "living accusation"*:* "The Grund survives its defeat and stays, so to say, as a reminder of the mediocrity of the origins of the actual being and of the fragility of its triumph."[79] In short, Schelling's earlier attempt at the construction of system now leads to the non-thinkable or to non-philosophy.

c. Nature as Barbaric Principle, or Groundless Ground

As in the *Freedom* essay, *The Ages* starts with the two principles in God's necessity: "the outpouring, outstretching, self-giving being, and an equivalently eternal force of selfhood, of retreat into itself, of Being in itself" (6). For Schelling, the nature of God is both "an eternal No" or the "eternal withdrawal of its being into itself," and an "eternal Yes, an eternal outstretching" of its being (*AW* 11). This eternal, "negating primordial force" or "active darkness" cannot be eradicated.[80] Nature is the "abyss of the past," the contractive, negating potency that marks the beginning "in what is necessary of God" (*AW* 30-31). Natural being or life only becomes through "the constant contradiction of a

[79] Quoted in Lindberg, "Night," 170.
[80] Schelling faults rationalism and idealism for attempting this eradication and denying the incomprehensibility of this negative force or 'active darkness.'

swathing, contracting force" (*AW* 31). The opposing, expanding force of light, however, must also be posited in order for there to be negation or potency.[81]

Nature as a dark principle precedes God as existence, and is a "chaotic state, rife with contradiction" (*AW* 38). God as existent, or the advent of the understanding, however, posits this "wild fire" or "primordial state of the contradiction" as past (*AW* 38). Nature must necessarily remain external-eternal, for it is the very ground of reality and freedom. To be more precise, Nature is the immemorial, a depth, a *groundless ground*, original (*Urgrund*) and abyssal (*Abgrund*). It is a foundation that must be thought neither as a substantial basis, nor as absolute nothingness. If nature as first potency precedes revelation, then it is necessary that "this negating force does not know itself" (*AW* 85). The beginning must recede into the abyssal past in order for there to *be* a beginning, in order for time to commence. It is only in this way that there can be perpetual, ceaseless beginning. The problem of the primordial or beginning is the *unprethinkable* [*Unvordenklich*], the radically unthinkable that predates thought, but which thought is led to contemplate. Nature must be thought of as potency or inexhaustible potentiality, and thus non-being. It is "a state of eternal becoming, a continuing unfolding," within which the soul is "always enveloped" (*AW* 61, 58). Nature is now a *principle* or potency that reveals itself in its very withdrawal, in its very remaining. Schelling can thus be understood as heir to Heraclitus' enigmatic formula φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ, as Hadot writes. Nature is, as Hadot claims, "the original mystery of Being," which cannot be rendered thinkable by knowledge or the development of concepts.[82] The later Schelling introduces a goal which aims not at rendering comprehensible Nature insofar as it 'hides,' but at recognizing that "it is inherent in nature – or the world, or being-in-the-world, or Being – to be inexplicable."[83] The anxiety, melancholy, and anguish of life, as well as wonder, are now to be understood as "essential dimensions of human existence."[84] We are far from the notion of identity that recurred in his earlier works, which would accomplish a higher unity of duality or difference and thus systematicity. The conceptualization of Nature as an unassailable remainder means that there is an "excess of Being over the consciousness of Being," as Merleau-Ponty says, an "over-Being," or "desert of Being" (*N* 38).

[81] Wirth thus writes of the "conspiracy" of life, the inhalation and retraction of ground, as "a simultaneous expiration and inspiration" – for *conspīro* means "to breathe or blow together." Löwith also relates this "double movement of expansion and contraction" within life to respiration (*N* 38).
[82] Hadot, *Veil*, 301.
[83] ibid., 303.
[84] ibid.

Contra Kant and Descartes, we cannot place ourselves in 'front' of Nature in order to grasp it as a 'something known.' It is always already past and beneath us; it envelops us, and will 'destroy' us as individual product. This depth or distance – which is also a *deepening* and a *distancing*, since the ground is always active and dynamic – is the condition through which we may have knowledge of Nature. There is, as Merleau-Ponty would say, dimensional or vertical Being – a Being in *depth*. In other words, against the rationalist tradition, it is not the case that this aforementioned distance is an obstacle to be overcome in order to achieve true knowledge. It is not an obstacle but *is* the very mode of access: we do not know Nature in spite of this depth, but because of it. We will return to this idea of depth, inextricably linked to Merleau-Ponty's concept of negativity, in subsequent chapters. It is important to emphasize here that the concept of depth as groundless ground constitutes a critique of Cartesian ontology – that is, both thinking substance and the fullness and punctuality of Cartesian extension. Unlike Kant, Schelling thus formulates a concept of Nature no longer bound by the Cartesian ontology of the object. Indeed, Schelling writes that nature is "within and in itself" a "spiritual-corporeal being"; matter is not impenetrable, inert, or solely corporeal, and insofar as it is the unfolding of (inhibited) forces, matter is in fact "undeniably something spiritual" (*AW* 61). In fact, Schelling argues that the "lack of an intermediate concept" between being and nothingness such that "everything that does not *have being* is nothing," constitutes the "main weakness of all modern philosophy" (*AW* 64). As we will see, it is precisely this intermediary or intertwining between being and nothingness that Merleau-Ponty seeks.[85]

While Schelling's earlier investigations of nature involved an organized hierarchy of proportions of forces and graduated stages of nature, we now find nature to be chaotic, unruly, and inherently violent. Indeed, anxiety is "the fundamental sensation of every living creature" and it is through "violent struggle" that all things are born (*AW* 92). Suffering and pain is "universal and necessary in all life," including in the life of God, for all living things must "break out of the darkness to transfiguration" (*AW* 101) and 'suffer' nature in order to become. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, Nature is a "weight" or "mass" that all beings bear and drag behind them (*N* 48). The immemorial or abyssal past therefore *punctures* the present; it is always operative as non-Being. As Merleau-Ponty writes in a working note in 1960, Nature is "the *Urtümlich* [natural, primitive],

[85] See *N* 70.

the *Ursprünglich* [original, primal] is not of long ago," but is found in the present as an 'ever new' and 'always the same'" (*VI* 267). On Robert Vallier's reading, the primordial "is to be found in the thickness of the living historical present," and "what we find there is an *always new*, which promises a future, and an *always the same*, which preserves the past."[86] Nature must therefore be understood in terms of historicity or futurity, *and* what unassailably remains. Nature is, as Lucien Herr writes against Hegel, "at the first day" (*VI* 267).[87] As such, Vallier claims that Nature "transcends temporal distinction while at the same time implicating the past and the present in a mutual relation of *Ineinander*."[88] The past always surges into the present, and conflict constantly threatens to disrupt the relative permanence of natural beings – but this ceaseless productivity of difference is, as Vallier writes, the 'promise' of a future. After Schelling, nature and history can no longer be thought apart.

§5. To Bear One's Shadow: Schellingian 'Overcoming'

As Schelling writes at the end of *The Ages*, modern philosophy has achieved the "dissolution of everything in itself into thoughts" (106); the opposition between Being and thought has led to the objectification and destruction of the former. In the process, "they lost all might and that (let the right word stand here) barbaric principle that, when overcome but not annihilated, is the foundation of all greatness and beauty" (*AW* 107). Nature as a barbaric principle must be overcome – all life must pass through the fire of contradiction – but this is not a decision the self is capable of actively making, for the freedom of the act lies in the immemorial past.[89] Freedom is possible because there is a past deeper than the past, and because there is a history prior to history. What philosophy must accomplish is an overcoming that does not constitute annihilation. An 'overcoming,' for Schelling, must involve a confrontation that does not reduce ground to objective thought. We must also be attentive to the affective or passive sense of the term, which denotes being struck or overwhelmed. This means that the overcoming of which Schelling writes, which it is philosophy's task to 'accomplish,' must be never-

[86] Robert Vallier, "*Être sauvage* and the Barbarian Principle: Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Schelling," *Chiasmi International* 2 (2000): 85.
[87] As Bech argues, Merleau-Ponty adapts Herr's "admonishment" of Hegel's impoverished idea of nature into one that stresses how "the past outlives itself indefinitely in Nature" and ensures survival "as the miracle of a continually renewed beginning" ("*Être brut* or Nature," 161).
[88] Vallier, "*Être sauvage*," 85.
[89] Wirth therefore identifies in Schelling's later works "a *Verstummen*, a growing silent before the sublimity of freedom's inexpressibility" ("Introduction," xxvii). Wirth understands this growing silent in terms of Socratic knowledge. See also Culbertson, "Nature and Self-Knowledge," 232-233.

ending. We are here close to Merleau-Ponty's reading of the Husserlian task of philosophy as infinite. Nature as barbaric principle, as the ground on which thought and life 'rest,' as it were, must be *endured*. The figure of the philosopher thus comes to stand side by side with the artist, as Burke argues, drawing on Heidegger: Schelling's overcoming involves one "courageously stand in the abyssal openness," and that to undergo this "radical wonder" is to "stand with the painter in the originary opening and unfolding of the perceptual world."[90] Indeed, Schelling employs the notion of *thaumazein* or 'wonder' himself in the *Erlanger* lecture series, when he speaks of the "indebtedness and openness of reason, its wonder or amazement [*Erstaunen* or *thaumazein*] before the 'unprethinkability [*Unvordenklichkeit*]' of its ground."[91] The idea of *thaumazein* will also reappear in Husserl, as we will see. What philosophy must accomplish is thus a standing, suffering and enduring of openness and wonder - an overcoming that cannot, therefore, be overcome.

Nature as a barbaric principle cannot be annihilated, for it is that which allows beings to appear; it is what must remain active and unthought (resistant to the understanding) in order for there to be a world. Indeed, Schelling claims that "without this principle which resists thinking, the world would actually already be dissolved into nothing," it is the "ground of revelation" itself (*AW* 107). It is, as Merleau-Ponty says, "indestructible" (*VI* 267). This is the way we ought to interpret Merleau-Ponty's declaration in *Signs*:

> the ultimate task of phenomenology as philosophy of consciousness is to understand its relationship to non-phenomenology. What resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the 'barbarous' source Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it. The philosopher must bear his shadow, which is not simply the factual absence of future light (178).

The weight of nature and natural being within us cannot be annihilated. Yet, it cannot remain outside phenomenology for it is the task of philosophy to express the mystery of existence and the world – what Merleau-Ponty calls brute being, *être brut*. Nature as the non-constituted must be thought *as* the indivisible remainder, as abyssal past, the *Abgrund,* and as *unprethinkable*. In other words, as Toadvine asserts, the philosophical task is paradoxical, since it must "interrogate silence with the aim of

[90] Patrick Burke, "Prefatory Meditations," in *The Barbarian Principle*, eds. J. M. Wirth and P. Burke (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 32.
[91] Wirth, "Introduction," 16.

bringing it to expression, all the while respecting its character *as* silence."[92] The philosopher must bear the non-constituted, the darkness of the barbaric principle that necessarily remains, a kind of 'darkness' underfoot[93] which is found at the base of all life. The philosopher must bear his shadow – for Schelling this entails a kind of suffering – for the shadow is not the factual absence of future light, it is the very ground of light and, indeed, of a future. It is not a possession, but the weight, *corporeal* and *historical* - that we drag behind us. Schelling's selection of the term 'barbaric,' which, as we saw just above, he very deliberately employs – "let the right word stand here" – is thus of significance. We may interpret Schelling's use of this term with reference to its Greek meaning: βάρβᾶρος was used to describe those who were foreign or non-Greek. The term is an onomatopoetic rendering of the unintelligible noise, strange speech[94] or 'babble' of those who did not speak Greek. As such, we could say that the term signifies not the *absence* of language, but rather that which resists idealization but is nonetheless grasped as harboring meaning. Nature is a barbarian principle because it cannot be rendered intelligible, but neither can it be negated; it is the primordial contact that gives rise to the very possibility of reason and intelligibility.

§6. Conclusion

It is perhaps not altogether surprising that Paul Ricœur relates Merleau-Ponty to Schelling, as a philosopher of the "absolute genesis of the finite," rather than to Heidegger and Husserl.[95] Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's characterization of the discovery of history is perhaps an oblique reference to Schelling: history "is not the discovery of a thing, a force, or a destiny; it is the discovery of a questioning and, you might say, a kind of anguish."[96] History is no longer the unfolding of the Absolute; in the later works, history is narration, but only on the basis of an unwritten and unwrite-able past. History is possible because of the discovery of that which precedes it: the pre-reflective, or the

[92] Toadvine, "Reconversion," 457. Philosophy is the consistent "reconversion" or the "chiasmic exchange between silence and speech" (474). See also Toadvine, *Nature*, 128-130.
[93] See John Llewelyn, "A Footnote in the History of φύσις."
[94] See Shawn A. Ross, "*Barbarophonos,*" *Classical Philology* 100 (2005): 304.
[95] Paul Ricœur, Foreword to *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* by Gary B. Madison (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), xix.
[96] Merleau-Ponty, *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture,* eds. H.J. Silverman and J. Barry, Jr. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1991), 128. The 'discovery' of history is at once an 'invention,' for it is the interrogation of our encounter with reality, which involves a kind of Husserlian 'retrograde movement' whereby history is always *to be* made, yet always appears as preceding us. Merleau-Ponty contrasts historical and natural time; in light of his later work, however, it is possible to problematize this distinction insofar as 'natural time' is increasingly elaborated in terms of *Stiftung*, development of and by *differentiation* – and hence dimensionality - and not in terms of causality.

opening conditioned by the irreducible gap between ground and existence. In Merleau-Pontian terms, there is *negativity* in Being. The philosophical task is to express the meaning of nature through prereflexive experience, and not via the transparency of objective thought. A philosophy suited to the task would then be close to art and poetry, and would involve a creative interrogation of the subterranean and unruly principle. As such, Merleau-Ponty reads in Schelling the desire for a poetic rather than reflective consciousness, for the former "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" (*N* 50). Philosophy does not relinquish its autonomy and Schelling does not abandon the pursuit of reason – but what he seeks is "a Reason that is not prosaic, a poetry that is not irrational" (*N* 50).

In the same working note of November 1960 discussed earlier, Merleau-Ponty writes: "Existential eternity. The indestructible, the barbaric Principle. Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother" (*VI* 267). What would it mean to perform a psychoanalysis of Nature? If Nature cannot be an object I find in front of myself – Being is always 'behind' us – how can we approach it in order to psychoanalyze it? As Vallier reminds us, the psychoanalysis Merleau-Ponty desires to perform does not pertain to a psyche, but rather to "the structures that allow Being to appear."[97] For Merleau-Ponty, both philosophy and psychoanalysis aim "toward the same *latency*."[98] This latency can be understood as the non-instituted, that which "carries" us, and it can also be understood as the unconscious, "that *intemporal*, that *indestructible* element in us."[99] A psychoanalysis of Nature is thus neither curative nor therapeutic, but a kind of excavation of the abyssal past, an analysis of the pre-reflective from a historically situated standpoint. For Merleau-Ponty, we may continue to use the term 'unconscious,' following Freud, "so long as we do not forget that the word is the index of an enigma"[100] - the significance of the term thus lies in the fact that it *indicates* the mystery, wonder, or enigma of the world.

For Merleau-Ponty, our inextricable intertwining with Nature and the indestructibility of Nature as ground entails that such an analysis of natural being involves an interrogation of reflection itself, a 'radical' or 'hyper-reflection.' As Mauro

[97] Vallier, "*Être sauvage*," 88.
[98] Merleau-Ponty, "Préface" to A. Hesnard, *L'Œuvre de Freud*, trans. A. L. Fisher as "Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis: Preface to Hesnard's *L'Oevure de Freud*," *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* 18, Iss. 1-3 (1982): 71.
[99] ibid.
[100] ibid.

Carbone writes, hyper-reflection "attempts to be a philosophical *prolongation* of non-philosophy," as opposed to reflective analysis, which attempts to "bring non-philosophy back to philosophy."[101] Hyper-reflection in principle cannot be a return to coincidence, but must be participatory, creative, and infinite. Phenomenology must confront primordial nature, not in order to 'resolve' it as a problem to be overcome via coincidence, but to confront it *as* that which makes the "task of reflective philosophy"[102] impossible. This difficulty names the possibility and philosophical necessity of expression, for there is something in experience or in the world that can never be completely brought into the 'light' of objective thought. It also names the impossibility of a complete reduction. Schelling's critique of subjective idealism and the problem of Nature thus lead us to Merleau-Ponty's engagement with the problem of givenness and the unreflected or the *Nichturpräsentierbar* in Husserlian phenomenology. Indeed, it is to Husserl that Merleau-Ponty explicitly refers when he writes of the philosopher who must bear his shadow.

With regard to Kant's philosophy, we have seen that the impossible task involves attaining the unconditioned as the foundation of all knowledge. The in-itself of Nature is radically inaccessible for Kant. With Schelling, however, the problem of nature is no longer simply epistemological but ontological; moreover, we find that Being is irreducible to thought and that Nature constitutes a dark, indestructible remainder (and reminder). As a groundless ground, the barbaric principle of nature cannot be reconciled with his earlier idealist project. The philosophical task, then, is no longer to respond to the impossible task in order to be rid of that which renders system incomplete, but to comprehend how there can be possibility in spite of impossibility, to think this possibility and impossibility together, phenomenology and non-phenomenology - and to think the possibility of 'bearing' the latter.

[101] Mauro Carbone, *The Thinking of the Sensible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 17.
[102] Merleau-Ponty, *Texts and Dialogues*, 168.

chapter 3

TOWARD THE LIMITS OF PHENOMENOLOGY: THE STRABISM OF NATURE IN HUSSERL

Positive science is science lost in the world. One must first lose the world through epoché *so as to regain it in universal self-examination.*
-Edmund Husserl[1]

Husserl's thought is as much attracted by the haeccity of Nature as by the vortex of absolute consciousness.
-Merleau-Ponty[2]

Introduction: Wonder as Rupture and Return

For Schelling, "the main task of all philosophy consists of solving the problem of the existence of the world." Schelling insists on the philosophical importance of the 'thatness' of a thing, which exceeds the concept and can only be "taught by experience,"[3] alongside the 'whatness' of a thing, which remains the primary focus of Kantian theoretical philosophy. On Merleau-Ponty's reading, Schelling and Husserl share a concern with rehabilitating "the idea of Nature in the framework of reflexive philosophy" (*N* 71). While the existence of the world – *that* it exists – is certainly of philosophical interest, Husserl's chief aim is to address the problem: How is it that there is a world for me? How is it that there is objectivity? To attend to such questions, we must first ask how the world itself becomes a problem. The world as phenomenon is precisely what Husserl's phenomenological reduction is intended to reveal. As such, the idea of the reduction is central to Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl's idea of Nature. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty famously asserts in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* that "the most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (*PhP* lxxvii). In order to understand the significance of Merleau-Ponty's claim, we must first outline what the reduction is and what it aims to achieve. To do so, we return briefly to the idea of wonder.

[1] *The Paris Lectures*, trans. P. Koestenbaum (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), 39.
[2] *S* 165.
[3] *Berlin Lectures*, 129.

As mentioned above, Schelling makes use of the Greek idea of *thaumazein*, or 'wonder' as an undergoing-overcoming of the ground of reason. One must overcome (active) and *be* overcome (affective/passive), one must suffer and comprehend. The affective dimension of *thaumazein*, as the 'state,' as it were, in which philosophy begins, is important to emphasize.[4] For Descartes, wonder was the first of all emotions, one that carried an affective force with the capacity to immobilize the body. [5] Llewelyn succinctly captures the startling and paradoxical nature of this 'first' emotion when he writes: "*thaumazein* both opens our eyes wide and plunges us into the dark."[6] *Thaumazein* is thus a profound and dizzying disorientation, for not only are we confronted with the unfamiliarity of the once familiar, we are also confronted with the difficulty of moving forward in light of the radical loss of what we think we know. We are thus ungrounded or uprooted. Wonder, as Llewelyn puts it, "knows no way out from the unordinariness of the most ordinary."[7]

For Husserl, wonder is a "variant of curiosity," and invites the to-be-philosopher to achieve a kind of distancing, to become a non-participating "surveyor of the world."[8] This distancing is not the same as that found in reflexive analysis, for it is not the reduction of the world to a construct of a founding subject but rather a revelation of the world to a being that is in and of it. In other words, the reduction does not lead to subjective idealism. It is 'critical' in a way that differs from Kantian philosophy; as Merleau-Ponty writes, the latter "makes the world immanent to the subject" whereas Husserl's reduction conceives of the subject "as a transcendence toward the world," involving a "*standing in wonder* before the world" (*PhP* lxxvii). Drawing explicitly on Eugen Fink's reading of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty argues that phenomenological reflection

> does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world; rather, it steps back in order to see transcendences spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear (*PhP* lxviii).

[4] In the *Theaetetus*, 155d, Plato has Socrates say: "Wonder is the only beginning of philosophy." See also Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 982b.
[5] Heinämaa, "From Decisions to Passions," 141; Deckard, "A Sudden Surprise of the Soul," 957.
[6] John Llewelyn, "On the Saying that Philosophy Begins in *Thaumazein*," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 4 (2001): 48.
[7] ibid., 54.
[8] Edmund Husserl, "The Vienna Lecture," in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 285. Hereafter abbreviated *V*.

Wonder is thus a break with the ordinary or with *doxa*, an irruptive event that leads to the possibility of the "*theoria* of genuine science" (*V* 285). As Heinämaa writes, on Fink's reading, the reduction is a "catastrophic event"; it is "the first strike, the impulse, that starts the destruction."[9] Wonder, for Husserl as for Schelling, involves passivity-activity, a sudden overturning (*kata-strophé*), an event through which we do not *lose* the world, but rather, the way in which we *reveal* the world and thereby 'gain' it, as it were, for the first time.[10] Furthermore, *thaumazein* must be sustained and endured. One must ceaselessly interrogate *doxa*: the task of *theoria* is infinite, which is also to say that for Husserl "the philosopher is a perpetual beginner" (*PhP* lxxviii). As Lenkowski claims, this interrogation is a "sustaining refusal" to "allow the world to return" - in other words, "to let the world cease to be a problem."[11] Moreover, the *epoché* is a transformation that opens the philosopher to not only a new way of thinking but also of experiencing, and one must keep in mind not only the link between 'to experience' (*éprouver*) and 'to suffer' but also the shared etymological origin of 'experience' and 'experiment' when Merleau-Ponty writes, again in the Preface: "philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment of its own beginning, that it consists entirely in describing this beginning" (*PhP* lxxviii). Philosophy's task is therefore infinite.

For Merleau-Ponty, this rupture "can teach us nothing except the unmotivated springing forth of the world" (*PhP* lxviii). He famously claims, "The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction," since radical reflection leads us to become aware of reflection's "own dependence on an unreflected life that is its initial, constant, and final situation" (*PhP* lxxvii-lxxviii). This impossibility means that the subject cannot be wholly disentangled from the world, and that the unreflected or *Vorgegebenheit* [pregivenness] remains ineluctably the background and pre-history of reflection. As Seebohm writes, reflection is "unable to penetrate it [the unreflected], though it is its very presupposition," and this constitutes "the root of the contradictions and paradoxes of the reduction."[12] However, this impossibility which the reduction itself teaches, the "unfinished nature of

[9] Heinämaa, "Decisions," 143.
[10] As Lenkowski writes, it is not "something *I do*," but rather "something which *happens to me*" ("What is Husserl's *Epoché*?," 309).
[11] ibid., 315.
[12] Thomas M. Seebohm, "The Phenomenological Movement: A Tradition without Method? Merleau-Ponty and Husserl," in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, eds. T. Toadvine and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 61.

phenomenology and the inchoate style in which it proceeds," does not constitute a failure: "they were inevitable because phenomenology's task was to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason" (*PhP* lxxxv). A mystery, however, is not the same as a problem: "there can be no question of dissolving it through some 'solution'" (*PhP* lxxxv). Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, "the passage from philosophy to the absolute, to the transcendental field, to wild and 'vertical' being is *by definition* progressive, incomplete" (*VI* 178). It is intrinsic to the reduction itself, to its fecundity and radical potentiality, to be incomplete. As we saw in the last chapter, reflection is led to confront its own limits, for it unveils an "unreflected dimension" which necessarily remains at a distance, but which we "cannot doubt that reflection attains, since it is through reflection itself that we have an idea of it" (*S* 161). In short, as the notion of *thaumazein* implies, we perform the *epoché* in order to uncover the realm of transcendental subjectivity, and this eventually prompts us to re-*turn* in order to interrogate the pre-philosophical dimension, to describe phenomenology's own beginning through regressive inquiry. Phenomenology begins "within the natural attitude in order to lead out of it,"[13] but then works to clarify the natural attitude in order to "unveil a *Weltthesis* that is prereflexive" (*N* 71). Phenomenology is, as Sallis writes, a philosophy that is "radical" precisely insofar as it ceaselessly questions its own beginning.[14] Philosophy begins in wonder, and, having once begun, wonders how to arrive at its own beginning.

Merleau-Ponty's contention that the incompleteness of the reduction is the reduction itself, which we see sustained from the *Phenomenology* to *The Visible and the Invisible*, ought to be thought alongside his critique of Husserl's philosophy of nature. What both accounts illuminate is the same paradox: phenomenology as transcendental idealism concedes a latency or excessiveness which it cannot synthesize, but which is methodologically necessary. This leads to a philosophy of Nature that, as Merleau-Ponty argues, is "difficult to integrate into the framework of a transcendental idealism" (*N* 79) for it undermines the possibility of establishing a presuppositionless starting point for science. In other words, as we saw with Schelling, it undermines the very possibility of the Absolute to ground itself – and thus to be truly absolute.

Merleau-Ponty describes what he calls the 'strabism' of nature in Husserl. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty's critique of Husserl's concept of nature leads not to an

[13] Eugen Fink, "The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Critique," trans. R. O. Elveton in *The Phenomenology of Husserl* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 108. Hereafter *PP*.
[14] John Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1973), 16.

abandonment of Husserlian phenomenology, but to a thematization of its limits. Again, for Merleau-Ponty phenomenology's "ultimate task" is "to understand its relationship to non-phenomenology" (*S* 178). On Merleau-Ponty's reading, Husserl oscillates between two 'tendencies,' unable to abandon transcendental idealism or the excessiveness of nature to which his analyses led him. It will be argued, following Toadvine's assertion, that Husserl's so-called failure is a 'success,' insofar as "Husserl succeeds – despite himself – in revealing the 'residuum,' the non-philosophical basis of philosophy, in the only possible way."[15] In other words, while Husserl was "visibly embarrassed" (*N* 79) by the difficulty that his own analyses of nature posed for his transcendental philosophy, for Merleau-Ponty the significance of Husserl's findings lies in the possibility of understanding such paradoxes *as* irresolvable. Phenomenology succeeds precisely insofar as it reveals ambiguity or opacity as fundamental. Through the problem of nature, Husserl uncovers the unthought or unreflected dimension that becomes central to Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Accordingly, for Merleau-Ponty they are recast not so much as problems but as philosophical themes.

Merleau-Ponty identifies the 'first' direction in the works leading up to and including *Ideas II*; it is in the latter that we can discern the beginnings of a fundamental tension in Husserl's concept of Nature, a tension that Merleau-Ponty claims Husserl never resolves. Husserl wants to render visible – via bracketing – the natural attitude toward the world and thus reveal the intentional structure and transcendental subjectivity subtending it. As Merleau-Ponty contends, the reduction "is going to place us in a wholly other universe, show us a system of noetic-noematic relations in the world, and reduce Nature to a state of a noema" (*N* 71). This nature is not 'natural.' However, for Merleau-Ponty this does not mean that nature is wholly constructed by transcendental subjectivity. In *Ideas II*, Husserl oscillates between the thought of nature as the sphere of 'mere' or "pure things" [*blosse Sachen*] and nature as "the totality of objects that can be given as primally present and that make up a domain of common primal presence for all communicating subjects" (171). This second idea of nature, discernible in the latter half of *Ideas II* and in the later works - namely, *The Crisis* and 'Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature' – is characterized by "a priority of life over the physical world," as Merleau-

[15] Ted Toadvine, "Leaving Husserl's Cave? The Philosopher's Shadow Revisited," in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, eds. T. Toadvine and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 83.

Ponty puts it (*HL* 75).[16] We will see this strabism at two key points: first, in the tension between 'reduced' nature or noema and the realm of pre-givenness [*Vorgegebenheit*], and second, in the difference between the naturalistic (natural-scientific) idea of nature and the natural (personalistic) one. This chapter will argue that in Husserl's concept of nature we may discern an intensification of Cartesian ontological diplopia. Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology or binocular philosophy is to be situated at the limits of Husserl's phenomenology.

§1. The Phenomenological Reduction and Husserl's Critique of Rationalism

For Husserl, the phenomenological reduction is the first step toward a truly genuine transcendental philosophy. The reduction demands we put out of play our acceptances, what we take for granted, what we experience 'naturally' and as simply evident in our dealings in the world - in short, the 'natural attitude.' The natural attitude is one of naiveté; Husserl's term *Selbstverständlichkeiten* captures this idea succinctly, designating what is unquestioned but not necessarily *unquestionable*.[17] As a 'perpetual beginner,' Husserl consistently attempts to explicate this 'beginning,' transformation or 'upheaval' [*Umsturz*] that would establish the ultimate ground(ing) of science. For Husserl, Descartes fails to recognize the genuine significance of his discovery (the *cogito*) because he unwittingly remains within the natural attitude, Kant fails to secure "a true beginning," and German Idealism struggles but fails to "free itself from hidden objectivistic presuppositions" (*C* 199, 337).[18]

According to Husserl, it is "no wonder that we already find the idea of a universal mathematics in Descartes," for this idea is prefigured in the Galilean understanding of nature as a "self-enclosed world of bodies" submitted to "mathematically rational" processes (*C* 60-1). Descartes's radicalism was undermined by his "natural common sense" (*C* 80) or by naturalized Galilean rationalism. Like Schelling, however, Husserl credits Descartes with introducing transcendental philosophy "in its primal form" as "an attempt at an absolutely subjectivistic grounding of philosophy through the apodictic ego" (*C* 199). As such, Moran points out the "central paradox in Husserl's thought which sought to overcome a certain crude kind of

[16] See Toadvine, "Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview," for a comprehensive chronological account of Merleau-Ponty's references to Husserl's works.
[17] Translation note, *C* 24f.
[18] The history of transcendental philosophy is hence "a history of renews attempts" to bring it "to its starting point" (*C* 199).

Cartesianism by a radical rethinking of the Cartesian project itself."[19] Indeed, Husserl also seeks "the *universal unity of knowledge* by means of a unitary and *absolutely rational foundation.*"[20] The philosopher must "attempt to destroy" all knowledge previously gained, in order to construct knowledge from "total poverty and destruction." [21] This 'destructive' attempt is the phenomenological reduction.

With Kant, a "systematically constructed scientific philosophy appears for the *first time since Descartes* – a philosophy which must be called *transcendental subjectivism*" (*C* 97). For Husserl – as for Fichte and Schelling – Kant's philosophy is the first systematic attempt at "a truly universal transcendental philosophy meant to be a *rigorous science*" (*C* 99). [22] However, as Fink points out in the *Kantstudien* essay, Critical philosophy "clarifies that which is within the world (beings) by means of the world-form," and hence remains a "*mundane* philosophy" (*PP* 97). [23] As we saw in chapter 1, criticism attains knowledge by "transcending beings (or, ontic knowledge) to their *meaning*, to the *a priori* relationships" (*PP* 100). As such, Fink argues that theoretical cognition "is determined by the passage from inner-worldly beings to the *a priori* form of the world," and thereby remains naturalistic, bound to the world-form. Phenomenology, however, as Fink famously asserts, "explicitly raises the question concerning the origin of the *world"* (*PP* 96-97).[24]

a. The Natural Attitude

The natural attitude corresponds to the practical, habitual, and everyday world within which I live, act, and make judgments. In it, I experience things immediately as holding certain "value-characters" (i.e. beautiful, pleasant) and "practicalities" (i.e. the "the pen to write with").[25] Moreover, even if these things turn out to be illusions, I do not doubt that the world exists, that it is real, that the world "remains ever, in the sense of the general thesis, a world that has its being out there" (*I* 56). As Merleau-Ponty argues,

[19] Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 16.
[20] ibid., 3.
[21] ibid., 4.
[22] Both Husserlian phenomenology and Critical philosophy raise the question of knowledge transcendentally, define the transcendental ego as 'irreal,' and claim a "compatibility" between the "transcendental ideality of beings" and their empirical existence, although the latter is always grounded by the former (*PP* 90-91).
[23] Husserl explicitly endorses the argumentation and analyses in Fink's essay at the start of the text.
[24] As Lawlor explains, this does not mean that phenomenology is speculative metaphysics; for the former, the absolute must be within the world, for the latter, the absolute as explanatory principle is found 'outside' the world, or at least understood as a separate being. Accordingly, phenomenology must "win back the world," rather than "transcend the limits of the world to another world" (*Derrida and Husserl*, 13).
[25] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 53. Hereafter abbreviated *I*.

there is "an absolute certainty of the world in general," a non-Cartesian certainty he calls "perceptual faith" - and hence a "preconscious possession of the world in the pre-reflective cogito" (*PhP* 311). In short, "to perceive is to believe in a world" (*PhP* 311). Importantly, this "standing-within-the-belief-in-the-world first of all signifies the position of *man* within the belief in the world, that is, man is the subject who accepts the world" (*PP* 108).[26] The reduction is hence difficult to communicate[27]; as radical self-reflection, the reduction is a kind of 'return' or 're-entering' of ourselves which is simultaneously an ecstatic 'going-outside self,' for it takes us beyond or 'behind' the realm of human possibilities (*S* 161). As Ricœur writes, "It is in conquering oneself as man that the pure subject inaugurates phenomenology."[28]

In the natural attitude, I live within the world-horizon that goes unthematized; it is only after having performed the *epoché* that the world is understood as "pregiven," for it is only by being bracketed that the belief in the world, and 'I,' along with it, can become a phenomenon. For Husserl, transcendence leads not to another world or the world-less realm of the Kantian ego. Rather, the phenomenological "method of knowing" leads "to the origin of the world itself and makes it the thematic object of a possible knowledge" (*PP* 98-99). In other words, the reduction is not a radical withdrawing from, or destruction of, the world; it is the revealing of the world as phenomenon (and the staunch belief in it) as the correlate of transcendental subjectivity and therefore allows us to ask *how* there is a world. In considering "*consciousness-as-such"* Husserl effectively "*radicalizes* Kant's anthropocentric model by lifting it to the eidetic level," establishing what Luft calls a "*noocentric* concept of cognition."[29] That is to say, it is not that human cognition exists, but rather, that "*experience-as-such-exists.*"[30] For Husserl, "all being receives its meaning in meaning-bestowing acts of transcendental subjectivity."[31]

[26] This acceptance is not contingent: "to be in the world and to be naturally caught up in dealing with things found in one's milieu are therein *constitutive*, not accidental," as Bruzina argues. Bruzina also points to Fink's use of the term *Weltbefangenheit* [captivation in the world] instead of 'natural attitude,' a term that can also be translated as "*prejuge du monde*," which is Merleau-Ponty's term for the natural attitude in the *Phenomenology* ("Eugen Fink," 194).
[27] For a succinct summary of the difficulties of phenomenological research, see Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl,* 19-21.
[28] Paul Ricœur, "Husserl's *Ideas II*: Analyses and Problems," trans. E. G. Ballard and L. Embree in *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 26.
[29] Sebastian Luft, "From Being to Givenness and Back: Some Remarks on the Meaning of Transcendental Idealism in Kant and Husserl," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*15, no. 3 (2007): 376.
[30] ibid., 377.
[31] ibid., 368.

§2. The Strabism of Nature I: "Reduced" Nature and the Ambiguity of the Pre-given

Consciousness is fundamentally intentional - it is always "consciousness *of* something."[32] That is, the perceived is not an object in itself, but given in adumbrations or profiles and never 'all at once' (*I* 76). The self-identical object is the unity of "*a manifold system of continuous patterns of appearances and perspective variations*" (*I* 76-77) and is constituted via a series of acts. Husserl's intentional notion of consciousness aims at the dissolution of the category of the in-itself and the subject-object dichotomy. There is hence an important distinction to be made between the object and the content of consciousness. As he explains in *Ideas I,* the *noema* refers not to the object of perception, but to the intentional content or meaning of the act (which also includes a sense-bestowing component). Husserl provides the example of "looking with pleasure in a garden at a blossoming apple-tree." From a naturalistic viewpoint, the apple tree is a real, transcendent object in objective space and time, and the pleasure I undergo is a human psychical state. Once we bracket the natural attitude, we find there nonetheless remains a relation between the perception and the perceived: the experience of "this apple-tree in bloom, in this garden, and so forth" (*I* 186). As such, "the *tree plain and simple*" can "burn away," but the *noema* as "the meaning of *this* perception, something that belongs necessarily to its essence – cannot burn away" (*I* 187). The reduction reveals intentional 'threads'; it does not sever them, for there can be no consciousness without meaning.

In *Ideas I,* nature is 'reduced' to what appears to consciousness (a *noema*), and this appearing is attributable to the constitutive acts of transcendental subjectivity. The latter is the "final premise which is *apodictically* certain, to which everything is related that has a meaning for me."[33] Hence Merleau-Ponty claims, "Nature seems enveloped by philosophical consciousness" and "we do not think it by itself" (*N* 71). As Scanlon explains, *Ideas I* emphasizes "the absolute character of pure consciousness," leaving phenomenology open to the charge of being an "abstract idealism that eschewed all concern with the real world of human life" (*I2* xvii). Furthermore, it offers a very narrow analysis of possible objects of perception. However, there are clearly different 'regions' of empirical objects, to which belong the possibility of a respective eidetic science or regional ontology. As Schutz explains, each "concrete empirical objectivity

[32] Husserl, *Paris*, 13. See also *C* 171.
[33] Husserl, *Paris*, 48.

together with its material essence" belongs to a particular region which is constituted in transcendental consciousness.[34] Each region has a basic concept – i.e. 'real thing,' or 'animate body' – as well as a set of "rules for the course of possible intuitions."[35] In *Ideas II*, Husserl is concerned with accounting for the constitution of material nature, animal nature, and spiritual world as regional ontologies, to which correspond a certain type of science – natural science, biology and psychology, and the human sciences, respectively – as well as a basic concept and set of rules. As such, the second volume is intended to clarify the relationship between phenomenology and the positive sciences - in short, to provide the ontological foundation for the possibility of each science.

At the outset of *Ideas II*, Husserl introduces the natural-scientific attitude as a theoretical attitude toward nature, through which the latter becomes objectified. Nature as intended by natural science is a "sphere of 'mere things' [*blosse Sachen*]," to which value and practical predicates do not apply – such as the beautiful, the useful, or the good (*I2* 27). Crowell thus characterizes this first idea of nature as 'meaningless,' for it is the correlate of a kind of 'valueless' regard on behalf of the Objectivating Ego-subject.[36] The Object is cognitively valued, not for what it is in itself, but for what it permits in the pursuit of theoretical knowledge (how it may be transformed, manipulated, experimented on, etc.). As a 'mere thing' it is valued only insofar as it is 'valueless' in itself. The basic concept of material nature as regional ontology is the spatio-temporally extended 'mere thing' which can only be grasped after having performed a reduction. The "essential attribute" of the thing is its corporeal extension as the "essential form" of all the various properties it may acquire (*I2* 34). Objectified nature is the "stratum of spatio-temporal materiality," the lowest and first stratum of reality (*I2* 28).

Moreover, Husserl claims that the objects which "for the first time *will become* theoretical are *already, in a certain manner, laid out there in advance*" (*I2* 8). There are "pre-given objectivities" or objects that are already "constituted in intentional lived experiences" (*I2* 9). In short, perception itself paves the way for this first idea of nature. This means, as Schutz writes, "the material thing refers from the outset to the body of

[34] Alfred Schutz, "Edmund Husserl's Ideas, Volume II," in *Collected Papers, Vol. III: Studies in Phenomenological Philosophy*, ed. Ilse Schutz (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 16.
[35] ibid.
[36] Steven Galt Crowell, "The Mythical and the Meaningless: Husserl and the Two Faces of Nature," in *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*, eds. T. Nenon and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 82. The notion of nature as meaningless is "itself a metaphysical proposition," as Uexküll argues (quoted in Hoffmeyer, "Uexküllian," 75).

the experiencing subject."[37] For Husserl, all constitutive analysis of the object of material nature "ultimately leads back to sensation" or to sensuous intuition (*I2* 26). We must therefore bring things to their "exemplary givenness," which involves a presentification of continuous perceptions. What must be explained is how the material body gives itself as self-identical despite the variations it undergoes (under different lighting, change of position, color, etc.). According to Husserl, the material body "is a synthetic unity of a manifold of strata of 'sensuous appearances' of different senses," each strata pertaining to one sense – visual, tactual, aural (*I2* 42-43). As such, the constitution of the material thing is indissociable from the experience of the perceiving body; the real thing remains identical despite and *through* its causal relations with other things. As Husserl argues, with regard to the material thing, "*reality* (or, what is here the same, *substantiality*) *and causality belong together inseparably*. Real properties are *eo ipso* causal ones" (*I2* 48). The objective determination of a material thing as a substantial reality presupposes the unified, kinaesthetic movements of the body that perceives it. Thus, as Landgrebe argues, the living body "exhibits itself as the condition of there being anything at all like material things for us." [38]There is an intertwining between material and animal nature, such that the former cannot be constituted without the latter. We will see this intertwining, permeation[39] or interlacing[40] persist when we reach the 'higher' stratum of the spiritual world. However, we can already see here how the pursuit of knowledge of the causal "nexuses" of material things, and the determinations of the "real properties" of material objects – in short, the possibility for science – is already anticipated in Husserl's analyses of perception.

Nature as the "sphere of pure things" thus arises as a theoretical possibility by virtue of the pre-given objectivities spontaneously produced in experience. As Merleau-Ponty writes, this idea of nature therefore "has its foundation in a structure of human perception" (*N* 72). As such, this first conception is 'natural' insofar as we 'naturally' experience nature as a real, material, transcendent object governed by laws. Nature is experienced as already on the way to 'reduced' nature, the nature of the natural sciences. Husserl writes that "what underlies natural science is always an *idea of the essence of nature*, if only an implicit one" (*I* 3), but what he fails to question at this

[37] Schutz, "Husserl's Ideas," 19.
[38] Ludwig Landgrebe, "Regions of Being and Regional Ontologies in Husserl's Phenomenology," trans. R. Cote in *The Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl: Six Essays*, ed. D. Welton (London and New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 159.
[39] ibid., 158.
[40] Schutz, "Husserl's Ideas," 16.

stage is the possibility that this 'natural' idea is itself a conditioned, historical construct.[41] It is the propinquity between nature as pre-given objectivity and as amenable to the natural sciences that needs to be interrogated. In short, while Husserl is intent on developing a phenomenological account of nature, this intentional analysis appears to be in collusion, as it were, with the scientific concept and therefore comes 'prepared' for science. Yet, how are we to account for pre-theoretical constitution? As Merleau-Ponty argues, we can equally say that either the pre-givens are "always 'already constituted' for us," or "they are 'never completely constituted' – in short, that consciousness is always behind or ahead of them, never contemporaneous" (*S* 165). This ambiguity would then necessitate a reduction or archaeology that could never be 'complete' for it could never attain a noema:[42]

> In such cases we do still have a grouping of intentional threads around certain knots which govern them, but the series of retro-references (*Rückdeutungen*) which lead us ever deeper could not possibly reach completion in the intellectual possession of a noema. There is an ordered sequence of steps, but it is without end as it is without beginning. Husserl's thought is as much attracted by the haecceity of Nature as by the vortex of absolute consciousness (*S* 165).

This *necessary* excessiveness of pregivenness [*Vorgegebenheit*], the excessiveness of nature over nature-as-noema, is what Merleau-Ponty calls Husserl's 'unthought.' The ontology of *blosse Sachen* is thus "false" and one Husserl will later undermine, for it "makes a purely theoretical or idealizing attitude absolute, neglecting or taking as understood a relation with being which founds the purely theoretical attitude" (*S* 163). For Merleau-Ponty, what Husserl's analyses point to is a gap between "transcendent Nature" and "the immanence of mind" (*S* 166), and he sees phenomenology's task as unveiling the "pre-theoretical layer" on which both materialism and the philosophy of mind are in fact founded (*S* 165). Merleau-Ponty argues that if there are "no things without the frequentation of my body, the thing given to my body is still far from the pure thing, it remains like a curl of shaved wood kept within my body" (*N* 75). He wants to advance into the gap between the pure thing and pregivenness, and this entails, as Husserl shows, a theory of bodily perception.

Remarkably, before moving to the realm of animal nature, Husserl writes that the analyses carried out thus far relate solely to the thing for a solipsistic subject. That is,

[41] We may apply Husserl's critique of Descartes in the *Crisis* toward Husserl's understanding of nature in *Ideas II*.
[42] As Dastur argues, both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger thus challenge "the *right* of the phenomenological reduction to be completed and the *status* of the 'subjectivity' with which it leaves us," for "philosophy cannot definitively tear itself out of perceptual faith and enclose itself in the kingdom of pure significations" ("World, Flesh, Vision," 27).

we have yet to reach "the level on which the Objective material thing is actually constituted" (*I2* 60), for objectivity requires and presupposes intersubjectivity. We have seen that the constitution of the material thing relies on "the make-up of the experiencing subject" and must be "related to *my Body and my 'normal sensibility'*" (*I2* 61). Things are in a certain spatial relation to my body, and I am free to shift my perspective, move my eyes and my head, direct my body elsewhere. As Landgrebe writes, "Through my body I am interwoven with the causality of the thing-world."[43] Yet, the thing that appears under 'normal conditions' is not the "physicalistic thing," which is abstracted from all relativity and can therefore ground objective knowledge. The solipsistic subject has the "*phenomenon* of its Body" but is "unaware of the *Objective Body* in the full and proper sense" (*I2* 86). Objectivity requires a community of reasoning subjects, each of whom "stand in a relation of empathy to other cognizing subjects, and for that he must have Corporeality and belong to the same world" (*I2* 87). The objective thing and Body are *co-constituted*. In order for us to carry out analyses as a solitary subject we must forget that the subject is firstly a human being in the world, that it has a living body it takes as its own and through which it relates to other subjects and bodies. We can see that 'reduced' nature already recalls the world of the natural attitude. For Merleau-Ponty, the perceived world is insurmountable: the "universe of pure things is an undermined universe, behind which there is the solidity of the perceived" (*N* 73), it is just that this solidity has been 'purified.' The pure thing has a history, a history within which the I is intertwined. We can already see here that we will have to depart from reduced nature and return to the natural attitude.

