

CHAPTER 4: BETWEEN CLEAR SPACE AND THE NIGHT

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

Maurice Merleau-Ponty “Phenomenology of Perception” p433

No matter how sophisticated the work of ontology may become, the problem it must address will always remain simple. The tradition bequeaths a central paradox that is easy to articulate, across different vocabularies. This chapter will look at key aspects of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in order to argue that he provides a “solution” to the ontological problem. The solution is quoted, perhaps *sous-rature*, because with Merleau-Ponty’s answer, things do not come to an end. The phenomenological treatment of ontological difference leads not to a full stop, a closure. Rather, it leads to an unfolding.

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The central paradox of ontology could be named thus: how do we rest between clear space and the night? This poetic formulation will have to wait however. For the moment, let us call it: the paradox of immanence and transcendence. For the nth time, it will be introduced. Dualism produces two modalities of expression, two orders of being. Dualism announces that there is objective and subjective being. Each order or series supports itself as the fundamental, but in so doing displaces the fundamentality of the other. But the other order would always seem to retain the prestige of an equiprimordiality. One can introduce the paradox in the following way: the subject is the locus of knowledge. Yet knowledge purports to be knowledge of a transcendent order, of exteriority. Therefore, both the subject and object are deemed essential to what it is to know. And yet the subjective appears to be ontologically disjunct from the objective. As M.C.Dillon writes,

The sphere of immanence is traditionally conceived as the sphere of interiority, the sphere of conscious life, the sphere of the given insofar as it is given. Transcendence is conceived as exteriority, the universe of things existing in themselves and independent of consciousness. Conceived in these traditional ways, immanence and transcendence are mutually exclusive,

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and the lines of demarcation between them impermeable.(Dillon,1988:36)

In order to know, Dillon's 'lines of demarcation' must be crossed. The condition for a valid epistemology is an ontology of conjunction, across the apparent divide of subject and object. Something like an philosophical manifesto emerges from this point: all epistemological questions presuppose an ontological problematic. As Dillon says incisively, 'No epistemology can succeed in mediating what an antecedently adopted ontology has defined as mutually exclusive.'(Ibid.) Transcendental philosophy since Kant has tried to conflate these two concerns; for instance Kant's attempt to fix the ontological distinction between the phenomenon and the noumenon within the epistemological framework of a transcendental empiricism in "The Critique of Pure Reason". The response Merleau-Ponty gives is that questions concerning the conditions of possibility of knowledge must be suspended. Although his early period of writings are permeated with the 'language of consciousness'¹, as we shall see, this is much more the legacy of the constraints of the tradition than that which is affirmed by the sway of his thought. The question of resolving the paradox of immanence and transcendence must be settled before questions of the form of

¹ The phrase is Dillons.

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transcendentality are broached upon. In other words, the conditions of possibility for transcendentality are *ontological*. The transcendental horizon of transcendentality is the question of the shape of the boundary between immanence and transcendence. But then this privileging of the ontological over the epistemological must transform the status of the latter.²

The idea implicit in the previous chapter was that Heidegger himself suspended transcendental questioning after ‘the turn’, precisely because he came to see more clearly the confusions at work in Kant’s conflation of ontology and epistemology. After “Being and Time”, Heidegger attempts in his own way to resolve the paradox of immanence and transcendence. I argued that Heidegger’s attempts ultimately privilege the transcendent. But this privilege itself can only work by way of dissimulating its real nature: that of a re-instituted immanence. Therefore, by displacing the work of the subject for the apparent worklessness of architecture, Heidegger actually ends up ascribing another form of work and another form of subjectivity onto building. This is the origin of his monumentalist thinking of architecture. The subject of architecture ends up becoming the architecture

² The transformation of epistemology away from a latent or manifest hylomorphism first emerges in Merleau-Ponty’s interest in the figure-ground relation of the Gestalt psychologists. However, one could argue that the privilege of an apriori form of experience over experience itself is inverted by the time of Kant’s second edition, in particular through the introduction of the “Refutation of Idealism”. As Krell reminds us in his book “Architecture” “Heidegger is right to wonder whether *everything* in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* would have to change because of this new emphasis on *outer* sense.” (Krell, 1997:50)

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of a displaced subjectivity. In this way, Heidegger fails to provide a bridge between subject and object.

The previous chapter argued in addition that the same goes for Heidegger's post-turn account of language. By displacing man's mastery of language- the ideology of the nascent age of information, Heidegger ends up ascribing to language a mystical transcendence. But this can only be in actuality another form of subjectivity, another layer of immanence. The evidence for this comes in Heidegger's attempt to declare what poetry refers to. Instead of allowing a space for the *work* of the poet, albeit a work that carries through mediation, Heidegger brings in a 'silent poetry' of language itself. In other words, Heidegger's post-turn thinking of language brings us to the very brink of a linguistic immanence.

Put in this light, I suggested that Heidegger's attempt to solve the paradox of ontology refuses to think the body. In discussing the work of architecture, the ambulant body of the spectator is not referred to. This is a very strange and significant omission, considering that architecture has no work beyond those whose bodies come into contact with it or within the sway of its visibility. In his account of language, on the other hand, Heidegger seems unable to think the work of the poet- a work that must always involve a mediation through the embodiment of difference.

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Moreover, Heidegger's emphasis on the event of language would seem to distance the relation between language and embodied being-in-the-world.

How then can the paradox of ontology be resolved? Up until this point, immanence and transcendence have been considered as oppositional poles that must be 'bridged'. The bridges offered by Heidegger, of the work of architecture and language, merely re-institute the paradox at another level. Instead of an oppositional relationship between the human subject and its outside, post-turn Heidegger leads us to an oppositional relationship between architecture, language and their outsides. The difference is that in the latter case, the outsides are silenced. We do not hear from those subjected to architecture. And we do not hear from those subjected to language. We are left wanting another set of bridges to a reconstituted set of outsides.

As I shall show, Merleau-Ponty radically transforms our approach to the paradox of ontology. He argues that immanence and transcendence are not oppositional modes of being that need to be bridged in order for us to know. The subject and the object are, in fact, co-implicatory orders of being. For Merleau-Ponty, the sphere of immanence does not require and yet oppose the transcendent. On the contrary, the sphere of immanence can only constitute itself on the basis of an inter-involvement with the

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transcendent, and vice versa. Far from requiring a 'bridge', in Merleau-Ponty's thought a precessive intertwining between subject and world demands that we articulate its nature. We do not need to search for or invent a bridge- say in architecture, art or language, for there is no water to cross.

It is clear that such a solution would radically transform how we think ontology. But on what basis can we begin to implement such a transformation? What is it that always already precedes the frantic search for a bridge, that makes the water disappear?

