

“A THOUSAND WAYS OF WALKING”

1. *Space and Agency*

A guiding feature of Michel Foucault's work is the attention placed on questions of space and embodiment in relation to power formations, from the various disciplinary modes of body conditioning of the institutions of modernity to the redemptive figure of the 'heterotopia'. The disciplined body and the ideal of the heterotopia are opposites, one involving a materialistic and institutional conditioning of the body, the other opening up a space of resistance. Thus it is plausible to point to a fundamental ambivalence Foucault had in relation to embodiment and space. On the one hand, the body is subject to its institutional outsides, inscribed within a code of norms and subtle or violent pressures to conform.¹ The subject can be recognised as such only in so far as it undertakes the process of conforming to laws which threaten expulsion from the order of the normal should their limits to the boundaries of agency be challenged. The body of the subject in Foucault's oeuvre tends therefore to be characterised as passive, as the recipient of fixing powers which it did not choose and could not challenge. As he says,

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body.(F:83)

On the other hand in his later work, particularly "Le Souci de Soi", Foucault's thinking turned away from an emphasis on passivity in the subject and towards a conception of the embodied self that is capable of self-cultivation and perhaps even transformation through a genealogy of bodily practices. In such a case the body challenges space and opens itself up to the heterotopic ideal. This paper will follow the contour of Foucault's turn; it is

¹In these terms, there is a marked parallel between Foucault's genealogies of disciplinary practices and Lacanian psychoanalysis. For instance, it could be put that Foucault's work expresses the capacity of the subject *to be a subject* in terms of a materialistic extrapolation of the Symbolic.

my aim in this work and beyond it to explore the possibilities of ‘non-passive embodied transformation.’ The key term I will use to inaugurate this project is that of performance. I will rely theoretically on the resources of a thinker Foucault dismissed in an early work, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I will argue that only through *amplifying* discourses of the everyday body performing in the world, of the body as the opening towards the possibility of performance, that a *politics* of the body can be inaugurated. In this sense, my work here will provide an extension of Foucault’s notion of productive power; for beyond Foucault, a productive power can be installed which resists a continued implicit passivity - a power of being that is situated within the schema of the subject’s motile scope.

I do not take what I have just called a ‘politics of the body’ to be a sub-category of the more general field of politics. On the contrary, I will claim that only in terms of a philosophical attention placed on the body, through an ontology of the corporeal, can ‘the political’ be installed. I shall argue that politics begins with a relation to the visible body, conditioned, coded and marking out a position within the socius. Only in the terms of degrees of inclusion or exclusion of body types do human communities of recognition further themselves or open their conventions to disruption. The forces of inclusion and exclusion are the forces of power, of the asymmetries that construct themselves across the matrix of being. Politics, as I am characterising it here, involves a critical relation to the dynamics of power at work in the community of recognition, involving as it does questions of justice, difference and equality in legal, ethical and policy terms.

Instead of ascribing to the contemporary tendency to mark out some equivalent form of ontological passivity, whether in the face of the institution, technology, history, language, the Symbolic or the Other, or some combination of all of these, I shall argue that this beginning of the political can only be established given that the body of the subject is recognised as always already moving in relation to the transformation of its situation. In other words, the critical relation that I am characterising as the political begins with performance as the critique of powers invested within the body. Using Merleau-Ponty, I shall argue that codification is constituted only in relation to the mode in which it is taken up performatively. Even in cases of apparent objectification and paralysation, I will contend that there lies the possibility of playing with the powers of fixity. What have often been characterised as irreversible modes of power’s articulation, I will take to involve opportunities for reversion and subversion.

In sum, I shall be arguing that the political is most fundamentally inscribed within the terms of a phenomenological ontology of the body. Politics is grounded ontologically as a critical relation to the factors of embodiment. And again, this critical relation is first opened up as a possibility within performance. As such, by way of positioning in a radical way Merleau-Ponty's notions of 'reversibility' and 'style', my paper aims to challenge the conventional positioning of phenomenology in contemporary philosophical discourses as a moribund atavism that can only fail in response to the modes of articulation that succeeded it.