§3. Double Sensation and *Einfühlung*: The Constitution of Animal Nature

To the realm of material nature corresponds the possibility of developing a mathematized understanding of nature. Husserl now focuses on animal nature, to which corresponds the sensing, animate Body. Animal nature is an inseparable nexus of Body and soul; psychic life can never be given without a lower substratum of materiality. As Merleau-Ponty explains, my relation with my body is "not that of a pure I"; rather, "I live in my body, and by means of it I live in the things" (*N* 74). Thus what stands opposed to material nature is not the soul but "the *concrete unity* of [lived] Body and

[43] Ludwig Landgrebe, "The Phenomenology of Corporeality and the Problem of Matter," trans. D. Welton in *The Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl: Six Essays*, ed. D. Welton (London and New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 39.

soul, the human (or animal) subject" (*I2* 146). Husserl now turns to the constitution of this concrete unity – again, initially for the solipsistic subject. These analyses will be central to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, and we will return to these in Part III.

The "spatially experienced body," as a natural object, is "perceived by means of the Body" (*I2* 152). When I see and touch my left hand with my right, I have certain touch-appearances (i.e. smoothness, softness) which are accompanied by visual ones. These appearances of my left hand are subsequently objectified, but for my right hand (as the 'perceiving' thing in this case). However, when I touch my left hand, I also find in the left hand a "series of touch-sensations, which are '*localized'* in it, though these are not constitutive of properties" (*I2* 152). The natural object now becomes a body: it is, as Merleau-Ponty explains, a field - a "within-which" and a "through-which" (*N* 75). The body is constituted through double sensation, through an overcoming of externality (the left hand is no longer simply the physical thing, the right no longer simply a perceiving thing). The body becomes itself once it achieves this quasi-reflection; it is never simply an object, nor a wholly active power. Merleau-Ponty stresses the ambiguity of the subject-object distinction here: "We have to learn to consider my body as an object, yet my body is not yet completely objectified" (*N* 75). Husserl gives the example of pressing down on a table with my hand: it is one and the same sensation of pressure that is had when I perceive the surface of the table and when I sense digital pressure (*I2* 154). This 'one and the same,' however, does not mean that they can be conflated. As Morris explains, "perception depends on activity and passivity remaining incongruent yet counterpart and reversible."[44]

In the case of double sensation, "the same touch-sensation is apprehended as a feature of the 'external' Object and is apprehended as a sensation of the Body as Object" (*I2* 155). In other words, as Merleau-Ponty explains, "when my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a 'physical thing.' But at the same moment…an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right" (*S* 166). In the body touching itself touching there is neither a strict demarcation nor a "unidirectional relationship" between the perceiver and the perceived (*S* 166). This negativity and reversibility will be central to Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Reversibility is negative, or points to negativity, insofar as reversibility presupposes

[44] David Morris, "The Enigma of Reversibility," *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (2010): 154. See also: Morris, "Reversibility and *Ereignis*," 136-137.

non-coincidence. That is, negativity is the hinge that allows for a crossing-over that does not result in fusion, a 'stoppage' that disallows the collapse of two sides (touching and touched) into one another. Importantly, negativity here is not a 'no' that prohibits reflection – indeed, reversibility is central to the constitution of the body; it is the principle of doubleness that permits identity through difference.

Importantly, for Merleau-Ponty, Husserl's analyses bring about an overturning of "our idea of the thing and the world," and necessitate an "ontological rehabilitation of the sensible" (*S* 166-167). Husserl introduces mixture: if the subject-object distinction is "blurred" in my body, it is also "blurred in the thing" which is "woven into the same intentional fabric of my body" (*S* 167). For Husserl, the body is a thing and a power, a being-able, a capacity to sense – and must incorporate or localize sensations. Furthermore, the localization of sense is 'extended' in a manner that differs from material extension. The Body is 'real' realized extension, a concrete unity of body and soul. However, we are still on the level of the solipsistic subject; double sensation attains only a 'partial' reflection. As Merleau-Ponty explains, in Husserl's account, for the subject to have knowledge of itself as a subject, "there must be a mirror for it. There must be others" (*N* 75).

While material nature can be given as "primally present," animal nature cannot. Animal beings are "given originally in such a way that they *presuppose* primal presences, whereas they themselves cannot be given in primal presence" (*I2* 172, italics added). We experience animal nature as both corporeal body [*Körper*] –thus primally present – and "appresented interiority" (*I2* 171). I cannot see their 'other' side – the *nichturpräsentierbar*. Negativity is the prerequisite for the constitution of the phenomenal body *and* for the experience of others. Crucially, negativity is an indeterminate absence "rooted in presence," and which 'counts' in the world (*S* 172). It is not simply the 'other side,' and hence cannot be 'filled,' accessed, or frontally approached. As such, the constitution of the interiority of animal beings is conditioned by the inclusion *in* the world of a 'negative' that ensures and sustains infinite concealment, insofar as negativity is not only *de facto* but *de jure.* Negativity is what prevents coincidence (in the case of double sensation) or unmediated access to the other, and hence maintains the alterity of the other as other. It is the principle that ensures not only duplicity but also *differentiation:* the continual and inexhaustible production of difference.

For Husserl, I perceive that another body is inhabited by a soul because of the consciousness I have of my body (when I apprehend another Body I "feel by empathy that in them there is an Ego-Subject"). That is, I endow the corporeal body with interiority and this is achieved through empathy, not intellection. I do not simply transfer "onto the body of the other what I otherwise know of my soul" (*N* 76). This empathy or *Einfühlung* is fundamentally corporeal; "the hand of the other that I shake is to be understood on the mode of the touching-touched hand" (*N* 76). Indeed, I in fact "prepared myself for understanding that there are other *animalia* and possibly other men" through the touching-touched relation (*S* 168). As such, I do not "project on the body of the other an 'I think,' but I apperceive the body as perceiving before apperceiving it as thinking" (*N* 76). Husserl explicitly avoids an intellectualist account of empathy. I do not introject my Ego into my Body or the other's, and this is a fundamental condition of alterity. Rather, it is prehuman carnal empathy that serves as the precondition of intersubjectivity. As Merleau-Ponty explains, I will never be able to "think the other person's thought" – I can only construct a thought "behind this mannequin, a presence to self modelled on my own; but it is still my self that I put in it" (*S* 169). The experience of others for Husserl is primarily esthesiological, and is founded through an extension of the inter-existence of my two hands in double sensation. Furthermore, it is only through the constitution of the other's Body that "the closed unity, man, is constituted," and which I subsequently 'transfer' to myself (*I2* 175). The 'closed unity' that I am is only achieved through the constitution of the other as the concrete unity of body and soul.

Animal nature is thus originally given as a complex unity or an intertwining of Body and soul; other subjects are apperceived through empathy "as analogons of oneself and, at the same time as natural Objects" (*I2* 179). Beings are thus 'known' esthesiologically prior to being known as a thinking being *and* prior to being 'known' as such. It is only now that nature may be constituted "as intersubjectively common and as determinable Objectively (exactly), and oneself as subject is constituted as member of this 'Objective nature'" (*I2* 179). In other words, intersubjectivity is the precondition for being in itself. Now once we have a determinable Objective nature, there must be a subject "*for* which is constituted the totality of nature, physical as well as animal" (*I2* 180). This leads Husserl to the field of spirit which is *no longer nature*. Again, for Husserl the "ultimate subject, the phenomenological one, which can never be bracketed and is the very subject doing all eidetic phenomenological research, is the pure Ego" (*I2*

183). Once we approach the constitution of the spiritual world, we find, as Landgrebe writes, that what appeared at the start to be a "tripartite construction" – material nature, animal nature, human world – is now revealed to be a duality: nature and spirit.[45]

§4. The Strabism of Nature II: The (Re)turn to the Natural Attitude

Husserl now introduces the personalistic attitude, which is 'natural' but not natural-scientific: "what is experienced in it *is not nature in the sense of all the natural sciences* but is, so to say, something *contrary to nature*" (*I2* 189). The personalistic attitude is the attitude in which the subject lives, values the things of his/her environment, engages in practical life, is conscious of other communicative subjects in the world, the world in which he/she has use-Objects, belongs to a community, etc. (*I2* 191-192). It corresponds to the spiritual world. While physical nature is objective in the naturalistic attitude, in the personalistic one we take the things around us with their value-predicates and not as objects as such. Even the natural scientist finds themselves in the personalistic attitude, in which they "live like any other person" and is cognizant of their existence as "the subject of his *surrounding world*" or *Umwelt* (*I2* 193).[46] The term *Um-welt* signifies the "world around, the world in which the subject is placed in immediately and without reflection."[47] The *Umwelt* is hence essentially social or communal, the world of shared objects, values, and significations.[48] Both the natural-scientific (now: naturalistic) and personalistic attitudes are now to be understood as variants of the natural attitude as outlined earlier in opposition to the transcendental attitude. However, for Husserl they do not stand on equal ground, as it were:

> the naturalistic attitude is in fact subordinated to the personalistic, and that the former only acquires by means of an abstraction or, rather, by means of a kind of self-forgetfulness of the personal Ego, a certain autonomy – whereby it proceeds illegitimately to absolutize its world, i.e., nature (*I2* 193).

The personalistic attitude is in a sense more 'natural' than the naturalistic attitude. Now insofar as there is an *Umwelt* or surrounding world, there must be objectivities

[45] Landgrebe, "Regions," 168.
[46] According to Thomas Nenon, Husserl's use of the term ought to be traced back to his reading of Avenarius' *Der menschliche Weltbegriff* (1891) (proceedings from Husserl Circle 2012, Boston College, 2).
[47] Carlo Brentari, *Jakob von Uexküll: The Discovery of the Umwelt between Biosemiotics and Theoretical Biology*, trans. C. Graciet (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 75.
[48] Husserl's *Umwelt* ought to be understood in the context of the debate between Dilthey and the Baden School of Neo-Kantianism, with regard to the classification of the sciences. For Husserl, both are mistaken in taking Nature and mind as "scientific themes prior to scientific cognizing" (Jalbert, "Husserl's Position," 283) thus neglecting the experiential world, which is grounding with respect to *any* scientific or theoretical cognition. See also Konopka, "The Role of *Umwelt*."

within the world that are intersubjectively constituted and identical for all subjects. There is a general "consensus of the subjects of a community with respect to the predicates describing the appearance of Objects"; such Objective determinations are possible, and indeed necessary, because they are "produced in rational thought of experience" (*I2* 218). Husserl therefore returns to the idea of nature, now from the analysis of the constitution of the spiritual world, for which objectively determined nature is a precondition. We started with the natural-scientific attitude only to find that this "naturalistically considered world is of course not *the* world," for the everyday, practical, and communal world is "given prior" (*I2* 219). In other words, the spiritual world includes nature "as an Objectivity constituted in the context of the personal world" (*I2* 220). Natural science is a spiritual accomplishment. Nature as intersubjectively constituted, and as commonly experienced in the spiritual world, is prioritized. As Husserl argues, spirit cannot be wholly naturalized, "for in that case what gives nature its sense would be missing" (*I2* 311). Nature is thus a "field of relativities," and spirit is the absolute that "sustains" it (*I2* 311). Husserl claims:

> [I]f we could eliminate all spirits from the world, then that is the end of nature. But if we eliminate nature, 'true,' Objective-intersubjective existence, there always still remains something: the spirit as individual spirit (*I2* 311).

If nature is objective-intersubjective existence, relative to and supported by absolute spirit, then the natural object cannot have individuality. The "this-ness" and individuality of a thing is determined as such "only in relation to consciousness" (*I2* 315). Unlike spirit, the natural thing is subject to real/physical causal laws, such that its determination "refers back to a here and now and consequently to some subject or nexus of subjects" (*I2* 315). The spirit, on the other hand, possesses its own motivation (the law of motivation pertains to spirit, causality to nature). Accordingly, Husserl writes: "Nature is the X and in principle nothing but the X which is determined through universal determinations" (*I2* 316). Nature loses all of its particular intuited qualities.

As Schutz explains, for Husserl "the spiritual world has ontological precedence over the naturalistic one."[49] Spirit as individuation is "the sedimentation of its habitualities" and hence has an "individual history,"[50] which the natural thing lacks. On Landgrebe and Seebohm's reading, this signals a departure from a "methodological

[49] Schutz, "Husserl's Ideas," 34.
[50] ibid., 35.

concept of constitution" to a metaphysical one.[51] Constitution is no longer the "correlation of the given to its corresponding consciousness" but rather the idea that "all being is essentially for consciousness."[52] The spirit as absolute renders nature a construct; it is solely extension, with no hidden sides. However, as Landgrebe argues, this means that "nature can no longer be talked about as the most basic region of being, as that which founds other regions," [53] for in the last analysis nature is found to be relative and *founded*. If this is the case, then the sphere of pre-givenness Husserl discusses in the constitution of material nature is simply the result of the activity of absolute spirit. Consciousness would found the sphere of pre-givenness, and this would render perception the 'receiving' of what one has given. But this is precisely not the phenomenological idea of givenness, which holds that the object must be described in *its* manner of appearing *for* a consciousness. Sensuous intuition, and therefore passivity, is a necessary precondition for the constitution of nature - I must have a body for I become conscious of material things and animal subjectivities through sense. Indeed, Husserl seems to be outlining an absolute idealism which is at odds with his phenomenological method, which is to purely describe "consciousness in the manner in which it is consciousness," and the objects found in consciousness – and thereby "to exclude every interpretation originating, as each does, from scientific or metaphysical presuppositions."[54]

On Merleau-Ponty's reading, "the fact that there is *no* Nature *without* mind, or that Nature may be *done away with* in thought *without* doing away with mind, does not mean that Nature is produced by mind" (*S* 162). Merleau-Ponty recognizes Landgrebe's concerns with the text, but finds in Husserl's enigmas or ambiguities – methodological/metaphysical notion of constitution, noema/pregivenness, naturalistic/personalistic attitude – an immensely rich description of the sensible. This description is characterized by a strabism, for it involves a 'looking' in two different directions at once: Husserl's reflection

> is both an analytics of essence and an analytics of existences. For it is 'ideally' (*idealiter*) that whatever is given to one subject is as a matter of principle given to all others, but it is from the 'fundamental and original presence' of sensible being that the obviousness and universality which are conveyed by these relationships of essences come (*S* 171).

[51] Landgrebe, "Regions," 169; Seebohm, "The Phenomenological Movement," 68.
[52] Landgrebe, "Regions," 169.
[53] ibid., 170.
[54] ibid., 172.

Nature must be objective-intersubjective existence in order for there to be ideal objects that can be given as identical, but this nature is subtended by a 'deeper' or more primary nature. Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl results in a move beyond a positivist phenomenology: Nature is the reduced material object *and* what is given as primal presence - but what is given "in fundamental and original presence (*das urpräsentierbare Sein*), is not the whole of being, and not even all being there is experience of" (*S* 173). Indeed, we saw that animal subjectivities have appresented interiority - they cannot be given in original presence – but this is achieved corporeally, and not by thought. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty claims, in a formulation that resonates with his analyses in the *Nature* course:

> This is what *animalia* and men are: absolutely present beings who have a wake of the negative. A perceiving body that I see is also a certain absence that is hollowed out and tactfully dealt with behind that body by its behaviour. But absence is itself rooted in presence; it is through his body that the other person's soul is soul in my eyes. 'Negativities' also count in the sensible world, which is decidedly the universal one (*S* 172).

Husserl's analysis does not leave us with an irreducible discordance between constituting consciousness as absolute, and nature as a founding, constitutive lower stratum. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, Husserl "rediscovers sensible being as the universal form of brute being," which 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" (*S* 172). Perception involves an irremediable absence or negativity, and Husserl's phenomenological analyses are 'successful' insofar as he uncovers this "non-philosophical basis of philosophy."[55] What the strabism of nature demonstrates is not a logical incongruence between two different ideas of nature, but the necessity of understanding both ideas at once. This entails a departure from a philosophy of essence, but Merleau-Ponty thinks Husserl has already – perhaps unwittingly – shown this to be the case: "Husserl implies that even if we meant to posit absolute or true being as the correlative of an absolute mind, such an absolute being would not merit its name unless it had some relationship to what we men call being" (*S* 171). Absolute mind would have to be corporeal, it would have to have a sensing body, and it would have to be capable of having things (reality) in common with human subjects. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, in a formulation that recalls Schelling, "even God

[55] Toadvine, "Husserl's Cave," 83.

can become an instance only on the condition of being taken up in the tissue of carnal things" (*N* 76). For Merleau-Ponty, Husserl leads us to a certain truth of perception, which involves a "rehabilitation of the sensible" and the formulation of a new ontology. This advance into the unthought of Husserl's philosophy must itself be infinite, for it leads not to absolute spirit and therefore a metaphysics, but rather to a philosophy of being as the intertwining or 'mutual interpenetration' of Nature and Spirit.[56]

> That every being presents itself at a distance, which does not prevent us from 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" (*VI* 127).

For Landgrebe and Seebohm, Husserl's ontological primacy of spirit overturns the intentional analysis he carries out with regard to the constitution of nature; for Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, Husserl's analyses lead to an ontology of the sensible wherein the strabism of nature, the oscillation between nature as primally present and the world in which we live naturally, is overcome. What Husserl demonstrates is that the pre-objective only exists "by being fulfilled in the founding of logical objectivity" so that "reflection does not coincide with what is constituted" (*S* 173, 179). Again, what is at stake here is the possibility of a complete reduction.

§5. The Intensification of Ontological Diplopia: The Intertwining

We have seen that the constitution of each regional ontology involves the creation of being as the accomplishment of acts of consciousness. Constituted objectivities will become a lower (pregiven) stratum of sense for higher acts. Anything that is experienced, for Husserl, must be correlated with the constituting subject and intentional acts. However, Merleau-Ponty claims that Husserl's analyses complicate this relationship, for being in itself depends on "incarnate minds" or the kinaesthetic movements of the body and thereby "draws its truth from a 'layer' where there is neither absolute mind nor the immanence of intentional objects" (*S* 172). We must recast the relationship between constituted and constituting as a "double-edged" relationship of *Fundierung* ['founding'] (*S* 173). The development of *blosse Sachen* 'draws its truth' from "carnal intersubjectivity"; as such, the latter appears to be primary. Yet, the pre-objective cannot be primary "since it is established…only by being fulfilled in the founding of logical objectivity" (*S* 173). *Blosse Sachen* or

[56] ibid., 92.

objectivity is the achievement of intercorporeality, but intercorporeality "culminates in (and is changed into) the advent of *blosse Sachen*" (*S* 173). In the interwoven relation of *Fundierung* neither is primary; what we must think is mutual dependency or a mobile circularity that edges toward the future only by reworking the past. In other words, there is a temporal dimension to the process of *Fundierung*. When there is logical objectivity there will be and *will have been* intercorporeality, intercorporeality that sought 'fulfilment' and therefore oriented toward the future. Furthermore:

> Logical objectivity derives from carnal intersubjectivity on the condition that it has been forgotten as carnal intersubjectivity, and it is carnal intersubjectivity itself which produces this forgetfulness by wending its way toward logical objectivity… Intercorporeality goes beyond itself and ends up unconscious of itself as intercorporeality; it displaces and changes the situation it set out from (*S* 173).

Carnal intersubjectivity can only serve as an origin insofar as it is forgotten. Logical objectivity is therefore supported by something that comes into existence with it and cannot be equated with it. As such, there is no pure production. A difference therefore lies at the origin, a difference that must be forgotten in order to be founded, and in order to found that which it differs from. We therefore find that while "the perceived thing rests upon the body proper," the "entire functioning of the body proper hangs upon the perceived thing" and that the body "is nothing less but nothing more than the things' condition of possibility" (*S* 173). This relation of interdependency or intertwining is therefore demonstrative of a kind of "demonic" teleology, for there is a thickness of the present, a receding and forgetting of the past as past in order to supersede, and thereby become, itself.[57] Thus it is not that the body constitutes the thing in the sense of "principle to consequence," but rather, "we are present at a kind of propagation, encroachment, or enjambment which prefigures the passage from the *solus ipse* to the other person, from the 'solipsist' thing to the intersubjective thing" (*S* 173). Importantly, the sphere of solipsism is in fact "without ego and without ipse," so that intersubjective life emerges not from *solitude* but from "the haze of an anonymous life" (*S* 174).[58] Just as the perceived thing is coeval with the body, the constitution of the other does not follow the constitution of the body, but rather "others and my body are born together from the original ecstasy" (*S* 174). Again, the constitution of the other is

[57] See *MPR* 416.

[58] As Merleau-Ponty points out, the solipsistic ego is only alone due to its relation to a "phantom of the other," such that "we are truly alone only on the condition that we do not know we are; it is this very ignorance which is our solitude" (*S* 174). Rather, "I am a 'communist' in each of my perceptions," as Bimbenet argues, and "a solitary perception" is precisely not a perception but a "dream" ("Fallacy," 36-37).

not a construction, for it is only because man is "outside himself in the world and because one ek-stasis is compossible with other ek-stases" that there can be others (*S* 170).

Anticipating his discussion of morphogenesis, Merleau-Ponty writes that constitution is "neither just the development of a future which is implied in its beginning, nor just the effect which an external ordering has in us" (*S* 176, cf. *N* 155). Each layer of constitution is founded through a forgetting, but this forgetting "is not simply 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" (*S* 176). On Merleau-Ponty's reading, these circularities or "adventures of constitutive analysis" constitute the strength of Husserl's phenomenology:

> If Husserl holds fast to the clarities of constitution, this is no madness of consciousness, nor does it mean that consciousness has the right to substitute what is clear to it for established natural dependencies. It means that the transcendental field has ceased to be simply the field of our thought and has become the field of the whole of experience, and that Husserl trusts the truth which we are *in* from birth and which ought to be able to contain both the truths of consciousness and the truths of Nature (*S* 177).

The strabism of nature presents a problem for transcendental idealism, which upholds the priority of constituting consciousness and the ontological primacy of spirit over the relativity of nature. However, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty steers us in a direction that is no less absolute, but which deposes reflective consciousness. For him, Husserl's analyses lead "to the rejecting of the notion of the subject, or to the defining of the subject as a field, as a hierarchized system of structures opened by an inaugural *there is*" (*VI* 239). We have therefore moved from an ontology of the spirit established on the basis of a tension between two ideas of nature, to a phenomenological ontology wherein this strabism is understood from within, thereby overcoming but not 'resolving' or destroying this ambiguity. In other words, we are approaching a binocular philosophy. This involves a conception of negativity in immanence. The reduction is for Merleau-Ponty "a title for a multitude of operations" which remains incomplete (*S* 179). In Husserl's later works, the concept of constitution moves from "a project to gain intellectual possession of the world" to a method of "unveiling a back side of things that we have not constituted" (*S* 180). It is an active method that reveals a passivity, the 'always already there.' Natural being or the 'barbarous' source is the residue that the philosophy of consciousness reveals: "these beings beneath our idealizations and objectifications which secretly nourish them and in which we have difficulty

recognizing noema" (*S* 180). Husserl's analysis of nature "leads us conjointly in two opposite directions," and this does not lead one to negate or subsume the other. This non-coincidence is the impossibility of a complete reduction, the inability to return to "absolute consciousness" - but this non-coincidence is overcome "practically in our life" (*S* 178). [59] Being is not what appears to consciousness and therefore what has meaning for me as constituting consciousness; it is a transcendent field that includes natural being and non-philosophy. It is what Merleau-Ponty calls 'brute' or 'vertical being' in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

The phenomenological reduction is intended to render visible the natural attitude and the unquestioned belief in the world. However, this rupture is also "a means of conserving, of assuming all that was taken, believed, or valued by man, an effort to understand the natural attitude in order to clarify it, to unveil a *Weltthesis* that is prereflexive" (*N* 71). The *epoché* reveals the intentional acts of transcendental subjectivity, but what we find is that constitution is not a unidirectional process of construction achieved by consciousness. The reduction abandons the natural attitude, but in so doing "preserves 'the whole world of the natural attitude," for "the very transcendence of this world must retain a meaning in the eyes of 'reduced' consciousness" (*S* 162). As such, Merleau-Ponty claims, "phenomenology denounces the natural attitude and at the same time does more than any other philosophy to rehabilitate it" (*N* 72). Intentional analysis reveals a world beyond the "bifurcation of Nature and mind" (*S* 162), a "world before a thesis" (*N* 73). Indeed, the universe of *blosse Sachen* is a world of which we may attain theoretical knowledge, but it is not the world in which we live; it is the universe that correlates to an absolute "idealizing attitude" that is only possible on the basis of a forgetfulness of its history, its relation to the perceived world, and its 'foundedness.' Thus the natural attitude "goes beyond itself" but never completely; the transcendental attitude remains "in spite of everything 'natural'" (*S* 164). It remains 'natural' insofar as it never attains the absolute transparency of thought, since a philosophy of mind is itself an idealization that relies on a "pre-theoretical layer" that justifies it (*S* 166). As we saw above, even an absolute mind would have to be incarnate. For Merleau-Ponty, nature "stands at the horizon of our thought as a fact which there can be no question of deducing," and this "facticity of

[59] On Behnke's reading, "the question for which 'constitution' fails to be the answer is the question of *being* as the primal pre-given matrix for any 'experiencing' whatsoever" ("Merleau-Ponty's Ontological Reading of Constitution," 46).

nature is revealed to us in the universe of perception" (*IPP* 161). The reduction uncovers our irreducible dependency on the world and the intertwining of nature and mind. The reduction steps back or brackets the world of the natural attitude in order to return to it and to affirm its priority.

a. "Every Other Planet is Earth": The Earth as Ground and the Life-world

According to Moran, Husserl eventually comes to assert that "even in the most extreme performance of the reduction, the *correlation* of consciousness to world remains intact," and hence "the world remains as a horizon, it is always 'pregiven.'"[60] Indeed, in his later texts, Husserl expands his analysis of the constitution of a 'pure thing' in relation to the world of science. This can be understood as an extension of his critique of naturalism. According to Husserl, "in order to constitute the world of science, we have to suppose a preliminary *Umwelt*," and just as we had to analyze the embodied subject of perception with regard to intersubjectivity, we have to investigate those prerepresentational "objects preliminary to the world of 'things': the Earth" (*N* 77). In the 1934 text, 'Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature,' Husserl claims the Earth is neither infinite nor finite, mobile or at rest, but rather a "cradle," the "soil" of life and thought (*N* 77, *S* 180). In marked contrast to his approach in *Ideas II*, Husserl argues that in adopting the Copernican theory of the "constitution of the world," I depart from my "starting situation" and "pretend to be an absolute observer, forgetting my terrestrial roots" (*HL* 9). It is as though the natural attitude needs to be 'won' back from the theoretical attitude. The naturalistic view sees the world as absolute nature in itself, and in its abstraction excludes the subject for whom there is 'the' world. Husserl wants to rehabilitate the forgotten notion of ground [*Boden*]. The earth as *Boden* cannot be experienced first as a body, but rather "becomes a corporeal ground at higher levels of constitution of the world by virtue of experience, and that nullifies its primordial form of the ground" (*HL* 118). The earth as ground has been engulfed by the earth as a scientific physical object.

Husserl argues that the Earth "does not move," for it is a physical "whole' that is not a *body* (*HL* 122).[61] It is the reference point in relation to which both physical things and lived bodies can move or be at rest. The Earth cannot be a pure thing, for a pure

[60] Moran, *Introduction*, 165.
[61] This was the topic of a Paris debate between A. J. Ayer, Merleau-Ponty, Georges Bataille and Georges Ambrosino in 1951, recounted by Bataille (*The Unfinished System of Knowledge*, 111-112). See also Toadvine, "Elemental Past"; Himanka "Husserl's Argumentation"; Himanka "Does the Earth Move."

thing is constituted through sensation and the kinaesthetic movements of the corporeal body; the Earth is therefore the opening that is *presupposed* in the analysis of the constitution of nature. As Steinbock explains, when I move myself "I still have something else in relation to which I move, to which *I am relative* – something else that is *not* experienced originally as a physical-body: the earth-ground."[62] The earth cannot be constituted, it can never appear as an object– it cannot be "actually and primordially experienced" (*HL* 121). Insofar as it is the "domain of common primal presence," the "one space, the one time, the one world of things for all," Nature therefore "envelops everything, my perception and that of others, insofar as these can be for me only a divergence of my world" (*N* 78). Moreover, there is "a kinship between the being of the earth and that of my living body (Leib): I cannot say about my living body that it moves since my living body is always at the same distance away from me" (*HL* 9). This is a kinship that extends to other living bodies, "to animals whom I understand as variants of my corporeality" and even to terrestrial bodies (*HL* 9). This kinship is therefore based on pre-conceptual identification, expressing a corporeal intertwining or encroachment. In fact, in the later texts Husserl conceives of the animal as a 'variant' of the human being, and biology as "a science founded upon 'variant forms of empathy.'"[63] Merleau-Ponty will make a similar claim regarding the participation *in* nature implied in our very ability to know it; for instance, zoology presumes a "methodical *Einfühlung* [sympathy or feeling-with] into animal behavior" (*IPP* 165). This idea becomes thematic in the concept of the *Umwelt*, as we will see in Part II.

The Copernican view conceives of the world as a pure object and is hence an idealization or abstraction. Objective science "presupposes the being of this world" and accordingly "asks questions only on the ground of this world's existing in advance through prescientific life" (*C* 110-111). It is naive. As Himanka writes, "the original earth that neither moves nor rests is something that knowledge tends to cover rather than uncover."[64] The phenomenological reduction allows us to suspend the naturalistic attitude and regain an understanding of the Earth as ground. The ground can expand, and we may enlarge "our native soil," but the Earth "is by definition one,"[65] the "carrier

[62] Anthony J. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 117-118.
[63] Darian Meacham, "Biology, the Empathic Science: Husserl's Addendum XXIII of *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 44, no. 1 (2013): 14.
[64] Juha Himanka, "Husserl's Argumentation for the Pre-Copernican View of the Earth," *The Review of Metaphysics* 58 (2005): 636.
[65] This insistence involves a rejection of "*the very opposition between heaven and earth*," a rejection that "can effectively situate us beyond metaphysics" (Bimbenet, "To Have Done," 322).

of all the possible" (*S* 180, *N* 77). Contra Kant, the world is not a world of appearances "in relation to the appearance of pure things"; rather, the world of perception is "founding in relation to these pure things" (*N* 78). The very possibility of a pure thing or "the world of idealization" derives its truth, as it were, from an outside. It is dependent: "it is only true as limited and reincorporated into a more concrete given" (*N* 78). Accordingly, idealization "changes nothing in relation to the primacy of our carnal coexistence on one Earth. This Earth is *the arche"* (*HL* 74). Merleau-Ponty will argue that the scientific notion of the world as infinite is in fact "supported by the *Offenheit* of the *Umwelt*" which is the surrounding world *for* us, for "carnal subjects, with the openness from which idealization will come" (*HL* 74).

In the *Crisis*, Husserl focuses on the life-world as the pregiven, surrounding world that serves as the "constant ground of validity, an ever available source of what is taken for granted," the "grounding soil [*der gründende Boden*]" and the very "ground' of all praxis whether theoretical or extratheoretical" (*C* 133, 138, 142). It is the horizon within which all objects are given, including the objects of science. Husserl thus *historicizes* science; the scientist works within a certain theoretical tradition and forgets that he/she is the active subjectivity that "accomplishes science" (*V* 295). Moreover, the natural scientist resumes and furthers a tradition, and thus inherits scientific objects "ready-made" (*HL* 94). The objects of natural science, taken as 'natural' and 'given,' are themselves produced. For Husserl, modern natural science "has its roots in the consistent abstraction through which it *wants* to see, in the life-world, only corporeity" (*C* 227). Natural scientists thus operate on the basis of "a metaphysical residuum" since they "consider nature to be concrete and overlook the abstraction through which their nature has been shaped into a subject matter for science" (*C* 229). Natural science does not realize that the 'nature' of its nature (as object of study) is founded. As Husserl argues, "true nature in the sense of natural science is a product of the spirit that investigates nature" (*V* 297).

This introduces an ambiguity into Husserl's transcendental idealism, for if the life-world is pregiven, then consciousness (theoretical and pre-theoretical) does not constitute absolutely, but remains dependent on a sphere that precedes it. Furthermore, the life-world – the world in which we live, and therefore the perceptual world that is primary – founds the very possibility of a theoretical division between nature and mind. Merleau-Ponty therefore seeks to "take up the concrete relation of these two orders" without subordinating the physical world to the activity of the mind, but to take both as

"two correlative aspects of Being" (*HL* 76). In continuing to frame his analysis as transcendental phenomenology, Husserl sees in his foregoing analysis a paradox, "a priority of life over the physical world" (*HL* 76). For Merleau-Ponty, Husserl could have avoided this paradox had he "not enclosed his own discovery in the dimension of the 'consciousness' of the absolute Ego" and instead considered "constituting subjectivity as an eminent case of idealization" (*HL* 76). The Earth as ground and the mind, which "is not the absolute Ego" but rather *Denkmöglichkeit* [thinking possibility, conceivability] are *Ineinander* [in one another] and "entangled" (*HL* 76).

b. Horizon and Rehabilitated Possibility

In his 1959-1960 readings notes on Aron Gurwitsch, Merleau-Ponty furthers his critique of Husserl's intellectualism. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty identifies a disjuncture or gap between nature as pregivenness ('natural' nature) and nature as noema (reduced nature). This disjuncture or excessiveness is at once phenomenologically necessary and disruptive for Husserl's transcendental philosophy, for it introduces an ineradicable contingency. Merleau-Ponty's comments in the reading notes constitute an attempt to think this contingency *as* necessarily unassailable; again, Merleau-Ponty's thought installs itself in the Husserlian unthought.

As Stéphanie Ménasé explains, Merleau-Ponty challenges the "dualistic Husserlian opposition of noema and existing thing" and therefore departs from the eidetic method, which reduces being to essence.[66] Merleau-Ponty wants to think existence and essence together, and he does this by returning to Husserl's account of perception. He argues that we cannot "compose the thing thus: adumbrations + noema (aspect of the thing at an instant or for a sense) + the thing itself."[67] This composition cannot commence where it would like to commence, for "adumbrations already have the value of 'something'" and "the thing remains oneiric."[68] Again, regressive inquiry uncovers an ever-deepening or receding series of references. The world is always already meaningful. According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl's idealism entails that adumbrations, which may otherwise be considered 'open,' be reduced to incomplete

[66] Stéphanie Ménasé, Editor's Introduction to "Reading Notes and Comments on Aron Gurwitsch's *The Field of Consciousness*" by Merleau-Ponty. *Husserl Studies* 17 (2001): 174.
[67] Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Notes," 180.
[68] ibid.

perceptions.[69] This presupposes "a positive noematic ground" as the necessary "condition of the consciousness of incompleteness."[70] That is, for Husserl the "identity of the thing results from the *Einstimmigkeit* [harmony, concordance] of the appearances."[71] It is consciousness that constitutes the identity of the thing despite and through its varied modes. For Merleau-Ponty, however, the essence of the thing "is implicated in each *partial* appearance."[72] Moreover, each appearance is a solicitation, "an invitation to perceive more," such that the thing is transcendence: it is both and inseparably "irrecusable presence and the perpetual absence into which it withdraws" (*PhP* 242*).* The openness of perception is irreducible to the consciousness of incompleteness, and adumbrations are not destined to be overcome by a constituting consciousness that would confer meaning. We must rethink the notion of essence, which is nothing without existence, for it is "divergence and not possession of a positive." [73] Essence requires experience; it is a *dimension* or "in-variant" that is not a positive, and which therefore reveals itself as hidden, as the invariance established *through* variation. This is also the way in which Merleau-Ponty will conceive of animal being, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

As Merleau-Ponty explains in "Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology," the *eidos* or essence is "constantly implied in the flowing, vital horizon" and can be "grasped only in filigree, as a secret or hidden connection" (67). Insofar as it is insinuated or implied, it cannot "engulf the horizon" and is rather a "concrete *a priori*" (*HL* 67). Thus while for Husserl "hyletic givens enter into the definition of the thing itself because it is only a systematic linkage of noemas,"[74] for Merleau-Ponty perceptual hyletic elements are *themselves* significations. As he argues in *The Visible and the Invisible*, "*intentional* analysis that tries to compose the field with intentional threads does not see that the threads are emanations and idealizations of one fabric, differentiations of the fabric" (231). As we will see, this 'fabric' is the flesh. The ontology of flesh amounts to a recognition of "the undeniable horizonal structure of all intentionality," as Dastur puts it.[75] The notion of horizon thus entails a departure from

[69] This is 'incompleteness' is ultimately akin to the absence of the field that envelops the present figure in Cartesian vision. For Descartes, the visible world is "a world in itself upon which the light of the gaze is project and from which the gaze cuts out present figures" (Lawlor, *Implications*, 77).
[70] Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Notes," 180.
[71] ibid.
[72] ibid. Italics added.
[73] ibid., 179.
[74] ibid., 182.
[75] Dastur, "World, Flesh, Vision," 38.

Husserlian methodology whereby a horizon is analyzed "in terms of noesis and noema, consciousness of…and object."[76] Rather, the horizon is "the milieu of these crystallized structures [consciousness of, and object], their pre-intentional *Worin* [wherein]," it is the infinite openness of the *Umwelt*. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

> The horizon is to my here and now what my birth or my death is to my life: it is the total being where differentiation arises and dedifferentiation falls back – Take seriously this idea that the world is around me, not in front of me.[77]

The horizon names possibility and openness, and it must be traced back to the earth. We have seen that for Husserl there is only one earth, and it is not a spherical *Körper* [body] but a *Boden* or grounding soil, the very ground of experience [*Erfahrungsboden*]. This 'rediscovery' of the earth entails an ontological rehabilitation of the possible; for Merleau-Ponty we can say that the possible is "the openness of the *Umwelt* and not a system of logical Being," and that possibles – *even those of thought* [*Denkmöglichkeit*] are "possibles of the earth, of the *Weltmöglichkeit*" (*HL* 68). Importantly, this rediscovery of the earth as *arche* allows Merleau-Ponty to argue that the ontology of the sensible is "enveloping in relation to the thought of the infinite" (*HL* 69). Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl's rehabilitation of earth therefore problematizes the latter's positivism and eidetic method, as well as the very 'keystone' (the positive infinite) of Cartesian ontology. This is clear in a working note from 1960, in which Merleau-Ponty distinguishes Husserl's notion of world from the actualism and positivism of the Leibnizian notion of the possible. For Merleau-Ponty, the Leibnizian idea remains positivist for it posits the possible as "non-contradictory" and which does not involve *negativity*. Merleau-Ponty claims that for Husserl the world "is at the root of every thought of possibles," for its ontological structure "envelops every possible" and is that which "every possible leads back to" (*VI* 228-229). This ontological structure must therefore include natural negativity.

As such, Husserl's eidetic variation cannot "make me pass to an order of separated essences," but rather yields a "structural invariant" that achieves fulfilment [*Erfüllung*] only in the *logos* of the world (*VI* 229). If the horizon envelops the essences, then "the being of the essence is not primary, it does not rest on itself," and cannot be "*the* answer to the philosophical question" (*VI* 109). Philosophy, as Merleau-Ponty says, begins with the natural attitude or the perceptual faith, which is not 'false.'

[76] Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Notes," 182.
[77] ibid. See also *EM* 367.

Phenomenology begins with "what is primary for us (*Lebenswelt*)" and enquires into the essences, which is "what is primary in itself" – but it can never possess the world, and to equate Being with essence is to misunderstand both. What is primary in our experience of the world is not knowledge (contra Kant), but rather belief or 'faith' in the veracity of the world. Reading Husserl 'at the limits,' therefore, Merleau-Ponty argues that to make essences primary "would be the very negation of phenomenology," for "there is no sense in constituting the *Lebenswelt*: this is to destroy it."[78]

§6. Conclusion

For Merleau-Ponty, it is the "unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us" (*VI* 11), a certitude that neither Kantian philosophy nor skepticism interrogate but which both nonetheless presuppose. Phenomenology, however, poses the problem of the world and asks "what the being of the world means" (*VI* 6). Moreover, the life-world encompasses not only the nature of the natural sciences, or the "sensible world of the empiricists," but also the *historical* world (*HL* 66). As was the case for Schelling, for Husserl the problem of nature is the problem of the unreflected – and how to account for this within the framework of transcendental philosophy. Merleau-Ponty identifies a strabism in Husserl's thought of nature, which is tied to his claim in the *Phenomenology* that the reduction can never be completed. This is a continuation of his critique of idealism in Kantian thought; being cannot be equated with being-known, and metaphysics is irreducible to a theory of knowledge.[79] On Merleau-Ponty's reading, for Husserl there is no nature without mind, but nature is not, for that matter, a production of mind. There is an opening in Husserl's analyses that point toward an ineliminable residue of nature, a passivity in constituting consciousness. There is a tension between 'reduced' nature and the pregiven, and between nature in the 'second sense' – nature as common primal presence – and the nature of the naturalistic attitude. The reduction is therefore carried out in order to reveal the realm of transcendental subjectivity, but this in turn necessitates a return to the natural attitude and to the life-world. Indeed, as Lawlor writes, "no matter how extramundane the

[78] Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Notes," 186.
[79] See Brunschvicg's definition of *idéalisme* in André Lalande's *Vocabulaire de la Philosophie* as discussed in *Modern French Philosophy*, by Vincent Descombes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 19. As Merleau-Ponty writes, for Brunschvicg "the entire history of philosophy" was the "coming to consciousness" of universal reason as the "principle of all thought" (*Texts and Dialogues*, 131).

phenomenologist becomes, there is no final exit from the world."[80] We must understand consciousness according to the notion of horizon, such that: "to be conscious = to have a figure on a ground," and crucially "one cannot go back any further" (*VI* 191). For Merleau-Ponty, "the reduction no longer involves a return to ideal being, but brings us back to the spirit of Heraclitus, to an interweaving of horizons, to an open Being" (*IPP* 176). Analysis must make its way back to the natural attitude as a "*Weltthesis* prior to all theses"; we must return to the *doxa* of the natural attitude – this time as *Urdoxa* or perceptual faith (*S* 163, 164).[81]

According to Merleau-Ponty, "against his plans and according to his essential audacity, Husserl awakens a wild-flowering world and mind," he carves out a space between the transcendence of Nature and the "immanence of mind" and prioritizes "what is fundamental and original in our *existence*" without relinquishing the attempt to attain the universal essences of the things themselves (*S* 164, 181, italics added). Husserl's later work poses the problem of thinking the subject as at once "part of the world" and the condition of it; this informs Merleau-Ponty's attempt, as Barbaras writes, to "develop a phenomenology that takes into account the irreducibility of the life-world."[82] On Merleau-Ponty's reading, Husserl himself passed from philosophy as a rigorous science to philosophy as "pure interrogation," a "path" Merleau-Ponty explicitly attempts to retrace (*IPP* 173).[83] Just as post-Kantian philosophy attempts the critique of critique that Kant himself introduces,[84] Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how phenomenology must also begin with "a phenomenology of phenomenology."[85] As Richir remarks, there is a kind of "productive faithlessness" to Merleau-Ponty's Husserlianism which "thrives on everything that is paradoxical and aporetic in Husserl's work."[86] For Bernet, Merleau-Ponty *renews* Husserlian phenomenology precisely by demonstrating how the natural attitude "is already tormented by interrogation."[87]

Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl allows him to advance a thought of the possible beyond actualism, for it names the openness of the world within which I am

[80] Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 19.
[81] Even if philosophy could leave the natural attitude behind, it would have no reason to, for the natural attitude "is not false," and must be comprehended (*Texts and Dialogues,* 168).
[82] Barbaras, "Phenomenology of Life," 208.
[83] Merleau-Ponty claims philosophy as a 'rigorous science' is a dream that is 'over,' for the philosopher is "never done" with the interrogation of "himself and all things" (*S* 138).
[84] Beiser, *Fate*, 270; Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise*, 41.
[85] Morris, "Bringing Phenomenology," 26. See also Taminaux, *Dialectic and Difference*, 115-123.
[86] Richir, "Meaning," 71. See also Toadvine, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Lifeworldly Naturalism," 365-366.
[87] Rudolf Bernet, "The Subject in Nature," in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. P. Burke and J. Van der Veken (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993), 54.

enveloped. We therefore find an intensification of the strabism of nature we have been tracing throughout Part I. This intensification amounts to an intertwining or chiasm and hence allows for a binocular philosophy and the rehabilitation of depth that this permits. Husserl allows us to think the "inherence of the self-in-the-world or the world-in-the-self" (*IPP* 176), the intertwining that will become thematic in Merleau-Ponty's ontology. As we will see in the following chapters, this involves a conception of consciousness as "a *dimension* or *consequence* of phenomenality, not a *condition* for it," such that we can follow Morris and Barbaras in claiming that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is "a phenomenology of life."[88] This is to 'reverse' and hence rectify the Cartesian relation between the *cogito* and *sum,* as Madison and Toadvine point out.[89] Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, the theme of philosophy is "the horizon of horizons," the "universal ground of sense," and this sense is not an idea or an essence but a *ground* (*HL* 67). Philosophy therefore directs itself to the ground – "in the depth and not in the height (the ideas)" (*HL* 67).