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In the preface to his "Phenomenology of Perception", Merleau-Ponty states his indebtedness to and difference from the phenomenology of Husserl. The key statement is the following

The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: xiv)

The phenomenological or transcendental reduction to the sphere of immanence must remain incomplete. Husserlian phenomenology suffers from the same flawed attempt at ontological reduction as the critical

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philosophy of Kant. It is impossible to reduce the transcendent world into the eidetic evidence of essential meaning without ontological remainder. Immanence *suggests* transcendence and must be thought at least in part on its terms.

But how is transcendence suggested? What is the ontological remainder that reminds us of the impossibility of a reduction of the transcendent world into noematic essences?

For Merleau-Ponty, immanence cannot reduce transcendence (and therefore act as its ground- another form of displacing ontology) because immanence is always already constituted through a relation to the transcendent. In his thought, the nature of this precessive constitution arises out of *the embodied nature of subjectivity*. The subject cannot eviscerate itself of all transcendent contents because those contents are elements constitutive of subjectivity.

Before going into detail on how the embodied nature of subjectivity entails that transcendence and immanence presuppose each other in the “Phenomenology of Perception” and Merleau-Ponty’s later works, I would like to draw a series of analogies between the philosophical significance of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology and that of Plato’s ontology in the “Timaeus”. This will, I hope, provide initial clarification of what I take to be the import

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of Merleau-Ponty's work. I contend that in the history of western philosophy, only Plato and Merleau-Ponty have 'resolved' the ontological paradox of transcendence and immanence. Fortunately, in the case of the latter, important recent work has contributed to an appreciation of the profound significance of Merleau-Ponty's ontology.³ In the case of Plato, perhaps only Jacques Derrida's reading of the text begins to allude to the ontological significance at work.⁴

The key ontological shift at work in the "Timaeus" takes place with the introduction of the notion of the Receptacle of Becoming, which Plato also calls "Chora". Prior to its introduction, Plato's cosmology was constituted by the oppositional poles of the Ideal or intelligible and the material. In the beginning, the text therefore operates on the basis of a ontological disjunction between Being and Becoming. Chora, as becoming's receptacle, fits into neither the Ideal or the material. It is what Plato calls a *triton generis*, a 'third kind' of being. Chora allows the relation between Being and Becoming to take place. Chora therefore suggests itself as the most primordial ontological register, displacing the privilege previously accorded

³ Here I am referring principally to Dillon's important first monograph on Merleau-Ponty, "Merleau-Ponty's Ontology".

⁴ See Jacques Derrida's essay "Khora" in "On the Name". Whilst being a highly important essay contributing to an understanding of the difference between the crude aberrations of Platonism and the subtlety of the original, Derrida however reduces Plato's text to an abyssal series of displacements. The ontological significance of *chora* is not given sufficient treatment.

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to Being. Plato is careful to maintain this displacement; for Chora is not to be subsequently reinscribed *within* the order of Being or Becoming. Chora therefore allows Being and Becoming to take place, without thereby being placed within either. Chora therefore operates as an originary palimpsest; a surface for being that does not get rewritten *as* Being.

We do not begin, so to speak, with the Ideal, with the Platonic forms, with the geometric Ideal that orders platonism and its residues in Spinoza's method and beyond. Nor do we begin with the materiality of the things themselves. We do not find ourselves in the panic of displacement caused by not knowing which side of the river we must place ourselves. It is not a question of privileging the one or the other, or the One or the Many. The search for a bridge has forgotten that it begins by already assuming the value of oppositionality. The brief ontological interlude that is Plato's thinking of Chora suggests another founding value: that of a third space of becoming.

The history of metaphysics has always been apt to forget this suggestion of a third space beyond oppositionality, even if a counter tradition can be assembled which attempts to remain in relation to it.⁵ This is understandable, given the brevity and enigmatic formulation accorded to Chora in Plato's text. If we read Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment as

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fulfilling the same ontological space as Chora, we can for the first time begin to see the power of Plato's suggestion. Moreover, we see Merleau-Ponty's work as the response to an enigmatic suggestion not adequately addressed since its being written.

When one re-reads the "Phenomenology of Perception" with the third kind of the Chora in mind, the way in which Merleau-Ponty thinks embodiment in such proximately similar terms seems uncanny. Perhaps beyond Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and the Gestalt Psychologists, Merleau-Ponty was most fundamentally, in that text, in dialogue with the "Timaeus".

The first reference to a third space in the "Phenomenology of Perception" comes in the context of a discussion of the figure-ground relation of the Gestalt psychologists. The figure-ground relation can be regarded as an analogon to the hermeneutic circle. Just as the latter is in essence an insight into the virtuous circularity at work between interpreting parts of a text in light of the con-text of either the text itself or the corpus of texts (an oeuvre), so the figure-ground relation expresses the inter-involvement and mutual implication of the parts and wholes of perception. An object within my visual field only makes sense in terms of the background or context

⁵ The compendium compiled by Shmuel Sambursky "The Concept of Place in late Neoplatonism" is

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within which it is situated. But, conversely, the background or context signifies only on the basis of the object-figures which configure it. Merleau-Ponty's point is that the figure-ground relation of the Gestalt psychologists involves a tertiary ontology,

As far as spatiality is concerned, and this alone interests us at the moment, one's own body is the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure, and every figure stands out against the double horizon of external and bodily space. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:101)

The palimpsestical nature of the body manifests itself here; for the body-as-third-term is 'always tacitly understood.' The body does not reveal itself, in ordinary perception, as either of the order of a figure or as context. The body acts as a horizon for the appearance of the figure-ground relation, but does not get reinscribed within either series. The body is the horizon of both, as chora 'acts' as horizon to the Ideal and the Actual. The body is not objective. Merleau-Ponty writes that the patient observed is 'conscious of his bodily space as the matrix of his habitual action, but not as an objective setting; his body is at his disposal as a means of ingress into a familiar surrounding, but not as the means of expression of a gratuitous and free

the most significant attempt to furnish such a counter-tradition.

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spatial thought.’(Ibid:104) In this case, the patient reveals how under ‘normal’ conditions of embodiment we are not aware of our body as a physical entity like other entities in the world.

It is crucial to understand that Merleau-Ponty makes a clear-cut distinction between the ‘third space’ of embodiment and a common-sense understanding of the body as a worldly entity. As always in the work under consideration, Merleau-Ponty’s language varies from section to section and within sections, as the author struggles to break his thought out from the legacies of a hegemonic dualism that resides within the language of philosophy. In the section entitled “Space”, he writes

What counts for the orientation of the spectacle is not my body as it in fact is, as a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal ‘place’ defined by its task and situation.(Ibid:250)

Between the Ideal and the Actual, Merleau-Ponty expresses the third space as *virtual*. We look back to the “Timaeus” once again as the first articulation of the possible as a non-Ideal, non-Actual virtuality. Chora becomes the horizon of possibility for all subsequent oppositionalities. Oppositionalities that necessarily disavow their relation to the seat of Being and Becoming in order to valorise disjunction. It would be wrong however to consider

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Chora as a *transcendental* horizon. Chora is not the horizon of possibility for all *knowledge*. Rather, Chora occupies a space prior to all epistemic concerns - an ontological space.