2. *The Ontology of the Corporeal Schema*

In his early magnum opus the "Phenomenology of Perception", Merleau-Ponty tends to corporealise the basic conceptual framework of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" in his attempt to critique Kant's ontological presuppositions. For instance, in place of the 'I-think' as the determining factor of a transcendental deduction, Merleau-Ponty unveils a bodily 'I can'. For Merleau-Ponty, it is the body's freedom to act in the world which creates structures of meaning into which acts of perception are subsequently embedded. Although this manoeuvre appears to operate within the terms of a conventional transcendental framework, I suggest that through this move Merleau-Ponty fundamentally places himself outside Kantian ontological presuppositions. In other words, Merleau-Ponty's repetition of the basic Kantian categories of thought enacts a difference which produces a significant ontological shift away from transcendentalism. Put this way, Merleau-Ponty's subsequent work can be understood as the attempt to map this ontological shift, culminating in the explicit thematisation of the ontology of the 'flesh' in his late work.

What is radical therefore in Merleau-Ponty's work is the shift produced by emphasising the ontology of the body. The body ultimately proscribes a falling back on the side of the subject, precisely because the body is equally a phenomena of the world as much as the conduit of subjectivity. The body in Merleau-Ponty ultimately takes the place of time in a phenomenological subversion of the Kantian schematism. That is, the body becomes seen as the surface both for the subject's expression and for forces of the world to inscribe themselves. Merleau-Ponty advances upon the body as understood in the quote from Foucault above precisely because the body is ascribed an expressibility at the same time as it is understood as the surface on which institutional discourse inscribes itself. The body therefore *schematises* the

relation between the subject and world.

In the first instance, this corporeal schematism appears nonetheless to fall back into subjectivism in Merleau-Ponty's thought. This appearance often seems confirmed in the numerous implicit and explicit debts Merleau-Ponty pays to Husserl. For example, when Merleau-Ponty begins to describe the 'corporeal schema', he does so in terms which do not appear to alter the basic framework of Husserlian intentionality,

My "psyche" is not a series of "states of consciousness" that are rigorously closed in on themselves and inaccessible to anyone but me. My consciousness is turned primarily toward the world, turned toward things; it is above all a relation to the world.(MPb: 117)

The ontological conventions of Husserlian intentionality are not challenged in this statement - intentionality is the agency of a theoretical consciousness that constructs meaning into the world by projection or schematism. This uni-directional formula is again not seemingly not altered when Merleau-Ponty goes on to corporealise Husserl:

If I am a consciousness turned toward things, I can meet in things the actions of another and find in them a meaning, because they are themes of possible activity for my own body.(Ibid)

The body, as the locus for intentionality, replaces the Husserlian theoretical consciousness and yet appears not to challenge the ontology at work in its transcendental ground. All that seems to have altered thus far in the analysis is that it is the body that projects meaning onto the world and not theoretical consciousness. This is not a correct analysis however because the shift to the body as the schematic locus introduces a *systematicity* to intentionality. As Merleau-Ponty writes,

If my body is to appropriate the conducts given to me visually and make them its own, it must itself be given to me not as a mass of utterly private sensations but instead by what has been called a "postural" or "corporeal schema"...It is first and foremost a *system* whose different introceptive and extroceptive aspects express each other reciprocally, including even the roughest of relations with surrounding space and its principal

directions.(Ibid)

The system of intentions towards the world is what Merleau-Ponty terms 'style'. This systematicity of style applied to the intentional schema marks an advance upon Husserl's treatment of style. For instance, in the "Cartesian Meditations", Husserl writes that "the Ego shows..an abiding style with a unity of identity...a "personal character" (H:67). What is difficult to explain in terms of Husserl's construction is how this system of intentions is grounded in the subject. How is it possible for the theoretical consciousness to acquire habitual ways of being-in-the-world? Beyond Husserl's account, Merleau-Ponty's grounding of style in the body (through habit) has an initial plausibility to it which ought to be developed.