[88] Barbaras, "Phenomenology of Life," 226, 208; Morris, "Bringing Phenomenology," 26.
[89] Madison, *Phenomenology*, 154, and Toadvine, "Husserl's Cave," 78. Toadvine contends that "more primordial than doubt *per se* is the ambiguous faith in contact with being that every doubt implicitly takes for granted."

PART II: *NATURAL NEGATIVITY AND POSSIBILITY*

chapter 4

MERLEAU-PONTY'S CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SCIENCES AND THE ACCOUNT OF ANIMAL BEING IN *THE STRUCTURE OF BEHAVIOR*

All natural science is naïve in regard to its point of departure. The nature that it will investigate is for it simply there.

-Edmund Husserl[1]

An unbroken description of reality would be simultaneously the truest and most useless thing in the world, and it would certainly not be science. If we want to make reality and therefore truth useful to science, we must do violence to reality.

-Jakob von Uexküll[2]

Introduction: Nature and Consciousness

Reflection is ultimately dependent on the dimension of the unreflected, that barbarous source Schelling writes of, and which becomes thematic in Merleau-Ponty's later works. Yet it is reflective consciousness that reveals the unreflected or pregiven. We have seen this to be the case in both Schelling and Husserl. The notion of temporality thus becomes central to the problem of nature. This is the same difficulty or "paradox" Merleau-Ponty identifies in Bergson in the *Nature* course: "Being is anterior to perception, and this primordial Being is conceivable only in relation to perception" (*N* 55). Reflection thus reveals what it could never have been present 'at,' a past *for* a present that can never recuperate it, the discovery of a radical passivity or pre-history. There is a lateness that only *arrives* in the present, a primordial inheritance or resumption, such that the origin is never a 'true' beginning. Yet this is precisely what makes it founding – in short, an origin. The difficulty of reconciling the idea of nature within the framework of transcendental philosophy is also the focus of Merleau-Ponty's first major text, *The Structure of Behavior*. Merleau-Ponty explicitly states that the aim

[1] "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, eds. P. McCormick and F. A. Elliston (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 171.
[2] *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*, trans. C. J. Mellor and D. Gove in *Foundations of Comparative Ethology* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Inc., 1985), 227. Hereafter *UIT*.

of the text is "to understand the relations of consciousness and nature."[3] He develops a critique of the objectivism or realism of the natural sciences and puts forth a case for the primacy of perceptual consciousness.

The Structure of Behavior provides the ground for Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception and indicates a move from transcendental philosophy to phenomenology, from the analysis of the relation between nature and consciousness to that of perception and intellection. For Merleau-Ponty, science and philosophy are not antithetical; from *The Structure of Behavior* through to the *Nature* course and 'Eye and Mind,' Merleau-Ponty consistently engages with the sciences in order to critique the objectivist ontology on which it relies, and to reaffirm the primacy of existent being and of perception. In the later works, however, the emphasis shifts from the primacy of perceptual consciousness to the ontology of sensible Being. In fact, for Merleau-Ponty, science is to be understood as "a certain (reduced) ontology in the broader context of the relation with the most primordial Being" (*N* 206). As such, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature is neither Kantian nor Schellingian – that is, the Schelling of the earlier works - for he seeks neither a theory of knowledge, which would postulate "an exhaustion of Being by the Being of science," nor a "metascience or secret science" (*N* 206).

This chapter begins by outlining Merleau-Ponty's approach to the relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences as articulated in the *Nature* course. Importantly, for Merleau-Ponty modern science "has increased our power over nature to an unbelievable degree," while it also "raises paradoxically the question of the meaning of its own truth" and 'overturns' the *a priori* of its knowledge (*IPP* 159, *S* 157). Modern science repudiates the Cartesian notion of pure extension and necessary being, and demonstrates how the 'object' is only an object *for* existent being. That is, modern science – and by modern science Merleau-Ponty is referring to quantum mechanics and the work of biologists Kurt Goldstein and Jakob von Uexküll, among others – acknowledges that the embodied observer is situated in the world, system, or field that he/she sets out to understand and, more radically, that this situatedness is a condition of access and hence of knowledge. In short, modern science must raise the question of the observer's access to the object(s) of science, and consequently include the embodied observer within the field of inquiry itself. We will then turn to *The Structure of*

[3] *La Structure du comportement*, trans. A. L. Fisher as *The Structure of Behavior* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 3. Hereafter *SB*.

Behavior wherein Merleau-Ponty critiques classical reflex theory – a critique that will be deepened in the *Nature* course – and develops a philosophy of form.

§1. Science and the Philosophy of Nature

For Husserl, scientific consciousness remains within the naturalistic attitude and paradoxically "ignores Nature" because it is "simply there": "it is a naïve and uncritical enjoyment of the natural certitude" (*N* 85).[4] In this sense, despite being the focus of direct inquiry, Nature has been forgotten. In the naturalistic attitude we operate on the unquestioned presumption that the concept of Nature is not a problem in itself. As Schelling writes, it is the philosopher who must interpret or understand what the scientist, unaware of his or her freedom, 'invades' (i.e. Nature) or 'produces' (the scientific object). This entails we return to experience. This view accords with Husserl's argument in the *Crisis* that mathematical science "*represents* the life-world, *dresses it up* as 'objective actual and true' nature," such that "we take for *true being* what is actually a *method*" (*C* 51-52). The scientist therefore engages in what Husserl calls "discovery-concealment" (*C* 53), which is why, as Merleau-Ponty claims, the scientist "discloses more than he sees" (*N* 87). Methodology is activity, such that whatever understanding of the animal we obtain given a certain mode of 'access' always says more and less than what it lays claim to.

For Merleau-Ponty, however, modern science differs from Cartesian science insofar as it "places its own object and its relation to this object in question" (*N* 85). It can serve as an important corrective or critique, and can demonstrate what surpasses it. Indeed, in *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty argues that science itself demonstrates that the phenomenon is irreducible to mechanism and cannot be conceived as the sum of discrete, fully extended components. This is what makes science both an "exciting" and "exasperating" enterprise, insofar as the scientist "looks for a way to grasp the phenomenon" but does not seek to understand what it attempts to grasp (*N* 86). For Merleau-Ponty, science reveals what it *ought* to see but does not, for it obstinately maintains "the language of the traditional ontology" (*VI* 16). Thus his critique is also in part a denunciation of the purported neutrality or objectivism of the sciences. Against the claim that "philosophy is expelled from physics," he argues that

[4] Husserl, "Rigorous Science," 171.

"in fact it is physics that is overrun by philosophy."[5] In line with Schelling and Husserl, then, for Merleau-Ponty "the concern of the philosopher is to see; that of the scientist is to find a foothold" (*N* 86). It is, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, as though "blindness for Being were the price it has to pay for its success in the determination of beings" (*VI* 16). The philosopher must "see behind the back of the physicist what the physicist himself does not see" (*N* 87). This is no simple endeavor. As Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Phenomenology*: "nothing is more difficult than knowing precisely *what we see*" (59).

As we saw in the previous chapter, science presupposes and functions on the basis of prescientific life and the lifeworld, or the surrounding world for carnal subjects. As such, the term 'science' denotes a "systematic handling and a methodical use" of the experience that first begins with perception, and is hence "a set of means" which is "oriented toward the same truth that our first experiences establish an urgent need for" (*S* 101). In his view, the questions science asks "are interiorly animated by the fundamental interrogation which appears naked in philosophy" (*VI* 103). In contrast to Husserl, for whom the task of "universal constitution" was philosophically primary and which renders the analysis of the life-world a "preparatory step," for Merleau-Ponty philosophy is not a "realm numerically distinct from that of science" (*S* 112). This does not mean that we ought to look to science to explain nature, but neither can we begin from an absolute concept; for Merleau-Ponty we must begin from experience, and science provides experience "in its most regulated form" (*N* 87). Through a critique of classical physics and the scientific notions of space and time, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the primacy of perception for a philosophy of nature.

§2. From Classical to Modern Physics

In the wake of the French Revolution, the classical mathematician and astronomer Pierre-Simon Laplace championed the sciences as the "noblest of human activities," for it expressed the "triumph of rationality."[6] Indeed, Laplace famously exclaimed: "I do not need the hypothesis of God to explain the universe" (*N* 88). Despite its emphatic disavowal of theology, however, the advent of classical scientific thought did not signal the exclusion of theology from science. As Merleau-Ponty argues, this concept of Nature "belongs to a conception that is entirely theological in its infrastructure" (*N* 88).

[5] *MPR* 383.
[6] Roger Hahn, *Pierre Simon Laplace, 1749-1827: A Determined Scientist* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 119.

For Laplace, every being exists in objective space, in a world that has "an entirely extensive existence" (*N* 89). Nature replaces the concept of God, thereby maintaining an "analytical conception of Being" and a Cartesian account of nature (*N* 135, 89). This conception assumes that if one were to attain precise knowledge of nature and its laws, then every future could be logically inferred. The world would be "positive" or "full," a world in which "nothing will happen" (*N* 89). The famous Laplacian demon, "informed of the instantaneous positions and momenta of all the particles in the universe," would be able to predict and determine "the entire future and (because Newton's laws are time-reversible) past of the universe."[7] This is clearly a deterministic and "theological affirmation" of the world understood as a totality bound by necessity.[8]

Modern physics, however, has "deprived the old mechanics of its dogmatism" and hence made room for a "new scientific ontology" (*N* 90). For instance, quantum mechanics has demonstrated how the very act of observation involves the "creation and annihilation of particles" (*N* 92). It also introduces, alongside the "states of nonexistence and existence," the idea of a "zero state expressing the possibility of the passage to existence" (*N* 92). Whereas classical thinking remains positivist, only taking account of "positive determinations" through which it composes a "unique reality," quantum mechanics demonstrates this is impossible (*N* 92). Positive determinations cannot in fact be composed "in a preformed and completely accessible reality"; for Merleau-Ponty this "amounts to admitting that existing things are not individual realities, but generic realities," as the work of London and Bauer have demonstrated (*N* 92). Their studies have shown that we can have a function which allows us to approach a "maximum description" of the object, but this function only yields a "possible measurement" (*N* 92) and not the precise determination that classical thought portends to attain. In classical thought, the observer is a "fallible subjectivity" whose faulty perceptions can be corrected by "an increasingly perfected knowledge" of the apparatus or "our sensorial imperfections" (*N* 93). Classical logic thus maintains the notion of objective truth, with any failure to attain this truth ultimately attributable to the shortcomings of available tools or methods. For quantum mechanics, however, it is not the 'object' but the maximum function that constitutes a "unique reality." The

[7] Stuart A. Kauffman, "Foreword: Evolution beyond Newton, Darwin, and Entailing Law," in *Beyond Mechanism: Putting Life Back into Biology*, eds. B. G. Henning and A. Scarfe (PA: Lexington Books, 2013), 2.
[8] This is utterly "unsupportable" within contemporary biology. See Howard H. Pattee and Kalevi Kull, "Between Physics and Semiotics," in *Towards a Semiotic Biology*, eds. C. Emmeche and K. Kull (Singapore: Imperial College Press, 2011), 217.

introduction of the 'wave' therefore alters the classical conception, positing instead that there are certain values that "cannot be simultaneously known with entire certainty" by observable quantitative values (*N* 93).

The measuring apparatus has also undergone a change of meaning: in classical physics it is the "prolongation of our senses," while in modern physics it "does not present the object to us" but rather "realizes a sampling of this phenomenon as well as a fixation" (*N* 94). In modern physics, it is generally recognized that "known nature is an artificial nature" (*N* 94). This necessitates a rethinking of the relation between measurement - as a supposedly non-interventionist activity - and what it aims to measure, insofar as the very act of measuring 'fixes' the object. For London and Bauer, the role of the observer is no longer "to make the object pass from the in-itself to the for-itself," as it was for Descartes, but rather, the observer must intervene and posit "a thought that annexes itself to the apparatus" since the quantum object does not have "actual existence" (*N* 94). That is to say, the very act of observation is "an act of objectivation: the object is constructed by the subject" (*N* 96). The philosophical implications of modern physics therefore problematize the Kantian and Cartesian ideas of nature outlined earlier. Quantum mechanics repudiates the notion of the object as the simple correlate of the subject (perceptual and/or absolute), and it rejects the positivist model of the object as *partes extra partes*.

This is clearly demonstrated in the wave-particle paradox. While particles are "material entities" that occupy a specific point in space-time, waves are "disturbances (which cannot be localized to a point) that propagate in a medium (like water) or as oscillating fields."[9] Waves can "overlap at the same point in space," and the combination of their amplitudes can result in a "composite waveform." Hence, waves produce diffraction patterns while particles do not. What various experiments have shown, however, is that not only light but "under certain circumstances *matter* (generally thought of as being made of particles) is found to produce a diffraction pattern."[10] As Barad explains, at beginning of the twentieth century, physics was confronted with experiments that "seemed to indicate that light manifests particle-like characteristics under one set of experimental conditions and wavelike characteristics under other circumstances," *as does matter*.[11] Niels Bohr argues that "wave and particle

[9] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 76.
[10] ibid., 82.
[11] ibid., 99-100.

behaviors are exhibited under *complementary* – that is, *mutually exclusive* – circumstances"; in other words, the measuring apparatus yield different observations such that it is impossible "to find electrons behaving like particles and waves simultaneously."[12] Further, Bohr demonstrates that the very boundary between object and the observer is "indeterminate in the absence of a specific physical arrangement of the [measuring] apparatus."[13] This not only means that the object of observation cannot pre-exist the observation, but also that we can only account for the *effects* of measurement on the object provided the apparatus "*is itself treated as an object*, defying its purpose as a measuring instrument."[14] On Barad's reading, Bohr's analyses indicate an ontological, and not an epistemological claim: indeterminacy is *real*.[15] As we will see, this is also a fundamental claim in the field of biosemiotics.

Importantly, this constitutes a fundamental challenge to what Rosen terms the classical Newtonian formula of "object-in-space-before-subject" whereby "space is the sheer *boundedness* serving as the medium for the *unbounded* subject's operations upon *bounded* objects."[16] This ontological indeterminacy[17] demonstrates that the 'object' of observation must be produced, that the measuring instrument is an object and thus that the object-before-subject arrangement involves the intervention of a *second* object that effectively conditions the possibility of the 'first' distinction (subject-object). Similarly, as Rosen explains with regard to Planck's constant, at a certain sub-microscopic threshold "the analytical continuity of space gives way to a 'graininess' or discreteness that admits of no further quantitative determination."[18] What is reached is an indivisible kernel within which continuity gives way to discontinuity. Rosen argues that Planck's constant must be understood in terms of action/intervention: when we approach this threshold "it appears that precise objective measurement is thwarted by the fact that the energy that must be transferred to a system in order to observe it *disturbs* that system significantly."[19] We cannot say that the 'object' thereby observed pre-exists observation; rather, we must admit that "quantum mechanical action cannot be regarded merely as objective but must be seen as entailing an intimate merging of object and subject that

[12] ibid., 106.
[13] ibid., 114.
[14] ibid. Italics added.
[15] ibid., 127.
[16] Steven M. Rosen, *The Self-Evolving Cosmos* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2008), 44.
[17] This is to be contrasted with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, whereby the discontinuity inherent in the wave-particle paradox is an epistemological issue (Barad, *Meeting*, 116).
[18] Steven M. Rosen, "Why Natural Science Needs Phenomenological Philosophy," *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology* 30 (2015): 4.
[19] ibid.

defies Newtonian order."[20] Barad therefore claims Bohr's fundamental lesson is that "we are a part of that nature that we seek to understand."[21] This is, of course, the same idea we find in Schelling and Merleau-Ponty.

For Merleau-Ponty, "if a philosophy can correspond to quantum mechanics, it will be both a more realistic philosophy, of which the truth will not be defined in transcendental terms" (*N* 97). Modern physics inaugurates a "new philosophical problem," for it throws objectivist ontology into question. If, as Merleau-Ponty argues by way of Weizsäcker, "we cannot learn anything of the atom other than by experience, yet experience is a violation of nature," then the 'object' that science 'finds' is not an object at all. Rather, it is only the object *of* science, and not an in-itself. This problem thus approaches the problem of perception, since it means that physics can be neither realist nor idealist. The advent of modern physics impels us to posit a plane of reality above the objects in themselves. This plane "transcends the opposition object-subject, the objects corresponding to observed systems, and the subject being prolonged by the measuring apparatus" (*N* 98). Here we have only an 'image,' as it were, of "structural relations" - only the logic or form that permits description. For Merleau-Ponty, this leads us back to perception, for it is perception that "teaches me the infinite divisibility of space and teaches me that Being is not composed of elements" (*N* 99-100). The very "idea of a reality that includes an infinite series of qualitative values," the idea modern physics leads us to, is precisely an "idea of perception" (*N* 99). The value and provocation of modern physics is thus that it "destroys certain prejudices of philosophical and non-philosophical thought" (*N* 100). Again, for Merleau-Ponty philosophy is not principally antithetical to science – science can in fact critique philosophy (in this case, Cartesian ontology) and expose the transience of supposedly fixed notions about the world.

§3. Scientific Notions of Space and Time

Modern science also problematizes the absolutism of Euclidean space, which has been considered an "a priori condition of our science and our experience" (*N* 101).[22] This does not mean that non-Euclidean space is now to be understood as the 'true' model or

[20] ibid.
[21] Barad, *Meeting*, 67.
[22] Merleau-Ponty refers here to Hans Reichenbach, a philosopher of science initially Kantian, before breaking with Kant's philosophy due to the latter's inconsistency with physics, and mathematician Bernhard Riemann, who developed non-Euclidean, elliptic geometry (Salmon, "Reichenbach," 167).

structure of space; rather, this puts into question the "idea of a nature in itself of space" (*N* 103). As Merleau-Ponty argues, "there is not an experience of pure geometry in which we can grasp the structure of space" (*N* 103). The very notion of space in itself can only be established from outside of space – from a point of radical exteriority capable of posing the question in an 'objective' sense. However, this would be to introduce an outside that cannot formally belong to space itself, a sovereign gaze or absolute spectator without a spatio-temporal position. In other words, as Merleau-Ponty contends, "to pose the question of the nature in itself of space is to admit a *kosmostheoros*" (*N* 103). For living beings, however, the question of space is not posed as "it has no meaning for them: space is part of their situation, yet a space of situation is not in-itself" (*N* 103). Indeed, space is "not a something," and to withdraw "into a worldless perception" would get us no closer to understanding it (*N* 103, *PhP* 263). As such, even non-Euclidean space remains a metric. We must think of the various scientific conceptions of space as corresponding to certain kinds of physics (i.e. Einsteinian) and the "experimental verifications" they allow (*N* 103). If Einstein's theory of relativity lends weight to Riemannian space, for example, this does not "authorize us to say that space *is* Riemannian" (*N* 103). Rather, as Merleau-Ponty argues in the *Phenomenology*, space is only meaningful within a perceptual field (293). Drawing on Bergson, Merleau-Ponty argues that physics presupposes our perception of space; it is the perceptual field that gives us "the first model of Being, with which science works in order to give an articulated vision of Being" (*N* 105). Again, once we trace the origin of scientific objectivity, or regressively inquire into its genesis, we find that science requires originary experience and therefore cannot legitimately "provide an ontology" (*N* 105). This does allow us, however, to "advance the notion that no ontology is exactly *required* by the thought proper to physics at work" (*VI* 17).

Similarly, we have the impression of different times (i.e. elongated in boredom, contracted in excitement) and accept a plurality of different temporal experiences, although in principle we make use of "universal time" (*N* 108). Yet we encounter philosophical difficulties when we approach the scientific notion of the relativity of time. Drawing again on Bergson, Merleau-Ponty claims the physicist must create a "stationary point" in relation to which other references appear mobile (*N* 108). In doing so, there would only be one stationary point and thus "one single lived time," while the others can only be "attributed" (*N* 108). This amounts to an 'egocentric' concept of

time, and forces the physicist to multiply "successive egocentric views" when attempting to account for the coexistence of multiple observers (*N* 109). Thus for Bergson "the point of view of physicists is only a semi-relativism" and the "paradoxes of relativity" persist (*N* 108). As he contends in *Time and Free Will*, science must first eliminate the "essential and qualitative element" of time and motion in order to deal or work with them.[23] Bergson and Merleau-Ponty's critique accords with that of Lee Smolin and Steven Rosen, both of whom contend that Einsteinian relativity posits the relativity of space and time by enclosing this variability "*within a new context of invariance*" – that of space-time.[24] Thus, as Smolin argues, Einsteinian relativity "suggests that the whole history of the world is a timeless unity."[25] Time may be relativized, but nature is not 'dynamized'; moreover, within Einstein's space-time continuum we still find the object ("the objectified relativistic event"), the "static continuum that contains the event," and "the detached, idealized subject who analyzes all this from afar."[26]

Again, it is the task of philosophy "to understand what is done better than those who do it" (*N* 109). A philosophy of nature must elaborate a notion of time as experienced – and therefore as paradoxical. We must return to the primacy of perception: the philosopher must "restore not only the duration, but also the world of things" and therefore the "Absolute that the philosopher returns to is that of the incarnated and situated subject" (*N* 111). The Absolute is not the absolute of idealism or the classical conception of time, but rather the time of life, the actual time of the shared world in which we are situated as living beings. Indeed, there can be intersubjective time because "I can grasp the others only as occupying situations within my world" (*N* 111). Yet, as Husserl argues, co-perception can never be "identical perception" but rather names a unity of participation. That is, "philosophical simultaneity emerges from our belonging to the world as the world from which we arise" (*N* 112).

It is the "succession of simultaneities," and not duration or lived temporality, that counts and is countable for science. As Alfred North Whitehead argues, the "punctual spatiotemporal existences" that classical science work with can only arise out of a "work of thought" or process of abstraction (*N* 114). The classical concept of nature enables us to "abstract from change and to conceive of the full reality of Nature *at an*

[23] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 115.
[24] Rosen, "Natural Science," 3.
[25] Lee Smolin, *Time Reborn* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), xxii.
[26] Rosen, "Natural Science," 3.

instant."[27] For Whitehead, however, there is "no Nature in an instant: all reality implies a 'moving on of nature'" (*N* 114). Indeed, the classical Cartesian concept of Nature is one in which nothing happens, and hence amounts to an actualist notion of the world. Rather, for Whitehead nature is becoming, process, and unity. Whitehead focuses on the *event* as opposed to the object, for the latter is merely the "focal property to which we can attach variations" and thus simply an "abridged way of marking that there was an ensemble of relations" (*N* 116). The object is therefore a kind of conceptual shortcut and a 'fixing' of a process that is always already underway. Again, the object must be *made.* Accordingly, we tend to mistake "the abstract for the concrete," a mistake Whitehead calls the 'Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.'[28] Merleau-Ponty thus concludes that "we can only understand the nature of Being by referring to our 'self-awareness,' to perception in the state of its coming-to-be or birth" (*N* 116). As we will see in Part III, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature therefore includes an account of the human body.

Merleau-Ponty finds in Whitehead an "ontological value of perception": perception is "made starting from the interior of Nature" and "Nature is given to us only in sense awareness" (*N* 117).[29] For this reason, Nature is "what has never been unveiled, and which remains intact under unveiling" (*N* 118). For Whitehead as for Schelling, "there is no means to stop Nature to look at it"; despite appearing new to every perception, Nature is "never without a past" and "is never grasped in its beginnings" (*N* 118). Whitehead describes nature as a "spatiotemporal unfurling" (*N* 119), an immeasurable time within which subjectivity is caught. As was the case with Bergson, we can only speak of a time of Nature that we participate in. Merleau-Ponty calls Nature an "operating presence" – it is not an object of thought and cannot be grasped in an instant (*N* 120). Moreover, as Toadvine writes, "we are ourselves embedded, mind and body, within the temporal passage of nature" and this passage or "pulsation" is a chiasm of discontinuous or incommensurable temporalities.[30] This leads Merleau-Ponty to claim, recalling Schelling: "Nature is the memory of the world" (*N* 120). This is because Nature is a reality that "carried this past when it was present" (*N* 120). Accordingly, as Toadvine argues, embodied being necessarily remains "indebted to this prehistory, since our own materiality is never merely an object for us," for our "organic

[27] Alfred North Whitehead, *Nature and Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 45.
[28] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Pelican Mentor Books, 1948), 52.
[29] For an extensive account of the consonance between Whitehead's process philosophy and Merleau-Ponty's ontology, see Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), Ch. 2 and Ch. 10 in particular.
[30] Toadvine, "Elemental Past," 271. See also Mazis, "The Depths of time."

inheritance" is the very "generative ground of experience."[31] Against Cartesian ontology, we must think Nature as a mixture: it is "that in which we are, that in which we are mixed" (*N* 121). Nature is unthinkable from a distance, and we cannot replace the being of nature with the thought of it.

We have outlined Merleau-Ponty's critique of classical physics and the scientific notions of space and time, and we have seen that in each case the scientific concept in question is brought back to the philosophical problem of perception. *The Structure of Behavior* generally proceeds in a similar way, although in this early text Merleau-Ponty focuses not on physics but on the organism and the dominant philosophical and scientific approaches to living being at the time of his inquiry.

§4. *The Structure of Behavior*: Critique of Classical Reflex Theory

As Welsh explains, Merleau-Ponty's first major published text was written in the midst of an ongoing debate between idealism and empirical science, or philosophy and scientific psychology.[32] For critical philosophy and idealism, as we saw with Kant and Fichte, the physical natural world is a series of "objective relations borne by consciousness" such that there can be "nothing in the world which is foreign to the mind" (*SB* 3). Empiricism or physicalism, on the other hand, fails to grasp natural processes as that of a *living* being. In order to begin his inquiry from a perspective that subscribes to neither intellectualism nor empiricism, Merleau-Ponty starts "from below": the analysis of behavior. According to Merleau-Ponty, behavior is "neutral" with respect to these classical distinctions. He begins the text with a critique of reflex theory.

The classical notion of the reflex takes it to be "the action of a defined physical or chemical agent on a locally defined receptor which evokes a defined response by means of a defined pathway" (*SB* 9). The organism is conceived as passive, as a bundle of various mechanisms waiting to be 'triggered,' and limited by the absolute properties of its discrete, anatomical elements. If, for example, in "naïve consciousness" a moving light appears on a wall in a dark room, I say that it 'attracts' my attention and 'pulls' me 'toward' it (*SB* 7). However, "the moment that light is defined as a physical agent which makes an impression on my retina," the appearance of the light within my experience becomes "phenomenal light" as distinct from scientific, "real light" (*SB* 7). The

[31] Toadvine, "Elemental Past," 275.
[32] Talia Welsh, "From Gestalt to Structure," *Theory and Psychology* 16, no. 4 (2006): 528.

phenomenal experience is abandoned in order to grasp the scientific 'reality' of the situation, which posits a "physical agent" or "stimulus," "receptor" or "reaction," and a "succession of physical facts" (*SB* 7). The passive organism is reduced to a series of receptors, and can only react in the way "prescribed for it by the place of excitation and the nerve circuits which originate there" (*SB* 9). That is, intentionality and subjective value "have no foundation in things"; it must be stated that I do not move my eyes "in order to see" but rather that "I perceive the position of the spot *because* my body has responded to it by adapted reflexes" (*SB* 9).

As neurophysiologist Charles Sherrington has demonstrated, however, a complex stimulus is "something other than the sum of its elements," and the organism plays an active role in the constitution of form (*SB* 12-13). The reaction or the "fate of excitation" is not wholly bound by anatomical elements, but is "determined by its relation to the whole of the organic state" (*SB* 15). The relation between organism and milieu is characterized not by linear but "circular causality" (*SB* 15). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty contends that "we cannot even presume that what is functionally simple necessarily corresponds to what is anatomically simple" (*SB* 15). Additionally, it is only under artificial laboratory conditions that such one-to-one correspondences between stimulus and excitation are discernible. However, under such "pathological"[33] conditions the organism does not act "normally"; it is compelled to react "by means of detached parts," and responds "not to complex situations but to isolated stimuli" (*SB* 44). These stimuli are fabricated, insofar as they have a "separate existence only in human science" (*SB* 44). As such the very notion of a 'normal' reflex is unjustified. As Goldstein writes in *The Organism*, a "simple stimulus response relationship" is virtually impossible to directly observe, and one can only defend such a claim "if one construes the reflex as an abstraction."[34] The stimulus is not a purely physical reality and can give rise to variable 'effects'; correspondingly, the excitation ought to be understood as a response instead of a mechanical reaction. As Goldstein argues, "even under normal conditions, the reflex cannot be properly understood in terms of the isolated mechanism alone," and this holds true for both animal and human studies.[35] The organism must be taken out of nature in order for its 'nature' to be investigated. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, we have become

[33] Canguilhem, *Knowledge*, 113.
[34] Kurt Goldstein, *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man* (Salt Lake City: American Book Publishing, 1939), 79.
[35] ibid., 69-70.

used to treating as 'cause' the condition we can most easily influence. Anatomy must be considered a stage in a larger global process.

Classical reflex theory presupposes that the isolation of stimuli and the submission of the organism to controlled anthropomorphic conditions are capable of yielding objective knowledge of behavior. In fact, this mode of attaining knowledge *produces* behavior, since it compels 'rudimentary' reactions to measurable stimuli. Moreover, the attempt to account for a complex stimulus cannot simply involve multiplying reflexes into increasingly complex combinations of 'reflex liaisons.' According to Merleau-Ponty, Sherrington attempts to "reconstruct the concrete" with "a sum of abstractions" even after he "admits that the classical reflex is an abstraction" (*SB* 32).That is, Sherrington reduces "the difference between the traditional schema and actual nerve activity" to a difference in degree, thus preserving the formal structure and rationality of classical reflex theory. Sherrington's commitment to the principles of classical physiology therefore prevent him from applying his categories to the very phenomena "which he himself has brought to light" (*SB* 33).

Finally, Merleau-Ponty points out that the capacity for mechanistic behavior "represents a late acquisition in animal ontogenesis" (*SB* 45). As Jakob von Uexküll remarks, while the reflex may be useful in explaining the functions of the adult organism, it struggles to account for "the physiological processes that guide the development of that organism in the embryonic phase."[36] For example, the reflex can only be found in the adult salamander, while the embryo "executes movements of the ensemble, global and undifferentiated movements of swimming" (*SB* 45). This resonates with Schelling's assertion that mechanism is secondary to primary productivity. In Merleau-Ponty's view, it may be that "pure reflexes" are found most easily in the human being "because man is perhaps alone in being able to abandon this or that part of his body separately to the influences of the milieu" (*SB* 45). In sum, the reflex is not "the fundamental activity of the living being but of the experimental apparatus which we use for studying it" (*SB* 45). It is only in experimentation or by "anthropomorphic illusion" that we may consider the reflex "a constituent element of animal behavior" (*SB* 46). As Merleau-Ponty's critique suggests, reflexes represent only "a very special case of behavior, observable under certain determined conditions" (*SB* 46). It is not the most elemental unit of organic behavior, and we are not authorized to

[36] Brentari, *Uexküll,* 60-61.

grant the reflex a 'rudimentary' status simply because of its apparent mechanistic simplicity. For Merleau-Ponty, if we seek to grasp "that which makes a living being a living being," we must address the "indecomposable structure of behavior" (*SB* 46). In order to do so, one cannot hope to generate the 'whole' by the composition of the parts. The concept of the reflex and the reductive and mechanistic model of organic behavior it offers and sustains do not capture – philosophically or scientifically - natural being.

Merleau-Ponty thus faults science not with its inability to formulate an adequate *concept* of the organism, but with failing to recognize how behavior points beyond the concepts that it presupposes and utilizes. Science therefore 'discovers' more than it can account for, and ultimately demonstrates the limitations of its own presuppositions. Merleau-Ponty's critique of classical reflex theory thus constitutes a repudiation of the mechanistic and positivist understanding of the organism and behavior. Conceived as such, the 'mindless' mechanistic behavior – encapsulated in the idea of the reflex - of the organism is clearly akin to the Cartesian notion of the animal machine. Merleau-Ponty's critique problematizes the positivist or 'realist' bias of empirical classical science, which holds that the organism is a physical thing completely graspable by science. This amounts to doing "physics *in* the living being," as opposed to "physics *of* the living being" (*SB* 151, italics added). As Kant had already recognized in the third *Critique*, there will never be a Newton of biology.[37] Indeed, while "the living can and must be analyzed in physico-chemical terms," this must be "a chapter in physics"; in biology, on the other hand, "everything is still to be done."[38]

a. Forms of Behavior: Syncretic, Amovable, and Symbolic

Merleau-Ponty's critique of mechanism continues in his analyses of higher forms of behavior. Drawing on the work of Gestalt theorists Goldstein and Koffka, and physiologists Ivan Pavlov and F.J.J. Buytendijk, Merleau-Ponty concludes that "it is not the real world which constitutes the perceived world" and therefore it is not stimuli "which determine the contents of perception" (*SB* 88). Rather, "the living physiology of the nervous system can only be understood by starting from phenomenal givens" (*SB* 88), and these ought to be understood in terms of structure. Gestalt theory emphasizes that all experiences occur on the basis of a figure-ground configuration, such that differences in a perceptual field necessarily appear against a background of

[37] See Stuart A. Kauffman, "Beyond Reductionism: Reinventing the Sacred," *Zygon* 42, no. 4 (2007): 911.
[38] Canguilhem, *Knowledge*, 113.

dedifferentiation. The field cannot be homogenous in order for a gestalt or structure to be perceived. Moreover, Gestaltists Raymond Wheeler and Wolfgang Köhler emphasize the "identity of physical and mental laws," and hence reject as an "artificial dichotomy of dualistic ignorance" the problem of "materialism *versus* vitalism."[39] This is precisely the dichotomy Merleau-Ponty attempts to move beyond in this text. Furthermore, Gestalt theory distinguishes between "non-additive groupings" and additive/combinatory arrangements of physical objects, claiming that structure is a novel and primary form irreducible to its components. It would in fact be more accurate to speak of a "structural moment in an organization" rather than employ the term 'part' with regard to a gestalten.[40]

An analysis of perception allows us to conceive behavior according to the notion of Gestalt, which would lead to drawing distinctions, not between sensation and intellect or between "a chaos of elements and a higher system which would organize them," but rather between different kinds of organization (*SB* 91). Form is "not a physical reality, but an object of perception," not "a thing of the physical world" but "a perceived whole" (*SB* 143). This leads Merleau-Ponty to distinguish three types of behavior: 'syncretic', 'amovable' and 'symbolic' forms. These forms exist on a continuum; behavior becomes increasingly complex as it ascends toward symbolic behavior. They do not delineate three essential kinds of animal being – they are to be understood dialectically, not substantially. As such, he argues that "there is no species of animal whose behavior *never* goes beyond the syncretic level nor any whose behavior *never* descends below the symbolic forms" – animals are distributed along this scale based on their typical behavior (*SB* 104).

At the level of syncretic forms, behavior is bound to the "framework of its natural conditions" and responds 'globally' to experimental conditions in a way that are analogous to "vital situations" (*SB* 104). For example, if a piece of glass is placed between a toad and an earthworm, the toad repeatedly tries to seize it "in spite of the failures which ought to be inhibiting" because in its natural life "the instinctual equipment prescribes repeated attempts when confronted with a mobile objective" (*SB* 105). As such the frog does not react to the experimental apparatus. Merleau-Ponty argues that we can call this kind of behavior 'instinctive' – but in a broadened sense,

[39] George Wilfried Hartmann, *Gestalt Psychology: A Survey of Facts and Principles* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1935), 70.
[40] Köhler thus favors not arithmetic but integral calculus, for the latter provides a more accurate demonstration of the "nature of the physical gestalt" (ibid., 40).

often indistinguishable from so-called intelligent behavior.[41] In syncretic forms of behavior relations are bound to vital, concrete situations. Amovable forms, on the other hand, are capable of responding to signals "which are not determined by the instinctual equipment" and instead founded on structures. As such, learning is possible at this level. In such behavior, the organism adapts to a "simple temporal or spatial contiguity of a conditioned and an unconditioned stimulus" (*SB* 105-106). However, this contiguity must be *for* the organism, the structure must have meaning for the animal. Merleau-Ponty cites Köhler's experiments on domestic chickens as an example. In these experiments, the chickens first become accustomed to choosing between light gray and medium gray grain. Then the medium gray is taken away and a new gray (lighter than the first 'light' gray) is introduced. Instead of continuing to choose the first, original light gray, the chicken chooses the new lighter gray. That is, the colors are not taken 'in themselves' - the chickens do not adapt to the actual material properties of the grain, but demonstrate the ability for differentiation. According to Merleau-Ponty, the error of empiricist and intellectualist psychology lies in employing the reasoning of physico-geometric realities and relations to the field of animal activity. As he explains:

> a sort of animal physics immanent in behavior could be described, but its originality could only be understood by a psychology and a philosophy capable of making a place for the indeterminant as such, capable of comprehending that a mode of behavior or an experience can have a 'vague' and 'open' signification without being empty of signification (*SB* 115).

The assertion of the reality of indeterminacy accords with Barad's argument, as we saw above. Furthermore, the notion of open signification – vague but not meaningless – anticipates the concept of natural negativity and radical openness, which he formulates in the *Nature* course.

As in the case of Köhler's chickens, amovable forms of behavior are incapable of treating an object as a thing, in the sense of a durable unity. The animal does, however, have an environment (*Umwelt*) or meaningful surrounding world in which certain stimuli bear on the "typical activity" of the animal (*SB* 130). In other words, amovable behavior must be "*understood* in its immanent law, not *explained* by a plurality of separated causes" (*SB* 120), and therefore it would be inaccurate to characterize such forms of behavior as deficient according to an externally imposed standard, which is

[41] Mazis writes of the oneiric character of instinct, and how this realm "can easily give way to the symbolic" ("Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Nature," 239-241).

what empiricism and intellectualism tend to do. Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues that the gestures of behavior "are not directed to the true world or pure being, but to being-for-the-animal" (*SB* 125). Merleau-Ponty returns to this idea in the *Nature* course, as we will see in the following chapter.

It is only symbolic behavior which is able to "find an invariant in the external object, under the diversity of its aspects" (*SB* 118). Symbolic behavior is hence characterized by the use of the thing-structure, the "possibility of varied expressions of a same theme" and the "substitutions of points of view" that this entails (*SB* 122). Importantly, symbolic behavior "liberates the 'stimuli' from the here-and-now relations" and "from the functional values which the needs of the species, defined once and for all, assign to them" (*SB* 122). It is only in this final form of behavior that objectivity and possibility exists, and as such Merleau-Ponty will claim that behavior in this form "no longer *has* only one signification, it *is* itself signification" (*SB* 122). Yet this behavior does not signify consciousness, but rather "a certain manner of treating the world, of 'being-in-the-world' or of 'existing'" (*SB* 125-126). In fact, there is no behavior – animal or human – "which certifies a pure consciousness behind it," and even the other person "is never given to me as the exact equivalent of myself thinking" (*SB* 126) as we saw in chapter 3. In this sense, as Merleau-Ponty argues, "it is not only to animals that consciousness must be denied" (*SB* 126).[42]

b. Toward a Philosophy of Form: Physical, Vital, and Human Orders

Syncretic, amovable and symbolic forms thus pertain to the structure of the organism's meaningful reality. Behavior cannot be understood with reference to "completed modes of a unique world (*Welt*)," but rather with reference to "a series of 'environments' and 'milieu' in which the stimuli intervene according to what they signify" (*SB* 129-130). Thus, it is not possible to isolate in animal behavior "something like a first layer of reactions which would correspond to the physical and chemical properties of the world" (*SB* 130). As such, Merleau-Ponty seeks to develop a "philosophy of form" that would "be substituted for the philosophy of substances" (*SB* 132). He identifies three orders – physical, vital, and human – which "represent different degrees of integration" (*SB* 133). Importantly, in theorizing these three orders, Merleau-Ponty diverges from Gestalt theory. The latter is incapable of recognizing the "structural character" of the three

[42] For Merleau-Ponty, "the reference to a sensible or historical given is not a provisional imperfection; it is essential to physical knowledge" (*SB* 145).

orders, for it maintains a physicalistic theory of behavior (*SB* 134).[43] On Merleau-Ponty's reading, while Gestalt theory critiques mechanism, it continues to define behavior physicalistically and therefore in terms of causality. The structure or Gestalt is "placed among the number of events of nature" and is thus "used like a cause or a real thing" (*SB* 136, 193). However, this is precisely *not* the concept of form that Merleau-Ponty thinks Gestalt theory offers; he seeks not a realist or physicalistic notion of form, nor a mentalist concept, but rather the "synthesis of matter and idea" (*SB* 137). Indeed, Gestalt psychology has shown that "physical laws do not furnish an explanation *of* the structures, they represent an explanation *within* the structures" (*SB* 193). What Merleau-Ponty seeks is an intermediary concept between thing and idea.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the physical world is not "an intersecting of linear causal series in which each keeps its individuality" (*SB* 139). Rather, physical laws must be conceived as systems or combinations and not in isolation; moreover, they are inseparable from "concrete events where it intersects with other laws and receives a truth value along with them" (*SB* 139). In sum, "the relation of structure and law in science is a relation of reciprocal inclusion" (*SB* 141). In the physical order, the 'equilibrium' of physical form is "obtained with respect to external conditions" (*SB* 145). In contrast, vital structures obtain equilibrium with respect to "virtual" conditions which "the system itself brings into existence" (*SB* 146).The organism has a "certain style of 'address' – an aptitude' to the world"[44] and "optimal conditions of activity" (*SB* 148). Thus, the vital order can be expressed by a norm, whereas physical structures "can be expressed by a law" (*SB* 148). Importantly, in the vital order the relations between the organism and its milieu are dialectical. Consequently, these relations cannot be understood in mechanistic terms; organic behavior at this 'level' cannot be conceived physicalistically, and must be understood as forms of a different kind entirely. As Toadvine explains, "subsequent levels of structure integrate and reorganize the preceding levels in order to introduce original qualities."[45] Life or the vital order remains "dependent on physical forms and is nothing other than a reorganization of these forms in accordance with the demands of a more complex structure," yet it also "introduces

[43] Köhler and Wertheimer, for instance, both argue that Gestalt theory can be justified with reference to physical nature. According to Welsh, this is why Merleau-Ponty consistently sides with Goldstein, who eventually distances himself from Gestalt theory (Welsh, "From Gestalt," 539).
[44] John F. Bannan, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 45.
[45] Toadvine, *Nature*, 32.

new qualities inexplicable in terms of purely physical organization."[46] The 'totality' of the organism is "not an *appearance"* but a phenomenon, and behavior is not a 'thing-in-itself' but rather "an embodied dialectic which radiates over a milieu immanent to it" (*SB* 159, 161).

As we have seen in the symbolic form, in the human order the thing-structure exists. The human being also has the capacity to go beyond "created structures in order to create others" (*SB* 175-6) and can therefore orient itself vis-à-vis the possible or the virtual. As Toadvine points out, Merleau-Ponty thus defends a "traditional denigration of the prospects of animals for self-expression and creativity."[47] This philosophy of animal life is revised in the later works. *The Structure of Behavior* concludes with the primacy of perceptual consciousness, but this is a consciousness that necessarily draws on a continued dialectical relation with the structures that 'precede' or subtend it. Structurally akin to the shift from the physical to the vital order, "the advent of human action and of human perception" is "irreducible to the vital dialectic of the organism and its milieu" (*SB* 176). Yet, "not being a new *substance*," each of the three orders must be "conceived as a retaking and a 'new' *structuration* of the preceding one" (*SB* 184, italics added). Thus a dialectical relation inheres between the human order and the preceding two. Higher behavior thus "retains the subordinated dialectics in the present depths of its existence" (*SB* 207-208). Hence we cannot conceive of mind as "a specific difference which would be added to vital or psychological being" (*SB* 181). Mind is "not a new sort of being but a new form of unity" (*SB* 181), a new organization. For Merleau-Ponty "Man is not a rational animal" (*SB* 181); we are human, as Toadvine cogently argues, "only as *having been* animal and only as *being still* animal in ways that exceed our efforts to take them into account.'[48]

c. Perceptual Consciousness: From Transcendental Philosophy to Phenomenology

Matter, life and mind cannot be "defined as three orders of reality or three sorts of beings," but rather "three forms of unity" (*SB* 201). This prohibits us from asserting that man is an animal to which reason or *logos* is affixed, or that life is merely a "force which is added to physico-chemical processes" (*SB* 201). The originality of each order is a result of its depth. Living beings can no longer "be conceived in-themselves (*en*

[46] ibid., 33.
[47] Ted Toadvine, "Melody of Life," 269.
[48] Ted Toadvine, "The Time of Animal Voices," *Environmental Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2014): 116.

soi)," but can be defined only "by an idea in which they participate, by a signification which is realized in them" (*SB* 202). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes structure as "the joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible" (*SB* 206), and in which it is not possible to isolate discrete elements without thereby 'losing' or renouncing structure itself. Idea and existence only have meaning when taken together. Consciousness never perceives 'isolated' content, as it were, since all consciousness is intentional, and what appears always appears against a background or horizon. In other words, consciousness of a thing, "as soon as it is identifiable and recognizable," presupposes "the apprehension of a meaning through the lived impression which is not *contained* in consciousness and is not a real part of it" (*SB* 200). Structure is phenomenologically primary.

Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty argues that "all the sciences situate themselves in a "complete" and real world without realizing that perceptual experience is constituting with respect to this world" (*SB* 219). This emphasis on perceptual consciousness inevitably leads to a discussion of body, an account of which is articulated in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. In light of the three dialectical orders mapped out above, the soul-body relation cannot be one of opposition. Furthermore, this dialectical relationality means that this lived whole cannot be decomposed. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is "the acquired dialectical soil upon which a higher 'formation' is established, and the soul is the meaning which is then established" (*SB* 210). Body and soul can neither be absolutely distinguished nor unified; the comprehensibility of both inheres in their structural relation. Indeed, the body is neither a "pure thing" nor a "pure idea" (*SB* 207). The distinction Merleau-Ponty foregrounds is not that between matter and form, or body and mind, but that of "the lived and the known" or structure and signification (*SB* 215, 224). Structure is the articulation of the nexus or jointure of idea and lived existence.

§5. Conclusion

As Toadvine writes, *The Structure of Behavior* maintains "a certain priority for 'intellectual' consciousness as the highest level of gestalt integration."[49] However, this priority is tentative; by integrating his account of the primacy of perceptual consciousness into critical transcendental philosophy, Merleau-Ponty introduces a

[49] Toadvine, *Nature*, 17.

tension into the latter from within. He states that if such integration were "not acceptable, it would be necessary to define transcendental philosophy anew" (*SB* 224). Indeed, the problem we are left with at the end of the text concerns "how to maintain the ontological primacy of perceptual consciousness alongside the epistemological primacy of intellectual reflection."[50] The return to perception as original experience, however, necessarily takes into account the lived experience of the world as constituted. As such, Merleau-Ponty invokes Husserl's phenomenological reduction as a way of proceeding. We must inquire back into the world of perception as originary, the world of "lived perspectives," the world in which form is both structure and meaning, or a whole which is not yet an idea. As such, *The Structure of Behavior* concludes:

> the natural 'thing,' the organism, the behavior of others and my own behavior exist only by their meaning; but this meaning which springs forth in them is not yet a Kantian object; the intentional life which constitutes them is not yet a representation; and the 'comprehension' which gives access to them is not yet an intellection (*SB* 224).

The Structure of Behavior constitutes a rigorous and systematic critique of the theoretical presuppositions underlying the organism as an object of science. Merleau-Ponty interrogates the adequacy of mechanism or causalism to account for organic behavior, and he does this by philosophically engaging with the findings of the sciences themselves. That is, the difficulties faced by modern science illustrate the shortcomings of objectivist ontology and the tenets of classical reflex theory. Against both empiricism and intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty argues that behavior displays a style or a manner of existing, and that neither animal nor human behavior "certifies a pure consciousness behind it" (*SB* 126). In the second *Nature* course, held in the year 1957-1958, Merleau-Ponty returns to and deepens his critique of mechanism and vitalism, as well as the objectivist ontology that continues to inform the presuppositions of science. In it, he introduces the concept of natural negativity, which will be central to his phenomenological ontology, and the idea of the *Umwelt*, which permits him to develop an account of the organism as a contingent existence that participates in an idea or 'theme' that does not, however, completely determine it.

[50] ibid.

chapter 5

THE UNFURLING OF THE ANIMAL: THE *UMWELT* AND THE THEME OF ANIMAL MELODY

Everything physical can be cut with a knife – but not a melody.

-Jakob von Uexküll[1]

The reality of the organism supposes a non-Parmenidean Being, a form that escapes from the dilemma of being and nonbeing.

-Merleau-Ponty[2]

Introduction: Reconceiving the Living Organism

In the second *Nature* course, fifteen years after the publication of *The Structure of Behavior,* Merleau-Ponty returns to the theoretical debates within modern biology. The primary focus is no longer to elucidate the relation between nature and consciousness, but rather to "pose the ontological problem, that is, the problem of the relation between subject and object" (*N* 135). The ontological problem is now the dominant and principal theme "to which all other problems – Naturalism, humanism, theism – are subordinated" (*N* 134-135). It is in these lectures on animality that the ontological question begins to emerge as primary.

According to Canguilhem, Goldstein and biologist Jakob von Uexküll effect a reversal of the classical, mechanistic conception of the animal organism, exemplified in the works of biologist and physiologist Jacques Loeb and behaviorist John B. Watson.[3] For Canguilhem, both "agree on this fundamental point: to study a living being in its experimentally constructed conditions is to make a milieu for it, to impose a milieu on it; yet it is characteristic of the living that it makes its milieu for itself, that it composes its milieu."[4] As we have seen, knowledge acquisition is activity – for Schelling, it presupposes freedom – and experimentation is the imposition of a superficial, anthropomorphic milieu, or even an 'invasion' of nature. For Goldstein, the notion of a dominant milieu that would "command" the living being is "the archetype of a

[1] *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, trans. J. D. O'Neil (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 194.
[2] *N* 183.
[3] Canguilhem, *Knowledge*, 106-110.
[4] ibid., 110-111.

catastrophic situation," and this is precisely the condition imposed on the living by laboratory experimentation.[5] The so-called "objective" relations that inhere between the living and the milieu under such experimental conditions are "among all possible relations, those that make the least sense biologically; they are pathological."[6] It is not only the case that in experimentation the organism is submitted to artificial and anthropomorphic conditions and thereby prompted to behave pathologically or 'abnormally'; through 'fixing' and isolating the organism as an object, we attain knowledge pertaining to the product we have created and not the living being we seek to understand. Clarification via construction is obfuscation, and analysis via disentanglement, as Merleau-Ponty says, leads to unintelligibility. In such situations, scientific discovery amounts to concealment, as Husserl reminds us.

Goldstein and Uexküll's 'reversal,' as Canguilhem describes it, necessitates a fundamental shift in the way in which we not only methodologically approach or 'access' the animal, but also in the way in which we understand what the organism *is*. If it is a primary "characteristic of the living that it makes its milieu for itself," then the living organism cannot be conceived as an object that enters into mechanical relations with other objects. In order to understand the animal we must understand how it behaves, what it does and what it has; the organism cannot be understood divorced from its subjective world or *Umwelt*, and the *Umwelt* cannot be theoretically isolated from the animal subject. As Uexküll writes in *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, for the physiologist "every living thing is an object that is located in his human world," while for the biologist "each and every living thing is a subject that lives in its own world, of which it is the center."[7] The term *Um-welt*, as we saw with Husserl, refers to the surrounding world, "literally the world around, the world in which the subject is placed in immediately and without reflection."[8] It refers to the animal's "perceptual life-world" [9] or the "subjective (subjectivized, meaningful) world of an organism," the lived, experiential world of the animal.[10] This is in part why, as Brentari explains, Uexküll abandons the mechanistic term 'milieu' and adopts *Umwelt* to express the animal's environment, for the latter is "more than just a mere combination of

[5] ibid., 113.
[6] ibid.
[7] Uexküll, *A Foray*, 45.
[8] Brentari, *Uexküll*, 75. For an account of the origin of the term, see U. Sutrop, "Umwelt – Word and Concept: Two Hundred Years of Semantic Change," *Semiotica* 134, Iss. 1/4 (2001).
[9] Uexküll, *A Foray*, 2.
[10] Kalevi Kull, "Jakob von Uexküll: An Introduction," *Semiotica* 134, Iss. 1/4 (2001), 7.

physical, atmospheric and climatic conditions," but the "*intertwining of vital relations with other living beings*."[11] Goldstein and Uexküll, however, introduce the problem of *meaning*, and conceive of the relation between the living and the milieu "as a debate (*Auseinandersetzung*), to which the living brings its own proper norms of appreciating situations, both dominating the milieu and accommodating itself to it."[12] Merleau-Ponty, however, uses the term 'milieu' and *Umwelt* relatively interchangeably in his later works.

The purpose of this chapter and the following one is to establish the importance of the idea of negativity in Merleau-Ponty's later work on animal life and nature. It will begin with a discussion of the significance of Uexküll's work for Merleau-Ponty. As Toadvine points out, while Merleau-Ponty indirectly refers to Uexküll in *The Structure of Behavior* by way of Buytendijk, he explicitly investigates Uexküll's work in the *Nature* course of 1957-58.[13] This chapter offers a Merleau-Pontian reading of Uexküll that stresses the irreducible contingency of animal life, a reading that offers a critique of Uexküll's notion of nature as harmonious by way of the concept of negativity. We then turn, in the following chapter, to the studies of George E. Coghill and Arnold Gesell, which constitute a refutation of the idea of the animal-machine and point to a novel concept of totality and behavior that problematizes the distinction between anatomy and physiology, and behavior and form. The concept of negativity will be pivotal to Merleau-Ponty's reading of these investigations. Natural negativity will then be discussed with reference to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the works of E. S. Russell, Adolf Portmann, and Konrad Lorenz. It will be argued that Merleau-Ponty's engagement with biology and critique of actualism allows him to develop a philosophy of Being as dimensionality. Finally, the resonance of Merleau-Ponty's claims with contemporary biosemiotics and theoretical biology will be addressed.

§1. The Introduction of Meaning: Jakob von Uexküll's *Umwelt*

In his 1909 text *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*, Uexküll compares two jellyfish – Rhizostoma and Gonionemus - with a "similar structure," same external world, and the "same nervous equipment and central nervous system" (229-230). These two

[11] Brentari, *Uexküll*, 79. The influence of Uexküll's theory for biology and the humanities is well known. His work is foundational for zoosemiotics, biosemiotics, and Norwegian eco-philosophy. It has also attracted considerable attention within German philosophical anthropology (Scheler, Plessner, Gehlen) and continental philosophy (Heidegger, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Agamben).
[12] Canguilhem, *Knowledge*, 113.
[13] Toadvine, *Nature*, 88.

organisms, however, live in "completely different environments" and are "not at all comparable if one examines their way of life" (*UIT* 230). The animal's environment [*Umwelt*] thus differs from the "external world"[14]; two organisms may be situated in and 'share' the same objective world, and yet live in entirely different environments. The "actual" world and the order of the in-itself is therefore to be distinguished from the meaningful, lived, perceptual environment or *Umwelt* of the animal. As Uexküll explains, while the 'external world' is the same for both jellyfish,

> Rhizostoma constantly closes it out, while Gonionemus admits a rich stream of effects of the external world through the portals of its receptors. The organism is like a magic world, closed off to all effects of the external world, opening only to the right key. If no lock is present, no key can be found (*UIT* 229-230).

Uexküll cautions against judging the perfection of an organism on the basis of the complexity of its structure; perfection only makes sense "if one correlates each construction plan with its execution" (*UIT* 222). We cannot evaluate the organism's 'perfection' based on anatomy alone, but neither can we evaluate an abstracted environment, for the latter is "only comprehensible from its connections to the actions of the animal" (*UIT* 230). It would be of no use to judge an organism as 'poor' on the basis of an imposed standard that has no relevance for it – this would be akin to finding fault in being unable to unlock something that has no lock to begin with. There must be a consonance or a relation (a particular lock or key); as Uexküll puts it, "the environment consists only of those questions that the animal can answer" (*UIT* 230). As such, all animals "are inserted [*eingepasst*][15] into their environments to the *same* degree of perfection."[16] This is possible because the *Umwelt* is a species-specific, "closed unit" of two worlds: the perceptual world [*Merkwelt*] of the animal subject, and its productions or operative, "effect world" [*Wirkwelt*].[17] The operative world of the animal "encompasses the objects that fit the animal's feeding and locomotion organs," but these objects are not necessarily cognitively registered.[18] As Brentari explains, this means that there are certain objects that 'exist,' as it were, in the operative but not

[14] 'External world' here refers to what we would commonly term 'environment.' The phenomenological meaning of the term 'world' would actually be closer to *Umwelt* than to 'environment.'
[15] Brentari writes of *Einpassung*, translated as "adaptive insertion" and "coined with explicit reference to the Darwinian notion of *Anpassung* (adaptation), as emphasizing the finalism of the relation between the animal and its *Umwelt*" (*Uexküll*, 78).
[16] Uexküll, *A Foray*, 50. Italics added.
[17] ibid., 42.
[18] Brentari, *Uexküll*, 99.

perceptive world, such as air and water for birds and fish, respectively.[19] The stimuli perceived by the organism that is "sent out" from the object is called the "perceptive mark" [*Merkmal*], and "the aspects of the object responsible for sending out stimuli become *perceptive mark carriers* for the animal."[20] Uexküll's notion of animal subjectivity is therefore one for which 'consciousness' need not intervene. The organism need not be cognizant of the stimulus in order for the 'object' to be part of its *Umwelt*. Indeed, while the human observer may see "perceptive marks and operative carriers" as "unified in a single object," for the animal "these are *unified on a behavioural plane, but not on a representative or cognitive one*."[21]

a. The Bauplan

The perceptual world of the animal depends on the animal's "building-plan" [*Bauplan*], the sensory organization that gives rise to the possibility of the animal's perception of certain aspects of its *Umwelt*. This is also the case for human beings, as Uexküll asserts: "This island of the senses, that wraps every man like a garment, we call his *Umwelt.*"[22] Furthermore, in a resoundingly Kantian formulation, Uexküll maintains that objects "always remain products of the human subject" and "become 'things' in front of us only when they have become covered by all the sensory envelopes that the island of the senses can give them."[23] Prior to this 'covering' they are, somewhat paradoxically, shrouded and unknowable for the perceiver. Thus there is no pre-existing real 'object' without relation to a subject; indeed, it is only because the "sensory spheres of individual humans" are similar that "the objects in the different Umwelten are also similar."[24] This similarity has resulted in the naïve, anthropocentric, and "premature conclusion that objects by themselves are autonomous realities."[25] For Uexküll, nothing authorizes us to claim that "all living creatures experience the same sun, the same moon and the same stars," for the moon that a small child experiences as "barely eight meters away on the child's horizon" and reaches out for "is not the same moon that we see."[26] Further, the sun that we experience is "essentially different" to the sun the mosquito sees. As Uexküll argues, against the Cartesian ontology of the object, observation of

[19] ibid.
[20] Quoted in Brentari, *Uexküll* 101.
[21] Brentari, *Uexküll*, 101.
[22] Uexküll, "An Introduction to Umwelt (1936)," trans. G. Brunow. *Semiotica* 134, Iss. 1/4 (2001): 107.
[23] ibid.
[24] ibid., 108.
[25] ibid.
[26] ibid.

animal Umwelten forces us to concede that "variability of objects is the norm," for "every object becomes something completely different on entering a different *Umwelt.*"[27] A flower stem may appear to us as a flower's support; it transforms into "a pipe full of liquid" for the spittlebug, a path for an ant, food for a grazing cow, decoration for a child assembling a bouquet.[28] The *Umwelt* is thus "governed in all its parts by its meaning for the subject."[29]

The *Bauplan* of an animal is tied to anatomical structure, and to the reflexes of the organism, particularly in so-called lower animals. It is an a priori form. This is why, as Merleau-Ponty explains, lower animals display characteristic behavior that gives them "the air of being machines" (*N* 168). A medusa jellyfish, for example, displays a single movement that has three functions; its "entire life consists in these rhythmic contractions" (*N* 168). Thus one cannot truly say that the animal "lives in the sea," as there is "no regulation by the external milieu" (*N* 168). In this case, we have the impression of an 'animal-machine'; we can say the medusa jellyfish "obeys its anatomical plan," or *Bauplan* (*N* 168). In this way, as Merleau-Ponty notes, Uexküll brings "finalism nearer to mechanism," for the organism does "obey" its *Bauplan* but this plan is not externally determined; it is only the human observer that is tempted "to invent an inventor of it" (*N* 168).[30] However, when we look to animals that appear to be even simpler than animal-machines, we find that the behavior of these animals "present[s] us with something wholly different from mechanical activity" (*N* 169). For example, amoebas look as if they are made of "flowing protoplasm"; without defined organs, the amoeba is "made of pseudopods (legs) or vacuoles (stomach)," which at every instant disappears in order to be recreated (*N* 169-170). While in the case of the animal-machine there is a "difference between functioning and birth" – such that construction and regeneration is unobservable, thus leading to the possibility of being termed 'machines' in the first place – the amoeba appears to be "continuous birth, pure production" (*N* 170). Mechanism as explanatory principle or as a basis for interpretation fails in this case. As we saw in the previous chapter, reflexes are a relatively 'late' acquisition and more readily discernible among so-called 'higher' animals. For an organism whose *Bauplan* is continuously changing and in flux, "supermechanic

[27] ibid.
[28] ibid.
[29] Uexküll, *A Theory*, 144.
[30] For an account of the ambiguous ontological status of the *Bauplan* in Uexküll's work see: Brentari, *Uexküll*, 59-60; Pobojewska "New Biology."

regulation clearly steps in the foreground."[31] Now if we consider "supermechanic regulation as a specific property of life," as Uexküll asserts we ought to, then "we must say: *an amoeba is less of a machine than a horse*."[32] As Merleau-Ponty claims, "protoplasm creates organs like a magician," and thus to "maintain itself and to function are the same thing" for the amoeba (*N* 170).

b. Unity without Coordinating Center

The sea urchin, on the other hand, has a comparably "higher level of physiological, environmental and even behavioural complexity."[33] As Brentari explains, the sea urchin perceives objects in its *Umwelt* through "stimulus combinations" and therefore illustrates "a (yet rudimentary) capacity to synthesize objects starting from the stimuli coming from sensibility."[34] What is of particular philosophical interest to Merleau-Ponty is the urchin's lack of central organization. As Merleau-Ponty asserts, the central nervous system is "far from being the origin and ground of the unity of the organism"; rather, it is the "prevalence of protoplasm" (*N* 170) that weights the most heavily on the ensemble of organs. In fact, Uexküll argues that this emphasis on the central nervous system is "entirely unjustified, since nature can answer its own questions with any organ" (*UIT* 230). In terms of physical structure, the urchin has a number of 'quills,' each of which have "developed into autonomous reflex persons."[35] Although such reflex persons act in concert, they are "completely independent."[36] As such, Uexküll describes the sea urchin's *Bauplan* as a "reflex republic," in which a totality or "civil peace" persists despite "the complete autonomy of all reflex persons" and the lack of an organizing center.[37] This is possible despite the fact that the sea urchin as a unity must be capable of "transforming stimulus combinations into excitations" in order for there to be a "true effect of an object," as opposed to discontinuous stimuli (*UIT* 231). Uexküll explains how the sea urchin is to be distinguished from higher animals, charting a path *between* vitalism and mechanism: "When a dog runs, the animal moves its legs. When a sea urchin runs, the legs move the animal" (*UIT* 231). The urchin is *moved* without being abandoned to the whims of a determinate milieu, or to a "hostile outer world in

[31] Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innenwelt*, 26. Quoted Brentari, 70.
[32] ibid.
[33] Brentari, *Uexküll*, 81.
[34] ibid., 82.
[35] Uexküll, *A Foray*, 76.
[36] ibid.
[37] ibid.

which it leads a brutish struggle for existence" (*UIT* 231). The urchin is the subject and the center of its world, and it lives in an *Umwelt* that suits "its capabilities down to the last detail, as if there were only one world and only one sea urchin" (*UIT* 231-232). As we will see, for Uexküll this is the case because nature as a whole is teleological: nature conforms to a plan.[38] Uexküll is led to posit a teleological *Naturfaktor* that subtends the *Bauplan* of the organism, and which is empirically unobservable and strictly unknowable. If Uexküll is a vitalist, he is also a rigorous empiricist – and his vitalism is Kantian. Merleau-Ponty, however, will disinvest Uexküll's *Umwelt* of its Kantianism; for him, the concept of the *Umwelt* even takes us beyond Schelling.

The notion of *Umwelt* clearly demonstrates a "refusal to classify animals as if their behavior and their organism represented more and more perfect solutions to the same problem" (*N* 171). As Merleau-Ponty explains, in lower animals there is a 'closed' unity of function without the need for positing an organizing center. In higher animals, however, the *Umwelt* is no longer a 'closed unity' but an opening conditioned by their biological and cognitive constitution. This 'opening' is the formation of a *Gegenwelt* or "counter-world," which is a "new world of excitation originating in the central nervous system that is erected between the environment and the motor nervous system" (*UIT* 233-234). Higher animals possess a classificatory power, a capacity to differentiate stimuli and objects in its *Umwelt*. In the counter-world of higher animals, the objects of the *Umwelt* are 'mirrored' in schemata. As Merleau-Ponty explains, the objective exterior environment now "plays the role of a sign rather than that of a cause" (*N* 171). Similar to the symbolic form elaborated in *The Structure of Behavior*, higher animals can deduce the "possibility of the object" from the "effects that they receive, and from the way their receptive organs are constituted" (*N* 172). This means, as Brentari points out, that "between the subject (human or animal) and the external reality there is a semiotic relationship, of *interpretation* or even *translation*."[39] The nervous system "amounts to a rejoinder to the exterior world" (*N* 171). Accordingly, consciousness "is only one of the varied forms of behavior" and must "appear as institution, as a type of behavior" (*N* 167). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty concludes that the *Umwelt* is "a type of which the organization, the consciousness, and the machine are only variations" (*N* 168).

[38] Uexküll's teleology is to be contrasted with Aristotelian or Drieschian vitalist teleology, which is characterized as "purposiveness, goal-directedness or tension towards an end (*Zweckmässigkeit*)," as Brentari points out (*Uexküll,* 237).
[39] Brentari, *Uexküll,* 85.

Furthermore, the *Umwelt* of the animal is thus radically inaccessible to the human observer. Methodologically, the scientific observer must "make do with a tedious and imprecise reconstruction" of the "variety of counterworlds" that mirror[40] the surroundings of the animal. Ultimately, however, "it is not *their* environment that we see, but *ours*" (*UIT* 234-235). In fact, the *Umwelt* is "always a part of the animal itself, constructed by *its* organization, and processed into an indissoluble whole with the animal itself" (*UIT* 234-235). All organisms, including plants, constitute transcendent realities that "remain imperceptible" for us; therefore, we are forced to concede that "the problem of life slips away again and again from our short-sighted eyes" (*UIT* 244).

§2. The Soap Bubble and Harmonious Nature: Uexküll's Kantianism

Uexküll employs the image of the animal's *Umwelt* as a soap bubble in *A Foray*, a metaphor that, as Buchanan writes, neatly emphasizes "how Uexküll sees the *Umwelt* as finite and spherical by encircling the organism within certain limits," and which precludes us "from ever penetrating into another organism's soap bubble."[41] Tønnessen attributes the use of this image to Uexküll's Kantianism, as it "leads him to portray Umwelten as closed, sealed-off worlds."[42] In fact, in *Theoretical Biology* Uexküll explicitly describes the task of biology as the expansion of Kantianism in two directions: (1) to account for the role of the body as a biological form, and (2) to "investigate the relationships with the objects of the other subjects (animals)."[43] As Deely asserts, it was indeed Kant "who best understood the limiting functions of psychobiological constitution upon knowledge."[44] It is Uexküll's transcendental approach, and not his emphasis on the teleology of nature – thus the first *Critique* and not the third - that Brentari argues is Uexküll's "principal and most original link" to Kantian philosophy.[45] Uexküll naturalizes Kant, extending to animal subjects (and their species specificity) the "universality of the transcendental structures."[46] Cognition is discursive, arising only through the synthesis of sensible intuition and the understanding, or the transcendental structure of the species. Uexküll's Kantianism has

[40] Brentari explains that this 'mirroring' – is non-mimetic, not "an exact reproduction of the external world," but "a formal, non-isomorphic correspondence" (*Uexküll*, 88).
[41] Brett Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 25.
[42] Morten Tønnessen, Introduction to *Jakob von Uexkull: The Discovery of the Umwelt between Biosemiotics and Theoretical Biology* by Carlo Brentari, 10.
[43] Uexküll, *Theoretical Biology*, xv.
[44] John Deely, "Umwelt," *Semiotica* 134, Iss. 1/4 (2001): 126.
[45] Brentari, *Uexküll*, 65.
[46] ibid., 108.

thus led to the charge of 'fixism' with regard to the rigidity of each species' *Umwelten*.[47] The idea of perfection mentioned above is, as Stjernfelt points out, a "static idea" and prompts a refutation of the idea of adaptation insofar as the latter "implies imperfection being pervasive in nature."[48] The fixity of each species' *Umwelten* is refuted by Uexküll's student Konrad Lorenz, who holds that the "correspondence between the cognitive structure of the organism and the extrasubjective reality" is the result of an evolutionary process of adaptation.[49] This is why, as Brentari explains, Uexküll is unable to account for "the potential for misunderstanding or error in the relationship between animals and environment."[50] Lorenz's goose that imprints on a human being is therefore an unfortunate error, abnormality or "discrepancy."[51] Lorenz will eventually characterize Uexküll as a "vitalist among the vitalists, ferocious idealist, Kantian – a proper enemy of the natural research," who puts forth "a kind of monadology" that 'horrifies' the scientist.[52]

Uexküll extends Kant's transcendental aesthetic to non-human subjects and their various sensory spheres, which allows human beings to observe animal environments on the condition that we accept that any knowledge thereby gained is essentially limited. We saw above that objects become meaningful for the organism only when various stimuli are transformed by the *Bauplan* of the animal into excitations. The organism transforms, differentiates, modifies, or *produces* the meaning of the 'object,' which thereby *is* the object, and which in a strict sense does not pre-exist the relation that the *Umwelt* names. The object can never be the same; the 'same' object is transformed when it enters into a different *Umwelt*. As such, a stone "becomes a carrier of meaning as soon as it enters into a relationship with a subject," and since no animal (with the exception of man) is ever simply a pure observer, "one may assert that no animal ever enters into a relationship with an 'object' [in general]."[53] Moreover, the object or the thing in itself is absolutely inaccessible and unknowable. Not all stimuli, particularly in lower animals, become perceptive marks; the organism must be 'open' to a certain stimulus in order for the sensory organ to transform it into a meaningful

[47] ibid., 114.
[48] Frederik Stjernfelt, "A Natural Symphony?" *Semiotica* 134, Iss. 1/4 (2001): 86.
[49] Quoted in Brentari, *Uexküll*, 220.
[50] Brentari, *Uexküll*, 147.
[51] ibid. Uexküll therefore fails to grasp the "positive possibilities" that imprinting may create. Thus Brentari claims, "in the teleological and 'hyper-harmonious' context of Uexküllian theoretical biology, dysfunction often appears as an enigma" (146).
[52] Quoted in Carlo Brentari, "Konrad Lorenz's Epistemological Criticism Towards Jakob von Uexküll," *Sign Systems Studies* 37, Iss. 3/4 (2009): 648.
[53] Quoted in Brentari, *Uexküll*, 159.

stimulus, in short, for the organism to experience it. This entails that even for higher animals "the external reality in itself, the non-interpreted and non-translated surroundings, will always remain unknown."[54] In other words, an inaccessible noumenal realm subsists, and this is why Uexküll can argue that all organisms are perfectly and harmoniously adapted to their environments. Yet, as Brentari argues, the notion of the *Umwelt*, which is a relational concept that differs significantly from "the anatomical and physiological study of the animal," as well as from positivist behaviorism, draws on Kant's philosophy in order to go beyond it: "by turning the transcendental subject into an interpreting subject, and by turning environmental experience into a translating and interpreting process."[55]

a. Natural Plan and Design

There is another aspect of Uexküll's Kantianism that is not entirely overcome by Uexküll's emphasis on the organism as interpretative and activity-passivity: the problem of the *Naturfaktor* and *planmässigkeit* [plan accordance]. This also leads us to the musical references that recur in Uexküll's work, which Merleau-Ponty refers to in passing in *The Structure of Behavior* as well as in the *Nature* course. Uexküll consistently positions himself against mechanism and positivistic science.[56] He argues that physics and chemistry only acknowledge "the law of cause and effect" and deny "the existence of design in nature," a denial resulting from the shift from Kepler to Newton, whereby the starry sky became "a meaningless mechanical thing."[57] As Smolin writes, Kepler's discovery prompted a shift from an "Earth-centered" cosmology to one centered on the sun, which effectively "deepens the harmony of the world."[58] For Uexküll, there must be a unity to the world, a design that would endow the world with meaning. Uexküll's emphasis on and commitment to natural design also accounts for his denunciation of the accidental and plan-less universe implied by Darwinism. As Buchanan explains, on Uexküll's reading, "Darwinism is too haphazard in accounting for natural events," but also excessively emphasizes the materialism and determinism of

[54] Brentari, *Uexküll*, 88.
[55] ibid., 239.
[56] In particular, the work of Haeckel, Boerhaave, and Julien de la Mettrie (Brentari, *Uexküll*, 50-51).
[57] Uexküll, "The New Concept of Umwelt: A Link Between Science and the Humanities (1937)," *Semiotica* 134, Iss. 1/4 (2001): 144. Hereafter *NCU*. Buchanan discusses the importance of the absence or withdrawal of God for Uexküll's reading of the history of science (*Onto-Ethologies,* 16-17). What is most important, however, as Buchanan writes, is what this "fundamentally shattering" shift means for Uexküll's stance vis-à-vis Darwinism.
[58] Smolin, *Time Reborn*, 18-19.

genes for a species.[59] For Uexküll, Darwin posits "both a chaotic freedom and a materialist determinism," leading to a "hopeless confusion" and a "planless, chaotic physicalism."[60] Against both Darwinism and mechanistic science, Uexküll expressly wants to advance a vitalist[61] notion of natural development in accordance with a plan. Stjernfelt thus claims Uexküll's "ardent anti-Darwinism" results in "a bizarre brand of creationism," the biological world having been "created by a 'composer.'"[62]

This *planmässigkeit*, however, plays out on multiple levels: it refers to the structure or symphony of the individual organism, the relation between each animal and its *Umwelt* as discussed above, to the "contrapuntal" designs of certain organisms (as well as among organisms and non-living things), as well as to Nature as a whole. To return to the sea urchin, Uexküll emphasizes not the 'impulse' but the "unitary plan" of the organism that "draws the entire surroundings of the sea urchin into its organization" (*UIT* 231). Due to our objectivist bias, we tend to afford primacy to the "design of the body," and subsequently "deduce the design of sensory perceptions from the body" (*NCU* 117). Yet it is the plan or the "musical harmony" (*NCU* 117) and not the design of the musical instrument that is primary; in fact, it is the requirements of the former that determine and define the latter. Hence Uexküll argues that animal performances are not a "product of a harmonic build of the body"; rather, "it is the harmony of the performance that determines that of the body" (*NCU* 117). Yet this performance is conditioned by the *Bauplan* of the organism. That is, Uexküll eschews physicalism but maintains a notion of harmony and unity that comes close to affirming an idea or 'score' that would direct and determine performance. As he writes in 1937, "every *Umwelt* of a normal animal is a faultless composition of nature – you only have to understand how to look for its theme and its notes" (*NCU* 120). He concludes, in a formulation that emphasizes his vision of nature as conformity to plan: "Everything physical can be cut with a knife – but not a melody."[63]

In the famous example of the tick in the introduction to *A Foray*, Uexküll describes how the "design" of the blind and deaf tick (but which has photosensitive skin), is contrapuntal to the design of mammals. The tick, for which the smell of butyric

[59] Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 19.
[60] ibid.
[61] Brentari qualifies Uexküll's vitalism: he characterizes Uexküll's biology as empiricist or materialistic vitalism. According to Brentari, a direct line runs from Albrecht von Haller, Ernst von Baer, Johannes Müller, Caspar Wolff to J. F. Blumenbach. See *Uexküll*, 54.
[62] Stjernfelt, "Natural Symphony," 80.
[63] Uexküll, *A Theory*, 194.

acid and a specific temperature of mammals are meaningful signals or carriers, has been known to wait for eighteen years on its branch for a mammal to pass underneath. Similarly, the spider's web contains properties that are contrapuntal to the fly: "the strength of the threads that have to withstand the collision of the fly, and the thinness of the threads to make them invisible to the fly" (*NCU* 122). As Uexküll writes in *A Theory of Meaning*, we can therefore say that "the spider's web is configured in a fly-like way, because the spider is also fly-like."[64] Further, the spider weaves its web prior to encountering a fly. In other words, non-mechanistic relationality is what is primary – more so than the spider or the fly as a 'bounded,' individual entity. The organism is defined in accordance with its *Umwelt* and the meaningful relations it enters into. Buchanan succinctly expresses the ontological significance of Uexküll's descriptions: "At bottom, an organism *is* what it is capable of becoming, insofar as it already is the other that it becomes in the harmonious relation."[65] Yet this capability cannot be logically determined – it is potentiality. As such, Uexküll asserts that the "fundamental principle of the whole technology of Nature" can be gleaned in Goethe's saying: "Were the eye not sunlike, it could never gaze upon the sun" – although Uexküll is quick to add: "Were the sun not eyelike, it could not shine in any sky."[66] The conditions of possibility for the relations a thing is capable of entering into, and its 'functional' potentialities, thus emerge *with* the existence of the relations themselves. The eye could not be sun-like without the sun being eye-like; this 'like-ness' names an intertwining that is revealed as always already underway at the moment we recognize this complementarity. For Uexküll, "all properties of living creatures we find connected to units according to a plan, and these units are contrapuntally matched to the properties of other units"; thus we find that nature is "a comprehensive harmonic totality" (*NCU* 122). We ought to think of "meaning in the natural score" as akin to "harmony in the musical score," a conjunction or link that functions according to non-logical or non-mechanical laws.[67]

It is not the idea of harmony with respect to a "duet" or "triad" of organisms, but the vitalist idea of *Naturfaktor* or natural force that presents a difficulty. This idea also subtends Uexküll's notion of the perfect agreement between the animal and its environment. Uexküll writes of the perfection of all animal organisms, inter-animality

[64] ibid., 190.
[65] Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 34.
[66] Uexküll, *A Theory*, 190.
[67] ibid., 189.

and natural development: "It was as if the same masterful hand were gliding across the keys of life since time immemorial."[68] Indeed, Thure von Uexküll asserts that in his father's writings, "Nature may be compared to a composer who listens to his own construction."[69] The *Naturfaktor*, which is speculative, unknowable and must therefore be postulated – similar to Schelling's idea of nature as absolute productivity – is "ultimately responsible for the harmony and accordance in effect on every level of nature (in the single organism, among different organisms, in ecosystems, etc.)."[70] However, as Brentari explains, while we know that the *Naturfaktor* has instituted a "harmonious" and "comprehensive plan that includes the individual building-plans," and has organized "the relationships between organisms and specific environments smoothly," we cannot know "if this plan has a purpose."[71] Nature is teleological and unfolds according to a plan, but this plan is unknowable and must remain an "eternal mystery"[72]; Nature is "forever unknowable behind all of the worlds it produces."[73] The idea of Nature as a "harmonic totality" is therefore empirically unverifiable and risks sedimenting species-fixity (which would subsequently omit the possibility of change or historical becoming) and introducing necessity or determinism by cosmic design. As Jesper Hoffmeyer suggests, Uexküll's *planmässigkeit* and the tension in his work between harmony and freedom (or improvisation, as it were) can easily lead to the idea that "organic evolution is not itself a creative process but a gradual, if majestic, unfolding of Nature's own master plan."[74] The radical unknowability of the *Naturfaktor*, however, also makes it possible to interpret Uexküll's harmonic composition of nature more generously, as Buchanan does: "The plan that nature abides by is a musical score. Yet, Uexküll never to my knowledge confirms what type of musical score this might be."[75]

§3. The Unfurling of the Animal: Merleau-Ponty's Critical Reading of Uexküll

a. Animal Melody

[68] ibid., 195.
[69] Quoted in Hoffmeyer, "Uexküllian Planmässigkeit," *Sign Systems Studies* 32, Iss. 1/2 (2004): 74. As Hoffmeyer goes on to suggest, "a nature that listens to its own composition is not a metaphor that easily mingles with the idea of a deteriorating harmony" (79).
[70] Brentari, *Uexküll*, 123.
[71] ibid., 238.
[72] Quoted in Brentari, *Uexküll*, 166.
[73] Uexküll, *A Foray*, 135.
[74] Hoffmeyer, "Uexküllian," 75.
[75] Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 27.

It is significant that Merleau-Ponty refers to Uexküll's musical metaphors in the *Nature* course, but always to the idea of *melody*, and not harmony. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's single reference to Uexküll in *The Structure of Behavior* concerned the idea that every organism "is a melody which sings itself" (*SB* 159).[76] The idea of melody also appears earlier in the text, in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the primacy of form or structure with regard to behavior that depend on a 'central sector' or coordinating center. He contrasts the 'unity' of coordination of a machine, which responds to stimuli (for which it has been programmed), to that of the living being:

> Here the coordinated elements …constitute together, by their very union, a whole which has its proper law and which manifests it as soon as the first elements of excitation are given, just as the first notes of a melody assign a certain mode of resolution to the whole. While the notes taken separately have an equivocal signification, being capable of entering into an infinity of possible ensembles, in the melody each one is demanded by the context and contributes its part in expressing something which is not contained in any one of them and which binds them together internally…Coordination is now the creation of a unity of meaning which is expressed in the juxtaposed parts, the creation of certain relations which owe nothing to the materiality of the terms which they unite (*SB* 87).

We can note here that the idea of melody emphasizes the whole over the particular combination of the 'parts' and introduces the notion of an implicit totality or 'resolution' that is nowhere given but implied or insinuated. The notes participate in a whole and find themselves 'demanded by the context,' bound by a unity that is only possible because of separation or isolated elements that prior to engagement or being strung together are capable of "entering into an infinity of possible ensembles." Melody thus names a unity that works with elements, but which involves an excess that is unthematizable according to mechanical laws - but which *musical* laws express. Indeed, Uexküll claims it is to musical laws that we must look if we wish to discern "the laws of life" (*NCU* 117). What is expressed is something "not contained" in any of the elements or notes, and it is this negativity or excess that "binds them together internally." As noted in the previous chapter, *The Structure of Behavior* thus advances a non-positivist conception of the whole or totality, and this involves the positing of a 'something more' that is neither a something nor nothing, without which the whole could not be what it is. Now in the *Nature* course, the temporal significance of the idea of melody with reference to living beings comes to the forefront:

[76] Toadvine, *Nature*, 88. This is an idea Uexküll takes from biologist Karl Ernst von Baer.

> The melody gives us a particular consciousness of time. We think naturally that the past secretes the future ahead of it. But this notion of time is refuted by the melody. At the moment when the melody begins, the last note is there, in its own manner. In a melody, a reciprocal influence between the first and the last note takes place, and we have to say that the first note is possible only because of the last, and vice versa. It is in this way that things happen in the construction of a living being. There is no priority of effect over cause. Just as we cannot say that the last note is the end of the melody and that the first is the effect of it, neither can we distinguish the meaning apart from the meaning where it is expressed. As Proust says, melody is a Platonic idea that we cannot see separately. It is impossible to distinguish the means and the end, the essence and the existence in it (*N* 176).

There is reciprocity between the first and last note such that each is the possibility of the other; there exists a virtual 'ending,' the last note 'in its own manner,' once the melody commences. While in the earlier text the separate notes have their own capacity that is taken up by the context or melody, now the first note only comes into existence with the last. The first and last note do not have the relation of cause and effect, of a future that would be bound by a past that 'secretes' it. The first *becomes* first only once the melody has begun, so that the possibilities of the note become imaginable once the note is 'anchored,' as it were. As such, we can say that the melody must begin before the note that pre-exists it can become what it is. This vertiginous teleology is akin to that found in the relation between the reflected and unreflected. Moreover, essence and existence are indistinguishable; as Merleau-Ponty argues, the meaning (or idea or essence) cannot be thought without its expression (or temporal, spatial existence). Melody "occupies a privileged site between the virtual and the actual," as Toadvine argues.[77] Meaning or essence relies on temporal unfolding, and it is melody, not harmony, that expresses this idea.[78] The idea of melody is akin to what Merleau-Ponty calls *institution* [*Stiftung*]: the organism is the emergence of a field, an event that is also the advent of something more than itself, a 'happening' and an arrival or materialization. It establishes a dimension "in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense and will make a *sequel*, a history" (*IP* 8-9).

It is the "theme of the melody, much more than the idea of a nature-subject or of a suprasensible thing" (*N* 178), and more than the idea of an overarching *plan*, that expresses animal life. Melody implies an "internal connection in the multiple" that *takes time* to unfold, and which is not given prior to the first note; the connection "is not that

[77] Toadvine, "Melody of Life," 271.
[78] Musicologist William Pole writes, "melody conveys essentially the idea of *motion*; harmony is consistent with the idea of *rest*. Melody must go on, or it is not melody" (*Philosophy of Music*, 178).

of the divine understanding"[79] and is hence a finite or 'concrete' essence-existence. The theme of melody is here mobilized against a Schellingian unbridled naturalism (in the *Naturphilosophie* works) encapsulated in the idea of a nature-subject.[80] Arguably, this also pits Merleau-Ponty's interpretation firmly against the third 'level' of Uexküll's *planmässigkeit* explored above: Nature as a harmonic totality. Merleau-Ponty's reading of Uexküll is in fact taken up by biosemiotics theorists Hoffmeyer and Stjernfelt as offering a "solution" to the problem of Uexküll's vitalism, finalist teleology, and the harmonious idea of nature.[81] For both, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation "makes it possible to see the life of the individual organism as a realization, a variation of the theme, requiring no vitalist goal."[82] Merleau-Ponty's critical reading demonstrates "the lucky possibilities of Uexküll's melody metaphor," which therefore "go beyond his own static perfection intentions: music may be perfect, but it is far from always the case."[83] Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on melody with regard to the animal allows him to argue - with Uexküll - against positivist science, but also constitutes a critical adjustment of Uexküll's theory, insofar as it makes room for creativity, variation, and becoming with regard to animal life. The idea of melody incorporates virtuality and movement, possibility and futurity. However, as we will see, this does not mean that Merleau-Ponty adopts a Darwinian position; in fact, in the third *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty explicitly positions his philosophy at equal distance from Darwinism and Idealism – both have elements worth retaining, but neither is sufficient.

b. "An Intermediary Reality"

The concept of *Umwelt* challenges the behaviorist assumption that mechanistic thought is capable of grasping the basic elements or characteristics of lower animals (as we have seen, the *Bauplan* is incapable of accounting for protoplasm), as well as the idea that consciousness or mind precedes, and indeed drives or *causes*, behavior in higher animals. It is also an ontological reality and not merely an epistemological problem; that is, it is not a methodological issue of gaining knowledge of, and unproblematic access to, the animal's subjective world. The *Umwelt* is the meaningful world of the animal,

[79] *MPR* 420.
[80] See *N* 84: "Natural production is conceived as hyperphysical causality. This is the temptation of Schelling's philosophy…Reason is mistaken, and the rational human is conceived as what remains of a being that is now extinct."
[81] Hoffmeyer, "Uexküllian," and Stjernfelt, "Natural Symphony."
[82] Stjernfelt, "Natural Symphony," 88.
[83] ibid.

and marks, for Merleau-Ponty, "the difference between the world such as it exists in itself, and the world as the world of a living being. It is an intermediary reality" (*N* 167). This is why "identical exterior conditions bring along different possibilities of behavior" (*N* 176). We can therefore speak of "the beginning of culture," for the animal "defines within Nature a species of preculture" through "the architecture of symbols that the animal brings from its side" (*N* 176). It is an intermediary reality between the objective and subjective orders; it differs from the order of the in-itself, and it is a reality not wholly produced by animal consciousness, for it does not require intellection. We cannot commence with objective conditions or the external environment and proceed to access it; it cannot be logically deduced, but is a novel, natural emergence. The *Umwelt* is not a thing or a combination of objects, it is "a relation of meaning" that inheres "between the situation and the movement of the animal" (*N* 175). The "ontological status" of the *Umwelt* cannot be explained "through physical processes alone nor through an explicit plan in the consciousness of the animal."[84] Rather, it is "a kind of self-organization at the level of life," as Toadvine puts it.[85] Thus the *Umwelt* names participation through translation or interpretation, and the living being must be understood as a kind of power to be affected, an activity that is active because it is also passive, a passivity that is active by virtue of its passivity. As Merleau-Ponty explains, "there is no stimulation from the outside that had not been provoked by the animal's own movement," and "each action of the milieu is conditioned by the action of the animal" (*N* 175). What the organism is affected by is what it in a certain sense anticipates or actively creates; the organism produces the meaning of its world – and thus its *Umwelt* - as much as it participates in the latter. In other words, what is crucial here is that perception and behavior must be thought in conjunction; the living being is indissociable from its behavior (which can no longer be thought in terms of mechanism or finalism).

According to Merleau-Ponty, behaviors "deposit a surplus of signification on the surface of objects" (*N* 173). This in turn forces us to consider perceptual time [*Merkzeit*] and space as the meaningful dimensions of the organism's *Umwelt*, the perceptual world that is also its sphere of action. Thus while we may conceive of 'pure' objective space, "the space of action is made of divergences, between my left and my right hand, from a zero-point that is the axis of the trunk" (*N* 173). The primacy of the perceptual-active

[84] Toadvine, *Nature*, 88.
[85] ibid.

sphere is the same in the case of experienced time: the shortest period of time that the human being can measure is one-eighteenth of a second – "beyond this there is no more than simultaneity" (*N* 173). This fraction of a second marks the lower perceptive limit for the human; eighteen years is the upper limit or threshold for the tick, "beyond which nothing is perceived" (*N* 173). Hence, Merleau-Ponty argues, "we must understand life as the opening of a field of action," and this 'opening' is not a straightforward production on the part of the animal, nor imposed on it: "the animal is produced by the production of a milieu, that is, by the appearing in the physical world of a field radically different from the physical world" (*N* 173).

c. "The Animal is Like a Quiet Force": The Introduction of Negativity

How are we then to understand the "subject that projects an *Umwelt*" (*N* 176)? How might we conceive of a subject in the absence of a central region – as was the case in the sea urchin, for example? Merleau-Ponty declares, in a formulation that eschews both Aristotelian finalism or preformationism and mechanism: "the unfurling of the animal is like a pure wake that is related to no boat" (*N* 176). Moreover, since "behavior cannot be understood if we understand it moment by moment" (*N* 175), as Schelling, Whitehead, and Bergson[86] also contend, we can only attain images of the "momentary manifestation" of organisms, so that the "thing that is unfurled from the egg to the chicken," "constitutes a chain of objects without becoming an object" (*N* 176). Now, as we have seen, for Uexküll, the development of the organism abides by an internal law unknowable to us; Merleau-Ponty therefore says that for Uexküll "we are englobed in an *Umgebung* [environment] that our *Umwelt* cannot englobe" (*N* 177). This is Uexküll's "Kantian solution," as Merleau-Ponty argues. In *A Foray*, Uexküll takes up Schelling's solution, which is to posit a hidden *Natursubject* that lies "behind all the produced worlds" (*N* 177). According to Merleau-Ponty, the concept of the *Umwelt* actually breaks with both Kant and Schelling; it brings together the problem of genesis or development, and form. It does this by introducing the principle of negativity:

> With the living being, a milieu of events appears, which opens on a spatial and a temporal field. This surging-forth of a privileged milieu is not the manifestation of a new force. The living being works only with physicochemical elements, but these subordinated forces join the unseen relations between them. We can at this moment speak of an animal.