A little further on in the text, Merleau-Ponty marks the distinction anew. Embodiment is '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.'(Ibid:254). The virtual, third-space body is therefore not 'simply located' in space and time. Merleau-Ponty's incarnation of internal time-consciousness releases the body from an analytic capture within the present. The embodied subject projects itself from the space-time of the present, ecstatically across the *stretch* of time.

The residual language of consciousness tempts Merleau-Ponty into reworking one of its key terms. He asks, 'Does not the experience of space provide a basis for its unity by means of an *entirely different kind of synthesis?*'(Ibid:244-emphasis added). The suggestion of thinking 'synthesis' anew occurs at different locations throughout the work.⁶ These references

⁶ Note however that Merleau-Ponty argues against the use of the word 'synthesis' as a way of accessing the primordial in other parts of the book. He argues that we cannot use the word 'since a synthesis presupposes, or at least, like the Kantian synthesis, posits discrete terms..' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:265) Eleven pages later in the English translation, at the end of the long footnote on Bergson, Merleau-Ponty prefers the word 'synopsis'.

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jostle for linguistic hegemony with an emergent and contestive vocabulary, outside of dualism.

First, the body is thematised as a kind of place, ‘My body is the place [le lieu] or rather the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression..’(Ibid:235 translation modified) A formulation that lies in tension with the body’s virtualisation 15 pages further on. Then, Merleau-Ponty develops the textural metaphor, ‘My body is the fabric [le texture commune] into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’.(Ibid) It is possible to highlight moments in the text where Merleau-Ponty begins to develop a language for the third term that leaves behind completely the Kantian/transcendental framework. For instance, he writes,

We cannot understand, therefore, the experience of space either in terms of the consideration of contents or of that of some pure unifying activity; we are confronted with that third spatiality towards which we pointed a little while ago, which is neither that of things in space, nor that of spatializing space, and which, on this account, evades the Kantian analysis and is presupposed by it. We need an absolute within the sphere of the relative...(Ibid:248)

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Those moments where Merleau-Ponty discusses his ontology of embodiment in relation to the valorization of disjunction that must always privilege analysis in spite of attentions put upon synthesis are those points where the new vocabulary installs itself. At the furthest from dualistic language and the transcendental framework, Merleau-Ponty writes

Now the body is essentially an expressive space...But our body is not merely one expressive space among the rest, for that is simply the constituted body. It is the origin of the rest, expressive movement itself, that which causes them to begin to exist as things, under our hands and eyes.(Ibid:146)

In this light, it is possible to see more clearly why it has taken so long to begin to comprehend the ontological significance of chora. Chora 'operates' as that which *places* Being and Becoming. Chora therefore resembles a proto-place. And yet, Plato's ontological rigour demands that chora is not installed as another place. We are left with the enigma of a relation between an ontologically primordial proto-place and that which it places, a relation that has no name, that resists thematisation. Although Merleau-Ponty likewise introduces a third term into ontology, his notion of a 'synthesis' (which is not a synthesis) involves a difference. Put simply, Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment introduces *movement*, as synthesis, or as the motility

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essential to the *third space*. The consequences of this innovation are essential. The time-space and space- time of the body inscribes Being and Becoming within history. Instead of an atemporal precessive cosmology (Chora), the receptacle of the body that moves through space and time, opening things up to themselves across its horizon, allows us to think tertiary ontology's relation to temporisation. Things reveal themselves only upon the 'double horizon' of the context and the body. But this possibility of manifestation is not *purely spatial*. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of motility demonstrates the irreducibly inter-articulated, interwoven nature of space and time:

By considering the body in movement, we can see better how it inhabits space (and, moreover, time) because movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their basic significance which is obscured in the commonplaces of established situations.(Ibid:102)

I will show in a moment in more detail how the phenomenology of motility advances upon the "Timaeus" suggestion of a 'third term' in ontology because of its relation to time. Just before that, I want to discuss a passage from the "Phenomenology of Perception" on the body-as-third-space. This will allow me to develop a final correspondence between chora and

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Merleau-Ponty's ontology. This passage shows Merleau-Ponty at the edge of an absolute break from the transcendental framework of all previous phenomenology. The 'absolute break' comes when one questions the *reference* of this body-as-third-space. Does it just refer to individual human bodies? Or does 'the body' refer, like chora, to that which installs the poles of being and becoming in a more general sense? The early Merleau-Ponty retains transcendental-ism, in most cases even when his language strays away from the conventions of its articulation, by limiting the pre-personal third-space body to that of individual human bodies. In that case, the corporeal schema, the 'I-can' that *incorporates* the Kantian 'I-think', thereby always retaining a latent transcendentalistic inflection. In this quote however, Merleau-Ponty for once begins to *loosen* the equivalence between the third-space of embodiment and that which manifests itself subsequently as this or that physical body. He writes,

The body is our general medium for having a world. (Ibid:146)

Here the anonymity of 'the body' is extended beyond being merely 'pre-personal'. The body does not automatically refer here to the body *of the subject*. And the notion of a 'general medium' suggests that an ontology of the middle term, no longer thought of as a *bridge between opposites*, but rather as a 'chiasm', has emerged. Nonetheless, the plural pronoun suggests a

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community, and the verb suggests a possession, both of which act to reinscribe the thought of the sentence within the terms of transcendentalism. To see what is meant here, I will contrast the previous quote with a similar passage in the late, unfinished work, “The Visible and the Invisible”. Here, Merleau-Ponty writes,

We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit- for then it would be the union of contradictories- but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being.(Merleau-Ponty,1968:147)

The substitution of the ‘flesh’ (*la chair*) for the body, from the “Phenomenology of Perception” to “The Visible and the Invisible” marks the complete break in Merleau-Ponty’s thought away from the language of consciousness, from the traces of dualistic ontology, and from the framework of Kant’s Critical thought. In the latter stages of this chapter, I will delve further into the non-transcendental ontology of the late Merleau-Ponty. For the moment, I will return to one last correspondence between *chora* and the third space of the body.

As Derrida notes in his essay, the nomological substitutions of *chora*

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demonstrate that in fact it has no name. Each naming of chora, as ‘receptacle of becoming’, as ‘the nurse’, ‘the midwife’, as ‘the sieve’, as ‘the virgin wax’, and each of the form of its traces in the text- the ideal society whose children are not owned by their parents, the ‘bastard logic’ of the language of chora and so on, demonstrate that the chora cannot be fixed through a proper name. Chora is anonymous. This anonymity is entirely consistent with chora’s un-inscribable position *prior* to Being and Becoming, *situating* both but not *situated* by either.

Although Merleau-Ponty cannot completely separate the third space of the body from a formulation in terms of its conditions of possibility, embodiment itself likewise remains anonymous. Here it is possible to mark a strong affinity across the centuries, an affinity born by excavating a precessive ‘bastard logic’. A logic that elides possession, and thereby lets each name for it slip away.