In order to do this, it is important to note the interdependence of motility and perception in the "Phenomenology of Perception". Thus far, Merleau-Ponty appears to have merely introduced new terms into the Kantian/ Husserlian transcendental frame. However, as is hinted at in the reference to 'introception' and 'extroception' in the last quotation, the ontological radicality of Merleau-Ponty's conception of bodily freedom is uncovered once it is acknowledged that the corporeal schema is not a *projection* upon the world, as with Husserl's intentional theoretical consciousness, rather it is an *engagement with* the world. The corporeal schema therefore is not of a different ontological order to the world amidst which it inserts itself. The freedom of the body in Merleau-Ponty is the freedom to disclose the facticity of a world within which the body finds itself. Perception and motility are double aspects of the same unitary bodily being-in-the-world. As Merleau-Ponty writes,

To have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual unfolding and of all those inter-sensory correspondences which lie beyond the segment of the world which we are actually perceiving. A thing is, therefore, not actually *given* in perception, it is internally taken up by us, reconstituted and experienced by us in so far as it is bound up with a world, the basic structures of which we carry with us, and of which it is merely one of many possible concrete forms.(MPc:326)

The body is therefore not *apart* from the world which it discloses through the agency of its perceptual freedom. The body is in some sense *of the*

world, a monism of the flesh. This conclusion however raises a problem: if the body and world are monistically intertwined, how is it that we conventionally distinguish between them in our experience? The challenge that Merleau-Ponty's thinking presents is how the world and the body are rendered distinct, given their ontological proximity.

It is at this point that a deeper examination of the relation between *style* and the *corporeal schema* in Merleau-Ponty can be introduced. I will argue that this analysis will demonstrate both that the body is not apart ontologically from the world which it discloses and yet that the body differs from the world, or rather that the body is the ground of the world's difference.

3. Style and reversibility in Merleau-Ponty read as performance.

The corporeal schema challenges the uni-directionality of Husserlian intentionality by being fundamentally *mimetic*. To become a subject for Merleau-Ponty is to acquire a pattern of motile expressions towards and within the world. This acquisition takes place through imitation. He writes,

A style is a certain manner of dealing with situations, which I identify or understand in an individual...by taking over that manner myself in a sort of imitative way, even though I may be quite unable to define it..(MPc:327)

The subject acquires bodily freedom from miming the other. In terms of the development of a system of being-in-the-world, the subject can therefore be said to be embodied within an environment and a culture. That is, the subject does not merely acquire bodily competence and freedom of expression atomistically, from one person or situation and then from another; rather, the subject is immersed within a particular system of bodily being. Beyond the style of the individual, there is therefore the grounding style of the *culture* and *environment* within which they are situated. In the Maussian/Bourdieu tradition, this grounding style is known as 'habitus'. Merleau-Ponty calls this grounding style the 'pre-personal tradition.' This tradition 'intends' its subjects reciprocally in relation to the subjects that intend themselves within it. In other words, the body's insertion and grounding within a culture entails a bi-directional intentionality.

What is crucial, in terms of understanding how the difference of the motile body can yet remain within a monism of the flesh is the ontological form Merleau-Ponty ascribes to mimesis. For Merleau-Ponty, the body never

merely repeats what it imitates or picks up from another or from the culture in which it is embedded. Rather, the body encounters the world anew with each movement and situation. In the contradictorily titled “An Unpublished Text”, he writes,

The perceiving subject...functions according to a natal pact between our body and the world, between ourselves and our body. Given a perpetually new natural and historical situation to control, the perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth; at each instant it is something new. Every incarnate subject is like an open notebook in which we do not yet know what will be written. (MPa:6)

For Merleau-Ponty, the orientation of the subject within a given world through the corporeal schema has the structure of a repetition within difference. The body’s habits of being are *unheimlich*, that is they are organised as both familiar and unfamiliar according to an oscillation that cannot be pre-determined or pre-dicted. Habit becomes verbalised as agency, as *habituation*. As such, habituation requires a constant re-orientation towards its habitat. This is because habitat itself- the environment and circumstance of being, is constantly differing across itself. The ‘perpetual newness’ of the world entails therefore something like a transmigration of bodily being; the body takes flight to be born again, as different. The corporeal schema therefore changes itself with each engagement with the world, and this because the body each time encounters the world as different.

The ramifications of this structuration of habit are profound. The following quotation from the *Phenomenology* will enable them to be explored.