[86] As Bergson writes in *Creative Evolution*, "We are at ease only in the discontinuous, in the immobile, in the dead" - so that "when the intellect undertakes the study of life, it necessarily treats the living like the inert" (165, 195).

> This moment is not entirely under the dependence of physicochemical conditions. The animal is like a quiet force (*N* 177).

The animal is 'quiet' because it emerges softly, without rupture. As he argues in *The Structure of Behavior*, we cannot locate 'life' at a certain point; it emerges out of a multiplicity, a field and set of relations. Similarly we cannot ascertain a break or rupture between styles of life: "there is not a break between the planned animal, the animal that plans, and the animal without plan" (*N* 176). This is of course a reference to lower animals like the sea urchin, to animals with a *Gegenwelt*, and to the human being, who has an open *Umwelt* by virtue of a "structural," as opposed to Kantian, freedom (*N* 178). Man, too, comes "silently into the world," as Merleau-Ponty writes in the third *Nature* course, with reference to Teilhard de Chardin. The animal is like a 'force' because it is irreducible to and cannot be defined as substance, subject, or a series of physicochemical elements. Rather, it is an intensity, a field of forces and relations – some of which are 'unseen.' There is 'natural' negativity, the introduction of a *difference within* the physical world which remains 'unseen,' the possibility of a kind of 'structural freedom' that cannot be thought independently of physico-chemistry, but which cannot be logically deduced from, or accounted for, by the latter. The animal must be thought in non-actualist and non-deterministic terms. As mentioned above, for Merleau-Ponty negativities "also count in the sensible world" (*S* 172).

Uexküll suggests that if we were to encounter an event whereby "the following influenced the preceding," then we would assuredly speak of a miracle (28-29).[87] This is precisely what happens in the case of protoplasm: "It is not the current structure, but the one to come, that determines the protoplasm's behavior," and this is a miracle "*not because of its lawlessness, but because it proves the action of incomprehensible laws*" (*UIT* 28-29, italics added). Uexküll's miracle comes close to Merleau-Ponty's idea of the theme of the animal melody, except Merleau-Ponty dispels with the need for a noumenal *Naturfaktor*. For Merleau-Ponty, the *Umwelt* is not a goal (it is non-teleological), not "present like an idea" (it is non-idealist), but rather a "theme that haunts consciousness" (*N* 178) akin to objects or 'poles' in oneiric consciousness. Uexküll's notion allows us to account for the "constitution of the anatomical and physiological organism" (*N* 178) without reducing it to physical structure. However, with the introduction of natural negativity, we may also see how Merleau-Ponty departs from Uexküll's teleological understanding of nature. As he argues, "the facts show it

[87] Quoted in Brentari, *Uexküll*, 71.

well, finality is quite imperfect, sometimes short of, sometimes beyond the useful" (*N* 175-176). As we will see, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes contingency and indeterminacy.

Merleau-Ponty also rejects the idea of a species-specific essence which would subordinate the animal to a static, timeless idea of its species; the very notion of the animal as an "executor of a plan traced from the outside" is refuted by the idea of the *Umwelt* (*N* 176). According to Merleau-Ponty, "we must admit *in* the very fabric of physical elements a transtemporal and transspatial element of which we do not take account by supposing an essence outside of time" (*N* 176, italics added). This transversal, durational element cannot be understood solely in terms of idealism or causalism. While it 'transcends' pure extension and punctual existence, it cannot be wholly defined in terms of participation in an atemporal or aspatial idea. Rather, it is a dimension or 'thickness' that both departs from *and* remains tethered to physical elements. As such, the introduction of a transspatial theme "does not consist in transforming a mechanical preformation into a metaphysical preformation, and placing what we cannot place in Being outside of Being" (*N* 183). The animal is the "realization, transspatial and transtemporal" (*N* 178), of the theme of the melody, but the melody is not an Idea in the Kantian or Platonic sense. The theme "is not outside its manifest realization; it is a variable thematism that the animal does not seek to realize by a copy of the model, but that haunts its particular realizations, without these themes being the goal of the organism" (*N* 178). Instead of playing a part in a harmonious composition, the animal is a *historical* variation on a theme that – *through variation* or divergence – realizes and expresses this theme or melody.[88] This is precisely the argument Merleau-Ponty makes against Husserl's dualism (noema and thing) in the reading notes on Gurwitsch as discussed earlier – the essence is an in-variant, a generality. Melody thus names what Mauro Carbone terms a 'sensible idea,' a form given "*together* with its own sensible deformations: the only ones which can offer us a presentation, albeit indirect, of that idea."[89] As Carbone writes, "the (animal) theme only exists *together* with the variations which on the one hand deny it – being variations – but which by this very negation indirectly affirm it."[90] Behavior or existence expresses essence through divergence, which is also to say that essence is what it is through

[88] The theme of the melody also problematizes the spatialization of duration, according to which time is thought as extensity, succession without admixture or without "mutual penetration,' as Bergson puts it (*Time*, 101).
[89] Mauro Carbone, *An Unprecedented Deformation: Marcel Proust and the Sensible Ideas*, trans. N. Keane (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 10.
[90] ibid., 20.

variation, that it is dependent on existence and temporality. The idea is "a guide indissociable from the activity" (*N* 183). Drawing on Proust, Carbone continues:

> Uexküll's perspective seems to characterize the theme as the *absent* which only its own variations can indirectly make present, and which is therefore *inseparable* from and *simultaneous* with them. The variations themselves constitute the theme, without however exhausting it…[I]n our vision, the particular, while offering itself as such, *contemporaneously* dimensionalizes itself and becomes a universal, like 'a note that becomes tonality.'[91]

The living being, as the 'particular,' is a quiet force and the opening of a field or a dimension. It is an oblique reference to a theme that is nowhere present but which 'haunts' its existence. We must therefore speak of the genesis or development of an idea that relies on historical, temporal and finite existence – a transcendent brought 'down to earth,' as it were. The organism is a style (variation, divergence), an expression and participation in a whole – and this whole is not a harmonious totality that in the last analysis would be explained by an overarching plan. As a dimension or force, the organism problematizes the metaphysical division between essence and existence, and being and nothingness. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty asserts, "the reality of the organism supposes a non-Parmenidean Being, a form that escapes from the dilemma of being and nonbeing" (*N* 183). That is, the unfurling or development of the animal is not deceptive or illusory; existence is not completely actual and hence timeless and unchanging. Consequently, as we will see, possibility cannot be subordinated to necessity, since what 'can' or 'could' exist does not necessarily have actual existence. The possible also *becomes*, for existence is not predetermined.

In the following chapter, we will focus more extensively on Merleau-Ponty's concept of negativity, which cannot be equated with nothingness or Parmenidean nonbeing, but is rather an immanent principle in Being. The idea of natural negativity is further developed in his philosophical exploration of the studies of George E. Coghill and Arnold Gesell, and will be explicitly linked to the dimension of the possible. The emphasis on contingency and futurity with regard to natural being takes us beyond Uexküll's Kantianism and anti-Darwinism, and introduces the idea of a non-actualist possible.

[91] ibid., 21.

chapter 6

NATURAL NEGATIVITY: NATURE AND THE NON-ACTUALIST POSSIBLE

The ultra-mechanism or ultra-finalism of the Darwinians rests upon the ontological principle of all or nothing: an organism is *absolutely what it is; if it were not, it would have been deprived of existence by the given conditions.*
-Merleau-Ponty[1]

…to see is to be granted the permission to not think the thing, since it is already seen.
-Merleau-Ponty[2]

§1. The Studies of Coghill and Gesell: Toward a New Concept of Totality

Merleau-Ponty continues his discussion of natural negativity in his analysis of anatomist and neuroembryologist G. E. Coghill's 1929 study on the *Amblystoma* or axolotl. Importantly, the concept of negativity not only acts as a critique of mechanism or vitalism, it also introduces or 'rehabilitates' the temporality of animal life and the dimension of the possible. That is, for Merleau-Ponty we find "dynamic, unstable equilibria in which every rearrangement *reassumes already latent activities* and transfigures them" (*IPP* 165, italics added). As Morris puts it, animals "manifest an onto-logic of being: they manifest the way that an invisible *of* the visible operates in being."[3] Negativity or the hollow (*creux*) is therefore to be sharply distinguished from lack, which is not only determinate but also invokes an end, 'higher principle,' or ultimate reality that would ultimately fulfill it.

Merleau-Ponty is particularly interested in Coghill's investigation of the development of the axolotl's motor behavior. The first motor act of the axolotl is swimming, which can be separated into distinct phases. In the first phase there is no motility, and muscles can only be directly stimulated (not through contact with the skin) (*N* 140). Secondly, there is the flexing of the head, and the animal is capable of

[1] *IPP* 165.
[2] *Texts and Dialogues,* 140.
[3] David Morris, "The Place of Animal Being," *Research in Phenomenology* 40 (2010): 194.

responding to a touch on the skin.[4] The animal is then able to bend itself into curl or coil. In the fourth phase, this movement becomes an "S" curvature, which is the "earliest co-ordination for locomotion."[5] Finally, "the animal makes several of these movements in series: it knows how to swim" (*N* 141). Anatomical or motor development occurs *alongside* sensory development, such that for Coghill "the mechanics of swimming" are "realized by the calendar of development" (*N* 141). That is, "if the animal knows how to swim, it is because it matures" (*N* 141). When the axolotl learns to walk, development will occur in much the same way: the movements of the legs begin as "enveloped" or "integrated in the movement of the trunk" (*N* 141). The first walking movements of the limbs are "nothing more nor less than the swimming movement with greatly reduced speed."[6] Indeed, Coghill finds that the movement of swimming is "the initial and dominant factor in terrestrial locomotion," such that "the general pattern of the primary nervous mechanism of walking" is already in place "before the animal can in the least respond to its environment."[7] The nervous system anticipates the development and future behavior of the organism: "the embryological development progressively realizes the individual parts (anatomically and functionally), at the same time that the behavior of the whole invades the periphery of the body" (*N* 142). How is it that anatomical development occurs in such a way that "the organism appears precociously adapted to its function" (*N* 142)?

According to Merleau-Ponty, Coghill introduces a "new notion" into his study – one that takes us beyond the realism of pure physiology. As the organism develops, "a certain power – 'what it can do' – is realized at the same time, a growing possibility interior to the maturing organism" (*N* 144). In Coghill's study, "we cannot define the animal by its immediate functioning; here the apparatus has meaning only for a future" (*N* 144). That is to say, the organism cannot be understood in actualist terms, in terms of its static or absolute properties – in short, as a mechanism with nervous functions. The axolotl self-creates a 'possible': the possibility of swimming or walking. Moreover, behavior "expands" through the organism's body as a whole – i.e. the animal first lives in its trunk, it gradually achieves independence of limbs – but the separate parts of the organism acquire their proper existence *at the same time*. As Coghill explains, the

[4] George E. Coghill, *Anatomy and the Problem of Behavior* (London and New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1964), 9.
[5] ibid.
[6] ibid., 25.
[7] ibid., 26, 86.

development of behavior involves two simultaneous processes: the "expansion of the total pattern" and the "individuation of partial systems."[8] This also means – against classical reflex theory – that reflexes "emerge as a special feature within a more diffuse but dominant mechanism of integration of the whole organism."[9] Reflexes are incomprehensible without the notion of the organism as a whole – and this affirms Schelling's inversion of the Kantian priority given to mechanism. Behavior is not "simply a combination or co-ordination of reflexes"; Coghill demonstrates that there exists a "dominant organic unity from the beginning."[10] Thus Merleau-Ponty writes, "life is hidden to the extent that it is realized" (*N* 145). In a sense, the organism anticipates itself, totality and organization occur simultaneously; behavior emerges in a way that cannot be explained purely physiologically. Anatomy must be understood dynamically. Indeed, "behavior appears as a principle immanent to the organism itself, as a principle that would first emerge as totality" (*N* 145). For Merleau-Ponty, this notion of totality is the primary philosophical meaning of Coghill's study.

In the work of Arnold Gesell we may discern a similar relation between anatomy/body and behavior or action. Gesell finds "an organic character" in behavior, a "reciprocal character of the notions of the body and behavior" (*N* 147). That is, on the one hand, "embryonic development anticipates future behavior," and the "organs of the embryo have no meaning if we consider them independently of all logic of behavior" (*N* 147). For Gesell, "all movement exercised by the embryo is the anticipation of a behavior which will be taken up by the child at a higher level" (*N* 148). On the other hand, behavior can also be "treated like a body, all the motor attitudes constituting a supplementary dimension of the body" (*N* 148). In the development of the embryo "certain acts acquired separately suddenly telescope into one unique act" (*N* 148). That is to say, motor acts come together and form a unity of meaningful behavior. The body is no longer simply an object or a 'thing,' but rather "a system of motor powers that crisscross in order to produce a behavior" (*N* 148). The animal, therefore, cannot be conceived as a machine. For Gesell the "stability of the organism" must be "endlessly reconquered and compromised"; in short, the organism is "a state of great dynamism" (*N* 150). Additionally, because behavior does not "descend" into an already 'complete' organism but rather "emerges from the lower levels," the animal should be "considered

[8] ibid., 88.
[9] ibid., 89.
[10] ibid.

as a field; that is, it is both physical being and a meaning" (*N* 150). It is a meaning since - no longer simply a physical being with quantitative properties - it necessarily includes "a relation between the parts and the whole" (*N* 150). Thus Gesell argues that the mystery of form is "the fundamental enigma of science" (*N* 150).

Both Coghill and Gesell's work pose a challenge to the tendency "to express the organism as the functioning of a machine" (*N* 150). Now, this reductive mechanistic notion has already been challenged by Darwin, but according to Merleau-Ponty this challenge nonetheless remains reductive. For Darwin, "the milieu discriminates that which allows or does not allow the survival of the organism"; Darwinism thus relies on the "idea of a perfect agency between the organism and the conditions external to it" (*N* 151). For Darwin, Coghill's axolotl swims "because if it didn't, it wouldn't exist" (*N* 151). This account remains deterministic. For Merleau-Ponty, Coghill and Gesell's new conception of behavior goes further; behavior is now "something that is ahead of its functioning, which carries a reference to the future, which is beyond the immediate possibles" (*N* 151). This idea accords with the theory of organic selection, commonly called the Baldwin effect, whereby the existence and actual, learned behaviors of the organism (in relation to its environment) can "instigate morphological evolution."[11] Consequently, Baldwinism posits a "concurrence of nature and nurture."[12] Coghill himself alludes to growth as the "creative function of the nervous system," the preparation of "neural mechanisms" within a "continuously growing embryonic matrix" that carry no possibility of "immediate expression."[13] Coghill concludes that man, and even the embryo of the axolotl, is "more than the sum of its reflexes or immediate behavior possibilities," and development must be understood as a "creative power."[14]

Merleau-Ponty is quick to point out the ease with which one can slip into vitalism here, positing 'behind' behavior an entelechy. Indeed, we are "tempted to seek organic unity behind the observable phenomena" (*N* 152). Instead, we are looking for an idea of totality that avoids vitalism and mechanism. For Merleau-Ponty, we can find such an idea of totality in the world of perception, for "in the phenomenal milieu, nothing impedes the whole from being other than the sum of its parts without being for all that a

[11] Adam C. Scarfe, "On a 'Life-Blind Spot' in Neo-Darwinism's Mechanistic Metaphysical Lens," in *Beyond Mechanism: Puttling Life Back into Biology*, eds. B. G. Henning and A. Scarfe (PA: Lexington Books, 2013), 37.
[12] Jesper Hoffmeyer and Kalevi Kull, "Baldwin and Biosemiotics: What Intelligence is For," in *Evolution and Learning: The Baldwin Effect Reconsidered*, eds. B. H. Weber and D. J. Depew (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2003), 255.
[13] Coghill, *Anatomy*, 108-109.
[14] ibid., 110.

transcendent entity" (*N* 153). One may observe in the institution of a painting, for example, how a certain logic materializes after the artist throws "his brush in as my diverse places as possible" (*N* 154). From the start, there is both "an impression of the unforeseeability of the touch and an impression of logic" (*N* 154). In this phenomenal experience, one can say that *already* with the "first sign, a halo of the possible appears, which was not contained in the first sign" (*N* 154). There is the inauguration - with the particular - of a dimension or field with its own perceptual logic. This openness is conditioned by divergence or negativity, which is why Merleau-Ponty offers, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, a deepening of his earlier conceptualization of the *Gestalt* as a form irreducible to its components: it is now Being "inflated with non-being or with the possible," "active silence"[15] that is "not only *what it is*" (*VI* 180-181). Indeed, the *Gestalten* are "exactly what we see": totalities "exactly as perception offers them: imperfect and incomplete or less perfect" (*IP* 129). Hence it is not an idea, for the idea is "free, intemporal, aspatial"; the *Gestalt* is rather "the *Etwas* of which the fragmentary phenomena will be the manifestation" (*VI* 204-205), and thus a temporal unfurling in the thickness or 'simultaneity' of the dimensional present.[16]

§2. The Principle of Negativity: Interrogative Being

We must not submit the organism to an Idea or essence to which it conforms, or a teleological principle that would govern its development. For Merleau-Ponty, the "future of the organism is not folded back in potential in the beginning of its organic life" (*N* 155), it does not contain a blueprint to which it is bound by necessity to actualize. He argues in an important passage:

> We must avoid two errors: placing the phenomena of a positive principle (idea, essence, entelechy) behind us, and not seeing the whole of the regulative principle. We must place in the organism a principle that is either *negative* or based on *absence*. We can say of the animal that each moment of its history is empty of what will follow, an emptiness which will be filled later. Each present moment is supported by a future larger than any future …It is only a question of an absence, but an absence of what?…There is a lack which is not a lack of this or that (*N* 155).

Merleau-Ponty cautions against falling back onto a vitalist notion that would be purely positive. There is potentiality in the organism, but this must not be hypostasized or understood as foundational. However, neither can we introduce an exterior or

[15] *MPR* 428-429.
[16] This is the same structure we find in each expressive note or word: it is "a divergence in relation to non-difference or to in-difference," that is not the result of any subjective act (*MPR* 428-429).

transcendent principle that would supplant the positivity of the vitalist notion by simply placing a positive principle *outside* the organism. Merleau-Ponty introduces a negative principle, a negativity that must be immanent to the organism. When he says that each moment of the animal's history is "empty of what will follow," he is referring to an emptiness that cannot be filled positively – the present of the organism gestures toward a future, but "a future larger than any future." This negativity is not nothing, but it is also without determination. The problem is no longer epistemological but ontological. Since the 'whole' to which Merleau-Ponty refers is no longer bound by a notion of substance – we can no longer say that the organism is an object or a thing, living being can no longer be conceptualized in these terms – temporality and historicity is introduced. Merleau-Ponty effectively raises the question of animality to another degree, as it were. If we have no recourse to "pure physiology" or pure instinct, then we must speak of *contingent* existence, institution or the emergence of sense (*IP* 16). The 'mode' of development of the organism is not 'pregiven' and hence "implies a history" or institution.[17] Indeed, institution is "openness to," but it does not occur in a 'void': it is an openness that "is always produced *on the basis of*."[18] We have definitively moved beyond the realist notions of mechanism, causalism or finalism; we are also beyond the prioritization of substance or essence. He asserts that the very "outlines of the organism" constitute a "factor of imbalance," and must be understood as "a prioris for future development" (*N* 156). Such imbalance is not 'economical,' it is defined not in relation to "exterior conditions which would play the same role as weights in a balance, but in relation to conditions within the organism itself" (*N* 156). The organism can no longer be described in accordance with Cartesian ontology:

> The directing principle is neither before nor behind; it's a phantom, it is the axolotl, all the organs of which would be the trace; it's the hollowed-out design of a certain style of action, which would be that of maturation; the arising of a need would be there before that which will fill it. It is not a positive being, but an interrogative being which defines life (*N* 156).

The organs of the axolotl, its positive substances or elements, are traces of a "phantom" or negativity – the axolotl is a "hollowed-out design" because it is temporal-historical, it is in a sense, both more than, and yet nothing but itself. This design is what the animal 'is,' what allows it to become what it is: a non-self-identical being, a

[17] Claude Lefort, Foreword to *Institution and Passivity*, by Merleau-Ponty (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), xi. As Vallier emphasizes, institution's futural orientation "depends on the indefinite fecundity of the past" ("Memory – Of the Future," 110-111).
[18] Lefort, "Foreword," xi; Vallier, "Institution," 287.

meaning and a 'thing.' Merleau-Ponty writes, "there is only the multiple, and this totality that surges from it is not at totality in potential, but the establishment of a certain dimension. From the moment when the animal swims, there will be life" (*N* 156). As Gesell found, multiple motor powers converge to produce behavior, but this totality or potential does not pre-exist or predetermine it. The relation between the multiple and the whole results in a 'dimension.' That is, when the physical movements of the axolotl becomes 'swimming,' there *is* life – an emergence of 'form,' of the multiple and the totality together – and there *will be* life – a negativity, a reference to the future 'as such' (not a specific, determinate future). Again, Merleau-Ponty uses the term 'institution' to describe how an event retrospectively renders intelligible the past (the pre-history of the axolotl as geared toward its emergence) and installs a reference to an indeterminate future. Institution retrospectively reorganizes 'what has been' such that it *becomes* the arrival of the 'will have been,' and sketches the outlines of a future.[19] As Lawlor writes, "what was possible was missing and yet was present in relief (*en creux*)," that is, 'present' as a hollow or cavity.[20] Determination is no longer delimitation or negation, which would point to a more 'supreme reality,' something like an Absolute (*N* 156). For Merleau-Ponty,

> life is not a sort of quasi-interiority, it is only a fold, the reality of a process…unobservable up close, which assuredly is made, and which is a reality. From the moment that the animal is made, it was not absent at the moment when it was not yet made (*N* 157).

We cannot search for life in things, and "to recognize life would not be to recognize a point of view from which the development of life would be first foreseen" (*N* 157). There is emergence of body and behavior, physical being and meaning, act and power; there is not emptiness *in* the thing in the past, there is emptiness in the present of a future.[21] The organism is not a positive phenomenon; there inheres in living being a negative principle which, far from delimiting or enclosing its being, is constitutive of it. The introduction of this notion of negativity at this stage in the *Nature* course is significant. We can discern here the departure from the old theoretical debates that preoccupied Merleau-Ponty from the time of *The Structure of Behavior*. This point

[19] See Morris, Introduction to *Time, Memory, Institution*: "Institution must be open to and anchored in something beyond it, to temporality and a flux of moments that will have (contingently) turned out to eventuate an event that steers institution" (7).
[20] Lawlor, *Implications*, 117.
[21] There is a consonance between this new notion of organism and the diacritical nature of linguistic meaning: "the structure of language, like the structure of the living being, is not a distribution of facts that would [allow] representing by a combination of possibles once and for all" (*N* 164).

marks a crucial shift in his thinking, one that provides the ground and passage for an articulation of chiasmic ontology, to which such a notion of negativity is foundational. The fact that this concept is introduced at the level of animality is also of significance, allowing him to later claim a "lateral union" of animality and humanity.

The unfurling of the animal as interrogative being necessitates a conception of totality that is not simply physical, punctual, present, full and physiologically 'complete,' absolutely actual; it demands an addition or supplement of 'something' else which makes it exceed positivism and yet not render it a figure of lack - that is to say, subordinate it to an idealism. This is the principle of negativity. There is no natural world within which 'all is given,' for nature implies movement and becoming; nature cannot be modelled on the actualist present. Being as depth and dimensionality refutes the idea of a totality in which all possibility is exhausted, and which amounts to ontological positivity.

a. Russell, Portmann, and Lorenz: Beyond Descartes and Kant

Merleau-Ponty concludes his study of animal behavior in the second *Nature* course with a discussion of the work of biologist E. S. Russell, zoologist Adolf Portmann's study of animal forms, and ethologist Konrad Lorenz's theory of animal instinct. These investigations further his critique of mechanism and vitalism as they demonstrate the unviability of maintaining an obstinate distinction between structure and behavior. Organic development *is* a behavior, as Ruyer argues.[22] These studies also repudiate Cartesian ontology and Kant's rigid distinction between teleology and mechanism.

In the work of E. S. Russell, Merleau-Ponty finds an account of cell relations in which physiological activity and behavior cannot be distinguished. According to Russell, biology must renounce the attempt to understand the activities of organisms apart from "the life of the organism as a living, developing, reproducing whole."[23] Unless we take the organism and its activities as a non-decomposable whole, and "consider first and above all their biological significance or *function*," we may certainly acquire disparate facts but these will never yield "a real biology."[24] Organic life cannot be understood apart from activity, and this activity is goal-directed or oriented. In flatworms, for example, there is an "equipotentiality of tissue," a "victorious

[22] Ruyer quoted in *IP* 84-85, 10f.
[23] E. S. Russell, *The Directiveness of Organic Activities* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1945), 2, 9.
[24] ibid., 9.

planification in each morsel of the flatworm," so that we may say: "a tissue gives the possible beyond its actual structure" (*N* 181). Yet, this finality is "blind" and regulated "on local conditions" (*N* 182). The organism "presents a limited and specialized teleology," and this teleology "is not all-powerful since it does not suppress the efficiency of physicochemical conditions, but it submits to all the vicissitudes of them" (*N* 182). We must not interpret Russell's study as a suggestion that "true" teleology subsists for which mechanism is merely an "obstacle" (*N* 182). Instead, "we must thus say that flatworms would manifest if…: they thus have a conditional existence" (*N* 183). Russell takes us beyond Kant, insofar as his study demonstrates an *intertwining* of teleology and mechanism that result in "a vital activity of a third order" (*N* 182).

Portmann's study of animal forms investigates the zoological significance of the exterior form or appearance of the animal. Portmann attempts to overturn the long-held Platonic assumption that appearances are merely deceptive, and that the true or "the most real is the deepest" (*N* 186). This incessant "probing into what is most deeply concealed" has impeded research into the outer appearances of animals, and this despite the abundant proliferation of animal images in visual culture.[25] For Portmann, the latter tend to be merely "optical stimuli" and do not in any way "reveal the meaning of animal forms."[26] They may be illustrative, but in barely more than a taxonomic, classificatory, or aesthetically pleasing sense. As Portmann demonstrates, an investigation of the appearances or ornamentations of animals repudiates the reductionist notion of animal life as dictated by the requirements of preservation (i.e. fur as protection from cold climate) or function and utility. Portmann insists that we must not see in the animal form a deceptive 'coating' that would conceal a deeper, hidden truth, but rather, that we must consider appearance to be *for* vision.

According to Portmann, the "optically formed pattern occurs only on visible parts" of the animal such that the "visual effect seems to be the special function of that aspect of the organic form made to be looked at."[27] Furthermore, this visual effect emerges alongside developmental processes and is "reinforced in its function by special ways in which the animal behaves."[28] We must see in the development of animal form "something other than an intraorganic activity" (*N* 187). For Portmann, the animal is a

[25] Adolf Portmann, *Animal Forms and Patterns: A Study of the Appearance of Animals*, trans. H. Czech (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 17-18.
[26] ibid., 18.
[27] ibid., 122.
[28] ibid.

manifestation of a meaning, a "displayed existential value" or "presentation value."[29] Drawing on Portmann, Morris writes that the animal face is "*of* a body, and expresses the whole of that body" while being irreducible to it.[30] The face, as "the outside of its own inside" or "the surfacing of its own interiorly inflected depths," gestures toward the inexhaustibility of the body.[31] The face thus expresses an inexhaustible depth, the visible of what is invisible or interior, and thus challenges what Morris calls "the logic of frontality," a logic attributable to Cartesian ontology. Indeed, for Portmann, meaning is irreducible to "the useful, the purposive, the functionally necessary" – what is meaningful is "what goes beyond all these spheres, yet can be clearly grasped in that it is correlated with the level of differentiation."[32] Merleau-Ponty thus claims there is a "perceptual" and "specular relation between animals: each is the mirror of the other," and this relation "gives an ontological value back to the notion of species" (*N* 189).[33] Due to this onto-perceptual relationality, Merleau-Ponty asserts: "what exists are not separated animals, but an inter-animality" (*N* 189). As Morris argues, this "logic of animality" points to "an onto-logic" of Being or chiasmic ontology.[34] The animal body can therefore be understood "as an organ of the for-other" (*N* 210). Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty concludes that life is "a power to invent the visible" (*N* 190), a 'power' that does not require the intervention of a consciousness.

A student of Uexküll, Konrad Lorenz conceives of instinct as "a primordial activity 'without object,' *objektlos*" (*N* 190). It is not goal-directed, but rather "an activity that is almost confused with the use of the organism" (*N* 190-191). The "instinctual" relation between the living organism and an object must be rethought, and this necessitates a departure from Uexküll's mechanistic terminology ('lock' and 'key'), for instinct is anticipatory or futural. For Lorenz, what is primary is not the relation to the object, so much as "an attempt to resolve an endogenous tension" (*N* 191). This tension does not seek the object "because it is directed toward it" but rather "because it is a means capable of resolving the tension, as if the object intervened" (*N* 191). Instinct demonstrates contingency and not determination, a style of problem-solving and not a

[29] ibid., 214.
[30] David Morris, "Faces and the Invisible of the Visible: Toward an Animal Ontology," *PhaenEx* 2, no. 2 (2007): 132.
[31] ibid., 157.
[32] Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 212.
[33] As Bannon argues, this also opens up a way of thinking inter-species relationality, since "each bodily schema" is now "the ground of the intercorporeity that becomes culture," and there are multiple ways of being a body ("Reading the Living Signs," 106).
[34] Morris, "Faces," 162.

prefigured reaction. For Lorenz, instinct "possesses a blindness and does not know its object," and is "before all else a theme, a style that meets up with that which evokes it in the milieu" (*N* 193). The animal displays a certain ambivalence toward the object or stimulus: Lorenz claims that "there is an oneiric, sacred, and absolute character of instinct" (*N* 193). That is, the instinct "does not aim so much at the real as at the irreal," for it is "oriented toward the image or the typical" (*N* 193). Instinct cannot be understood simply as a desire bound by necessity toward a specific stimulus-object which would 'activate' the organism. In fact, "the trigger acts only by actualizing a certain style of behavior," and is hence not a cause, but "evocative of an innate complex" (*N* 192). Similarly, for Ruyer, the stimulus or trigger is "thematic" or "expressive" and meaningful for the animal.[35] As Merleau-Ponty explains, the stimulation is contingent or "quasi-fatal"; it reveals mechanical behavior, yet it cannot be truly mechanical because "instinct is an endogenous activity" (*N* 192). Thus, Lorenz's concept of cross-species *Prägung* or imprint is to be understood in terms of this relation between the "innate schema" and the external situation. The *Prägung* can only occur before a certain developmental stage, and links the animal "not to an individual, but to a species" (*N* 194). Therefore, "the goose that learned to follow a man will follow all men" (*N* 194). Moreover, according to Lorenz "it remains a complete enigma as to how the bird is able to zoologically 'classify' the species to which it erroneously 'feels itself to be related.'"[36] The imprint is therefore indicative of institution, for it displays both a certain plasticity of animal life and dependence on general innate themes.

Additionally, since instinct is *objektlos*, we can speak of "empty activity." For Merleau-Ponty, it is through empty activity that "instinct is going to be capable of being derailed or is going to pass from instinctive activity to *symbolic activity*" (*N* 195). Empty activities become "means of communicating" and thus *social* activities - they are "executed as a substitute for effective action" (*N* 195). The ambivalence and ambiguity of the instinct and the relation between organism and object means that "an instinct is constituted rather as a systematic *elaboration* of the world than as a reference to an entirely constituted exterior world" (*N* 195, italics added). Instinct cannot simply be the unfulfilled relation to a pre-existing object, and this in turn constitutes the possibility for

[35] *IP* 85-86, 17f.
[36] Konrad Lorenz, *Studies in Animal and Human Behavior: Vol. I*, trans. R. Martin (London: Metheun and Co., 1970), 246.

instinct to develop into "symbolic function" (*N* 197). For Lorenz, ritualization can now occur - and with ritualization we can speak of "animal culture" (*N* 197-8). As such, Merleau-Ponty argues that animality is itself proof that the instituted cannot be defined "in opposition to the innate" (*IP* 16). Indeed, animal life demonstrates the creation of a field of meaning that negotiates between a 'cultural' and natural world, and which is neither "absolutely free" nor "absolutely prefigured" (*IP* 22).

As has been maintained since *The Structure of Behavior*, the organism "does not exist as a thing endowed with absolute properties, as fragments of Cartesian space" (*N* 183). On the other hand, the organism is not an existence subordinated to an idea or essence it can only imperfectly approximate. The studies of Russell, Portmann and Lorenz further complicate the relation between living organism and external milieu, as well as present a radical challenge to the distinction between mechanism and teleology, function and form, structure and behavior. Merleau-Ponty's 'rehabilitation' of nature thus restores contingency and indeterminacy to natural being, a quasi-blind productivity that had been occluded in Cartesian rationalism. Indeed, as he remarks in a series of radio lectures, for Merleau-Ponty the animal "proceeds unsteadily, by trial and error," and "displays very clearly the struggle involved in existing in a world into which it has been thrown, a world to which it has no key."[37]

§3. Against Actualism: Being as Dimensionality

In the third *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty advances his critique of the ontology of the object through an engagement with Darwinism and Idealism. Implied in his critique of the physicalism and mechanism of classical reflex theory, Merleau-Ponty now explicitly focuses on what he calls 'actualism.' This focus allows us to assert the primacy of becoming and process, and more importantly, the idea of negativity as ensuring *possibility*. In this way, negativity is a fundamentally critical and ethical concept. The animal emerges without rupture, and the idea of animal melody provides an account of genesis that demonstrates a certain relation to a theme. This account of development cannot be understood in positivist or actualist terms, nor in terms of the Idea, which

[37] *The World of Perception*, trans. O. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2004), 76. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of animal life therefore differs significantly from that of Heidegger's, who also drew on the work of Uexküll. Heidegger finds in the animal "a *not-having of world in the having of openness for whatever disinhibits*" (*The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 270) an openness that, paradoxically, closes the animal from the 'as such.' For Heidegger, the animal "does not stand alongside man and precisely has no world," but is rather a "being held captive" (269-270). For Merleau-Ponty, animals maintain a contingent relation with their environments, and display a certain ambivalence toward the object – they are not 'locked' into their disinhibiting ring.

places a non-sensible transcendent above historical existence. In fact, in the last analysis there is a "profound kinship" of the finalism of idealism and mechanism, for in both accounts "nothing happens, all is given" (*N* 236). Thus, while idealism refutes the dimension of the 'actual' in its reference to that which lies beyond the realm of the actual, it remains, in a specific sense, actualist. Actualism for Merleau-Ponty therefore refers to any conceptualization of nature that reduces the possible to the actual; it is the inability to think temporality (becoming) or account for contingency and ambiguity. It is incapable of accounting for chiasmic time or temporality, the thickness of the present, or the simultaneity of the discontinuous. Actualism therefore refers not only to the actual 'here and now,' but also to the static image of the actual that monopolizes and obliterates the future - or the opening to futurity - by positing a future that can be calculated, predicted, or foreseen. As such, it also retrospectively organizes and subjugates the past, insofar as the past becomes the necessary and successive order that leads to the present; this past cannot be irruptive or barbarous in the Schellingian sense.

Futurity therefore names something other than a set of all possible futures. A hollow or a gap is not the absence or lack of a determinate something, so that we may know in advance what may come to fill it. In this sense, natural negativity or emptiness does not render the organism any less 'whole.' As noted above, each present moment for the animal "is supported by a future larger than any future" (*N* 155). This 'larger' thus names the gap between determinate, quantifiable possibilities and the indeterminate, the 'large' that would be larger than large, beyond measurement. Importantly, this points to the contingency of the world, for this incalculable futurity or possibility presupposes a world that is always in a state of becoming and more than the cradle of determinate possibilities. Actualism is for Merleau-Ponty the subjection of the dimension of the possible to a thought of the possible tied to the actual – an ideology he terms 'possibilism' - which is therefore incapable of thinking a futurity other than an abstract future, or a determinate 'to come.' Actualism empties history out of historical existence, extinguishes contingency for the sake of clarity and order, and for an image of totality. Actualist thought cannot accommodate becoming or unfurling, and therefore *exhausts* reality only because it inadequately grasps it.

We will return to the critique of actualism in the following chapter and show how Merleau-Ponty's concept of negativity and philosophy of Nature challenges the totalization of the world due to the positivist infinitization of Nature that 'large

rationalism' posits. Actualist thought is thus tied to Cartesianism, incapable of conceiving futurity, fecundity, possibility and temporality.

a. Between Darwinism and Idealism

Darwinism is for Merleau-Ponty a problematic theory of emergence, as it reintroduces a finalist principle. On Merleau-Ponty's reading, Darwinism replaces "a factor of life" with one of death; the "elimination of the inept" in natural selection entails that the problem of the genesis of living being be reduced to "observable facts already given in the organism," and by demonstrating causality in the following terms: "this is because that is not" (*N* 247, 244). Accordingly, that which *is*, is only so "because it is the only possible" (*N* 244). It therefore makes use of a "positive phenomenology" (*N* 247). In other words, it relies on the absolutism of the actual as the sole dimension of Being; there is only "one dimension of the actual - the rest is impossible" (*N* 251). It is the actual world that contains "the power to determine the only possible" (*N* 175). Moreover, it assumes that "the simplest is chronologically first" and that "all animals are classifiable according to an objective hierarchy" (*N* 257). Yet for Merleau-Ponty, Darwinism is correct to say that the problem "is not at first to explain why this (Leibniz), that we must show that the rest is eliminated" (*N* 251). For Idealism, there is always "another dimension; there is the possible" (*N* 251). While Darwinism does not deal with the problem of possible worlds, it demonstrates evolution in terms of elimination: "it gives a fecundity of life starting from what there is only to be unfurled, a chance that uses *everything*" (*N* 251). In this sense, it puts forth an actualist interpretation of genesis or development. On the other hand, while idealism is "right to say that the actual is not, like a unique plane and without thickness, without relief, sufficient," it subordinates the actual to an other-worldly possible, and thus inserts a metaphysical element into the unfolding of life. Idealism maintains the idea of the "pure exterior" which is "doubled by a pure interiority that is parallel to it and does not meet it" (*N* 239). As such, for idealism "the notion of life equals the counterstroke of the in-itself to the for-itself when the latter perceives itself prepared from the outside: it cannot avoid this observation, but it does not authorize animating the outside" (*N* 239-240). The for-itself finds itself confronted with difference, but this exteriority is not to be granted ontological significance.

For Merleau-Ponty, we must "place something between chance and idea, between the interior and the exterior" and "this something is the suturing organism-

milieu, organism-organism," wherein "something happens which is not an actual fact – a jointure which is the articulation of the vertical order on the horizontal order" (*N* 251). The vertical order and 'organism-milieu' refers to idealism or vitalism; the organism is an interiority, an "originality in life."[38] The horizontal order and the term 'organism-organism' is to be understood as a reference to Darwinism. As Canguilhem explains, for Darwin the "fundamental biological relation" is that between "one living being to others," and thus "the first milieu an organism lives in is an entourage of living beings, which are for it enemies or allies, prey or predators."[39] The horizontal describes the Darwinian theory of descendance according to "objective time" and "causal order," the latter of which is animated by "the principle of mutation-selection" (*N* 250). In schematic terms, we can relate the horizontal order to a 'flat' actual, which contains a totality of possibilities, and the vertical order to a 'deep' actual which always refers to an idea which confers meaning. Merleau-Ponty thus seeks the jointure of these two orders, and argues for "the idea of Being as *dimensionality*, the above dimensions of which are only the realization and abstract aspects. Place the two orders in this ontological milieu" (*N* 251). As realizations and abstractions, the two orders cannot grasp the "something" that happens in the suture that inheres 'between' them, as it were. The ontology of nature demands a departure from actualism, from 'causality' and 'finality' (*N* 264). Accordingly, we cannot "invoke the all-powerful and foreseeing life; we only observe, by convergences and parallelisms, that there is a certain vocabulary of life" (*N* 265). Such convergences involve elements that cannot be statistically quantified; they are not the "only possible," contra Darwinism, but neither are they "causally imposed nor logically imposed; nor absolutely the best" (*N* 265). This departure from actualism entails a "rehabilitation of the negative," as Barbaras writes, for it necessitates the inclusion of negativity in Being, an "operating nonbeing" in reality.[40] The animal is "polarized by the future and therefore more than itself, but it does not depend on finality because what dynamizes the living is not a transcendent and positive being."[41] In short, we must admit an element of contingency, and conceive of a possible 'larger' than any possible.

§4. Merleau-Pontian Possibility and Contemporary Theoretical Biology

[38] Canguilhem, *Knowledge*, 104.
[39] ibid., 105.
[40] Barbaras, "Merleau-Ponty and Nature," 34.
[41] ibid.

In the final section of this chapter, we demonstrate how the critique of objectivist ontology persists within the natural sciences, and in ways that accord with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature. Furthermore, developments within the field of biosemiotics and theoretical biology lend weight to Merleau-Ponty's concept of natural negativity and non-actualist possibility.

Theoretical biologist Stuart A. Kauffman agrees with Kant: there will never be a "Newton of biology," for "the evolution of the biosphere cannot be entailed by laws of motion and their integration"; in fact, "*no law* entails the evolution of the biosphere."[42] For instance, Darwin would hold that the evolutionary function of the heart is to pump blood. However, the heart also makes sounds. This must then be eliminated as a causal factor, but a physicist could not, firstly, "deduce all the properties of a given heart," and secondly, have a way "to pick out as the relevant property that of pumping blood."[43] This is only possible after the fact, as it were. Further, Darwinian preadaptation involves the natural selection of "a part of an organism of no selective significance in the normal environment."[44] Significantly, preadaptation occurs for a "*novel* function in the biosphere."[45] Now, we must accept that "virtually any extant feature of an organism can become the subject of natural selection in the appropriate environment," but it is impossible to determine ahead of time all such 'possibles.'[46] In a term that recalls Schelling's *Unvordenklichkeit*, Kauffman claims these possible preadaptations are *unprestatable*. Moreover,

> The fact that we cannot prestate them is essential, and an essential limitation to the way Newton taught us to do science…we cannot prestate the relevant causal features of organisms in the biosphere…We are profoundly precluded from the Newtonian move. In short, the evolution of the biosphere is radically unknowable…because we cannot prestate the macroscopic relevant features of organisms and environments that will lead to the emergence of novel functions in the biosphere with their own causal properties that in turn alter the future evolution of the biosphere. Thus, the evolution of the biosphere is radically creative, ceaselessly creative, in way[s] that cannot be foretold.[47]

There is no mathematical model or algorithm that can predict the evolution of the biosphere. As Peirce argues, "the evolution of laws of nature that can be represented

[42] Kauffman, "Foreword," 6.
[43] Kauffman, "Beyond Reductionism," 911.
[44] ibid., 912.
[45] ibid.
[46] ibid.
[47] ibid., 912-913.

mathematically cannot be modelled mathematically."[48] We must note the scale and complexity of this unpredictability. For example, the middle ear bones "evolved by Darwinian preadaptations from the jaw bones of an early fish."[49] Now once the middle ear came into existence, it constituted not only a novel function but what Kauffman calls "a new adjacent possible empty niche," since an organism – e.g. a worm or bacterium – could possibly "evolve to live only in the middle ear."[50] Such organisms that are now in the "adjacent possible" could not have been possible prior to the middle ear. Thus the existence of the middle ear not only affects future evolution, but "alters the *possible* future evolution of the biosphere."[51] This distinction is crucial. If we consider the evolution of the biosphere we must admit that we are not only incapable of knowing what *will* happen, but also what *can* happen; accordingly, "we can construct no probability measure for this evolution by any known mathematical means."[52] We must acknowledge a radically unknowable – unprestatable or unprethinkable – realm of the possible that is beyond the 'possible' of what 'can' happen, which is tied to the actual. As Kauffman and Gare note, this also entails we recognize that reason is "insufficient," for "we cannot reason about what we cannot know."[53] Contemporary theoretical biology therefore affirms the ontological negativity that follows from Kant's strictly epistemological negativity.

There is a further implication of the idea of the adjacent possible. While we can say that it was natural selection that acted "on an evolving population of hearing animals" to "select a well-functioning middle ear system," we cannot say that natural selection acted to create the middle ear "as *a new adjacent possible empty niche*."[54] Natural selection cannot be the principle that explains this creation. For Kauffman, and this is crucial for it takes us beyond Darwin:

> without selection acting in any way to do so, evolution is creating its own future possibilities of becoming! And the worm or bacterium or both that evolves to live in the middle ear or swim bladder is a Radical Emergence unlike anything in physics.[55]

[48] Stuart A. Kauffman and Arran Gare, "Beyond Descartes and Newton: Recovering Life and Humanity," *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology* 30 (2015): 8.
[49] Kauffman, "Foreword," 12.
[50] ibid., 12-13.
[51] ibid., 13. Italics added.
[52] ibid., 14.
[53] Kauffman and Gare, "Beyond Descartes," 18.
[54] Kauffman, "Foreword," 14.
[55] ibid.