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

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world, but the system of anonymous 'functions' which draw every particular focus into a general project...(Merleau-Ponty,1962:254)

The physical body that comes after the virtual, 'synthesising' body is that which can lay claim to possession, both of itself and of entities in the world. The body of experience on the other hand does not possess itself. One does not 'have' a body, in the most primordial layer of experience. Rather, one 'inabits' the body (Ibid:139)

In a remarkable dense poetic text entitled "Genesis", it is possible to read Michel Serres as making the same comparison between chora and the body that I have been making. For Serres, the body is that which underlies and inscribes within itself (without being thereby inscripted) all subsequent signification. The body therefore becomes the fulcrum of a forgotten fundamental ontology, giving place to signification. As such, thinking the body becomes a way of deconstructing a privilege recently given to the sign. Serres is also sharply aware that the 'body' being referred to, as a third kind of being, is not at all to be equated with the physical body. This body operates as a spatio-temporal schematism, the condition of possibility for worldly existence. As spatio-temporal, the body in a sense is always a *dancing* body:

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All come to dance in order to read without speaking, to understand without language. They are all, nowadays, so exhausted, so saturated, so hagridden with discourse, language, writing. In the end fugitive meaning passes through there, taciturn.

The dancer's body is the Platonic *Chora*, the virgin wax on which one writes, pure location or pure place or naked space.(Serres, 1995:40)

One can read Serres here as saying that every-body is a dancing body. That is, it is just through the spatio-temporal agency of the motile being that 'writing' takes place. One can only write or express on the basis of a body which transforms meaning itself. And as the dancing body is constantly keeping meaning within play, this meaning becomes an expression only of the present, and as such, fugitive. I shall return to the dancing body shortly.

Before I move on to examining how Merleau-Ponty develops this 'third-space' of the body, I will summarise the points of correspondence and difference between his notion of embodiment in "Phenomenology of Perception" and the chora of "Timaeus":

1) Chora and Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment both displace

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dualistic ontology with the introduction of a ‘third term’.

- 2) The ‘third term’ is not however functioning as a ‘bridge’ between ontologically disjunct orders of Being. Rather, the third term is the primordial conjoint origin of those orders. Merleau-Ponty will later call this conjoint origin the ‘chiasm’, the ‘intertwining’ (*entrelacs*).
- 3) The body introduces movement across space and time into the ontological conjunction. As such, the third term inscribes time. Chora remains enigmatic because it does not. The body is the locus for a spatio-temporal schematism (the goal of thinking opened up after reading Heidegger’s “Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics” in the second chapter, in light of the first chapter’s critical reading of “Being and Time” section 70). In Serres’ words, the body is the *dancing* body.
- 4) The body, at least in the “Phenomenology of Perception” remains quasi-transcendental. It remains a form of subjectivism, even though it functions as the ‘pre-personal’. Chora is not. The flesh of the Merleau-Ponty’s later work is in this sense closer to the a-subjectivity of chora.
- 5) Chora and the body are anonymous. Serres says, ‘Whoever thinks is naked and whoever dances is nobody.’(Ibid:45)

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By taking Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment as preceding the spheres of subjective and objective being, the paradox of transcendence and immanence is resolved by challenging a primordial ontological disjunction. The body answers to a transcendence *within* immanence. Transcendence is chiasmically intertwined with immanence, not opposed to it. This intertwining always originates in the body of experience. I shall now examine in more detail the notion of embodiment at work in the "Phenomenology of Perception", in order to show how the body performs this chiasm between subjectivity and world.

Instead of going into detailed exegesis of the text, I will reinforce and exaggerate an implicit schema within the text itself. This will allow the reader to have a clear overarching framework in which to position the 'how' of the body as third term. I contend that in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, the lived experience of the 'normal' body contrasts with two modes that lie at its extremes. These two modes are that of abstraction on the one hand, and alienation on the other. It is possible to see the lived experience of the 'normal' body as occupying the middle position along a continuum between abstraction and alienation. This relation may be diagrammed as follows:

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CLEAR SPACE -----LIVED EXPERIENCE-----NIGHT

(Abstraction)

(Normal embodiment)

(Alienation)

Although the spaces of the body are always more complex than this diagram suggests, I will continue with its development in order to show how the nature of space changes when it is grounded in the normal lived experience of the body.⁷ I will begin by examining the nature of clear space and its relation to the norm, then I will look at the figure of the night. Finally, I shall broach upon what takes place between clear space and the night.

Clear space in the “Phenomenology of Perception” is the space of classical geometry. It is the space of the ‘simple object’ (of Chapter two). Objects are posited in space, and are measured according to their breadth and height. Their third dimension, depth, is merely an equivalent dimension. That is to say, depth can be considered as either breadth or height turned through 90 degrees.⁸ Moreover, the three axes of measurement have no intrinsic orientational or phenomenological value; they do not designate an ‘up’, ‘across’ or ‘distance’. Objects in clear space therefore have no relation to the body as ground, to the earth or the sky. They have no relation to themselves

⁷ In the final section of this chapter I will begin to deconstruct the normativity that runs throughout the text. In terms of the complexity gestured towards by Merleau-Ponty, let us note that he writes, ‘The description of human space could be developed indefinitely.’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:287)

⁸ On page 255 Merleau-Ponty reminds us of Berkeley’s famous definition of depth as ‘breadth seen from the side.’

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across time except in terms of the *logic* of identity. Objects in clear space receive their paradigmatic form when represented as objects from the vantage-less perspective of the axonometric grid. The object is projected axonometrically, such that the most distant façade appears as no more distant than that which is closest. The object has no background or context from which it appears. It resembles an in-itself, a self-contained transparency of being. Clear space is ‘clear’ precisely because there is no real ‘depth’, no real *position* or *perspective* upon things. There are just objects, in a neutral space, all equally available for representation. Merleau-Ponty describes clear space as ‘that impartial space in which all objects are equally important and enjoy the same right to existence..’(Merleau-Ponty,1962:287).

Merleau-Ponty argues that philosophy, when concerned with the problem of the ‘perception of space’, has restricted itself solely to examining how we come to experience the space of objects. It has not, that is, sought to question the *primacy* of this level of experience. No-one would doubt, least of all Merleau-Ponty, that we do often experience our bodies and the entities that surround it as objects that approximate to the geometric idealities of clear space. Moreover, no-one would want to refute the legitimacy of the axioms of classical geometry, for the least reason of their efficacy. However, Merleau-Ponty is concerned to show that up until this

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point, the philosophical enquiry into the perception of space has not been grounded in the body of experience. To counter this argument, he argues that classical geometry must be grounded in the proto-geometry and rationality of embodiment.