My personal existence must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body, not that momentary body which is the instrument of my personal choices and which fastens upon this or that world, but the system of anonymous ‘functions’ which draw every particular focus into a general project. Nor does this blind adherence to the world, this prejudice in favour of being, occur only at the beginning of my life. It endows every subsequent perception of

space with its meaning, and it is resumed at every instant. Space and perception generally represent, at the core of the subject, the fact of his birth, the perpetual contribution of his bodily being, a communication with the world more ancient than thought. (MPc:254)

This passage signals a final ontological break from the Husserlian resources upon which Merleau-Ponty's thought based itself. *Prior* to thinking, there is a body, in communication with a world. Moreover, this communication has the character of constant differentiation. The body and the world involve and reciprocally determine each other through a non-coincident encounter. The space of the world is given meaning through a perceptual opening which occurs in its midst. What is fundamental to acknowledge is that the double intentionality of the subject's exchange with the world involves an origin constructed within the terms of the present. This is the core conceptuality at work in the quasi-oxymoronic notion of a 'continued birth' in the previous quotation. For Merleau-Ponty, the origin or ground of both culture and the subject does not reside within an untouchable immemoriality, rather it is taken up anew in each communication between the body and the world. The origin of the cultural horizon or habitus is therefore transformed from a single origin, something that has always already been inaugurated, to a repetition within difference. *The origin of culture is founded upon the difference of the embodied subject in the present.* 'Culture', the place or site of grounding for a specific set of practices for bodily being, is constructed around the transformative difference of the present. In Merleau-Ponty's thought, the question of who is the subject, who the object or world, who is the agent and whom or what is being acted upon get enmeshed within each other. The embodied subject is at once the locus for the transmission and transformation of culture. At one and the same time, it is possible therefore to see the agent as an individual *and* as the way in which a cultural horizon or habitus articulates itself in the terms of the present. The embodied subject therefore acts within the terms of a cultural horizon to transform it, and yet is also acted upon *by* that horizon in transforming the subject. The world and the subject become aspects through which each is transformed by the other.

The key insight of Merleau-Ponty's in light of the above analysis is that the style of the corporeal schema is both grounded in the world and yet transformative of it. The subject is at once an aspect of the world and the site of its differentiation. Given the framework of this ontology, the subject is neither active to the point of subjectivism nor passive to the point of being

an effect or epi-phenomenon of inhuman forces to which it acts as mere repository. In other words, the subject can *perform* itself out of any mode of inscription or habitational horizon.

In these terms, the early thinking of Merleau-Ponty can be brought in proximity to the later work on the 'flesh' and on 'reversibility'. The 'communication more ancient than thought' involves a chiasmic monism whereby the patterning or schematism of both are expressed through each other. The embodied subject can be thought of as a fold or pleat in the fabric of being, expressing its transformation of the texture of the world through perception. And as has been demonstrated, this perceptual transfiguration of the world takes place *through* body motility. Through the schematism of the body, the world inscribes itself on the subject and the subject inscribes itself within the world. This conception leads to a rich understanding of the body as the fundamental ontology for subjectivity and worldhood. As the site for the schematism between subject and world, the body is the surface for the encounter between a complex field of forces: juridical, institutional, ethical, libidinal and so on. Each of these forces can become inscribed as an interiority: as constitutive of the subject's experience, or as an external constraint that functions as the anonymous authority of normativity. The body, as the ground of agency, is therefore the place or interface where questions of race, sexuality, consumption, publicity and privacy, visibility and invisibility, ability and disability, sanity and insanity and so on are negotiated. Discourse effects itself upon the body; but the ontological principle of reversibility articulated in the later work of Merleau-Ponty and implicit within the earlier dictates that discourse can also be engendered *by* the body. The subject's body is therefore not merely the conduit for the expression of inhuman forces beyond itself; rather the subject's body is also the ground of an agency that works by dialoging with those forces. Thus questions of what one eats, who one meets, who one makes love to, who one notices, who one subconsciously excludes, are decided by the confluence of active and passive forces at work on and by the body.