The middle ear therefore does not *cause* but *enables* "new evolutionary radical emergence," new "directions of becoming."[56] Kauffman's ontology is thus "one of generatively *enabling* but not deterministically *entailing* laws."[57] This takes us beyond the causalism and actualism Merleau-Ponty identifies in Darwinism. Moreover, Kauffman argues that this provides the basis for a new worldview, wherein we may recognize that "we live a life of ever-unfolding, often unprestatable opportunities that we partially create and co-create, with and without intent."[58]

Tied to the idea of the adjacent possible is Kauffman's claim regarding the "nonergodicity of the universe." As Hoffmeyer explains, this refers to the notion that "the universe never had the time it would have needed should its present state of affairs in any way be representative of its inbuilt possibilities."[59] For Kauffman, this means that the universe is historical, because "history enters when the space of the possible that might have been explored is larger, or vastly larger, than what has actually occurred."[60] The biosphere is "profoundly contingent upon history," for the "actual of the biosphere is so tiny compared to what might have occurred in the past 4.8 billion years," which dramatically and incalculably increases the 'dimensionality' of the adjacent possible.[61] Drawing on Kauffman and Uexküll, Hoffmeyer argues that we may think of animal *Umwelten* as developing "in accordance to a plan of nature," but this is a plan that "traps life in certain strategic choices and at the same time diversifies the dimensionality of ways to deal with these choices."[62] For Hoffmeyer, diversification "has expanded the field of future options by inventing radically new and sophisticated life strategies based on highly developed semiotic competences."[63] He emphasizes the semiotic freedom of natural beings as a "concrete expression" of Kauffman's ever-expanding dimensionality of the possible.[64]

For example, the male water mite "exhibits a behavior called 'courtship trembling,' in which he will walk slowly around the female in the water vegetation while vibrating his legs," a behavior that emerged "as an icon for the vibrations

[56] ibid., 15.
[57] Donald F. Favareau, "Creation of the Relevant Next: How Living Systems Capture the Power of the Adjacent Possible through Sign Use," *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology* 30 (2015): 4.
[58] Kauffman, "Foreword," 22.
[59] Hoffmeyer, "Uexküllian," 86.
[60] Stuart A. Kauffman, *Investigations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 152.
[61] ibid., 152; Hoffmeyer, "Uexküllian," 87.
[62] Hoffmeyer, "Uexküllian," 88.
[63] ibid., 89.
[64] Jesper Hoffmeyer, "Relations: The True Substrate for Evolution," *Semiotica* 178, Iss. 1/4 (2010): 96.

produced by prey animals."[65] The female mite "will often respond to male leg-trembling as if to prey, orienting itself to the source of the vibration." Hoffmeyer calls courtship trembling a form of "semethic interaction," a "behavioural interaction between two or more agents in which habits and signs reciprocally scaffold each other."[66] Organisms have the capacity "to take advantage of any regularities they may come upon as vehicles for signification, or signs."[67] Thus the "prey animal's involuntary vibrations have become incorporated into male courtship behavior as an icon."[68] The organism effectively converts a "cause-and-effect relation to a triadic sign relation whereby the cause is 'understood' as referring to the effect."[69] This introduces a causality "peculiar to this new form of relative being," that is too dynamic and sophisticated to be modelled off of the "simple dynamics of dyadic relations between things."[70] Now in the water mite example we found an iconic mating sign. In the balloon fly species (*Empididae*), the male fly uses captured insects as gifts for a female.[71] At an early evolutionary stage the gift is simply the insect; in later stages the gift is "wrapped in increasingly more silken thread, until the gift has reached the state of a real balloon."[72] In further stages, "the prey steadily diminishes in size, hence in food value, while the balloon increases commensurably in complexity."[73] Remarkably, eventually a stage is reached wherein the balloon is *empty*, a semiotic "tool for courtship," and this is the case even for evolved forms of the fly line that feed on nectar and not on insects. As Hoffmeyer argues, we have here a "symbolic mating sign," as opposed to an iconic one, wherein "all traces of the original dyadic relation have now been erased, and a purely triadic relation has taken over."[74]

The capacity for organisms to interpret and interact in the world – and to "generate *sign relations*" on the basis of such interactions – are crucial for biological survival. Importantly, the 'semiotic threshold,' or the "simplest system capable of semiosic activity" is not a "lower animal" but the living cell, such that Hoffmeyer and Sebeok argue that "semiosis and life" ought to be conceived as "co-existent."[75] Notably,

[65] ibid.
[66] ibid., 97.
[67] Jesper Hoffmeyer, "A Biosemiotic Approach to the Question of Meaning," *Zygon* 45, no. 2 (2010): 377.
[68] Hoffmeyer, "Relations," 97.
[69] Hoffmeyer, "Biosemiotic Approach," 376.
[70] ibid.
[71] Hoffmeyer, "Relations," 97.
[72] ibid.
[73] ibid.
[74] ibid., 98. Favareau explains this triadic structure in "Creation of the Relevant Next," 12.
[75] Jesper Hoffmeyer and Kalevi Kull, "Theories of Signs and Meaning: Views from Copenhagen and Tartu,' in *Towards a Semiotic Biology*, eds. C. Emmeche and K. Kull (Singapore: Imperial College Press, 2011), 282.

this is a Bergsonian claim: there is "no precise limit between organization and life" (*IP* 17). Further, this is also an argument against genetic determinism or the notion that DNA is the 'directive' of living systems. Accordingly, claiming certain genes 'for' certain behavior constitutes "a drastic oversimplification."[76] DNA does contain "recipes" for construction, but whether these "are actually *read* and executed by cellular effectors depends on membrane-bound activity."[77] Hoffmeyer argues that the role of DNA has to do with time and memory, for "the appearance of genes chained the membranes into a temporal world" insofar as they provided a "scaffolding" or support allowing for "semi-conservative permanence."[78] The field of biosemiotics thus attempts to shift the focus from "an externalist explanation in terms of gene strategies to an internalist explanation in which behaviors are caused by emotional settings connected to the *virtual reality* of the animal."[79] Indeed, Uexküll's observations of behavior already point to the reality of the virtual. Biosemiotics is therefore idealist in a very specific sense, for it posits "the reality of ideal objects," of which possibilities are a special kind.[80] According to Stjernfelt, the reality of possibility therefore "entails an ontological revolution admitting the indispensable role of ideality in this strict sense in the sciences."[81]

As biosemiotics theorist Donald Favareau succinctly argues: "Organisms live and die by such sign relations," and it is "in accordance with the relations of *this experiential world* that is grounded in, but not co-extensive with the agent-independent relations of physically existing world, that the creature has to coordinate its actions to eat, flee, forage, mate and sustain itself."[82] Indeed, what may appear as mechanism in certain 'lower' or simpler organisms to the human observer may actually be "the canalized products" of these organisms' evolutionary history.[83] Further, the development of organisms "may not even require much natural selection" in some cases, "because adaptation usually develops prior to its fixation in genetic memory."[84] For Hoffmeyer, this "semiogenic capacity" of living organisms leads to multiple semethic interactions

[76] Kenneth F. Schaffner, "Genes, Behavior, and Developmental Emergentism: One Process, Indivisible?" *Philosophy of Science* 65 (1998): 247.
[77] Jesper Hoffmeyer, "How Can it be the Case that the World Contains Human Beings?" *Australian Feminist Studies* 23, no. 55 (2008): 24.
[78] ibid., 25.
[79] Jesper Hoffmeyer, "Seeing Virtuality in Nature," *Semiotica* 134, Iss. 1/4 (2001): 385.
[80] Frederik Stjernfelt, "*Tractatus Hoffmeyerensis*: Biosemiotics as Expressed in 22 Basic Hypotheses," *Sign Systems Studies* 30, no. 1 (2002): 342.
[81] ibid.
[82] Favareau, "Creation," 12.
[83] ibid.
[84] Hoffmeyer and Kull, "Theories of Signs," 275.

which in turn branch out and integrate "the ecosystems of the planet into a global semiosphere."[85] This branching out leads to what Favareau calls the creation of the "Relevant Next," the field of the "open possibilities of the Adjacent Possible," which is developed through the organism's relation to its environment as well as its "previously captured sign relations."[86] The idea of consciousness need not intervene here. Favareau argues that these structures develop "through *enacted*, and not self-consciously reflective, *meaning-assignation* on the part of the organism."[87] Moreover, the increasing semiotic capabilities of organisms extend the realm of the possible. The emphasis on semiotic relationality obviously take us beyond mechanistic accounts of the organism, but it is important to note that it also presupposes the *institution of a transtemporal element*, as Merleau-Ponty asserted we must admit in the "very fabric of physical elements." As Fernández argues, "a sign does not exist at any singular, particular instant, just as motion does not exist instantaneously."[88] It also "multiplies reality," and thus expands the realm of the possible, as Kalevi Kull writes.[89]

According to Kauffman and biosemiotics – Hoffmeyer, Stjernfelt, Kull, and Favareau - we do not live in a deterministic or probabilistic universe. The scientists discussed in this section have developed theories that accord with Merleau-Ponty's critique of actualism and the notion of natural negativity – ontological, not simply epistemological – that attempt to take seriously the temporality of life and ensure an openness to the future, to the realm of the possible. If Kauffman's analyses are correct, "we are beyond Newton, and even beyond Darwin, who, in all his brilliance, did not see that without natural selection 'acting' at all, the evolving biosphere creates its own future possibilities."[90] Indeed, objectivist and reductive accounts of nature (termed "exoscience"), derived from Cartesian philosophy and Newtonian physics, assumes the timelessness of the objects of knowledge and therefore the timelessness of the world. Endoscience, on the other hand, takes the observer into account and therefore forces us "to acknowledge that we cannot transcend time and are observing the world at a particular time."[91] This resonates with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, Husserl's critique in the *Crisis* and Schelling and Goldstein's denunciation of scientific

[85] Hoffmeyer, "Biosemiotic Approach," 377.
[86] Favareau, "Creation," 12.
[87] ibid., 13.
[88] Eliseo Fernández, "Taking the Relational Turn: Biosemiotics and Some New Trends in Biology," *Biosemiotics* 3 (2010): 154.
[89] Hoffmeyer and Kull, "Theories," 275.
[90] Kauffman, "Foreword," 1.
[91] Kauffman and Gare, "Beyond Descartes," 10.

experimentation. Biology, for Hoffmeyer, ought to explain "the evolutionary advantages of possessing this capacity for *experiencing* the world and not just for behaving in it."[92] We must therefore turn to the third *Nature* course and account for the human body – and we must also advance beyond (or return from) the realm of animal being to the world of perception. Indeed, a philosophy of Nature leads us to "think the relation of this negativity, natural and human, and the positive, of Being and the hollow or the emptiness from which it is inseparable" (*N* 228). For Merleau-Ponty, animality and human being "are given only together, within a whole of Being," and this is understood through the very "use of life" (*N* 271). The following chapter will therefore address Merleau-Ponty's account of the human body as well as his concept of flesh with regard to nature.

§5. Conclusion

In the second *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty introduces the idea of natural negativity as part of his critique of Cartesian ontology, mechanism, and vitalism. Through a critical interpretation of Uexküll and an engagement with the studies of Coghill, Gesell, Portmann, Russell and Lorenz, Merleau-Ponty advances the notion of living being as emergent, as a 'quiet force,' or as the opening of a depth or field. The idea of negativity or absence is central to his philosophy of animal life, and allows him to posit a form that "escapes from the dilemma of being and nonbeing" or metaphysical dualism. This is precisely what the theme of animal melody expresses: the genesis of the idea, existential eternity, and in-variance through variation or divergence. That is, Merleau-Ponty does not want to do away with the notion of essence or *eidos*, but rather aims to rethink it in line with a more robust understanding of temporality and becoming, or nature and life. As such, he argues that the invariant "is *in* the variants (= in the 'divergences') which is the 'mobile' in the 'movement,' that is, not a positive term whose movement would be a 'property.'"[93] Accordingly, this understanding of existence-essence allows for a rehabilitation of the thought of the possible, for it escapes the reductionism and determinism of idealism and mechanism, both of which are actualist. To say that all is given is to say that all is knowable. This amounts to a subjugation of life to thought or to the concept, of lived temporality to ordered space and (spatialized) time, and history to a discrete, ordered series of cause and effect. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of natural

[92] Hoffmeyer, "Biosemiotic Approach," 386. Italics added.
[93] *MPR* 445. Italics added.

life hence 'restores' contingency or indeterminacy not only to nature but also to history. The actualist obliteration of the future is accordingly the erasure of the unknown or the unthought; it is a sovereign thought that effaces life by portending to capture it. It is also to misunderstand or misapprehend the present, for the present becomes what is always on the way to fulfilment, morphologically incomplete, always destined to become a condition in the past. It is a 'flat' present, without depth, viewed from a point outside of time. As Merleau-Ponty contends, we must take seriously the idea that we are in the world, which is around us and not in front of us. We must abandon the actualist presumption or fallacy that we are capable of thinking from outside the world – and this implies a further challenge, perhaps even more demanding by virtue of its apparent simplicity: we must avoid equating the world we think or contemplate with the world that we see.[94] To adopt the phenomenological viewpoint is to relinquish the transcendental one, which mistakenly believes in reflection as a beginning (without a shadow, without a body and without a history), and not a beginning that drags with it an unreflected past and fund from which it draws. Transcendental or reflexive consciousness is indebted consciousness.

As discussed above, recent theoretical biology and biosemiotics have reached conclusions that converge with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the real-possible (as opposed to the actualist-possible, or what he calls "possibilism," the "ideology of the logical possible"[95]). This realm of the possible that nature itself creates is in no way calculable or 'direct'; as Merleau-Ponty argues, "what is made *possible* by these 'natural' [preparations] throws them out at a distance, to the past, or beyond when it passes to the actual."[96] This 'rehabilitated' possible, tied to negativity, thus breaks 'out' or away from Cartesian immediacy and infinity – or to put it another way, the de-infinitization of Nature leads to the possibility of a rehabilitation of an ontology within which the possible and negativity is real. As we will see in the following and final chapter, to overcome Cartesian or objectified infinity is to rehabilitate infinity as openness, as *Offenheit* and not *Unendlichkeit*, the openness of the *Umwelt* or sensible Being.

[94] See *PhP* 59.
[95] *VI* 206, *MPR* 418.
[96] *MPR* 423.

PART III: *NATURE AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY*

chapter 7

BRUTE BEING: NATURE AND THE FLESH

If being is to disclose itself, it will do so before a transcendence, and not before an intentionality, it will be the engulfed brute being that returns to itself, it will be the sensible *that hollows itself out.*

-Merleau-Ponty[1]

With regard to pure understanding, the sensible appears as privation; it is only the abstraction from the irregular, from non-being, Spinoza will say. But in another sense, nonbeing, the nonthought, is. *That which is negative for intelligence is positive for life.*

-Merleau-Ponty[2]

Introduction: The Unveiling of Being

What Merleau-Ponty seeks in the *Nature* courses is not a representationalist 'exhibition' of Being in the fullness of an absolute thought, but rather "a true *explicitation* of Being" (*N* 206). Indeed, instead of a 'putting in place,' which implies an absolute spectator or a surveying thought with access to absolute knowledge, Merleau-Ponty proceeds obliquely or indirectly: he seeks the nexus. We must seek "the unveiling of Being as that which they [beings] define, that which places them together on the side of what is not nothing" (*N* 206). Thus while he seeks to avoid defining his ontology as atheistic for "it is unworthy of philosophy to begin with a denial [*denegation*]," [3] we could argue that Merleau-Ponty seeks an unveiling of Being through lived existence, without the mediation of God. What we are led to, however, is no less absolute; it is not a positive infinite but rather an "infinite finitude," [4] and thus fundamental openness and futurity. We will discuss this shift at the end of this chapter. For Merleau-Ponty, philosophy must "necessarily be a philosophy of *brute being* and not one of docile being which would have us believe the world can be fully explained." [5] His ontology is therefore 'indirect.' The term 'brute' recalls Schelling's 'barbarous' and resistant principle, and

[1] *VI* 210.
[2] *N* 16.
[3] *MPR* 388.
[4] Lawlor, *Implications*, 110.
[5] *MPR* 389.

indeed we must keep in mind the various significations of the term as it recurs in Merleau-Ponty's work: barbarian, animal, unreasonable, bodily, fleshly, and fundamental. Not docile and compliant being, but savage, untamed, contingent, wild being.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the human body, which is continuous with the philosophy of animal being and the primary focus of the third *Nature* course. At the start of the course he argues, "it is no longer a matter of ordering our reasons, but of seeing how all of this *holds together* – a philosophy of perspective and a philosophy of vertical Being" (*N* 206). We must deepen our understanding of Nature, which will "clarify us to the other Beings and their engagement in Being," and this deepening must occur through a philosophy of perception and carnal experience. This clarification must occur through an engagement with the nature that 'we' are. Thus we are not asking after Nature as object, as subject of science, or as "one separated and explanatory Being," but rather, we are asking what "being-natural" or "being-naturally" means (*N* 206). Importantly, when approached in this way – that is, the human body as part of a philosophy of Nature (to which a critique of the ontology of the object is central) - we find that the body is inconceivable in humanist terms or in accordance with philosophies of reflective consciousness. Accordingly, as Merleau-Ponty consistently emphasizes, to "speak of the flesh of the visible" does not entail doing anthropology, "to describe a world covered over with all our own projections" (*VI* 136); rather, while the visible is "realized by man," humanity is a "remarkable variant" of Being, a "horizonal generality, a generality of style" (*VI* 136, 237). This marks a departure from his analyses in the *Phenomenology*, for as he explicitly states in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the problems posed in the former "are insoluble because I start there from the 'consciousness' – 'object' – distinction" (*VI* 200). As Smith writes, the earlier text "remained bound to an ontology incapable of detailing the emergence of consciousness from the perceived world."[6] Merleau-Ponty's later ontology does not amount to a philosophy of consciousness or an anthropologism,[7] for it is not the human but brute Being is primary; the world is 'inserted' between the two 'leaves' of my body, just as my body is inserted between the two 'leaves' of "each thing and the world" (*VI* 264). We then address the principle of negativity, relating the notion of natural negativity to

[6] Dale E. Smith, "Merleau-Ponty's Indirect Ontology," *Dialogue* 27 (1988): 616. See also: M.C. Dillon, "Merleau-Ponty and the Transcendence of Immanence"; R. Bernet, "The Subject in Nature."
[7] See *VI* 136, 237, 263-4, 267, & 274-5.

reversibility and the invisible. This leads to a discussion of depth and Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'infinite,' which names the same principle of openness we find in his concept of possibility. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology requires that we no longer conceive of Nature as a theme among others, for once we deepen our understanding of Nature through phenomenological analyses of the body, and inversely, once we deepen our understanding of the body through the ontology of Nature - we find that the distinction between the "natural" and the "cultural" is abstract. In Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh, everything *is both cultural or historical and natural*, for "our perception is cultural-historical," and "even the cultural rests on the polymorphism of the wild Being" (*VI* 253).

§1. Nature and the Body

In his lectures on animality, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the irreducibility of living being to mechanist and vitalist thought. Function without form is incomprehensible, and organic behavior is dependent on physicochemical elements, but cannot be theorized or grasped solely in terms of these elements. Plasticity subsists in the realm of animal life, and this cannot be attributed to the intervention of consciousness. Living being only becomes comprehensible when adopting a 'global' view – that is, one must take structure and behavior, and function and form, as a whole or a new totality. The organism must be conceived as "an enveloping phenomenon, with the macroscopic style of an ensemble in movement" (*N* 207). In embryonic regulation, for example, we can discern physicochemical processes, but as Merleau-Ponty contends, "it is not physicochemistry requiring an organism of a typical form when the plan of the whole is restored from a part," as in the regeneration of flatworms (*N* 207). As we saw in the previous chapter, the specific relation between physicochemistry and life amounts to "a distinction between the event-based and the structural, between the ontic and the ontological" (*N* 207). For Merleau-Ponty, the realization of life is nothing but "a fold or a singularity of physicochemistry – or structure" (*N* 208). This 'fold' is synonymous with what he terms, drawing on Husserl, *Ineinander*: "the inherence of the self in the world and of the world in the self," the in(side) one another or each other (*N* 208, 306). Now this is the same nexus, intertwining or interlacing we find between the human body and animality and Nature.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty claims that grasping the human body or "humanity first as another manner of being a body," does not constitute a departure but will "give

us a verification and a deepening of what preceded" (*N* 208). That is, it is through the human body that we approach the chiasm or *Ineinander* of the human and animality, and this chiasm, in turn, will be "ratified by our lived, perceived *Ineinander*" (*N* 208). A philosophy of Nature is therefore also a philosophy of perception, for it clarifies the "approach to the human body as perceiving by showing us in what dimension the perceiving body must be sought, and how the invisible is divergence in relation to the visible" (*N* 208). This is why, as he argues, "it is the same *Ineinander* that we gradually approach from the two ends" (*N* 208). In other words, this *Ineinander* – that of humanity with animality and nature – is first approached by way of the concept of Nature and animal being. As we have seen, this has been carried out through a critique of mechanism and vitalism, and an emphasis on form and structure; this has led to an account of life as emergent (due to the intertwining of physicochemical elements and life). Secondly, this intertwining is approached from the other 'end,' as it were: from the human body as perceiving. Thus the preceding analyses are ratified and deepened by 'our' own lived and perceived *Ineinander* (because humanity is not another substance but interbeing, and thus what precedes must resonate with lived experience), and our own *Ineinander* is in turn clarified by all that came before (genesis and institution, the human body as emergent). In this sense, the commencement of an inquiry into the human body entails a kind of pre-history - and this is another case of the *Fundierung* or founding relation we saw in Husserl's account of constitution, discernible also in Schelling's notion of reflection. A philosophy of nature cannot be articulated without an account of the perceiving body, and an account of perception as divergence requires a philosophy of nature as the visible. Through a critique of the subject-object distinction and a critical engagement with the natural sciences – a rigorous and regulated form of inquiry into living being that allows us to begin from experience and not from concepts – the ontology of Nature brings us 'back' to the perceiving body. Anticipated in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Coghill and Gesell, and his characterization of living being as *interrogative*, the human perceiving body must also be understood in terms of negativity and absence.

In the third and final *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty articulates four fundamental or key claims with regard to the body and his philosophy of nature: (1) the perceiving body is in relation to an *Umwelt*, (2) the body, as esthesiological, is a power of *Einfühlung* with the world, so that we must speak of intercorporeity with regard to not only other animal or living beings, but with objects of perception, (3) the body is

symbolism and there is a *logos* of the sensible, and finally, (4) the human body is a dimension of Being, on this side of what is not nothing. These claims are inseparable, and can only be revealed or comprehended after - or in light of - the preceding courses on the concept of nature in the history of philosophy, and on the exciting and exasperating findings of the sciences. Moreover, this will lead us to Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, which must be understood in terms of nature and negativity.

a. The Umwelt *and the Body*

The human being is not to be understood as *animal rationale*, which is clear from Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body. As he puts it, "before being reason, humanity is another corporeity"; the human "cannot appear in its qualitative difference by the mere addition of reason to the animal body" (*N* 208, 214). Indeed, humanity *emerges* "just like Being in the manner of a watermark not as another substance, but as *interbeing*," just as we have seen in the case of animal being: "the organism is not a failure of physicochemistry; it is in the inter-world, like a watermark" (*N* 213). The organism emerges, not as absolute individuality, but as inter-animality.[8] We need not say that a vitalist principle descends into a mechanistic body; we need not "oppose causality to causality." Rather, the organism "goes beyond causality only by the detour of a reinterpretation of a new dimensionality" (*N* 213). In both cases, there is *differentiation*: no introduction of a new, 'higher' and ontologically distinct level of being, but rather the advent or unfurling of a form, the appearance of a latency (the becoming-visible of a mark) or 'quiet force' and the opening of a field. This is the same emergence Merleau-Ponty identifies in "every visible" – it is "born in silence under the gaze," laterally or 'noiselessly' in the Nietzschean sense (*VI* 246-7).

We must approach the human being through its body, and this reveals the human body as emerging through differentiation, "in the *Ineinander* with the animal" (*N* 214). For Merleau-Ponty, the sensible body is a "place of a kind of reflection," but this is not the reflection of a consciousness or a spectator (*N* 209). This quasi-reflection the sensible body achieves "has nothing in common with a consciousness that would descend into a body-object" (*N* 209). There is a subterranean reflection, as it were, 'from below' – a covert perceptual knowledge of the sensible, which is nonetheless not opaque. If we begin from what is already the case for the animal body – that "the body

[8] See *N* 186-189.

is not only a thing, but also a relation to an *Umwelt*" (*N* 209) – we are forced to reconsider the subject-object, or the in-itself and for-itself dualism, from which we can no longer begin. We have seen in the previous chapter that the *Umwelt* is an intermediary reality, the perceptual-active world of the organism. We must permit a certain kind of knowledge or reflection that is no longer bound to the ontology of the object and the primacy of the subject. As Merleau-Ponty argues, "let's say rather that the *Umwelt* (that is, the world + my body) is not dissimulated to me. I am witness to my *Umwelt*. My body likewise is not dissimulated for me" (*N* 216). This witnessing or knowing of the *Umwelt* is "a more or less large divergence in relation to a zero-body" (*N* 216). Knowledge of the *Umwelt* is a divergence in relation to a body that would be the "measurement of the world," such that an object or meaningful 'thing' in the *Umwelt* exists because of its relation to the perceiving body.

Correspondingly, "knowledge of the body is a divergence in relation to the 'there' of the *Umwelt*" (*N* 216). To know the body is to be open to the world, but to experience it as different to the things in the world – it is "closer to me than are things" (*N* 216). This knowledge via divergence is "the inverse of the identification I get by movement: *wahrnehmen* and *sich bewegen*" (*N* 216). In this sense it is the 'other side' of the *identification* achieved by movement, which is both to perceive *and* to move itself. Yet this identification is also conditioned by divergence or negativity that gives rise to its very possibility: I am witness to my *Umwelt* but "I cannot see myself in movement, witness my movement," I cannot "*move away from myself*" and it is precisely this invisible or 'failure' that "attests that *Wahrnehmen* is *Sich bewegen*, there is here a success in the failure" (*VI* 254-255). This understanding of movement as a kind of expressive articulation within sensible Being amounts to a critique of the empiricist and idealist understanding of movement, a critique that *rehabilitates* movement *as a phenomenon*. Indeed, movement can henceforth only be seen "*out of the corner of the eye*, on the condition that one does not reflect upon it, that one does not know what he sees."[9] For Merleau-Ponty, then, in accordance with his analyses of Uexküll, movement is activity-perception by virtue of constitutive negativity. Consequently, we can "*deduce perception* and aesthesiology from the very fact that the organism is an edifice of compensated instabilities" – that is, is the organizer of instability.[10]

[9] Merleau-Ponty, *Le Monde*, quoted in Håkansson, "Book Review," 107.
[10] *MPR* 435. The *Sich* of *Sich bewegen* need not involve consciousness, and pertains to all living organisms insofar as they express or establish such instability, understood as instability with regard to "*invariance in the variation*."

Moreover, the 'self' of self-movement is not to be understood as a consciousness. To be a body is to have a style, a certain power to participate, to be affected, to articulate and express both itself and the world. In this way, perception is fundamentally interrogative: to perceive is to move, to question, and to probe. The notion of the *Umwelt* thus allows Merleau-Ponty to maintain the primacy of the perceptual or carnal body for an account of the human being, which in turn allows for the idea of divergence or difference within Being. Differentiation is the difference that 'matters' and is fundamentally relational; it is not a difference between static, positivist entities but rather 'verbal'[11] or active: difference and differenc-ing. As such, Merleau-Ponty claims:

> movements, rests, distances, apparent sizes, etc., are only different indexes of refraction of the transparent medium that separates me from the *things themselves*, different expressions of that coherent distention across which Being shows itself and conceals itself (*VI* 229-230).

Change and consistency or the 'unchanging' [*Unveranderung*] constitute a "system of differentiation," a phenomenal structure that underlies the 'artificial' physiological re-construction of the phenomenon on the basis of geometric displacement (*VI* 229-230). Rather, there is a 'lived' index or a "graduated series of *divergencies*" because the body is a "two-dimensional being," both phenomenal and objective (*VI* 231, 136). As Håkansson writes, the phenomenon of movement "indicates how the body and the world surround and encroach on one another," and is hence an expression or "revelation" of being."[12]

b. "In a Circuit with the World": Reversibility and the Sensible

The human body emerges "in a circuit with the world, an *Einfühlung* with the world, with the things, with the animals, with other bodies" (*N* 209). What Merleau-Ponty names the "theory of the flesh" is what makes comprehensible the body as *Empfindbarkeit* [sensibility] and the notion of an esthesiological circuit with the world. In the *Nature* course, he argues: "the flesh is *Urpräsentierbarkeit* [fundamental presentability] of the *Nichturpräsentierten* [originary nonpresentable] as such, the visibility of the invisible" (*N* 209). The sensible is "the figuration in the visible of the invisible 'becoming aware'" (*N* 209). As a sensible being I have a commonality with the world because I am part of a circuit with it. It is the touching-touched relation, the

[11] We are employing this term as it is used in the notion of verbal *Wesen*, which we address below.
[12] Håkansson, "Book Review," 108, 107. Håkansson discusses how Merleau-Ponty "transposes" the idea of diacritical signs in Saussure's linguistics to the notion of movement and perception.

corporeality of *Einfühlung* that we found in Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl that resurfaces and is decisive here. As touched on earlier, for Merleau-Ponty the body is "touching-touched, seeing-seen," and therefore "the capacity to relate to something other than its own mass, to close its circuit on the visible, on a sensible exterior" (*N* 209). The body is therefore "the place of a kind of reflection." This reflection, however, must be qualified. For Merleau-Ponty, "the hand that I touch, I sense, could touch that which touches it," and "my hand is a thing above all for the other hand that touches it. It is not the hand that is touching and touched" (*N* 223). In the touching of one hand by the other, what one finds is reversibility and negativity: one cannot have the experience of "touching-being-touched"[13] – that is, the touching hand cannot coincide with the touched hand. The reversibility of this relation is key: "at the moment when the touched hand becomes the touching, it ceases to be touched; the reciprocity breaks up at the moment that it is going to be born" (*N* 223). As he claims, "I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization" (*VI* 147). However, this "kaleidoscopic change" (*N* 223) does not annihilate reciprocity. This finitude or eclipse is absolutely fundamental and does not stop Merleau-Ponty from nonetheless describing this 'failure' as a *realization*; this impossible subtends the possible, as it were. It is enabling:

> This failure is precisely the very apprehension of my body in its doubleness [*duplicité*], as thing and vehicle of my relation to the things. There are two 'sides' of an experience, conjugated and incompossible, but complementary. Their unity is irrecusable; it is simply as the invisible hinge on which two experiences are articulated – a self torn apart (*N* 223).

As such, there is an essential "fission or non-coincidence"[14] inherent in perception, as M.C. Dillon puts it, which nonetheless conditions its very possibility. That which is 'open' in the esthesiological circuit is "the flesh" (*N* 223). Insofar as things of the world participate in the flesh, insofar as "they are drowned in it," they are "the flesh of the world, the sensible" (*N* 223). Just as we saw the quiet emergence of life as a new totality or dimension in the previous *Nature* course, sensible being is "not in the objective body, nor even in the physiological," but is only comprehensible in terms of the 'unseen' or invisible relations between them. It is "the arrangement of a hollow" or an "irruption of a new field that comes from the interworld and is not the effect of antecedents" (*N* 210). We therefore approach the *Ineinander* from both ends: through emergence within an

[13] Dillon, *Ontology*, 158.
[14] ibid., 159.

esthesiological circuit with Nature, the sensible, or 'the flesh of the world' – and from the esthesiological relation discernible in lived experience, in our perceiving body, or the flesh that we are. The flesh is inexplicable in terms of objective body, as life is inexplicable in terms of physicochemistry. It thus contains a negativity, a not-nothing that cannot be presented or shown, but which is nonetheless in Being.[15] Merleau-Ponty calls it a "relative nonbeing" or a "natural negativity" (*N* 224); it is relative because it is not other or outside of being, and it is 'natural' because it is discernible at the level of life. Indeed, in his discussion of Portmann's study of animal appearances, Merleau-Ponty had concluded that life is "a power to invent the visible" (*N* 190). Natural negativity is fathomable insofar as we "install ourselves in perceived being/brute being, in the sensible" (*N* 210): "natural being is a hollow because it is the being of totality, macrophenomenon, that is, eminently perceived being" (*N* 218).

The touching-touched relation of the body is "analogous in the relation with the things: they 'touch me' just as much as I touch them" (*N* 224). Due to the intrinsic reversibility of the relation, Merleau-Ponty writes, "I haunt them at a distance, they haunt me at a distance. I am with them in a relation of *Einfühlung:* my within is an echo of their within" (*N* 224). This reversibility also applies to the self-other relation, such that the esthesiological structure of my body is not prior to my being in the world, but the world must already be given insofar as my body is the power of *Einfühlung*. Merleau-Ponty describes this reciprocity: "the articulation of their [other perceiving beings'] body on the world is lived by me in the articulation of my body on the world where I see them" (*N* 218). The "co-perception of the world" is "universal-lateral," and it is the sensible "body-things" that are what is "missing from my body in order to close its circuit" (*N* 218). The sensible body therefore emerges in a circuit with the things, exposed and open to the world, and is a *desirous* body insofar as it is duplicitous, insofar as it cannot 'close' its circuit or achieve coincidence. Again, similar to Portmann's study of the "specular" relations between animals, wherein the animal body may be understood as "organ of the for-other," there is for Merleau-Ponty a "*natural* rooting of the for-other," a manifestation that has "existential value," and which is grounded in the body's relation to the world (*N* 218, 210, 188).

c. Body as Symbolism

[15] Lawlor thus proposes the term 'negativism' to characterize Merleau-Ponty's attempt "to develop a concept of negation that is internal to being," against a positivist notion of negativity (*Thinking Through*, 34).

For Merleau-Ponty, once we conceive of the body "as the power of *Einfühlung*" we find that the body is also "already desire, libido, projection-introjection, identification" (*N* 210). The esthesiological structure (the corporal schema) of the human body "is thus a libidinal structure, the perception of a mode of desire, a relation of being and not of knowledge" (*N* 210). Since the body emerges without rupture, insofar as "esthesiology emerges from the relation to an *Umwelt,* human desire emerges from animal desire," for the latter is already "an opening to an *Umwelt* of fellow creatures" (*N* 225). The corporal schema is therefore not only a relation to things but to other corporal schemas, and these 'others' will be inserted "in the circuit of my hand to my hand," which is to say, a "carnal relation" will be formed (*N* 225). Since my body is part of an esthesiological circuit, I can understand that others are also sensible beings "because I perceive that the other is possible for me as an other perceiving the same sensibles that I perceive" (*N* 225). According to Merleau-Ponty, this means that "my corporeal schema is projected in the others and is also introjected, has relations of being with them, seeks identification, appears as undivided among them, desires them" (*N* 225). There is a libidinal dimension to the body insofar as "the body asks for something other than the body-thing or than its relations with itself" (*N* 225). Yet, the sensible body is in a circuit with others "by its own weight, in its autonomy" (*N* 225). It is due to reversibility or the doubleness of the body that there is simultaneous unity and incompossibility, an indivision of the circuit of the world held 'together,' as it were, by negativity. This is true not only of the human body, but also the animal: neither can "close in on itself" (*N* 271).

How can the body be both a thing and a 'measurement' of all perceived things, both closed and open? This is possible because there are not two separate orders of nature – namely, the (closed) body as object and the (open) body as standard – but rather, a "double nature" (*N* 211). Thus the eye is *both* a "thing seen" and "opening to the visible" (*N* 222), and my body is both in the world and measurement of it. The human body is symbolism, but not in a representationalist sense. The body is symbolism because of negativity: "without a preliminary *Auffassung* [apprehension] of the signifier and the signified supposed as separated, the body would pass in the world and the world in the body" (*N* 211). The body is symbolism because there is an irreducible distance or gap, the hinge of reversibility, a non-coincidence that maintains an openness and allows for expression. This non-coincidence, however, is corporeal and has nothing to do with consciousness or mind. For Merleau-Ponty, "an organ of the mobile senses (the eye, the

hand) is already a language because it is an interrogation (movement) and a response (perception as *Einfühlung* of a project), speaking and understanding. It is a tacit language" (*N* 211). For example, in the perception of the other's physiognomy – in their signature, gait or face – there is the possibility of a certain kind of comprehension "which is not yet a signification, an idea or a knowing" (*N* 211). There is thus a kind of pre-signification or 'tacit' natural symbolism of the body, without which we cannot understand conventional language. We do not 'leave' Nature in order to enter into language.

However, the symbolism of the body differs from that of language, for the former is "symbolism of indivision" or "latent meaning," while the latter is "conventional symbolism" or "manifest meaning" (*N* 219). Again, these are not two separate orders (such that we can speak of two symbolisms). For Merleau-Ponty, "*convention* itself presupposes a communication with self or other, and can appear only as a variant or divergence in relation to a preliminary communication" (*N* 212). Conventional language presupposes instituted language but cannot be reduced to it. Rather, it is introduced "by a hollow or a fold in Being which is not demanded by natural symbolism, but which recommences an investment of the same type" (*N* 219). Indeed, language as a system of differences "reproduces perceptual structures," and Logos (προφορικος) is "reticent" and "says everything except itself," just like "the silent Logos of perception" (ενδιαθερος) (*N* 212). Neither perception nor "words and meanings" are of "the absolute positive" (*N* 212), for language as a whole is not a "totality" but rather "a kind of negativity or non-sense in language" which is why "*all* language is indirect, allusive, or silence."[16] There is no break or rupture between natural and conventional symbolism; rather, there is the emergence of a new dimensionality out of the "milieu of natural Being" (*N* 219). The invisible therefore recommences or resumes an original 'investment.' There is *already* "a Logos of the natural esthetic world, on which the Logos of language relies" (*N* 212), and which irremediably remains "the source of sense," not in terms of content, but "in its carnal structure."[17] As such, language is 'natural' to man, as it recapitulates "what is instituted by communication in the visible; it is the other 'side' of it" (*N* 227).[18]

[16] Lawlor, *Thinking Through*, 38-39. Italics added.
[17] *MPR* 438-9.
[18] We can see here how the philosophy of nature necessarily leads to the problem of language. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's lectures of the emergence of ideality in Husserl's *Origin of Geometry* are contemporaneous with the third *Nature* course. As he writes, his aim is to think the series: φύσις—λογος – History.

d. "There is No Rupture": Lateral Relationality

As we saw in the previous chapter, the animal emerges like a 'quiet force,' without rupture. Similarly, in the third course Merleau-Ponty refers to Teilhard de Chardin's claim that "Man came silently into the world." The latter finds minimal "morphological variety" and asserts that it is impossible to demarcate the point at which "the human with consciousness" appears (*N* 267). Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty argues – through a critical reading of de Chardin - there is not a "beginning from zero" but rather a miniscule "metamorphosis":

> Little morphological novelty. Bipedal so that the hands can free up the jaw, that the maxillary muscles imprisoning the head can be relaxed, that the brain can enlarge, the face diminish, the eyes grow closer together and can fix on what the hands take up. Morphologically, it is a minute change. There is no rupture (*N* 272).

This view is of course incompatible with the dominant "definition of the human by cephalization, cerebralization, and reflection" (*N* 268) – in short, with the claim of human exceptionalism and transcendence. Against his own intuitions, de Chardin continues to define "the human of evolution by the appearance of reflection," thereby reinstating "a traditional philosophy of consciousness" (*N* 272). For Merleau-Ponty, there is no descent of a reflection "into a body otherwise prepared" (*N* 272). The human body is not the 'lining' of the reflection of the mind, but rather "reflection in figural form (the body touching itself, seeing itself)," "the inner of what is outer" (*N* 268, 273). Moreover the world is not, as Idealism generally claims, "inaccessible in-itself," but is rather the "other side" of the human body (*N* 268). Indeed, we now find ourselves in the nexus humanity-animality and mind/reflection-human body, in the chiasm that we have approached from both 'ends.' Reflection is emergent and the esthesiological body is already relational. Every thought, as Merleau-Ponty argues, "occurs to a flesh" (*VI* 146). The body is never simply an 'instrument' for reflective consciousness; rather, there is a "rigorous simultaneity" between body and reflection (*N* 273). Moreover, as we have seen earlier in this section, there is a corporeal reflection realized through reversibility – the impossible possible – and this is reflection in "figural form" (*N* 273). That is to say, this ambiguous reflection is "not the stand-in of an *already total reflection*" (*N* 273). It is a failure that does not truly fail, and that sets up the possibility of a thought for which non-coincidence would be – or become - a lack or failure. *Einfühlung* through carnal reversibility is 'incomplete' reflection in this sense, but it is primordial attachment; it is

the figural reflection that prefigures and subtends reflection or thought. What we must understand is therefore brute or preobjective Being, lateral relationality that links humanity and animality, mind and body, invisible and visible:

> [T]he relation of the human and animality is not a hierarchical relation, but lateral, an overcoming that does not abolish kinship. Even mind is incredibly penetrated by its corporal structure: eye and mind. It is starting from the visible that we can understand the invisible. Starting from the sensible that we can understand Being, its latency and its unveiling. And reflection as the coming-to-self of Being, as the *Selbstung* of Being, without a notion of the subject. And finally, the inclusion of visible Being in a more vast Being (*N* 268).

Prior to being the subject of reflection or of reason, humanity is, as we have seen, another corporeity - and it is only through this primordial kinship that we may reflect on this other 'manner' of being a body in the human being. Reflection presupposes this lateral overcoming, and thus mind or the invisible is 'penetrated' by corporeality. Thus, while in *The Structure of Behavior* the human order constitutes a 'higher' integrated structuration of the preceding orders (physical and vital) with which it nonetheless maintains a dialectical relation, the emphasis has now shifted from an emphasis on perceptual consciousness to an understanding of the human body as enmeshed in an esthesiological circuit with the world, from which mind or the invisible emerges not as a higher form, but rather as the obverse of the visible. As Toadvine contends, this means that reflection "involves not a break in the continuity of our relations with animals but an *affirmation* of this kinship."[19] Mind emerges from life, such that comprehension and our understanding "is grounded in the primordial attachment (to the natural world) which is *itself* the original comprehension, or understanding of the world."[20] That is, the 'realm' of animality, insofar as we may continue to speak of a demarcated realm, is already meaningful. For Merleau-Ponty, "animality and human being are given only together, within a whole of Being," and "our *Ineinander* in the sensible, with the animals, are permanent attestations" (*N* 271). Accordingly, as Kelly Oliver writes, "behavior expresses its own *logos*, and animality is the *logos* of the natural world. As such, language is not a rupture from the natural world but a continuation of it."[21] For Merleau-Ponty, it is the very "use of life," our intertwining and participation in the

[19] Toadvine, *Nature*, 91. Italics added.
[20] Theodore Geraets, "Merleau-Ponty's Conception of Nature," in *Analecta Husserliana Vol. XVI: Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature*, ed. A. Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), 301-302.
[21] Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How they Teach us to be Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 213.

sensible, our vision or 'having' of the visible – which is due not to *thought* but to the flesh – that "teaches us not only the union of our soul and our body, but also the lateral union of animality and humanity" (*N* 271).

Furthermore, as the passage above suggests, 'actual' or visible Being does not encompass 'reality' (understood here as brute Being) and always refers to that which exceeds it. Taking the actual as the visible allows us to grant – or return – meaning and 'reality' to the hidden dimensions of Being, which cannot be understood in separation from the visible. We must start from the sensible, which is what Merleau-Ponty terms 'transcendence' or being at a distance, the intertwining of perception and the perceived, the visible and the invisible. We cannot commence from the standpoint of reflective consciousness, for we can only understand Being from *within* – and this necessitates a rethinking of 'reflection,' as we saw above, which is now taken to be the 'coming-to-self of Being' and not the achievement of subjectivity. We have seen in preceding chapters that reflection cannot think its own emergence. For Merleau-Ponty, all reflection is modelled off the quasi-reflection of the hand touching-touched, which means that it is "not an identification with oneself (thought of seeing or of feeling) but non-difference with self = silent or blind identification" (*VI* 204). Reflection is itself "an institution of nature" and thus can only "apprehend itself" at a distance or "across a horizon" (*VI* 204). When reflection insists on direct access without remainder, then it must "make a language germinate, a 'transparent' apparatus that gives the illusion of a pure or empty presence to oneself" (*VI* 204).