The traditional problem of the perception of space and perception generally must be reintegrated into a vaster problem. To ask how one can, in an explicit act, determine spatial relationships and objects with their 'properties', is to ask a second order question, to give as primary an act which appears only against the background of an already familiar world, to admit that one has not yet become conscious of the experience of the world. In the natural attitude, I do not have *perceptions*, I do not posit this object as beside that one, along with their objective relationships, I have a flow of experiences which imply and explain each other both simultaneously and successively. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 280-281)

If clear space refers to bodies as equivalent to discrete objects, a reification of the exterior such that it threatens to reinstitute itself as fundamental

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reality (as with Whitehead's 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'⁹), Merleau-Ponty's 'night' constitutes a reification of interiority. The subject can no longer rationalise the distance between itself and the world. The subject loses its sense of self and becomes possessed by that which lies in front. Merleau-Ponty's description of night is one of the most lyrical of the entire work and is worth quoting at length,

This is what happens in the night. Night is not an object before me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses, stifling my recollections and almost destroying my personal identity. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance. Night has no outlines; it is itself in contact with me and its unity is the mystical unity of the *mana*. Even shouts or a distant light people it only vaguely, and then it comes to life in its entirety; it is pure depth without foreground or background, without surfaces and without any distance separating it from me. All space for the reflecting mind is sustained by thinking which relates its parts to each other, but in this case the thinking starts from nowhere. On the contrary, it is from the

⁹ See Chapter two.

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heart of nocturnal space that I become united with it.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962:283)

In this passage Merleau-Ponty holds that a collapse of boundaries between self and world results from an interiorisation. However, the solipsism of the night is not 'purely subjective'. Interiorisation is not an act of the subject. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty shows that this phrase does not make any sense, *unless* it is figured in terms of an absolute immersion in the world, to the limits of a subjective evisceration. In the night, the world immerses itself in the subject more than the subject immerses itself in the world. The subject announces the night in the passive voice. And at this point we encounter the uncanny liminal asymptote of a rigorously solipsistic logic: that an absolute interiority cannot be distinguished from an absolute exteriority. That Heidegger did not follow this logic to its limits is his greatest error in his reading of Rilke mentioned in the previous chapter.

I will summarise clear space and the night in poetic terms:

Clear Space: alienation of being. Copernicus at the limit. No centre of being, no more gravity. No vestige of home. No centre. De-centered from being de-centered. No space for the body -for *somapsyche* - the soul of the body squeezed out, strung out. Infinite, cold space. The nihil of the

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Axonometric.....

The Night: closing down of limits - an infinity intrudes absolutely. Even the stars oppress. No distance, no space to breathe. No arc of respiratory joy. Inspiration and expiration cancel each other out as the boundary between the outside and the inside collapses in a metaphysical autism.

Between clear space and the night lies the rational experience of space; a space not so distant from things in the world as to imbue them with an exteriorising neutrality- making them into objects. But then again a space that avoids collapsing the gap between the embodied subject and its midst, plunging the subject into the confusion of the night. This 'rational space' is the perceptual delimitation of an optimum vantage point. It is that point whereby the skyscraper neither teeters above us with a reversed vertigo, nor loses its awesome proportions through distance. It is the interval that allows for an exchange between the near and far, such that figure and ground can make sense in terms of each other. In contrast, clear space involves an abstract objectality, a derivation upon a primordial experience of space.

The night, on the other hand, is *not another derivation*. The above quote provides a clue in this respect. The reference to a 'pure depth' above shows that what Merleau-Ponty calls the night is the *origin* of our embodied

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experience. Merleau-Ponty continually stresses that any clarity of spatial experience is itself dependent upon a generalised spatiality of depth that threatens to absolve the subject of all individuality. He writes that 'Clear space..is not only surrounded, but also thoroughly permeated by another spatiality thrown into relief by morbid deviations from the normal.'(Ibid:287) Night, as the space of schizophrenia and other forms of insanity, is at the same time the general medium from out of which emerges the sense of things held apart from the subject. Merleau-Ponty therefore provides a theory of insanity which is thoroughly spatial.¹⁰

What is this maddening 'pure depth' (*la profondeur pure*) that is at the origin of all experience of space? If we remind ourselves of the equivalence between the three axes of geometric clear space and how this compares with 'lived space', it is possible to begin answering this question. The difference between clear space and the space of embodied experience is one of *depth*. Merleau-Ponty outlines the demands of the enquiry,

..we have to rediscover beneath depth as a relation between things or even between planes, which is objectified depth

¹⁰ 'What protects the sane man against delirium or hallucination, is not his critical powers, but the structure of his space: objects remain before him, keeping their distance..What brings about both hallucinations and myths is a shrinkage in the space directly experienced, a rooting of things in our body, the overwhelming proximity of the object, the oneness of man and the world, which is, not indeed abolished, but repressed by everyday perception or by objective thought, and which philosophical consciousness rediscovers.'(Merleau-Ponty,1962:291)

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detached from experience and transformed into breadth, a primordial depth, which confers upon the other its significance, and which is the thickness of a medium devoid of any thing.(Ibid:266)

Again, we are forced to ask: what is this primordial depth? The kernel of an answer was already developed in the second chapter's examination of Whitehead's notion of simple location and the thesis of complex location- the 'event of perception', which he developed in response. I contend that Merleau-Ponty's notion of depth refers to the spatio-temporal complexity at work in each act of perception. When we perceive an object, we only derivatively perceive the object on its own, in abstraction. Typically, the object can only be understood in terms of the double horizon of its context and the embodied position of the perceiver. This double horizon is always already temporal- therefore the object presented to us refers to itself and its relation to context, and also to other contexts and objects, across time.¹¹ Each act of perception of an object involves the presentation of a façade of its being, a partial manifestation. But, by co-implication, the object is presented in plenitudinality. Unlike Husserl's account however, the co-

¹¹ The object presents itself as an image open to multiplicity- as Proust declares in the quotation on page 134. The presentation of an image, always already complex, can be the opening to a *delire* of the writer. Merleau-Ponty enters into a similar sort of delirium in discussing red in "The Intertwining" chapter of "The Visible and the Invisible". See p132.

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implication of depth in Merleau-Ponty involves other objects, as the loci of other possible positions of perception.¹² Merleau-Ponty holds that ‘When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can ‘see’..’(Ibid:68). Depth therefore is the implication of plenitudinality of the object, a fullness of being which is latent within the partiality of its manifestation.

This being simultaneously present in experiences which are nevertheless mutually exclusive, this implication of one in the other, this contraction into one perceptual act of a whole possible process, constitutes the originality of depth. It is the dimension in which things or elements of things envelop each other, whereas breadth and height are the dimensions in which they are juxtaposed.(Ibid:265)

Our primordial experience of ‘objects’ is one of co-implication, of inter-involvement and an interweaving of beings. With a phenomenology of depth, the surface of beings revealed through the narrow limitations of perspective, a potential unbearable lightness of being, is filled through the monadological device of the other. The two-dimensionality of being merely

¹²See Husserl’s “Cartesian Meditations”, especially the 3rd and 4th meditations.