Given the way in which Merleau-Ponty emphasises the transformative potential of bodily being-in-the-world and motile perception, he can be seen as being the mirror opposite of Foucault. On the one hand, Foucault's work, as was stated in the beginning, tends to emphasise inscription and corporeal passivity. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty's account, in unveiling insights into a transformative account of habit and habituation, tends to ignore the inscriptive devices at work in the world. Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the

body in both the early and later phases in this respect fails to account for the asymmetries and exclusions of *power*. As the thinker of reversibility and the flesh, Merleau-Ponty assumed that a communication more ancient than thought with the world was always possible for any able body. Merleau-Ponty failed to think *irreversibility*, whether this is the effect of exclusion, under-nourishment or the violence of an othering more ancient than thought. Despite this failure within his thinking, I shall argue that Merleau-Ponty's work provides the resources for understanding performativity as the ground of the political.

4. *Performance as the ground of the political.*

Put simply, Foucault's work provides a rich understanding of the subjection of power. The human body is taken beyond a facile physicalist reference and thought of as the surface of a complex array of inscriptions and codifications. If we suspend for the moment the question of whether it is fair or not to reduce Foucault's thought to this position, the problem of this point of view is that it does not open up a space of response or resistance to the body's inscription. The body as 'purely disciplined', incapable of self-transformation and resistance to the anonymous authority of micro-power is the expression of a paranoid ontology.

It is at this moment in a thought which need not be called Foucauldian that Merleau-Ponty's account of transformative habit can be interposed, as the performative ground of a fundamental political ontology. The styling of the corporeal schema would then become the basis of a critical corporeal practice. In order to achieve this, it is necessary however to provide an account of *uncritical* corporeal practice. Merleau-Ponty's transformative habit must be thought as one possibility available to the subject, another of which would be falling back into an uncritical transmission of the somatic values sedimented within the habitus. An ascription of these two possibilities as that of the 'authentic' and the 'inauthentic' must however be rejected. The main reason for this is that there is no constitutive essentialism at work in a critical corporeal practice. To be engaged transformatively with the resources and trammings of the habitus is to expose the body to an *open* project. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "I possess the remote past, as I do the future, therefore, only in principle, and my life is slipping away from me on all sides and is circumscribed by impersonal zones." (MPc:331)

Given the alternatives between uncritical and critical engagement with the

world, a politics of performativity opens itself in the move from the former to the latter. Performance would therefore be a critical relation to the asymmetries of power at work in the horizon of given being. In contrast to this, a mere continuation of the somatic values of the habitus would leave the political undisclosed.

An essential implication of this thought is the following. Within the remit of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, both critical and uncritical modes of habituation would remain pre-reflexive and pre-conscious. Merleau-Ponty's thought in this respect has a parallel with the findings of psychoanalytic thought. In both Freud and Lacan there is the notion of an agency that is not conscious. Merleau-Ponty interposes here that unconscious agency can be critically active and transformative, engaged with the present of the world and yet not yet *aware* of this engagement. The suggestion beyond this is that unconscious or pre-conscious agency can respond *either* transformatively and creatively to the conditions of the present or merely pass those conditions on uncritically to the future. In the case of a creative transformation of the somatic horizons of the present, this pre-conscious critical practice opens up 'the political.' Henceforth, politics is grounded in an agency that is more ancient than thought, as a response to formations of power that striate themselves across the polyvocal surface of the body.

5. Conclusion

It is the tendency of contemporary western thought to ground the political in a *conscious* reflection upon questions of power, be it the macro-power of the nation or geo-politics or the micro-power of institutions such as the family, the office or the *polemos* of the sexes. By employing a critical reading of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, an alternative to this tendency has been opened up. The advance this alternative framework supplies is that it returns us to the fundamental issues of the political. Politics involves most fundamentally questions addressed to and supplied to the body. This statement accords with the findings of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology. For Merleau-Ponty, we are, most fundamentally, motile perceiving agents disclosing the world through the communication we have with it. The structure of meaning of the world is not given in advance of this fleshy dance we have with it. Politics, according to this viewpoint, would most fundamentally be a critical mode of communication, a creative engagement that approaches the world by suspending what is given. In this

paper, this creative and critical engagement has been conceptualised in terms of performance and performativity. To conclude, it is the suggestion here that an acceptance of Merleau-Ponty's framework for thinking the relation between agency and the body permits us to recognise that the imbalances and oppressions of power are already being challenged through each performance of our encounter with the world. The corollary of this is that each time we succumb to the suggestions of an uncritical habituation, we are at the same instant refusing to designate ourselves as political agents.

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