As such, subjectivity "is truly *no one*," for "what is constitutive of the subject is to be integrally with the things, with the world," in short, to be generality.[22] The subject "returns from the thing itself blindly identified" for it is "only a *separation* (*écart*) with respect to it," an anonymity "buried in the world" (*VI* 201). The body-things relationality and hence prehuman anonymity subtends subjectivity; the 'one' is an abstraction. In fact, the body is "to the greatest extent what every thing is: a *dimensional* this," the "universal thing" (*VI* 259-260). The body is not only a seer and a "thing seen" but is flesh, such that "everything said about the sensed body pertains to the whole of the sensible of which it is a part" (*VI* 138). Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, "subjectivity is this foam at the mouth of the world, that the world never dissipates."[23] Importantly, this resonates with and recalls his claim that animal and human beings are "absolutely

[22] *MPR* 426.
[23] *MPR* 426. See *VI* 201.

present beings who have a wake of the negative," as well as his characterization of the animal 'subject' as an "unfurling" that is akin to "a pure wake that is related to no boat." There is no I or subject (human or animal) that projects a world in front of it: there is not constitution but institution, natural production thought outside of causality or finalism and idealism. Both 'foam' and 'wake,' apart from being aquatic or marine references, also refer to a kind of opening that is *also* an emptiness or hollow, a generative multiplicity; both terms thus contain a reference to something prior to and beyond itself, and cannot be understood outside of time. The present, for Merleau-Ponty, is hence not punctual but deep or 'thick,' a gathering or intertwining of multiple temporalities. A wake is a trail of water but also refers to a hole or opening in ice, and foam refers both to the sea and to the formation of a mass of bubbles. Subjectivity is thus a kind of opening – it is at the 'mouth of the world' - a latency or possibility (not the *only* possible) a-rising from and *dragging with it* a past, with the wake of the negative, a froth or porous crystallization that the world does not dispel. It is also fundamentally temporal or imminent – it is a continuous open-ing or movement, which the view from above, or high altitude thinking, does not *see*, for it sees (or thinks) only a static object. Both the animal and human subject are fundamentally temporal, a thickness of multiplicities, and not dense but porous (as froth or foam illustrate). Indeed, as he claims in *Institution and Passivity*, the time of the animal is "already open to a future" and is not outside of time; there is a "kinship of finitudes," an intertwining that "reflects the animalization of the human by the animal" (20).

The human being, understood as part of a philosophy of nature and in terms of the ontology of the flesh, "does not precede the material arrangement of the human body, and it no more results from it" (*EM* 355). As Lawlor writes, the material or "accidental character of the makeup of the human body is a necessary condition," but not a sufficient one.[24] Rather, the self is "a self by confusion," which is irremediably "caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future."[25] The human body participates in an explosion that it does not instigate, it is an openness or a 'light,' a being of dehiscence, a "being with two facets"[26]:

> A human body is present when, between seeing and visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between the hand and the hand a kind of crossover is made, when the spark of the sensing-sensible is lit, when the fire starts to

[24] Lawlor, *Thinking Through*, 147.
[25] ibid.
[26] *MPR* 436, *VI* 216.

> burn that will not stop burning until some accident of the body unmakes what no accident would have sufficed to make (*EM* 355).

The enigma of reversibility and the doubleness of the body as "the sensible sentient" is thus a "prototype of Being," for while "we are in humanity as a horizon of Being," humanity does not project or constitute this horizon – "it is the horizon, not humanity, that is being" (*VI* 237). In this sense, in approaching the human body as part of Nature we can only note its status as a "remarkable variant," and its "constitutive paradox" does not belong to man, but rather to brute Being. Finally, this lateral relationality or interweaving, which is in the last analysis possible on the basis of the flesh, means Merleau-Ponty has reconfigured the "primordial definition of sensibility" from that given in *The Structure of Behavior* (which maintained an emphasis on perceptual consciousness) to a definition based on negativity and reversibility: it is now "the return of the visible upon itself, a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient" (*VI* 142).

§2. Brute, Wild Being: Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Ontology

a. Essence and Facticity

We must start from the sensible in order to understand nature, *logos*, and history - that within which we are englobed and which supports the possibility of knowledge. Merleau-Ponty expresses this phenomenological ontology in an important passage in the third *Nature* course:

> In the order of *Einfühlung*, of the 'vertical' where our corporeity is given to us, there is precisely an opening to a visible, the being of which is not defined by the *percipi* [condition of being perceived], where on the contrary the *Percipere* [to gather, to perceive] is defined by participation in an active *Esse*… (*N* 271).

Visible being is defined not simply as that which is perceived (sensibly intuited in Kantian terms, or the *noema*). Indeed, as we saw with Husserl, visible things and bodies or *animalia* have "hidden sides"; they are not given all at once, and they are not "constituted by our thought, but lived as a variant of our corporeity" (*N* 271). Rather, in the 'vertical' order – which, as we must remember, for Merleau-Ponty means dimensionality and depth – sensible being is "defined by participation in an active *Esse*." The notion of active *Wesen* recurs in Merleau-Ponty's later works, and deepens his critique of Husserl while remaining 'faithful' to the latter. This concept draws on Heidegger, who insists on a notion of essence as not "what-ness," which is merely the

abstracted and impoverished sense of the term, but rather, "emerging," "holding sway," and "enduring as present (*Gegenwart*), pre-sencing and ab-sencing."[27] Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty claims we must think being in terms of style, 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" (*VI* 114-115). As Carbone explains, Heidegger's emphasis on the verbal sense of *Wesen* "aims to name the *unfolding* of the essence of Being," recalling the term φύσις, which names self-emergence, self-unfolding, and persistence or holding sway.[28] Now we have already seen the notion of active *Wesen* in the idea of the animal theme or melody. We saw that it is a theme that 'haunts' consciousness; it is in-variance, a hiatus or emptiness, a virtuality that exists by virtue of, and through, divergence or difference. Likewise, the *Wesen* of a rose is "the roseness extending itself throughout the rose," it expresses "neither essence nor existence" but *both* the 'whatness' and 'thatness' of the rose (*VI* 174). The *Wesen* of red does not require thought, for it is "a *Wesen* that in principle is accessible only through the seeing," once "the seeing is given" (*VI* 247). As he argues in *The Visible and the Invisible*, "there is no individual that would not be a representative of a species or of a family of beings," there exists a "generality of the things" (*VI* 114-115, 220). What Merleau-Ponty is getting at here is a deepening and radicalization of this earlier claim, but without relinquishing its 'naturalness,' as it were. What is at stake is not 'natural' being in the sense of a distinct region, but rather brute, polymorphous or wild Being. Merleau-Ponty now claims that perceptual being participates in an active *Wesen*, for the essence is only valid for me, only "survives my own intuition of the moment," because to experience is to be open to "one sole world" and to be inscribed or "caught up in the fabric of one sole Being" (*VI* 110). To be inescapably caught up in one sole Being or Being in indivision[29] means "there is no positive vision that would definitively give me the essentiality of the essence" (*VI* 112). This is, of course, not a renunciation of essence, but an attempt to think essence beyond the antithesis existence/essence or fact/essence.

Earlier, we saw that for Merleau-Ponty the horizon envelops the essences, such that Husserl's eidetic variation yields a "structural invariant" that requires the *logos* of

[27] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 75-76.
[28] Carbone, *Deformation*, 38f., 93-94.
[29] Merleau-Ponty writes of the ambiguity of this inescapable belongingness, which introduces both freedom of decision and consciousness *and* the ineluctable tie to concrete existence, with regard to Da Vinci: "There can be no consciousness that is not sustained by its primordial involvement in life and by the manner of this involvement" (*Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. H.L. Dreyfus and P.A. Dreyfus, 24). Hence, "We never get away from our life. We never see our ideas or our freedom face to face" (*SNS* 25).

the world for fulfilment. On Merleau-Ponty's reading, Husserl's phenomenology urges us to return to the *doxa* of the natural attitude as *Urdoxa*. What this "rehabilitation of the *Urdoxa*" constitutes, as Richir argues, is "a rehabilitation of the phenomenological indeterminity in principle,"[30] which is also a rehabilitation of the sensible and of the possible, as we have seen. This resonates with Merleau-Ponty's notes on Gurwitsch, as well as with the philosophical significance of the observations of Uexküll and Barad's reading of Bohr, as we saw in previous chapters. In this way, Richir argues, Merleau-Ponty's active *Wesen* is situated 'between' Heidegger and Husserl, although ultimately closer to Husserl and Fink's phenomenology. According to Richir, Merleau-Ponty's contribution is situated between Heidegger's "ontic fact (the *Vorhandenheit*) and from the eidetic ideality (equally *vorhanden* and arrived at by ideation), and is, not factual, but itself *factitious*."[31] That is, as Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and Invisible*, while

> the possibilities by essence can indeed envelop and dominate *the facts*; they themselves derive from another, and more fundamental, possibility: that which works over my experience, opens it to the world and to Being, and which, to be sure, does not find them before itself as *facts* but animates and organizes *their facticity* (*VI* 110).

There is a more fundamental possibility, more primary than "the logico-eidetic possibility of ideations and the variations based on facts," such that eidetic possibilities "appear themselves like *factical* possibilities of *existing* that are organized by the possibility which opens my experience to the world and to Being."[32] Wild Being is "that pre-spiritual milieu without which nothing is thinkable" (*VI* 204) and names a primordial possibility that is therefore *prior* to the fact–essence antithesis and gives rise to the possibility of the latter. For Merleau-Ponty, essences "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" (*VI* 110). These essences are not positive, but rather "articulations or hinges of Being."[33] As such, Richir calls these respondents "wild *Wesen*" or "*incarnate existentials*" which "do not belong to

[30] Marc Richir, "Merleau-Ponty and the Question of Phenomenological Architectonics," in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, eds. P. Burke & J. Van der Veken (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 45.
[31] ibid., 43.
[32] ibid., 46.
[33] *MPR* 445; "Reading Notes," 179.

'being,'" but which are nonetheless not nothing.[34] In other words, "*Wesen* are indeed each time *Wesen* of flesh."[35]

Flesh, which has "no name in any philosophy," is not matter, substance, or mind, but rather an 'element' - an "incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being" (*VI* 139-140). As an incarnate principle, it is "the inauguration of the *where* and the *when*, the possibility and exigency for the fact; in a word: facticity, *what makes the fact be a fact*" (*VI* 139-140, italics added). Hence it is to wild Being that we must look for the 'response' to the philosophical question of Being, or our "indestructible tie" and "continual installation" in the world (*VI* 121). The 'answer' is "higher than the 'facts,' lower than the essences" (*VI* 121). We must not search for the essences, but neither should we aim at a "return to the immediate, the coincidence, the effective fusion with the existent" (*VI* 121). Rather, there is irremediable distancing and hiddenness that renders coincidence impossible. As Dastur reminds us, both immediacy or "absolute proximity" and infinite distance implies a being of "pure positivity"[36] and hence a metaphysics. For Merleau-Ponty, "the experience of a coincidence" can only be partial (a reference to Bergson) and hence temporal, "an overlaying, as of a hollow and a relief which remain distinct" (*VI* 123). Philosophical interrogation is hence not a "return to an immediate," for the "immediate is at the horizon and must be thought as such; it is only by remaining at a distance that it remains itself" (*VI* 123). This appearing-receding is ontological; in the last analysis defining philosophy "as the search for the essences" remains as committed to positivism as the search for an immediate "fusion with the things" (*VI* 127). As maintained since *The Phenomenology of Perception*, both empiricism and intellectualism are incapable of grasping perception. What we are then left with is a choice between philosophy "flattened to the sole plane of ideality or to the sole plane of existence" (*VI* 127). Against this false alternative, Merleau-Ponty asserts that it is precisely "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" (*VI* 127). Reflective or critical thought abolishes this distance in order to think the object and thereby "by-passes the Being already there, pre-critical" (*VI* 202). This distance,

[34] Richir, "Phenomenological Architectonics," 47.
[35] ibid.
[36] Françoise Dastur, "Merleau-Ponty and Thinking from Within," in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, eds. P. Burke and J. Van der Veken (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 26.

however, is precisely the condition for knowledge of the object. As Dastur writes, it is what both "separates us from being" and "attaches us to it." [37]

b. The Flesh of the World: Openness and Transcendence

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology marks a departure from positive phenomenology and the restriction imposed by his starting point in the *Phenomenology* - namely, the "consciousness-object distinction," which thereby retains a philosophy of consciousness (*VI* 200, 183). Taminaux cogently explains the shift that has occurred: "I see to the extent that I can project my body into the world" now becomes "my body can see only to the extent that it is itself part of the visible."[38] Indeed, in the later works the human being does not transcend animal being; theories of evolution are analyzed in order to provide an *archaeology* of the human body, in order to "restore it in a fabric of preobjective, enveloping being, from which it emerges" (*N* 273). Emphasizing brute being as ontologically primary, Merleau-Ponty may now argue that it is "the unity by transgression" or "encroachment of 'thing' and 'world'" that is primary, such that the self is not the 'I can' of the bodily apprehension of objects, but rather a "certain nothingness sunken into a local and temporal *openness*" (*VI* 200-201). In the last analysis "it is by the flesh of the world" that "one can understand the lived body" (*VI* 250). This is why he sometimes describes brute Being as intra or endo-ontology. [39] In other words, the ontology of flesh, wild Being, or Being at a distance implies a transcendence *in* immanence. This 'distance' is precisely what makes proximity possible, which is why Merleau-Ponty also refers to brute Being as "being by promiscuity" (*VI* 234).

It is only on account of participation or inherence, of being sunk in and of the flesh, that I can be open to the world, and hence that I can 'go out of myself.' Furthermore, the things in the world have an inexhaustible depth and are thus 'transcendence.' Transcendence and depth are therefore two aspects of the thickness or dimensionality of the present, and both presuppose negativity. Transcendence is "a world seen within inherence in this world," a "Being encompassing-encompassed" (*VI* 227). It is "an explosion toward the world or being"[40] that I participate in as a carnal being, but which I do not constitute. In the case of a cube, for example, the thing-in-

[37] ibid.
[38] Jacques Taminaux. *Dialectic and Difference* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1985), 149.
[39] See *VI* 226, 227, 229.
[40] *MPR* 433.

itself is traditionally determined negatively, "*by opposition* to the perspectives"; rather, we must comprehend that we have "an openness upon the cube itself by means of a view of the cube which is a distancing, a transcendence" (*VI* 202). This distancing is not objective, for we are not in the dualist order of the subject-object or the for-itself and the in-itself; it is irremediable, for it is not a problem for epistemology (it is not a difficulty that arises from a powerlessness on behalf of a knowing subject), but has to do with the infrastructure of Being. In perceiving the cube "I go from myself unto it, I go out of myself into it," and I am – along with my view or gaze – "caught up in the same carnal world with it" (*VI* 202). It is "for my flesh, my body of vision, that there can be the cube itself which closes the circuit and completes my own being-seen," for, as we have seen above, I am open in the esthesiological circuit and "things are what are missing from my body" (*N* 218). Between my body and the things there is a chiasm, such that the things are "realized by the doubling up of my body into inside and outside," and, correspondingly, the things have "their inside and their outside" (*VI* 263). There is double exposure and double concealment, or exposure through concealment, activity-passivity, and unconcealment-hiddenness. I am encompassed or enveloped – and the cube along with me – in "the massive unity of Being," and it is not consciousness that constitutes the cube, but rather "the wild, non-refined, "vertical' Being that makes there be a cube" (*VI* 202-203). The visible is "a quality pregnant with a texture, the surface of a depth, a cross section upon a massive being, a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being" (*VI* 136). We have departed from positive phenomenology and the primacy of consciousness. The seer is not, as Alphonso Lingis puts it, "a gap, a clearing, in the fabric of the visible," for "there is no hole in the weave of the visible where I am"[41] since in the body of the seer there are only "'shadows stuffed with organs,' that is, more of the visible" (*VI* 138). Indeed, the seer is "he before whom the horizon opens" who is nonetheless "caught up, included within it," such that the seer's body participates in the flesh that reigns below and behind, "beyond the horizon, beneath his skin" (*VI* 149).

Things are not "laid out as perspective spectacles" in front of or before us, but are rather "structures, frameworks, the stars of our life" that gravitate and surround us (*VI* 220). These perceived things are already there, not constituted "*through* the act of perception"; the "eminent being" of things can therefore be "understood only by him who enters into perception, and with it keeps in distant-contact with them" (*VI* 220).

[41] Lingis, Translator's Preface to *The Visible and the Invisible* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), lvi.

Moreover, if things are "beings in depth" that are only accessible to a being that would "coexist with them in the same world," then we have diverged considerably from the Kantian thing-in-itself: it is the body as flesh "that can bring us to the things themselves" (*VI* 136, 217). While there always remains the possibility of "infinite analysis," to see means "to have an *Etwas*"; the visible is accessible *through* hiddenness. The seer is not nothingness but a "cavern," an openness or transcendence – and the thing is both an endless "invitation" to further interrogation *and* presence (*PhP* 242). This is because the thing is not "positively given" but "negatively defined by what it lacks as much as by what it possesses."[42] The Kantian thing in itself can never be *meaningfully* attained, for "it would cease to exist as a thing at the very moment that we believed we possessed it" (*PhP* 242). Paradoxically, in the "instant in which one would arrive at the things themselves, there would be no in-itself," for "it would lack this hollow where their parts gather themselves" (*IP* 126).

For Merleau-Ponty, the thing is transcendence, inseparably "irrecusable presence" and "perpetual absence" (*PhP* 242), or the *Urpräsentation* of the *Nichturpräsentierbar* (*VI* 217). The Kantian, Cartesian, or scientific thought of the object must be "placed back in the 'there is' which precedes it, back in the site, back upon the soil of the sensible world" (*EM* 352). The dimensionality of the thing is hence another way of stating the body's carnal entanglement in the world, which is both activity and passivity, seeing and being seen, touching and being touched. My body "is not simply a thing *seen* in fact (I do not see my back), it is visible by right, it falls under a vision that is both ineluctable and deferred" (*VI* 137); this is how it can have vision. As such, the burning on the back of the neck one undergoes when one feels 'looked at' is due to fact that "to feel one's body is also to feel its aspect for the other" (*VI* 245). I am implicated in the sensible, such that "to feel my eyes is to feel that they are threatened with being seen" the other (*VI* 254). This other is also a generality, such that I can be looked at not only by other animal beings, but also by things, as painters André Marchand and Paul Klee contend.[43] There is an irremediable "feeling of strangeness" before the world (*SNS* 18). Indeed, there is an intertwining or chiasm between body and world since both are not positivities but the "rejoinders" of each other. Things in the world are "incrusted" in the flesh of my body, "thorns in my flesh" (*EM* 354, *VI* 180-181). Merleau-Ponty's

[42] Håkansson, "Book Review," 106.
[43] See *EM* 358: Merleau-Ponty argues we must understand by creative inspiration both "inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that we no longer know who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted."

chiasmic ontology thus expresses the principle of intertwining: there is a "fundamental narcissism of all vision" because the seer is enmeshed in the visible and thus sees itself (but not sees itself seeing), and because to see itself is to be "seen by the outside," to be "seduced" and "captivated" (*VI* 139). As Lawlor writes, "there is passivity at the center of the self-relation."[44] I feel looked at by the things, I approach the things themselves, for this is the inextricable other side of being a seer, of participating in visible being. Insofar as "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another" and through this reciprocity or "commerce" form a visibility, "we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (*VI* 139). The visible-seer is hence *generality*, a field "opened by an inaugural *there is*," not a "psychic something" but rather "*the world itself with a certain coherent deformation*" (*VI* 239, 262. Italics added).

§3. Conclusion

The primordiality of brute Being thus prohibits the capitulation or reversion to any account of anthropogenesis and/or ontogenesis that would unproblematically assert the primacy of reflective consciousness. Importantly, what Merleau-Ponty calls transcendence "replaces causal thought," for the latter relies on the possibility of taking up a position outside of the world or outside of time in order to have a point of view on it, and in order to posit a sequence of events. Rather, we must articulate "a cosmology of the visible," a description of the flesh of the world in terms of "one sole explosion of Being which is forever" (*VI* 265). This 'eternity,' however, is existential and thus fundamentally historical. The particular or existence is not the opposite of the universal, but a particular mode of being-becoming universal. The universal is, as Merleau-Ponty writes, not above but beneath, not before but "*behind us*," for it is that "Being in indivision" within which "the sensible is hollowed out" (*VI* 218). As such, "Being is not a distance that *I* extend, but a distance of transgression, of encroachment and overcoming."[45] Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology thus describes the duplicity or doubleness of the body and world and the primacy of wild or brute Being; the seer is not a constituting consciousness but nevertheless goes to the things themselves in vision, and this 'seeing' is a being seen, for "every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is *inscribed* and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of" (*VI* 266). This is a relation that forms itself "*within Being*," a

[44] Lawlor, *Twentieth-Century*, 147.
[45] *MPR* 426.

crossing over, reciprocity or ‘exchange’ that “forms its unity across incompossibilities” but which does not install the binary or cleavage of the for-itself and the in-itself, interiority and exteriority, subject and object (*VI* 215). It is the between, the negativity or reversibility that maintains distance *and therefore proximity,* that “makes us belong to the same world” (*VI* 215). We will now focus more extensively on this ‘nothingness’ or negativity and the importance of this idea in his ontology.

chapter 8

THE PRINCIPLE OF NEGATIVITY AND THE 'REHABILITATION' OF THE POSSIBLE

The true nothingness, the nothingness that is true, is Being as distant and as non-hidden *(that is, also hidden).*

-Merleau-Ponty[1]

It is the function of the philosopher, the care and passion of the philosopher to protect to the utmost the possible.

-Michel Serres[2]

Introduction: Being as Dimensionality

In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of Nature we have found no "substantial differences between physical Nature, life and mind," for we have "passed between causal-realist thinking and philosophical idealism" by finding in "brute, savage, vertical, present Being a *dimension* that is not that of representation and not that of the In-itself" (*N* 212). Being as dimensionality, however, is Being "interiorly woven with negation" (*N* 212). As we saw with the development of living being, there is natural negativity or the introduction of a difference *within* the physical world; there is the 'wake' of the negative, an institution of Nature, an organic possible that gestures toward the future. Natural negativity thus pertains to openness, temporality, unfurling, or becoming; it is what allows us to understand the organism as reliant on and yet irreducible to physicochemical elements. Thus for Merleau-Ponty "life is not a separable thing, but an investment, a singular point, a hollow in Being," and the human emerges without rupture (*N* 238). Furthermore, transcendence does not take us out of the world, but is the way in which we are 'at' the world while being carnally enmeshed in it. What we find in *The Visible and the Invisible* is therefore a deepening, elaboration, and continuation of this generality or 'theme' already introduced at the 'level' of life, as it were. Negativity is thus a principle, as we saw in earlier chapters; it is the groundless ground, *Urgrund* and *Abgrund*, not a positivist nothing, but an 'unprethinkable' element, remainder, or latency. Nature is therefore 'unprestatable,' which is the result of the verticality and

[1] *MPR* 426.
[2] *Genesis*, trans. G. James and J. Nielson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 23.

contingency of Being. It is a barbaric principle, a darkness that cannot be brought 'into the light' of thought or phenomenality, although inseparable from the visible. This ceaseless withdrawal means that reflection is always 'late' and approaches the unreflected, or its pre-historical-history and mythological 'origin' while remaining ultimately incapable of recuperating this abyssal past.

§1. Nature and Ontology

Negativity must be thought *in* Being, for it is the hinge or the fold, the 'between' that is neither something nor nothing. It is the 'turning point' between the visible and the invisible, the touching and the touched, the seeing and the seen. It is what can never appear as such, but which is revealed through reversibility; it is therefore revealed *obliquely* or indirectly. Moreover, it is not a logical or speculative addition to be inserted in order to fill an explanatory gap. Rather, it names a hollow or separation (*écart*), a gap ungraspable in positivist terms, but which must nonetheless be understood as inhering in visible being. Indeed, it is the very condition of the intertwining; it is the fissure or perforation that would resist coincidence, conflation, and punctuality, and which would inscribe a division or difference in auto-affection. As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty we must not search for the essence from 'above' (infinite distance) or attempt to fuse with the world and attain immediacy (coincidence). Negativity is the withdrawal or receding, the absence or hollow that eludes thought and representation. As such, it is not logical negation; Merleau-Ponty is insistent that he is searching for a concept of the negative "that does not transform nature, man and history, into abstractions," but rather a negative "which is their very fabric."[3] Negativity is thus an active or mobile principle, a 'wild' and temporal principle - it is not a hole or lack, but rather the *écart*, a hollow (*creux*). As such, the notion of negativity is also a critique of nothingness, the latter understood in terms of the dilemma of being and nothingness instituted by Descartes and continued by the rationalist tradition and the sciences. Importantly, this means that the problem of Nature, understood here as the problem of negativity, is not one theme among others but pertains to brute or wild Being: Nature and ontology can no longer be thought apart.

Furthermore, in accordance with his characterization of subjectivity as anonymous generality, it is not the 'I' that posits or projects negativity – negativity is neither a

[3] "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel," in *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau-Ponty*, ed. H.J. Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 76.

logical concept nor an activity – I am not a for-itself, the nothingness that negates. Indeed, this negativity is "the truth of what Sartre says about nothingness": it is not consciousness or "I-ness," but it is "Being as distant and as *non-hidden* (that is, also hidden) that is the "nothingness that is true."[4] The principle of negativity is thus a means of having, and not a nothingness that 'I' am, a nothingness that "drinks in the world" and which "needs the world in order to be no matter what (even nothingness)."[5] Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty we must avoid thinking experience "against the ground of nothingness," for our very "experience of the thing and of the world" is "precisely the ground that we need in order to think nothingness in any way whatever" (*VI* 162). The objectivist thought of the thing constitutes "a double error, with regard to the thing and with regard to nothingness," for the 'something' that we are open to is not the "identity, the positivity, the plenitude of the thing" (*VI* 162). To 'silhouette' the thing against the ground of nothingness is to completely "denature" it (*VI* 162).

Negativity, and not nothingness, is the principle of my participation in the flesh of the world, and is also what makes possible philosophical questioning. As Merleau-Ponty argues, "he who questions is not nothing" but rather "a being that questions himself," for "the negative in him is borne by an infrastructure of being" (*VI* 120). Therefore, while he repeatedly invokes Paul Valéry's notion of a "flaw in the great diamond" throughout his works, in his phenomenological ontology it is no longer perceptual consciousness that constitutes this 'flaw,' for this 'fault' does not belong to the human.[6] The 'I' is not a rip or a tear in the texture of the visible, as Lingis reminds us. Rather, we ought to think of the flaw as natural negativity, as inherent in brute Being or a 'natural' defect that gives rise to expression and facticity. Thus it continues to indicate finitude or a "typical fact" (*VI* 233), but this is a finitude that no longer belongs to man alone.[7] Rather, it articulates "my constitutive transcendence" (*VI* 233). I am not the author of meaning, I do not inaugurate negativity; negativity or the *écart* "is not a no I affect *myself* with, a lack which I constitute as a lack by the upsurge of an *end* which I give myself – it is a *natural* negativity, a first institution, always already there" (*VI* 216). Indeed, as he writes in a working note, thought is not "an *activity* of the soul" and "it is not I who makes myself think any more than it is I who makes my heart beat" (*VI*

[4] *MPR* 426.
[5] *Texts and Dialogues*, 136, *S* 154.
[6] See *PhP* 215, *SNS* 45, *VI* 233.
[7] As Foti contends, expression "is not introduced into nature by humans, nor even by animal life, but is rather "primordial, having always already begun anonymously" (*Tracing Expression*, 11).

221). Moreover, just as the animal has a history and a contingent existence, the same vertiginous logic of institution is discernible in the human being. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no way of disentangling what is innate and spontaneous, and there is no other freedom than the one that "dawns in us without breaking our bonds with the world" (*SNS* 21). We are "condemned to sense" (*PhP* lxxxiv), "a certain project from birth," and hence "there can be no consciousness that is not sustained by its primordial involvement in life and by the manner of this involvement" (*SNS* 24).

Merleau-Ponty's concept of negativity cannot, therefore, be equated with nothingness, because it is neither something nor nothing, neither positive nor negative. More precisely, he is formulating an idea of negativity that is non-positivist – and hence non-negativist, since nothingness is for him bound to positivism, it is the negative *conceived in positivist terms*. For Merleau-Ponty, the positive and the negative mean "absolutely nothing" (*VI* 237). We have already seen Merleau-Ponty surpass the dilemma between being and nothingness in the investigation of the living organism. Indeed, if we start "from the positive" we are "obliged to hollow out lacunae in it": the organism can only be conceived "as a *cavity*" and "subjectivity as the retreat of for Itself" (*VI* 231-232). The analyses of nature and life already take us beyond Cartesian objectivist ontology, and therefore the 'rehabilitation of the possible' that Merleau-Ponty's ontology leads to can be understood as 'natural' in part. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's critique of nothingness is a version of the claim discussed earlier regarding the secret kinship of idealism and mechanism. Both are finalist, and this finalism or causality is prefigured by actualist thought or an 'artificialism' – and here we can equate actualist thought with the idea of a positivist infinite in which 'nothing happens' because all is given.[8] Positivist thought or objectivist ontology only permits a causal thought and is thus incapable of thinking 'becoming' other than as contradiction or impossibility.

Importantly, it is because of this non-negativist/positivist idea of negativity that Merleau-Ponty can write of "Being in indivision" *against* the positivist notion of Being as pure interiority. We cannot understand his ontology without this idea. Being in indivision is analogous to what he calls "Being in promiscuity" or "being at a distance," and is therefore linked to his idea of transcendence, as well as the idea of 'pregnancy,' which means both productivity or fecundity and 'typicality,' "cohesion of self with self,

[8] See *N* 236.

identity in depth (dynamic identity)" (*VI* 208). Negativity is what makes indivision in-division, indivision ('in-' here as negative) *through* or 'in' division, and not what renders it impossible. Indivision always already contains a reference to separation or division within the universal. It is the difference, the hyphen in 'in-division' – the distance that makes proximity possible, the fissure that makes coincidence imminent but never complete - that changes nothing but is not, for that matter, nothing. We ought to hear the same ambiguity or 'doubleness' in the term 'invisible.' Identity can only be understood within difference – identity is always 'dynamic.' Thus he writes that the 'two' or the 'pair' is "a fragmentation of being, it is a possibility for separation (two eyes, two ears: the possibility for *discrimination,* for the use of the diacritical)" and the "advent of difference" (*VI* 216-217). In other words, Being in indivision is what makes identity or sameness thinkable and, as a consequence, the very possibility of ontic difference. Negativity as a fecund and 'dark' principle is therefore 'contained' or overcome (but not negated nor annihilated) within Being, the principle of differentiation that allows Merleau-Ponty to move beyond Cartesian dualism and monism.

§2. The Untouchable of Touch, The Invisible of Vision

We saw above that the ambiguous relation of reversibility between the touching and the touched is the model for understanding reflection in general. The identity or reflection that is achieved is hence "not an identification with oneself" but rather "non-difference with self = silent or blind identification" (*VI* 204). As Lawlor contends, Merleau-Ponty effectively "transforms auto-affection into hetero-affection," for "auto-experience is never self-adequate; it always contains latency and invisibility."[9] If I can never attain coincidence, if "my left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things," and if therefore I cannot hold onto my hold on the world, this is because "my two hands are part of the same body" (*VI* 147-148). My perception can never "grasp the body in the act of perceiving," and the "reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment" (*VI* 9). Reversibility, the hiatus or negativity between touching and touched, is "the hinge between them, solid, unshakeable," and remains "irremediably hidden from me" (*VI* 148). This negativity, however, "is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world" (*VI* 148). However, while our hands "do not suffice for touch," we must not

[9] Lawlor, *Twentieth-Century*, 142.

conclude from this that *they do not touch*, which would be to "relegate them to the world of objects" (*VI* 137). For Merleau-Ponty, to touch oneself is therefore "not to apprehend oneself as an ob-ject," but rather to be openness, to be both "destined to oneself (narcissism)" *and* to "escape *oneself*, to be ignorant of *oneself*" (*VI* 249). We must not revert to the "bifurcation of subject and object, to forego in advance the understanding of the sensible" (*VI* 137), a capitulation which entails we conceive of negativity as abyssal, solely in terms of what makes coincidence impossible. For Merleau-Ponty, this impossible 'junction' is achieved not by the body, nor by the mind or an other's consciousness, but rather in the "untouchable" (*VI* 254). Moreover, this untouchable "is not a touchable in fact inaccessible," it is not "a *positive that is elsewhere*," but rather a "true negative, i.e. an *Unverborgenheit* of the *Verborgenheit*, an *Urpräsentation* of the *Nichturpräsentierbar*" (*VI* 254). Indeed, as we saw above, visible being cannot be considered according to objectivist thought, and is hence not positive; as such, the invisible or the *Nichturpräsentierbar* cannot be logical negation. Rather, this untouchable is the latency that inheres in brute Being or the *there is.* It is by virtue of the flesh and not due to consciousness that my two hands, each with its own experience, is "one sole organ" that touches not two but "one sole thing through both hands," and that my two eyes are "channels of one sole Cyclopean vision" (*VI* 141). Binocular vision or touch, and the "double belongingness" of the body as both sensible and sentient, is hence made possible by reversibility or negativity. In short, as Lawlor and Evans write, it is because "the flesh accomplishes its narcissism only by separating itself into two 'parts' – because it *is* this 'dehiscence' – it cannot see itself seeing, touch itself touching."[10]

It is precisely this untouchable or negative that allows for a kind of reflection, a practical realization or quasi-failure. Non-coincidence is the condition for reflection; the untouchable of the touching-touched is what allows for touch, and is where the touching 'takes place.' Reversibility is thus "not an actual *identity* of the touching and the touched" but rather "their identity by principle (always abortive)" (*VI* 272). In short, negativity or the *écart* is not only *de facto* but *de jure*.[11] This "negativity that inhabits the touch" ensures that "the body is not an empirical fact" and hence "has an ontological signification" (*VI* 254-255). It is what conditions the imminence and elusiveness of coincidence; it is the delay, distance, or difference that conditions my belonging to the

[10] Evans and Lawlor, "Introduction," 11.
[11] See *VI* 254-255.

flesh of the world and to the indivision of Being. Dispossession is how I am capable of 'having.' Using the example of a glove turned inside out, Merleau-Ponty contends that "I touch the one [side] *through* the other," I touch the other side or the outside through the inside (*VI* 263). Negativity is the 'axis,' hinge, or fold: the "end of the finger of the glove is nothingness – but a nothingness one can turn over, and where then one sees *things*" (*VI* 263). Negativity is constitutive, it is the difference or hollow that allows me to appear to myself, for it opens me to the world and to my Self (through non-difference and not self-sameness). While nothingness is a static, actualist idea of the negative, negativity as principle is temporal, mobile, and fundamentally generative.

Analogously, I do not hear myself as I hear others, I cannot see or touch myself in movement (perception), and I cannot see myself seeing: as Merleau-Ponty writes, "I will never see my own retinas," for my eyes are in principle "invisible for me" (*VI* 146, 254). My vision is a fold or "central cavity of the visible" (*VI* 146), a hollow 'from which' I see, and this only because I am a divergence in the flesh of the world, because I am presence as an absence from self. It is because there is an irremediable 'blind spot' or a *punctum caecum* that I have vision, that I have consciousness:

> *What* it [consciousness] 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…*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 *ob*ject is born. It is inevitable that the consciousness be mystified, inverted, indirect, in principle it sees the things *through the other end*, in principle it disregards Being and prefers the object to it…it ignores the non-dissimulation of Being, the *Unverborgenheit*, the non-mediated presence which is not something positive, which is being of the far-offs (*être des lointains*) (*VI* 248).

Again, the invisible is not only a *de facto* invisible, and negativity is the hinge, pivot or passage that allows for identity within difference and what 'prepares' vision. It is the not-nothing that 'ties' consciousness to Being, and is the very possibility of facticity. Consciousness 'ignores' or 'disregards' the unconcealedness and latency of Being, for it sees according to thought and not to vision.[12] Hence for Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is blind both because of, and in spite of, its blindness. This is the same claim made with regard to the scientist: the philosopher tries to see, while the scientist is concerned with intervention, as though the "blindness for Being" were the cost of its ontic determinations. For Merleau-Ponty, vision is neither a "mode of thought" nor a

[12] This latency must also be understood temporally. It is, as Al-Saji writes, the "experiential trace of the difference that time makes for vision," and this difference is what conditions indirect or lateral "philosophical" vision ("When Thinking Hesitates," 358).

self-presence; rather, "it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present from the inside at the fission of Being only at the end of which do I close up into myself" (*EM* 374).

It is not thought, therefore, but vision itself that teaches us how to see.[13] As we saw earlier, our carnal enmeshment in the world and our situatedness is how we can attain objectivity. Things appear in accordance with the figure-ground structure of perception, and are therefore given on a horizon. It is the horizon that in fact "*enables it to be a thing*: gaps, ellipses, allusions to the sensible world, divergence, variation, difference of the 'world'" (*IP* 130, italics added). As such, Merleau-Ponty argues that the thing is always 'mysterious,' and this mystery is what makes the thing *what it is* and not the thing in itself. Furthermore, we must think of the horizon here in terms of the openness of the *Umwelt*, and hence not only in terms of nature or visible being, but also in terms of *history* as the "horizon of my life," and which includes the "ideological, imaginary, mythical, praxical, and symbolic fields" (*IP* 130-131). There are imperceptions in perception; indifferentiation or a withdrawing ground is the accompaniment and necessary lining or halo of the visible. This is the truth of the idea of Gestalt: being is "inflated with non-being or with the possible," and therefore "it is not only *what it is*" (*VI* 180-181). As he writes in 'Eye and Mind,' every visible "functions also as a dimension, because it is given as the result of a dehiscence of Being," such that "what defines the visible is to have a lining of invisibility in the strict sense, which it makes present as a certain absence" (375). The in-visible is always 'of' the visible - it must always be understood in terms of the genitive. It is the "secret counterpart of the visible" (*VI* 215). Accordingly, when I have a vision of myself in the mirror, my self-perception "gives me a *Nicht Urpräsentierbar* (a non-visible, myself), but this it gives me through an *Urpräsentierbar* (my tactile or visual appearance) in transparency (i.e. as latency)" (*VI* 249-250). The non-visible myself or soul is "*a hollow and not a void*, not absolute non-being with respect to a Being that would be plenitude," and its bond with the body is akin to that "between the solid vault and the hollow it forms" (*VI* 232-233). As such, this does not contradict but constitutes the reverse or other side of the experience of consciousness as "*Urpräsentierbar* for Itself which is presented as *Nichturpräsentierbar* for the other" (*VI* 239). This reversibility, or this

[13] This 'seeing' is fundamentally intersubjective and ethical. As Oliver writes, "I do not see other people in the world; I see with them" (137). See "Beyond Recognition: Merleau-Ponty and an Ethics of Vision" for an excellent account of the political and ethical ramifications of Merleau-Ponty's embodied subject as passivity-activity, or as witness (*Intertwinings*, ed. G. Weiss, SUNY Press, 2008).

"double inscription" of outside and inside, links me to the world and to other seers-visibles. The invisible for me, the mind or soul of the other, "into which I can never see, onto which I can never hold," and "which I can never know," is therefore absent – but this is precisely how it is present: "I can still feel it, feel with it, feel into it – *Einfühlung* – and believe."[14]

§3. Depth as Primordial Dimension

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology arises out of a sustained critique of positivism or objectivist ontology, and the metaphysical dualism which this 'flat' ontology gives rise to. This is clearly discernible in his rehabilitation of depth as an originary dimension. The idea of depth is crucial – Merleau-Ponty returns to it in his last published text - and expresses the problem of negativity, the ontology of flesh or being at a distance, and the critique of Sartrean and Cartesian nothingness. A surveying thought cannot be a perspective, for it relies on an infinite number of perspectives without recognizing its own – and therefore rests on "the absolute positivity of Being" (*EM* 363). We have already seen glimpses of the importance of the dimension of depth for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and ontology: we are sunk in corporeity, buried in the world. The object can be for me only because it recedes or withdraws, but also because it shows or reveals its hiddenness. We can think of depth, following Dastur, as the "*spatiotemporal* dimension of distance."[15] It is not by 'accident' that the object is given *as* deformed, this is rather "the price of its being 'real.'"[16] That is to say, not only is the thing "a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views," a formulation that emphasizes my current perspective as partial (but which does not necessarily disrupt the ontology of the object), but things are also "beings in depth," such that they *resist* my inspection, and it is this mystery or "resistance which is precisely their reality, their 'openness'"[17] (*VI* 219). What depth shows is the presentation of the thing "as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves."[18]

As we saw above, for Merleau-Ponty transcendence or openness names "Being doubled with nothingness, and what is to be explained is its doubling (which, moreover, is never finished)" and *not* how the relation between being and nothingness can be

[14] Evans and Lawlor, "Introduction," 11.
[15] Dastur, "World, Flesh, Vision," 30.
[16] Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. J. M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 15-16.
[17] ibid., 16.
[18] *SNS* 15.

"constructed" (*VI* 237). As such, there is negativity in Being and the visible is "the surface of an inexhaustible depth." It therefore invites infinite analysis. Moreover, since transcendence occurs in the field of the present or the thickness of simultaneity, depth as a first dimension ought to be understood temporally as well as spatially. As Mazis argues, there is a "depth dimension of time," a "layering" or "enjambment" of time such that time too, is "chiasmatic."[19] The notion of depth is hence linked to Merleau-Ponty's idea of infinity as 'militant finitude,' which ought to be understood as akin to possibility as non-actualist futurity (as we saw in preceding chapters). Both ideas – Merleau-Pontian infinity and possibility – pertain to brute or polymorphous Being thought from *within*. Furthermore, both entail a surpassing of logical contradiction, for the latter may only be asserted on the basis of a perceptual logic that is its secret inheritance. Vision (or reflection) is "born 'as occasioned' by what happens in the body," and hence "must carry in its heart that heaviness, that dependence which cannot come to it by some intrusion from outside" (*EM* 365).

To rehabilitate the enigma of vision is to rehabilitate depth as not the third but rather the *first* dimension, as well as to rethink negativity and infinity. The "false mystery"[20] of depth arises out of the adherence to classical ontology, whereby space is "the in-itself par excellence" and "remains absolutely in itself, everywhere equal to itself, homogeneous" (*EM* 363). In accordance with Cartesian space and objectivist ontology, depth, which is invisible for finite experience, is "immediately equivalent" with *breadth*, for it relies on the classical notion of space (with interchangeable dimensions) (*PhP* 266-267). For Descartes, then, it is a "false problem," while for Merleau-Ponty it is "the whole question."[21] Depth is invisible, for while I see objects that are partially hidden by other objects and hence see things "staggered at intervals" or "each thing outside the other," what I see is not depth but *width* (*EM* 363).[22] To restore ontological value to the dimension of depth is to take seriously the dimension of the hidden or the latent, or negativity and the invisible. I see the surface of a thing from a certain point of view, and it is precisely because my gaze is "limited by a surface,"

[19] Glen A. Mazis, "The Depths of Time in the World's Memory of Self," in *Time, Memory, Institution: Merleau-Ponty's New Ontology of Self*, eds. David Morris and Kym Maclaren (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 46-47. Mazis focuses on temporal depth or the intertwining of temporalities, and argues that the time of our concrete existence must therefore be understood as "inseparably interwoven with cultural time and natural time" as well as "geological time" (67).
[20] Lawlor, *Implications*, 77.
[21] ibid., 80.
[22] Similar to Husserl's critique of Descartes' doubt, which failed to sufficiently confront the natural attitude, Merleau-Ponty claims that Descartes remains bound to the ontic, and "elevates certain properties of beings into a structure of Being" (*EM* 363).

because the "concealed inside and behind" of the object (and the other objects that are concealed by the thing I am gazing at) constitutes a concealment not only in fact but in principle, that I approach the things themselves.[23] Thus, for Merleau-Ponty "I see things, each one in its place, precisely because they eclipse one another; they are rivals before my gaze precisely because each one is in its own place" (*EM* 369). The enigma is therefore "their known exteriority in their envelopment and their mutual dependence in their autonomy" (*EM* 369). This deformation is not logically contradictory but *necessary* and demands 'translation' into 'perceptual' or experiential logic.[24] Similarly:

> When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if I saw, without this flesh, the geometry of the tiles, then I would stop seeing the tiled bottom as it is, where it is, namely, farther away than any identical place (*EM* 371).