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a point in the visual field is enriched by spaces for the other - loci that surmount the occlusions of situatedness. The other is always elsewhere *in space*, guaranteeing that this surface has its concomitant depth. It does not matter that the other is only a chimney, a wall, or a table, that is possible perspective enough.

The delirium at the heart of pure depth is that of the loss of self. The intertwining between things in space threatens the subject's ability to achieve distance from the world. To change metaphor, the monadological surface of mirrors threatens to confuse the gap between the self and its infinite reflections elsewhere in the universe. The monadological mirror sends a shiver of indistinguishability through the core of the subject's space. Depth is, to repeat, 'the thickness of a medium devoid of any thing.'(Ibid:266). Pure depth, the intertwining of being, emerges in the night. The night introduces insanity as the origin of our embodied experience. Merleau-Ponty makes it a condition of embodied being-in-the-world that its possibility occurs only on the basis of the risk of the subject-world gap collapsing. At the limit of our embodied existence, depth opens experience to the delirium of an Undifferentiation. Our embodied subjectivity occurs on the ground of a pre-personal anonymity of being. Another name for this is depth, a depth that always originates through an

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undifferentiation of being. This intertwining of depth will later be named as ‘flesh’ [la chair] in “The Visible and the Invisible”. The earlier work shows that the pure primordial depth, being of nocturnal origin, is always already a space of insanity. The embodied subject-world relation emerges out of the thickness of this undifferentiated medium. The flesh too will therefore perdure as the space of insanity, or the insanity of space.

The desire for certainty in philosophy has found two divergent but parallel articulations- that of empiricism and intellectualism. The former valorises the object of experience, and in so doing opens itself to the skepticism of an incapacity to provide the grounds for a connection between this object and the transcendent thing. The latter esteems the subject of experience, but by reducing experience to the sphere of immanence, obtains certainty at the price of there being no transcendent measure of truth and falsity.¹³ By thematising the night as the core of our emergent experience, Merleau-Ponty is implicitly resisting another philosophical formulation of certainty. Our experience of the world, an experience that always implies maintaining a distance vulnerable to collapse or over-extension, cannot thereby be certain. Merleau-Ponty writes that ‘If myths, dreams and illusion are to be possible, the apparent and the real must remain ambiguous in the subject as

¹³ In making this comparison between intellectualism and empiricism I am grateful to M.C.Dillon for

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in the object.’(Ibid:294) How then do we establish a relation to the opacity of transcendent things, and to the uncertainty of all our experience, without giving in to a generalised skepticism? Merleau-Ponty’s answer in “Phenomenology of Perception”, an answer which is developed into the subheading for an entire section by the time of “The Visible and the Invisible”, is that we have *perceptual faith*.¹⁴ It is only through perceptual faith that the interval between clear space and the night is maintained. Knowledge of the world, as has by now been established, is guaranteed only by the ontological inter-involvement of transcendence and immanence. However, Merleau-Ponty’s situation of the origin of the rational experience in space on the basis of a distancing from the night of indefinitely ramifying co-implication, the distancing of perceptual faith, raises a question: how is rationality maintained? Or, put another way, whence perceptual faith?

I shall not venture answers to these difficult questions here. However, what can be said is that the linear security of the diagram above must be complexified. The night is the core of the emergence of depth. From this ‘primordial’ depth emerges a depth at work in rational experience: a depth between clear space and the night. And again, at the outer extreme, depth

the lucid first two chapters of his book “Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology”.

¹⁴ ‘Perceiving is pinning one’s faith, at a stroke, in a whole future of experiences, and doing so in a present which never strictly guarantees the future; it is placing one’s belief in a world.’(Merleau-Ponty,1962:297)

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empties itself of all existential content, becomes neutral, in clear space.

Having established the fragility of the lived experience of space for the 'rational' subject, we can now develop some of the main themes of embodiment Merleau-Ponty introduces in the "Phenomenology of Perception".

The body is, for Merleau-Ponty, a precessively orientated being. The body therefore is that diagram of capacities to act towards and in the world in certain ways.¹⁵ These capacities are wrought through a combination of the corporeal practices at work in the body's grounding culture- its *habitus*, and the physiological limits of the body itself. Whenever an embodied subject intends to act, it does so subsequently only on the basis of a postural or *corporeal schema*¹⁶ It acts in this or that action on the basis of a predispositional matrix of ways of occupying and dealing with the world.

The world, on the other hand, is not merely the pointless grid of clear space. The ontological remainder of a transcendental reduction is that of a space that is always already directed. Beyond the incorporated intentionality of the subject, the world offers itself through the directives of what we might call a

¹⁵ Feminist commentators on Merleau-Ponty such as Iris Marion Young have criticised the functionalism of his notion of the 'I can', comparing it to an embodied female 'I cannot' (see her essay "Throwing Like a Girl"). These criticisms, while valid and opening up his thought to difference, do not however challenge his work itself as a resource for thinking. See also, for a critique of Merleau-Ponty's functionalism, Alphonso Lingis' paper "Phantom Equator".

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‘worldly intentionality’.¹⁷ The precessive space of the world suggest ways of embodied negotiation of it. As Merleau-Ponty writes,

Generally speaking, our perception would not comprise either outlines, figures, backgrounds or objects, and would consequently not be perception of anything, or indeed exist at all, if the subject of perception were not this gaze which takes a grip upon things only in so far as they have a general direction..since every conceivable being is related either directly or indirectly to the perceived world, and since the perceived world is grasped only in terms of direction, we cannot dissociate being from orientated being..(Ibid:253)

The ‘primordial encounter with being’(p252) therefore is the site of exchange, the interplay of a double intentionality, that of the subject and world. The body directs itself towards and within the world on the basis of the patternings of habit. The world in its turn suggests directions of orientation for that body.

However, within the account thus far set up, it is not possible to account for

¹⁶ In the *Phenomenology*, see especially pp 137-142.

¹⁷ It is by emphasising the directives of space itself that we can approach the work of the sculptor Anish Kapoor. His ‘objects’ suggest forms of comportment towards them (rather than vice versa). Kapoor can be seen to be revamping a sculptural motif first developed by James Turrel in the 1970’s.

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the genesis of either embodiment or world. This is the task now before us.

The primordial encounter with being is the site of origin. The most significant insight of the whole of the “Phenomenology of Perception” is found on page 254 of the translation, where the interchange and exchange between body and world takes the notion of origin in a new direction for thinking. I shall now examine this insight in detail.

On a naïve level, the body acquires the patternings of a postural schema through the embodied cultural practices of its grounding places, its habitus. The place of the ground is therefore taken to be a uni-directional linear causality. The origin of a particular set of cultural practices happened once and once only. In this way the origins of a culture take on the semblance of occurring in an immemorial time, and of being the authentic foundations of the beginning. These embodied practices get taken up by the child and repeated.

This model of repetition is rejected by Merleau-Ponty, and the rejection is given its most emphatic statement on this page. We will continue with the quote given a few pages ago, where, it will be recalled, Merleau-Ponty distinguished the momentary body from the anonymous body-as-function gathering every particular focus into a general project.

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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. (Ibid:254)

In the French, the last sentence from this extract reads, ‘une communication avec le monde plus vieille que la pensée.’ The “vielle” here is ambiguous; it could be read in the sense of “ancient” or “old”, at the same time however, it could be read in the sense of “previous to” or “prior to”. Through this ambiguity in the French language, Merleau-Ponty is able to convey how the given is saturated with the past, such that at each moment of the encounter with the given (which itself is of course historically constituted at and through each moment), all of the past is at stake, from the immemorial mythic foundations to the most recent transformations.

The double intentionality of the subject’s exchange with the world, of a transcendence within immanence, therefore constructs the origin *within the terms of the present*. For Merleau-Ponty, the origin does not reside within an

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untouchable immemoriality, rather it is taken up anew in each communication between the body and world. The origin of culture therefore is transformed from a simple repetition to a repetition of 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 set of specific practices for bodily being, is constructed around the transformative difference of the present. In Merleau-Ponty’s thinking therefore, the questions of who is the subject, and who the object, who is the agent and what is being acted upon get completely enmeshed within each other. The embodied subject is at the same time 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 articulates itself in the terms of the present. The “Phenomenology of Perception” is replete with an inchoate reversibility. The embodied subject therefore acts within the terms of a cultural horizon, and yet is acted upon by that horizon.

Returning to Serres’ figure of the dancer may be helpful at this moment. He writes,

The more I dance, the more I am naked, absent, a calculation and a number. Dance is to the body proper what exercise of

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thought is to the subject known as I. The more I dance, the less I am me. If I dance something, I am that something or I signify it. When I dance, I am only the blank body of the sign. The sign is a transparency that tends towards its designation. The dancer, like the thinker, is an arrow pointing elsewhere. He shows something else, he makes it exist, he makes an absent world descend into presence. He must thus himself be absent. The body of the dancer is the body of the possible, blank, naked, nonexistent. (Serres, 1995:39-40)

Serres is clear that subjectivity is questioned once the ontological priority of the choric dancing body is brought into play. An individualist or psychologistic reading of a dancing body (and by this, we can assume once again that any body is a dancing body) forecloses the communication with a world that is essential to all embodied movement. Through motility, the individualism of a 'subject' alone, suspended from history, disappears. Henceforth, the more I dance, the less I am I. The dancing subject embodies a world that is given and to be transformed, *through* movement, through the dance. Dancing the body discloses history and being as transformable potentialities, within the motile arcs of the present. And this transformability always thereby points 'elsewhere' - to a future whose course

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is about to be reworked, in the present. The reworking of the future, for Serres as for Merleau-Ponty, is settled in the present, as a descent from the virtual to the actual. And this reworking takes place both within *and* beyond the ambit of the subject, as a transcendence within immanence of the anonymous agent. The dancing body is a *spect-actor*, a body that is both witness to transformation and its agent.¹⁸

To continue with this Serresian trope, with each step, the dancer alters not only their relation to the tradition of dance to which they belong, but they also transform that tradition itself. Again, I am employing ‘dance’ in the widest sense possible, as demarcating patternings determining the intentional arcs of motile being. But the nature of the double-intentionality has profound ontological implications for the subject itself. *The origin of embodied subjectivity is founded within the difference of the present.* The ontological core of embodied subjectivity, the being of its identity, is constructed around difference. The body’s motility, its movement through time and space, a pattern of gestures and postures of being, only takes place on the ground of habitus. But this ground only offers itself through being reworked in the present. In this way, Merleau-Ponty offers us the most profound ontology of the relation between history and embodiment,

¹⁸By using the word ‘spect-actor’ I am referring to the important work of the radical Brazilian ‘playwright’, Augusto Boal. See his book, “Games for actors and non-actors.”

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In every focusing movement my body unites present, past and future, it secretes time, or rather it becomes that location in nature where, for the first time, events, instead of pushing each other into the realm of being, project round the present a double horizon of past and future and acquire a historical orientation..My body takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present; it is not a thing, but creates time instead of submitting to it..(Ibid:240)¹⁹

The subject's primordial encounter with the world is mutually transformative. The ground of embodiment, the practices of a culture, is a ground itself based upon the difference of repetition. This repetition is the transformation enacted through the bodies which incorporate that ground in the space-time of the present. Cultures and the beings that embody it do not alter themselves across time through a difference that is in some sense external. Rather, the shifts and movements of culture are enacted through the most intimate ontological exchange. This exchange, Merleau-Ponty is clear, is pre-representational. Neither corporeal ambition nor the directives of the world transform each other most primordially within consciousness. The foundations of our identity as embodied beings is structured by a pre-

¹⁹ For a parallel account in terms of embodied memory, see Merleau-Ponty's lecture "The problem of

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personal repetition enacted only through difference. Transformation and the opening up of history and tradition takes place in obscurity, an activity of the *dusk*. And the gravity of this exchange is also clearly marked: history and the future are not dead concerns beyond the reach of the embodied subject, they are on the contrary the very means by which that subject takes up the world.

In this sense, we arrive at a significant insight into the nature of freedom. Freedom becomes, under this reading of Merleau-Ponty, the possibility to transform the cultural horizons given to one. Freedom is freedom to act within the terms of the historical patternings and habitus, in such a way that this action can now express itself according to the difference of the present. Freedom is therefore not a simple voluntarism. Nor must we dismiss freedom for the sake of an extreme historicism (such as Foucault's for example).²⁰ Freedom is essentially about *agency*, and the most fundamental form of agency is that of the body expressing its world (of corporeal traces and conditionings) in the present. The difference of the present ensures that the body must act to transform its givens, or else suffer the fate of no

sleep, the unconscious and memory" in "The Paris Lectures"

²⁰I am referring to Foucault's notion that history works through the body by imprinting itself upon it—as if the body was incapable of agency and resistance to a hegemonic inscription. For instance, in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", he writes, 'Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body.' (Foucault, 1984:83)

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longer being an agent, of being less of a historical being. History therefore stops becoming an external fate that descends upon all whose destiny it is to have been born into its time. The historical is most primordially the expression of the body's truth in the present of its being; all other forms of 'history' are derivative upon this. As we shall see in the next chapter, the conditions which allow for freedom are not however always dependent upon the 'spectator' themselves. The corporeal schema of agency, of a possibility of communicating with a world prior to thought, can itself be blocked, through the other.