Depth, or the irrecusable hiddenness or absence of things, is how "things have a flesh," but this is the case only for a subject that would "coexist with them in the same world" (*VI* 219, 136). It is only because "the world surrounds me," because "there is a point whence I see" – with the 'blindness' that this entails – and because I am a carnal being, that I am open to the flesh of the world. The things are not "flat beings but beings in depth" (*VI* 136), for I participate in polymorphous Being. The dimension of depth thus allows me not only to approach "a certain indissoluble link between the things and me" as Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, but to "grasp transcendence as concrete experience"[25] provided we *see* the enigma of vision, and see the overlapping or encroachment. Therefore, we must see as painters see, we must "take literally what vision teaches us": that "our openness to the world" is not "illusory or indirect," and that what we see is "the world itself" (*EM* 375). Indeed, as Carbone writes, it is the role of the painter (and, according to Carbone, the role of the poet) to "bring to expression" the "indistinguishability of activity and passivity" and hence the "reflexivity of Being itself."[26] That is, seeing as *voyance* is "a complying with the showing of the sensible universe itself," a going along with, and a being taken; it therefore involves a "mutation" of the relationship between humanity and Being such

[23] Yasuo Ito, "Depth and Infinity in Merleau-Ponty," *Husserliana Vol. LVIII*, eds. A. Tymieniecka and S. Matsuba (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998), 74.
[24] *VI* 256. See also *S* 158.
[25] Ito, "Depth," 67.
[26] Carbone, "Variations," 239-240.

that, as we saw above, humanity is a horizon of Being.[27] We must therefore consider as primary the structure, verticality, or thickness of Being, which is a "single dimensionality" that gives rise to and justifies all the other dimensions (*EM* 363-364). It is the philosophy of brute or polymorphous Being that allows us to conceive of being and nothingness, and presence and absence, as "two abstract properties" of transcendence or the structure of Being (*VI* 237). Depth therefore shows us the dehiscence of Being, for it asserts the following *without contradiction*: "the world is in accordance with my perspective *in order to be* independent of me, is for me in *order* to be without me, to be a world" (*EM* 375).

a. Negativity and Perceptual Logic

What Merleau-Ponty challenges us to conceive is how what I can never know *is* how I know, and how my having a blind spot is how I can see and be a consciousness – in short, how impotency, finitude, fault, or failure underlies realization, or how it conditions possibility. This perceptual 'logic' is mobilized against objectivist ontology. Negativity is the generative principle, a kind of guarantee of futurity and possibility, the negative "that makes possible the *vertical* world, the union of incompossibles, the being in transcendence," and "the possible as a claimant of existence" (*VI* 227-228). Thus Merleau-Ponty may assert that "to see is to not see" (*VI* 225) since "to see is always to see more than one sees" (*VI* 246-247), and this is because imperception, the blind spot, the untouchable, or the invisible is *of* the visible or the tactile. I see more than I see because the visible is perforated or dimensional and carries the lining of the invisible (the thing I see is never given all at once, when I perceive the other's body I feel into it, I experience the other as a subject, that is, as both other and variant of the same), and this is ultimately the same thing as saying that to see is not to see, because the invisible or negativity is the *creux of* the visible (I cannot see myself seeing, my vision is a cavity in the visible). Due to reversibility this negativity is 'overcome,' such that partial coincidence or impossibility is the condition of the possible. From the perspective of actualist thought, negativity is a hole or lack, emptiness or determinate absence; in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, negativity is recast as the principle of futurity or possibility. The untouchable is what allows for touch, is where touching

[27] ibid., 240. Carbone discusses seeing as *voyance* (clairvoyance or 'double vision'), which indicates the inauguration of a universal *through* the particular. It is therefore linked to the theme of animal melody and to binocular ontology. See also Oliver, "Beyond Recognition."

takes place, just as the unknowability of the soul or mind of the other is precisely how I know the other; my 'unfreedom' or the limitation of my power is how I am free,[28] anonymity or generality is the condition of individuality, my absence conditions my 'self-presence,' and I do not see despite having a blind spot, I do not see the tiles despite the water – I see because of it. To exist is to exist with others: to have a 'side' to 'show,' and hence to be vulnerable and exposed, to be caught in the order of latency and non-hiddenness, to be *interwoven*. When I meet the glance of the other, there is an "exchange," a "chiasma of two 'destinies,' two points of view," that amounts to "a sort of simultaneous reciprocal limitation" (*S* 231). It is this unbridgeable difference that makes us belong to the same world, for "as soon as glances meet, we are no longer wholly two, and it is hard to remain alone" (*S* 231). The 'place' or blind spot where our glances meet, this negativity that makes us *both* two and not-two, conditions the possibility of exchange, for it makes possible our indebtedness or passivity and maintains our difference: "You are not *me*, since you see me and I do not see myself. What I lack is this me that you see. And what you lack is the you I see" (*S* 231-232). Negativity thought in non-positivist terms is thus openness, the openness of the circuit of the world as flesh, the difference at the core or 'moment' of auto-affection, the eclipse of coincidence that makes it possible.

§4. "Existential Eternity": Infinity and Possibility

In a working note entitled "Labyrinth of Ontology," written around the time of the second *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty provides what is perhaps the clearest explication of his thought of the possible as not simply a critique of the ontology of the object, but also as a surpassing of the latter by way of regressive inquiry. This archaeology is simultaneously a kind of recovery. In this way, Merleau-Ponty begins to move away from an articulation of the possible as approached negatively or *a contrario* – that is, as that which is 'leftover,' which actualism or idealism cannot account for. This working note also demonstrates the difficulty of grasping the apparently straightforward claim – on which he has been consistently insistent - that essence and objectivity are "*idealizations of the primordial contact with being, the world, and the object*."[29] In line

[28] My freedom is "never determinism but never absolute choice," which is already implied in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of subjectivity: "each of us must be at once anonymous in the sense of an absolute individuality and anonymous in the sense of an absolute generality" (*PhP* 474).
[29] *MPR* 417. While empirical science for Husserl is discovery-concealment, we could say that for Merleau-Ponty phenomenology is overcoming-rehabilitation *through the task of expression*, of the discovery-concealment of brute Being by the empirical sciences and by rationalist philosophies.

with his discussion of the Husserlian notion of world as that which is "at the root of every thought of possibles," Merleau-Ponty insists on the idea of the existence of the world as a "brute" fact. What he is positioning himself (and Husserl, on his reading) against is the Leibnizian and actualist idea of the world as the "only one possible," which is to posit the necessity or inevitability of this world's existence. However, he also wants to avoid thinking of the world or contingent existence as "a residue, an opacity which remains after we have examined the essence and recognized that it was not impossible."[30] This is to approach the world through objectivist ontology. This is similar to the argument (or critical adjustment) he makes to the Sartrean account of nothingness: we cannot simply add facticity as a "counterpart" or "complement" to subjectivity as nothingness.[31]

In short, we must think the existence of the world otherwise: it is not the only possible, but neither is it to be considered in contradistinction to other possible worlds. We must think the world and existence – and hence possibility – other than in accordance with the "positive infinite" which is "major rationalism's secret" (*S* 149). Rather, as we saw in the previous chapter, "the real is not to be thought on the basis of the possible, but on the contrary the possible on the basis of the real and as a variant of the real."[32] We must reject the actualist idea of the possible which remains "a form of the ideology of the necessary," and which can only conceive of the logical possible or the possible as residue.[33] This is the possible thought as ontologically full, deducible, calculable and probabilistic – and therefore tied to necessity.[34] Actualism is a conception of the world in accordance with objectivist ontology.[35] Accordingly, contingency or the real can only be thought "as something irrational," and actuality as something that can be 'added' to an essence.[36] Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues that concepts and essences, "far from providing us with the starting point from which, through the addition of an obscure principle, we would pass to the actual," are in truth idealizations.[37] The Merleau-Pontian possible is therefore "a rehabilitation of the possible as much as a subordination of the logically possible," it is as much recovery as critique,

[30] ibid.
[31] *MPR* 426.
[32] *MPR* 417.
[33] ibid.
[34] In this case, the necessary would simply be "a possible that is fully possible, and the possible is only a necessity which inexplicably stops on its own path" (*MPR* 417).
[35] See *N* 277: "Actualism demands…that the senses be just that: causal operation in the exterior world."
[36] *MPR* 417.
[37] ibid.

rehabilitation-as-overcoming. To express this idea, Merleau-Ponty invokes Coghill's study:

> What I am here calling possible is as well not the contradictory…but the implicit totality, which prepares the salamander to swim even before the organs of swimming are in place. And this possibility (the organically possible), it exists even in physical being, since it as well is not by definition, since the physical something is not as well a pure object of thought.[38]

The possible names the openness of a "universe of structures" that imposes no necessity and thus no finalist principle. We must start with the brute existence of the world. Further, while it has remained relatively implicit in his critique of Nature thought in accordance with the ontology of the object, in this passage Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that his phenomenological ontology involves a rethinking of not only organic life but the physical world. This philosophy of perception and corporeality underlies his reading of Husserl and Uexküll, in particular – and it abandons the dualisms subject/object and existence/essence. Merleau-Pontian possibility therefore pertains to the flesh of the world. In sum, we must think contingency or existence beyond the ontology of the object or the positive infinite and its 'logic.' It is to think Schelling's barbarous principle as primary and not in terms of what system or reason cannot contain; from the standpoint of transcendental philosophy, the barbarian principle renders idealism anguished, from the standpoint of perception, it is negativity – the unreflected, the abyssal past, the groundless ground – that makes phenomenality and becoming possible.

Yet, as we have discovered, to think the barbarous source or the unreflected as primordial means to think it as 'first' in a very specific sense: the unreflected is a first that must 'come after,' its firstness or primordiality is guaranteed by the abyssal and receding past, but this means that it is necessarily forgotten – it must become a kind of memory – such that the unreflected is revealed through being 'covered over.' This also makes reflection 'late,' and ultimately dependent on the unreflected for its claim to primacy. Similarly, we must think finite perspective as primary, and not in terms of absolute perspective or givenness, and hence as subordinated to a totality. As he writes in the *Phenomenology*, "if there is to be an absolute object, it must be an infinity of different perspectives condensed into a strict coexistence, and it must be given as if through a single act of vision comprising a thousand gazes" (72). Of course, absolute

[38] *MPR* 418.

perspective is precisely *not* perspective, and an all-seeing eye would see nothing – it would have no blind spot – and it would not be seen; it would be incapable of vision (and therefore incapable of blindness). For Merleau-Ponty, to see is to be seen, and it is "to have the invisible since it is to have an *Urstiftung*,"[39] to be instituted or founded. This also means, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Husserl, that there can be no objectivity without finite or concrete perspective, for the latter is the very condition of the former. An absolute subject is not an incarnate subject, it has no 'soil' or 'earth,'[40] and therefore "it would not be a you for us: there is no you but the one who can respond to me, to whom I am as necessary as he is necessary to me."[41] An incarnate subject, as flesh of the world, "is a Being that is *eminently percipi*," it is fundamentally a Being-seen and hence generality (*VI* 250).

Merleau-Ponty's idea of possibility as non-actualist futurity, as we saw in his philosophy of Nature, is akin to infinity as "militant finitude," for both express the 'infinite finitude' that is only understandable from *within* Being, or in accordance with intra-ontology. It is only through conceiving of negativity or the invisible as *of* the visible, and hence "*Verborgenheit* by principle," that we may reconceive infinity:

> *Offenheit* of the *Umwelt* and not *Unendlichkeit* – *Unendlichkeit* is at bottom the *in itself*, the *ob-ject* – 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. But it lies no more in infinity than in the factual finitude (*VI* 251).

The openness of the world is inconceivable in terms of Cartesian infinity or objectivist ontology, for the latter can only conceive negativity as nothingness. For Merleau-Ponty, the Cartesians have "devaluated the closed world for the benefit of a positive infinity," which is to "elude infinity rather than to recognize it" (*VI* 169). As he argues in *Signs*, "the idea of the positive infinite is major rationalism's secret," and the positive infinite can only think the negative as a 'defect' (Descartes), negation (Spinoza), a nothingness that cannot be perceived (Malebranche), or as "the minimum of shadow necessary for making Being's sovereign self-production appear" in the case of Leibniz (*S* 150). In short, 'pure positivism' results in 'pure negativism,' as Lawlor argues.[42] We must therefore recall the 'kinship' Merleau-Ponty identifies in the finalism of Idealism and mechanism, which can be explained in terms of an underlying

[39] *MPR* 439.
[40] See *IP* 129.
[41] *MPR* 424.
[42] Lawlor, *Implications*, 110-112.

allegiance to a positive and timeless infinite. Merleau-Ponty's attempt to convert or "translate the positive infinite" into "infinite finitude,"[43] or *Unendlichkeit* into *Offenheit*, is hence to 'overcome' the rationalist thought of Nature and to conceive of Nature as an indestructible (and thus *eternal*), barbaric principle that cannot be surpassed 'once and for all,' for it is infinite depth or concealment. Thus it is "existential eternity," an eternity that "can never be beyond time,"[44] but which is infinite *because of finitude*, the active *Wesen*, the dimension opened by a finite existence that does not constitute but *resumes*, and hence participates in the instituted. As such, we ought to understand the *Offenheit* of the *Umwelt* in Husserlian and Uexküllian terms, keeping in mind Merleau-Ponty's critical adjustment of Uexküll's *Umwelt* theory (the repudiation of Uexküll's Kantian *planmässigkeit* and theory of harmonious Nature). That is, it names the openness of the horizon or a field of action in a meaningful natural, historical, and cultural world. Just as the horizon is "the total being where differentiation arises and dedifferentiation falls back" and therefore involves elements that are not consciously intended, the *Umwelt* for Uexküll involves both an operative and perceptual world, and therefore includes things that the organism need not be cognitively aware of. The *Umwelt* is openness because it includes all that has been taken for granted and all that has been forgotten – bodily and culturally, through training and habit, historically, through the (continuous) emergence of ideality,[45] and perceptually, for our proximity makes us forget our distance, our paradoxical 'tie' to the world. The openness of the *Umwelt* is due to the ontology of brute Being, which can only be thought in terms of an invisible or unseen that is not nothing, a concept of negativity thought outside of, beyond, or against the notion of nothingness, abyss, and lack. Furthermore, the shift from *Unendlichkeit* to the *Offenheit* of operative, infinite finitude, does not entail an abandonment of truth, but a rehabilitation of truth – no longer against or in spite of time,[46] but with it:

[43] ibid., 110.
[44] Ito, "Depth," 76.
[45] As Merleau-Ponty argues in *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, the question of the constitution of ideal objectivity necessarily involves the interrogation or "regressive inquiry" [*Ruckfrage*] of a tradition, and tradition *necessarily* involves a forgetting of empirical origins. Survival is ensured only by way of forgetfulness; the unthought or negativity is constitutive. Moreover, the constitution of ideality relies on the sensible world for its completion, because the 'as such' of the ideal object relies on virtual communication or writing – but writing, in order to complete itself, must be sensible, must be in the world. This means, as Derrida argues, that ideal objectivity "is such only 'after' having been put into intersubjective circulation" (*Husserl's Origin,* 65); in order to explicate structure, one needs genesis or history. History encroaches on phenomenology. See Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl*, Ch.5; *Thinking Through*, Ch. 3.
[46] As M.C. Dillon writes, truth involves the presupposition that objects "will always remain to some degree opaque," whereas Cartesian certainty involves "an attempt to eliminate the opacity of the world altogether and make it entirely transparent" (*Ontology*, 10).

> Since we are all hemmed in by history, it is up to us to understand that whatever truth we may have is to be gotten not in spite of but through our historical inherence. Superficially considered, our inherence destroys all truth; considered radically, it founds a new idea of truth (*S* 109).

A rehabilitated truth is inextricably tied to the depth and openness of the *Umwelt*, the inexhaustibility that is nonetheless manifest to us as sensible beings, as flesh. Indeed, it is only from a Cartesian or absolute perspective that this 'new idea' of truth appears relativistic.[47]

§5. Conclusion

The *Offenheit* of the *Umwelt* conditions the infinite task of philosophy, for it is infinity and depth – and not the positive infinite or negativist negativity, which is ultimately tied to a universe wherein 'all is given' – that has been granted ontological significance through Merleau-Ponty's rehabilitation of the sensible. As he insists in the reading notes on Gurwitsch:

> What philosophy must recapture is not an eidetico-reflexive system, it is the cradle of every system: the amorphous sound, containing all the possibilities of *Bildung* [formation], existential eternity, the active *wesen*, not as a destiny or a limit to our initiatives, but on the contrary as an *ens realissimum* [real, original being], the sound of *Offenheit* [openness], gathering into itself the *Unendlichkeit* [endlessness, infinity] of Cartesian being.[48]

Against the "infinity of idealization," Merleau-Ponty argues for the infinity of *Offenheit* and of the *Lebenswelt* as that which "exceeds us" (*VI* 169). This constitutes a 'recapture,' for "objectified Infinity" is neither self-evident nor absolute but ultimately dependent on the openness of the world. Phenomenology is therefore "the recognition that the theoretically *complete*, full world of the physical explanation is not so, and that therefore it is necessary to consider as ultimate, inexplicable, and *hence as world by itself* the whole of our experience of sensible being" (*VI* 256). We may therefore understand Merleau-Pontian overcoming as rehabilitation, and not as negation, annihilation, or 'return' to a state of primordial wholeness, in the Schellingian sense. To overcome the 'false mystery' of vision is to rehabilitate the dimension of depth, to overcome positivist nothingness is to rehabilitate negativity, to overcome Cartesian infinity is to rehabilitate infinity as openness, and to overcome logical contradiction or

[47] See Sallis, *Phenomenology*, 100-101.
[48] Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Notes," 187.

incompossibility is to rehabilitate perceptual logic. It is to restore or rehabilitate the possible *as* possible and not as impossible (for logic), to rehabilitate negativity as generativity and not as negative for thought (as contradictory), and hence not to *replace* but to *translate*, as Lawlor emphasizes.[49] It is not a re-turn to a prior state, but a kind of creative work or labor from 'where we are,' one that is endless and thus both a present and future task. This openness is not a position or a "thetic attitude," but rather names the "relationship in which we are open to the world because the world is open to us."[50] In other words, it is a historically situated task of translation, and one which entails a recuperation via excavation such that the rehabilitation of the possible also names the primacy of the primordial contact with brute Being and the openness of the *Umwelt.*

[49] Lawlor, *Implications*, Ch. 9.
[50] Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos*, 63.

CONCLUSION

WONDER, POSSIBILITY, AND THE OPENNESS OF THE WORLD

Philosophy is the perceptual faith questioning itself about itself. One can say of it, as of every faith, that it is a faith because *it is the possibility of doubt, and this indefatigable ranging over the things, which is our life, is also a continuous interrogation.*

-Merleau-Ponty[1]

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of Nature forms an indispensable part of his attempt to develop a phenomenological ontology that overcomes the vertigo of Cartesian thought. Importantly, chiasmic ontology or the philosophy of brute Being pertains to the perceptual field "insofar as it contains everything: nature and history."[2] As such, Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible* that the "Becoming-nature of man" is "the becoming-man of nature" (185). The rehabilitation of nature takes us 'beyond' nature, in the sense that it conditions and informs a series of interlinked transformations or 'translations': the overcoming of the positive infinite leads to the rehabilitation of 'militant finitude,' the static or actualist timelessness of Nature to 'existential eternity,' the logic of contradiction or incompossibility to perceptual logic, the actualist possible to the real-possible, and finally, ontological diplopia to a chiasmic ontology. For Merleau-Ponty, we must think negativity in Being. In short, he responds to the challenge of thinking the world – as Husserl contends, there is only one[3] - without recourse to a positive infinite. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty approaches "Nature outside of us" through "the Nature that we are"; he seeks "the *nexus*, and not the putting-in-place under the look of God" (*N* 206).

This approach constitutes a remarkable overcoming of Cartesian rationalism, for it surpasses ontological diplopia through a *grounding* of the opposition. This ground would be neither subjective nor objective; indeed, the later works make it abundantly clear that we cannot start from consciousness or from nature as an object – and hence

[1] *VI* 103.
[2] *MPR* 421.
[3] As Etienne Bimbenet remarks, the rejection of "the very opposition between heaven and earth," expressed through the claim that "there are not two worlds but only one," amounts to a surpassing of metaphysics ("To Have Done," 322).

with the solidity of a thing or foundation. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's ontology is a philosophy of Being in latency, and this implies a *groundless ground*, a depth that only exists in its withdrawing or irremediable hiddenness, in its intransigent deepening and distancing. As such, overcoming via rehabilitation does not signal an end to the standing in wonder before the world. Rather, it *ensures* it, for the world or *Umwelt* and my openness to it is inexhaustible. It reveals the ceaseless questioning or interrogation of brute Being, and the impossibility of a complete intellectual possession or totalization of the world. Contra the early Schelling, for Merleau-Ponty the existence of the world is not a problem to be 'solved.' If the body already introduces a partial reflection, and if in the philosophy of brute Being we have disrupted and moved beyond the distinction between subject and object, then we must, following Marcel, speak not of a 'problem' but a 'mystery.' The question of Being is a mystery, "a very singular type of problem" wherein the one who poses the problem is not a spectator but "caught up in the matter" - and to take this inherence seriously is to view ourselves as "one sole continued question."[4]

To stand in wonder before the mystery of existence is to acknowledge that one's activity is conditioned by passivity and vulnerability. It is, as Toadvine writes, to "never find oneself at home."[5] As Madison argues, for Merleau-Ponty, "philosophy can only be a perpetual astonishment; it is the awareness of the fundamentally and insurpassably mysterious character of existence."[6] Questioning is therefore at once a critical and creative activity, but one that also involves an element of passivity, for it is an openness *demanded* of us by virtue of what Richir calls "the incompletion in principle" of the world and of ourselves, "of every thing and every thought."[7] For Merleau-Ponty, *in principle* the "unknown" will never be wholly "transformed into the known," for the 'object' of philosophy "will never come to fill in the philosophical question, since this obturation would take from it the depth and the distance that are essential to it" (*VI* 101). Indeed, this unending standing in wonder is only 'disappointing' from the standpoint of "a false imaginary, which claims for itself a positivity that fills its own emptiness" (*EM* 378). It is this openness to the unthought and to negativity that amounts to something like an 'ethical' phenomenological stance toward the world and to others. If there is an ethical bent to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, it would be here - in

[4] *Texts and Dialogues*, 133, *VI* 103.
[5] Toadvine, *Nature*, 135.
[6] Madison, *Phenomenology*, 160.
[7] Richir, "Meaning," 67-68.

the excess of Being over thought. It would therefore insist on the principle of negativity, for the latter maintains and harbors an outside.

To rehabilitate nature is therefore not only to restore it as a philosophical question worth posing, but to rehabilitate it as a kind of 'elemental' recalcitrance that cannot be assimilated or 'returned' to the ambit of conceptual, representationalist thought. Instead, it must be understood as and in its irrecusable obscurity. This does not make philosophy impossible; it renders the philosophical task infinite, insofar as it posits the (non)hiddenness of Being, which I am always finding anew *and* as always already there. It is also to rehabilitate the meaning of nature, or more precisely, the oft-disavowed excessiveness at the core of the thought of nature in Western ontology. Descartes must be overcome, as Madison argues, "by means of a creative reappropriation."[8] As the foregoing analyses have demonstrated, Merleau-Ponty overcomes the strabism of nature or ontological diplopia through the formulation of a chiasmic or binocular ontology. The latter would achieve a single vision as the in-division of double vision and hence due to the negativity that inheres *in* vision or Being. Indeed, the flesh is both the principle of differentiation and the "principle of indivision, and, as such, it is the name of being as a whole."[9] Merleau-Ponty's ontology demands passivity-activity and *care*: philosophy is the interrogation of and through carnal adherence, our participation in Being at a distance, our intertwining with the flesh of the world; it is "not a particular body of knowledge; it is the vigilance which does not let us forget the source of all knowledge" (*S* 110). This critical vigilance or phenomenological interrogation can lead to a heightened attentiveness to the ways in which being in the world involves living with the ambiguities of encroachment. That is, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy lends itself to the articulation of an inter-existential (as opposed to intersubjective) relationality that opens up – and keeps open – ethical and political questions regarding our ways of engaging in the world.

As discussed above, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's perceptual logic, "to see is not to see" (*VI* 225). As the term 'clairvoyance' suggests, to see 'clearly' is to see more than one sees. Indeed, to see with negativity is not to see it, it is the 'not' inscribed in the very possibility of vision. Negativity is hence a kind of perforation or puncture, an opening that, as Schelling and Löwith argue, allows for respiration, inspiration, and movement. How, then, may we ethically engage with this excessiveness or constitutive

[8] Madison, *Phenomenology*, 154.
[9] Dastur, "World, Flesh, Vision," 37.

negativity? How may perceptual logic be mobilized in order to preserve this excessiveness? For example, we can see this obturation of negativity in the claim that we can completely know the other (phenomenologically, a presentification of the *nichturpräsentierbar*). Yet we can also discern this closure in the claim that we absolutely *cannot* know the other. That is, both give rise to the same ethical problem: to absolutely know and to be absolutely prohibited from knowing leads to the destruction of inexhaustibility or depth. Both therefore run the risk of authorizing a mode of relating to otherness and difference as a problem to be 'solved,' rather than as an illimitable mystery. What Merleau-Ponty's ontology allows us to see, however, is that the 'can' – I can completely know the other – is a *process* that is in principle inexhaustible, and the 'cannot' is a 'not' that needs to be mined and situated. The 'cannot' is a cannot for logic, and is therefore aligned with ideality or objectivist ontology; the impossible must be returned to the world of perception, wherein it is practically overcome. What stands opposed to impossibility is not possibility; partial coincidence or impossibility is the very condition of the possible. Negativity is therefore the holding open that is at once a holding apart and together. An ethics of negativity would then ensure the indefatigable interrogation of perceptual logic, but it would also entail a standing and enduring of tension or ambiguity. Openness, then, is a field of intensity or force.

Moreover, if my 'having' of world necessarily involves my participation in the flesh of the world, then can we not speak of the responsibility of a consciousness that finds itself within the world, a responsibility that would respond to pre-human, lateral relationality? If we are always already responding, then we cannot 'introduce' responsibility anew, as if responsibility begins only when we intellectually recognize it. That is, I am never faced with the option of disavowing relationality – in fact, any disavowal is only possible because of relationality, just as being-with is the precondition of solitude, and just as grief arises equally from absence and presence (the tie and the severance of the tie). We may enter into a relation, but we are constituted through relationality. Our experience of the world is shaped by what we affirm as much as what we disavow or deny. There is neither absolute determinism nor absolute choice. This duplicity *and* complicity is what Merleau-Ponty's ontology of Being at a distance allows us to think. The ethical potential of this perceptual logic can be gleaned in Slavoj Žižek's Merleau-Pontian reversal of the standard question regarding the encounter with a suffering animal – that is, not 'what do I see when I look at the cat' but rather, 'what

does the cat see when it looks at me?'[10] The animal looks back with a seeing that I see,[11] because I too am seen. Similarly, when Elaine Scarry writes of the "astonishing freedom"[12] of denying the existence of another person's pain, we may perform a similar reversal. In my denial or disavowal, and in the exercise of my 'astonishing freedom,' what does the sufferer see? This ethical reversibility does not require an intellectualist account of empathy, as Husserl has already demonstrated.

However, Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology allows us to go further: I am exposed to the suffering of the other and I must suffer this suffering. As Kafka reminds us, "We too must suffer all the suffering around us."[13] This freedom described by Scarry is truly 'astonishing' for it points to my ability to radically reduce the world of the other and literally contribute to their pain in my refusal to see it. It points to the intertwining of activity and passivity. Yet, is there not a kind of pain in the possibility of this denial, in the freedom or power I possess? When I ask 'can they suffer?' or 'are they *really* in pain,' do I not also suffer because I can ask the question, because through the power of address I suffer my being-implicated? When I ask, along with Bentham and Derrida regarding animals, "can they suffer?," I find that I *must* suffer my power to pose the question, a power that is at once passivity, for there is no non-violent 'no' that I can give in response. As Derrida argues, the undeniable reply to Bentham's provocative question "has never left any room for doubt."[14] In other words, Merleau-Ponty's ontology can lead to an interexistential ethic that allows or demands that we turn the question/ing around: don't I suffer the pain of being able to ask the question of the pain of others? Do I not suffer the 'I can,' does the sovereign I not suffer its sovereignty? My 'astonishing' freedom is ambiguous, for it is a freedom I 'possess' only because I am implicated, because activity is the obverse of passivity. My freedom is *in* my exposure or precarity, and once we locate it there we need not say that we must have *objective* knowledge of suffering in order to 'know' it. We need not achieve objective knowledge or certainty of the capacity of an animal to suffer, for we already know that we do, with a carnal and experiential 'knowing' that takes precedence. When I ask after the capacity

[10] "The Animal Gaze of the Other," in *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 234-239. For Zizek, in the "sad perplexed gaze" of the suffering cat subject to laboratory experimentation, we may see not only "our own monstrosity" but also the cat's seeing of us "in all our monstrosity"
[11] This seeing is not to be equated with intellectual recognition.
[12] *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.
[13] *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, trans. E. Kaiser and E. Wilkins (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2004), Aphorism 102, 97.
[14] Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 28.

of another being to suffer, this very questioning involves a disavowal of the furtive knowledge that subtends and conditions my very existence as a knowing, reflective subject. As such, this denial is double: a disavowal of empathic kinship or relationality that is at once a disavowal of the possibility of the very constitution of the self, such that in this denial I suffer my dissolution. I suffer the responsivity and complicity that is always already underway the moment I attempt to articulate a 'reply.' As "one sole continued question" I never finish responding, for I am not the one who poses the question and who demands a response; rather, I am a responder who may not realize they are responding, responding even when they are questioning. In accordance with Merleau-Ponty's ontology, then, we do not commence with a subject that ought to be ethically engaged, but rather with an empathic corporeal engagement that conditions the very possibility of subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh also enables an account of possibility that is at once an affirmation of perceptual logic and an ethico-political critique of the actualist ideology of 'possibilism.' Such a critique would conceive of 'the political' in terms of a demarcation and diminution of possibility to a defined set of possibles or the reduction of depth and dimensionality to the flat actualism of determinate choices or alternatives. In other words, the political intervenes when the possible is actively foreclosed or monopolized, which always involves contestation over *defining* and *delimiting* the realm of the possible – possibilities of action, resistance, ways of relating, 'styles' of being in the world, etc. What the foregoing analyses has illustrated, however, is that even the *conceivably possible* is founded on a more originary realm of possibility that subsists and cannot be eradicated. To define the realm of the possible in terms of a possibility in and of thought is to radically reduce it. It is to demarcate one reality or totalizing plane on which all contestation may take place, without questioning the legitimacy of this reduction or 'flatness.' We may therefore speak of a 'deep' possible or an inexhaustible possibility-in-depth which is both natural and cultural or historical. This would be akin to an 'adjacent possible' of the life-world, one that is radically creative, unforeseeable, and incalculable.

Furthermore, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us in his critical reading of Husserl, possibles of thought are themselves "possibles of the earth" (*HL* 68), such that what subtends determinate possibles is a more originary, dimensional possibility which must be ultimately traced back to nature as "our soil." Again, conceivability itself is intertwined with the earth as ground and therefore directions for future thought rely in

part on deepening the pre-existing but oft disavowed kinship with other beings – human and non-human animal beings, and material things - as variants of corporeality. The rehabilitation of the possible is also the recognition of the contingency of life insofar as it involves an account of the active *Wesen* and thus an acknowledgement that essence is dependent on historical existence. The notion of "existential eternity" or the "unveiling of Being as that which they [beings] define" (*N* 206) necessitates a recasting of essence as invariance, composed through historical variation or temporal existence. Importantly, this is a repudiation of Cartesian necessary being: life is contingent, and this contingency informs possibility. This idea of contingent being lends itself to the formulation of an inter-existential ethic whereby existence is neither necessary nor unnecessary: the 'this' – this person, this animal, this thing – would name a singularity that is contingent but which constitutes a 'difference' that is incalculable because radically indeterminate and inexhaustible. In other words, beyond diversity there is a difference of existence, a difference of the 'this' – indeed, *this* 'this' – that contributes to the expansion of the possible. As such, to foreclose the realm of the natural or organic possible is to render meaningless (or abstract) any 'idea' or essence.

Against the 'strong' solidity of the object, we have 'weak' or contingent Being; this weakness, latency, or hesitation, however, is not a weakness 'for' or 'of' anything, but rather a passivity thought beyond the passivity-activity dichotomy. As we have seen, both animal and human beings have the "wake of the negative," and neither can "close in on itself" (*S* 172, *N* 271). If I am a self 'torn apart' and if I cannot 'close in on myself,' then this anonymous kinship with the flesh of the world conditions my 'independence.' Again, my duplicity or doubleness *is* my complicity, my being enfolded and enveloped. The I is a kind of accomplice because interexistence or relationality subtends sovereignty and points to an originary exposure or precarity. This ontological 'weakness' conditions my participation and hence any 'doing' whatsoever; the 'weakness' of possibility is mobilized against the 'strength' of necessity. That we may only approach the world obliquely or laterally, that we cannot equate Being with thought – this is not a failure but the very condition of knowledge. In accordance with Merleau-Ponty's ontology, not only do we necessarily remain open or exposed to difference and otherness – nothing is given 'all at once' – the world *is* in its very openness, depth, and differentiation.

Finally, since nature constitutes a groundless ground, 'possibles of the earth' cannot be static. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature thus allows us to conceive of

possibility as generative and as pertaining to the intertwining of nature and history. Indeed, historical existence or facticity create further possibilities and hence extend or expand the field of the possible in creative and unforeseeable ways – and in ways that do not necessarily require intellection. As such, Merleau-Pontian possibility would be one that ceaselessly creates further possibilities that need not reflect pre-existing possibles. It thus makes possibility 'possible' again, for it frees it from actualist thought and both rehabilitates and preserves the realm of the possible as *openness*. What this 'rehabilitation' suggests, then, is a possibility that is always becoming larger than what it is, that is always surpassing itself or going beyond itself in order to remain itself: a possible that is only 'possible' because it is always already more, irremediably excessive.

* * *

This dissertation has argued that Merleau-Ponty's ontology necessarily includes a philosophy of nature, for the latter introduces the principle of negativity and 'rehabilitates' the realm of the possible with regard to natural development and interanimality. This deepens Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the perceptual body through the very abandonment of the primacy of perceptual consciousness; that is, the philosophy of nature leads to intra-ontology, and this *restores* the human body by situating it within pre-objective Being. It is the intertwining of body and the "eminent being" of things (*VI* 220), of seer and the visible, that conditions my openness and that allows me to 'have' the world as entangled with and participating within it. Accordingly, this dissertation has claimed that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature allows him to overcome the vertigo of Cartesian ontology – and its offshoots - and hence the bifurcation of subject and object, essence and existence, and being and nothingness. We will conclude by briefly tracing the path we have covered.

Part I outlined the ambiguity of the thought of nature that inheres in the philosophies of Kant, Schelling and Husserl. All three philosophies of consciousness may be understood as working within, or at the margins of, the Cartesian tradition. For Merleau-Ponty, there are two meanings of Kant's revolution: the anthropological meaning, and the absolutism of the human subject. Kantian philosophy makes "Being rest on man," such that we can no longer start from Being itself (*N* 21). It is the particularity of sensible constitution that determines the knowledge we may have of the

world. In the first *Critique*, Kant seeks to ascertain the formal, transcendental conditions for having any experience whatsoever. He conceives of nature as lawful regularity and the sum of all appearances. Furthermore, nature is opposed to freedom. However, Kant is also led to posit an excessiveness or unknowability at the very core of nature, in the idea of the thing-in-itself. In the third *Critique*, Kant argues that experience also leads us to think of the living organism in accordance with teleology, thereby departing from the stringency of the first conception. Yet, it is only intellectual intuition that is capable of thinking the convergence of teleology and mechanism, or the interiority of the organism. Again, this installs an excessiveness of nature that Kant can neither affirm nor deny. He must therefore maintain the possibility of the unconditioned or the abyss of reason. In sum, Kant introduces a radically undecidable negativity or excessiveness of nature which is necessary for his transcendental idealism, insofar as it ensures the possibility of human freedom.

Schelling seeks the unconditioned or the abyss of human reason, for this would ground and unify the Kantian system. In doing so, Schelling effectively renders constitutive what was for Kant only a reflecting judgment; for Schelling nature is *a priori*, both productivity (*naturans*) and product (*naturata*). Epistemological negativity now becomes ontological; that is, the problem of Nature is no longer a question of knowledge, a question of the kind of concept we may formulate of nature, but the problem of primordial being. In the early works, Schelling conceives of the philosophy of nature and transcendental idealism as mutually necessary for a unified system. He posits an identity or harmony between the ideal and real worlds, or between the forces in Nature and those that animate the progression of spirit. Nature constitutes a transcendental past and originary condition from which the human being, as reflective consciousness, is severed. Schelling's early works are thus animated by the desire to ground the possibility of a unified science. In the later works, Schelling conceives of nature as an eternal and withdrawing ground, a ground that cannot reveal itself but which is the precondition for the very appearing of Being. Nature is now a barbaric principle or indivisible remainder, one that imposes itself on all existence, including God's. It is a 'barbarous' source or an abyssal past, an unreflected dimension that resists thought. This second idea of nature undermines the transcendental idealism of the earlier Schelling.

We then turned to Merleau-Ponty's reading of the strabism of nature in Husserl, a tension or ambiguity Husserl does not resolve. Husserl oscillates between the thought of

nature as the sphere of *blosse Sachen* or as *noema*, and nature as what is given as primally present in the personalistic attitude. In fact, in the latter half of *Ideas II*, Husserl will come to argue that the personalistic attitude is more natural than the naturalistic attitude. As Merleau-Ponty argues, if we follow Husserl's intentional analyses, we find that the perceived world is insurmountable. In short, he insists on the impossibility of a complete phenomenological reduction. The constitution of material nature, for example, relies on animal nature or the phenomenal body, but the objective body (to which corresponds the objective material thing) requires the spiritual world, or the world of the natural attitude. Importantly, we established that Merleau-Ponty's ontology is to be situated at the limits of Husserlian phenomenology. In the latter, we discerned an intensification of the strabism of nature, for Husserl conceives of the *Ineinander* or intertwining: the "inherence of the self-in-the-world or of the world-in-the-self" (*IPP* 176). However, just as Descartes would not have been Descartes had he chosen to eliminate the enigma of vision,[15] Husserl would not have been Husserl had he not endured or suffered the dizziness of thought that results from the strabism of the thought of nature. Both philosophers thus rigorously maintain ambiguity and harbor an 'unthought' - a hiatus or negativity that they neither eradicate nor assimilate.

Part II addressed Merleau-Ponty's critique of the natural sciences in *The Structure of Behavior* and the *Nature* courses. As established in the introduction, science is one of the 'offshoots' of Cartesianism, and hence we find that it unwittingly draws on objectivist ontology. Modern science, however, has begun to critique its own Cartesian presuppositions, thus providing an important corrective to classical notions of time, space, and natural being. We focused first on the philosophical significance of the shift from the classical to modern sciences, before moving on to the account of animal behavior and natural being in *The Structure of Behavior*. Merleau-Ponty's critique of classical reflex theory and his philosophy of form allow him to move beyond the mechanistic notion of the organism. However, he concludes this early text with an emphasis on the primacy of perceptual consciousness. Chapters 5 and 6 focused on Merleau-Ponty's analyses of animal life in the *Nature* courses - in which Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of animal being changes significantly – and drew on the work of Uexküll, Coghill, Gesell, Russell, Portmann, and Lorenz. In these two chapters the idea of natural negativity was introduced, and it was argued that this decisive concept allows

[15] *EM* 365.

Merleau-Ponty to depart from objectivist ontology and the actualism of Darwinism, Idealism, and mechanism. Furthermore, the concept of natural negativity leads to a rehabilitation of the possible, for it renders indeterminacy and contingency 'real.' For Merleau-Ponty, the animal as well as the human being leads a contingent, historical, and natural existence. Finally, this section demonstrated how Merleau-Ponty's critique of actualism, the concept of natural negativity, and the rehabilitation of possibility (a future 'larger' than any determinate future), resonates with contemporary theoretical biology.

In Part III, we turned to the human body as part of a philosophy of nature. Indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty "the deepening of Nature must clarify to us the other Beings and their engagement in Being" (*N* 206), and this necessitates we approach the human body as part of nature. We must approach the chiasm of humanity and animality through an interrogation of the concept of animal being, and this chiasm or *Ineinander* will be "ratified by our lived, perceived *Ineinander*" (*N* 208). A philosophy of nature must include a philosophy of perception and vice versa, since Merleau-Ponty will now equate nature with the visible. For Merleau-Ponty, the bifurcation between the intelligible and the sensible, or essence and existence, can no longer be supported. For him, "even mind is incredibly penetrated by its corporal structure," and it is only "starting from the visible that we can understand the invisible" (*N* 268). As Schelling discovered, the standpoint of reflective consciousness cannot constitute a true 'beginning.' In other words, we can only comprehend Being from within, and this comprehension is not the achievement of a constituting consciousness or a reflective subject. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty argues that the perceiving body must be understood in relation to the *Umwelt*; it is a principally aesthesiological power, a "tacit language" (*N* 211) for and within the world, and a dimension of Being, such that there is no rupture between humanity and animality. In this section we returned to Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl's 'double sensation' or the touching-touched relation, and established the importance of the relation of reversibility for the ontology of flesh.

The final chapter focused more explicitly on the principle of negativity as found in both Merleau-Ponty's analyses of perception and in his account of animal life in Part II. It also demonstrated how the concept of negativity amounts to a critique of Cartesian ontology, for it is a 'negative' that must be thought beyond the 'dilemma' of being and nothingness. That is, Merleau-Ponty discovers a non-positivist notion of negativity, a principle of differentiation *within* Being that allows him to overcome metaphysical

dualism. This chapter outlined the centrality of negativity in Merleau-Ponty's account of quasi-reflection, in the case of touch and vision, and demonstrated how it also allows him to rehabilitate depth as a primordial dimension. We concluded with a discussion of the inexhaustible openness of the *Umwelt* that the concept of negativity (and accordingly, the non-actualist possible) allows us to conceive. Through an overcoming of objectivist ontology and the positive infinite that sustains it, Merleau-Ponty accomplishes an account of 'militant finitude' or infinite finitude, a concrete philosophy of existence that does not relinquish the ideal or the intelligible, but remains intertwined with it.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature amounts to a sustained refusal to equate nature as an object with nature as experienced. Indeed, he argues that Western ontology has never been able to unambiguously conceive nature in accordance with objectivist ontology. His phenomenological ontology, as noted above, resists the equation of Being with being-known. Both Descartes and Kant, while gesturing toward a gap or hiatus between the two, nonetheless maintain this identity. However, as we found in Schelling and Husserl, both of whom Merleau-Ponty commend for attempting to think the recalcitrance of nature within the framework of transcendental philosophy, the incongruence of Being and thought does not amount to a failure. Rather, it is what preserves or constitutes the very 'life' and creativity of thought, and conditions the infinite task of philosophy. The 'rehabilitation of the possible' entails a philosophy of Being as interrogative, a philosophy of Nature and of life as emergence and openness. Such a philosophy is unthinkable without the *Unvordenklich* (unprethinkable), the *Nichturpräsentierbar*, the unthought, difference, or the *écart*: in short, without negativity.

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APPENDIX

A. ABBREVIATIONS

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

EM *L'Œil et l'esprit*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. English translation by Michael B. Smith as "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, edited by Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, 351-378. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

HL *Notes de cours sur* L'origine de la géométrie *de Husserl, Suivi de Recherches sur la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty*. Edited by Renaud Barbaras. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998. English translation by Leonard Lawlor as *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, Including texts by Edmund Husserl.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002.

IP *L'Institution-La Passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955).* Paris: Éditions Belin, 2003. English translation by Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey as *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954-1955)*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010.

IPP *Éloge de la Philosophie, Lecon inaugurale faite au Collége de France, Le jeudi 15 janvier 1953.* English translation by John Wild and James M. Edie as *In Praise of Philosophy*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963.

MPR *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, Edited by Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor. Evanston: Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2007.

N *La Nature, notes cours du Collège de France*. Edited by Dominique Séglard. Paris: Seuil, 1995. English translation by Robert Vallier as *Nature : Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003.

PhP *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945. English translation by Donald Landes as *Phenomenology of Perception*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

S *Signes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1960. English translation by Richard McCleary as *Signs*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

SB *La Structure du comportement*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1942. English translation by Alden L. Fisher as *The Structure of Behavior*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011.

SNS *Sens et non-sens*. Paris: Nagel, 1948. English translation by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia A. Dreyfus as *Sense and Non-sense*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

VI *Le Visible et l'invisible, suivi de notes de travail*. Edited by Claude Lefort. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. English translation by Alphonso Lingis as *The Visible and the Invisible, followed by Working Notes*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Edmund Husserl

C *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*. Edited by Walter Biemel. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976. English translation by David Carr as *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

I *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie.* In *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung,* Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1913. English translation by W. R. Boyce Gibson as *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology.* London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2012.

I2 *Ideen zur einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie.* Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution. English translation by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer as *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenological investigations of constitution*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989.

V "Die Philosophie in der Krisis europäischen Menschheit," Public Lecture in Vienna, 1935. English translation by David Carr as "The Vienna Lecture," in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, 269-299. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling

AW *Die Weltalter*. Stuttgart: Cotta, 1861. English translation by Jason M. Wirth as *The Ages of the World (Fragment) from the Handwritten Remains, Third Version (c. 1815)*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

F *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*. 1809. English translation by Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt as *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

FO *Einleitung zu dem Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie*, 1799. English translation by Keith R. Peterson as *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

IPN *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur als Einleitung in das Studium dieser Wissenschaft*. Leipzig, 1797. English translation by Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath as *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature: as Introduction to the Study of this Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

ST *System des transcendentalen Idealismus*. Tübingen, 1800. English translation by Peter Heath as *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978.

Other Authors

NCU Jakob von Uexküll. "The New Concept of Umwelt: A Link Between Science and the Humanities (1937)." English translation by Gösta Brunow. *Semiotica* 134, Iss. 1/4 (2001): 111-123.

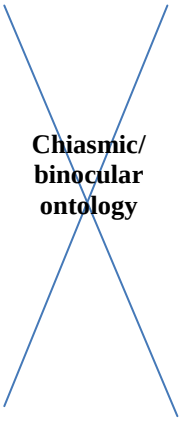
PP Eugen Fink. "Die phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik." *Kantstudien* 38 (1933): 321-383. English translation by R.

O. Elveton as “The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Critique.” In *The Phenomenology of Husserl*, 73-147. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970.

UIT Jakob von Uexküll. *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*. Berlin: Julius Springer Verlag, 1909. Partial English translation by Chauncey J. Mellor and Doris Gove in *Foundations of Comparative Ethology*, edited by Gordon M. Burghardt. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Inc., 1985.

B. CHART OF PART I

TOWARD A BINOCULAR PHILOSOPHY: NATURE AND ITS AMBIGUITIES

Interlocutors	**DESCARTES**	**KANT**	**SCHELLING**	**HUSSERL**	**MERLEAU-PONTY**
Philosophical question	Of what can I be certain?	What can I know?	How is there a world outside us, how is nature and experience possible?	How do I have a world? How is it that there is a common world?	How may I think or express my carnal inherence in and of the world?
Strabism of Nature	(ontology of the object) Infinite extension **Juxtaposition** (ontology of the existent) Realized extension	Sum of appearances **Undecidable, infinitely deferred** Teleology/ finality of nature	Philosophy of nature as one stem of system **Tension: anguish, torment** Barbaric principle	'pure thing,' *noema* **Oscillation** Primal presence, *Lebenswelt*	 **Chiasmic/ binocular ontology**
Negativity	Soul-body composite (in the shadow of the positive infinite)	The excessiveness of nature (the thing-in-itself and the organism)	Abyssal past, ungrounded ground, *Unvordenklichkeit*	Reversibility, the *Nichturpräsentierbar*	Natural, *in* Being