But before we can begin to discuss this, we must understand how freedom is put at risk by fragility of the space of rational existence in general. As was shown above, the sanity and rationality of a spacing between the subject and world is permeated by the possibility of the night, a possibility that may fulfill itself as either pathological or as a momentary hallucination. The obscurity of communication between subject and world is but a few shades away from an all-encompassing night. If we gather this possibility in light of this communication, we must conclude that the emergence of an embodied identity occurs on the cusp of insanity. Our embodied subjectivity transforms the world through a faith that battles with the possibility of a collapse into con-fusion.

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This threatening lack of distance has implications for the relation between the body and time. The fusion between subject and world that is the mark of a nocturnal ontology puts us at risk of losing our status as *historical beings*. In the night, we lose our relation to the movements of our body whereby what is past and what is future gets renegotiated. An extrapolation of Merleau-Ponty's thinking of the night and what I have called the 'dusk' of an ancient communication is therefore that those lost in dreams or the pathologies of a medium without thickness no longer occupy the space-time of the transformative present. Here we may picture the sidestepping of history by the drunk, in confused conversation with himself, pointing at phantom interlocutors. His confused steps are out of time with the steps of history, and he goes by unnoticed in the shadows of time. Again, as the following chapter will show, it is through the other that a denial of historical agency (and this last phrase by now should appear as tautologous) is often wrought, through the violence of the gaze.

*

I will now turn to the later work "The Visible and the Invisible" in order to argue that the relations outlined above between the body, subjectivity, space, time and history are not radically altered by the time of the late work. The difference this work introduces is rather that of a *de-centering* of the

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subject, to the extent that the quasi-transcendental of the earlier work is absolutely foreclosed. In terms of the radical notion of origin developed above however, the later work does not offer a different approach. In both cases, a phenomenology of the present is offered which is at the same time an ontology of difference within repetition.

The key notion introduced into “The Visible and the Invisible” is the concept of *reversibility*. The other innovations in vocabulary- the ‘chiasm’, ‘intertwining’, ‘flesh’, all are developments of this founding term. ‘Introduced’ has to be taken with the caveat that its operation was implicitly present within the “Phenomenology of Perception”. It is an essential aspect of embodiment in that first work that the embodied subject is able to perceive only because their embodiment is both immanent and transcendent. Our perception opens out onto the world only because our bodily being is the ground of both our status as subjects and our visibility as ‘objects’ in the world. As the phenomenologist writes, ‘I apprehend my body as subject-object, as capable of ‘seeing’ and ‘suffering’”(Merleau-Ponty,1962:95) With this in mind, the notion of reversibility is simple to introduce. Instead of founding ontology with a disjunctive relation between the subject and the object, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodied being grounds ontology in an intertwining of both. What is ‘subjective’ is

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always already of the object, and vice versa. The concept of reversibility enables us to follow more clearly the explicit work of this pre-dualistic ontology.

In the later work, the transcendence within immanence of embodiment, the crux of its reversibility, is modelled on the perception of touch. The hand that touches the other hand, or that touches another object, can only do so if it can at the same time be touched. The only possibility of avoiding this outcome is if the touching hand is insensate, if the nerve endings which enable the sensation of touch have been disabled in some way. But then, touching with a set of numb fingers is hardly *touching* at all! Under normal circumstances, my touching the other at the same time involves my being touched. The status of the 'at the same time' however is crucial. Merleau-Ponty argues that there is never simultaneity with reversibility; the touching of one hand by the other is not at the same time reversible. There is always a gap, an *ecart*, between touching/being touched and its reverse.

In the case of other modes of perception, the reversibility thesis works by extension. For example, I am able to see objects in the world only given the fact that my eyes are located in my body, and that vision requires a motile body that only sees through a sort of 'embodied dialogue' with the seen. Furthermore, the seen is at the most merely a surface, a partial percept, if

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the act of perception is limited to the analytics of a subject-percept relation. The “Phenomenology of Perception” showed, through the resources of Gestalt Psychology, that perception requires the horizon of a ground upon which the percept is situated, in order that the percept be comprehended. In that earlier work, Merleau-Ponty argued that in addition to this, the perceptual field gives the percept ‘depth’ on the basis of the surrounding objects occupying roles as other possible positions for perception. The co-implication of a background and a terrain of other possible views, across time as well as space, furnish the surface of the percept with a plenitude and a relation to its environs it would not otherwise have. In terms of the later work, the visual field of perception therefore works only on the basis of this field being potentially occupiable by the embodied subject, *reversing* roles with surrounding objects.

The notion of reversibility in “The Visible and the Invisible” occupies many levels of conceptuality. For example, beyond being the ontological prerequisite for perception, it enables us to understand the complex nature of percepts. The object perceived is not first of all this colour and this size and this shape and this form of movement, as if objects acquire the gravity of ontological status by *addition* of qualities. Rather, the object’s colour and so on are dependent upon all its other qualities. Only on the basis of its

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texture is this coat this shade of red.²¹ Reversibility therefore enables us to understand the implicit ontology of the ‘style of being’ that appears in the earlier work.²² A pre-representational synaesthesia works through the object, an internal horizon of co-dependent qualia that is the ground of its unity. The advancement the later text makes if any is in underlining the background of repetition within immanence at work in the object’s *style of being*. Just as the embodied subject takes up its matrix of comportments only by transforming the habitus of their ground, so too the object’s gathering or embodying of sensory qualia only occurs through transformation of the ‘given’ of those qualia. Hence Merleau-Ponty describes each incarnation of red as ‘a punctuation in the field of red things’. Previously, on the same page, he returns to the textural metaphor employed in the earlier book. He writes

..this red is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it, with which it forms a constellation, or with other colours it dominates or that repel it. In short, it is a certain node in the woof of the simultaneous and the successive. It is a concretion of visibility, it is not an atom. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:132)

²¹ In the delirium of his discussion of red things mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty writes ‘And its red

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The “Phenomenology of Perception” contains all the motifs of the later work, if only implicitly, in the case of certain concepts. The radical introduction of a ‘third kind’ in ontology is the cause of all of the tension of the earlier work, which is half written in the wake of the transcendental language of perception and consciousness, and half written in a language beyond dualism. The disturbance of this triadic ontology is resolved more fully in the later work, which succeeds in abandoning most of the traditional vocabulary of ontology in introducing its own.

The primordial pre-personality and anonymity of the embodied subject in the “Phenomenology of Perception” leads to the origination of identity in the miasma of the night. Identity is always already threatened on the basis of that which founds it. In the earlier work, this threat is undermined or reduced to an extent by the competency of the ‘rational’ subject- the subject who can maintain a distance from the night. It is a matter of uncertainty whether one can name the implicit ontology of this work as a reversion to monism. This is because rationality and sanity occur by standing *apart* from their ground. Although not posited in an acosmic space, the embodied subject attains rationality through a distancing whose ontological status is unclear.

literally is not the same as it appears in one constellation or the other..’(Merleau-Ponty,1968,132)

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In “The Visible and the Invisible” however, this unclarity is resolved. Reversibility is not maintained through a reversion to a subjectivity that resists a collapse into the monism of the night only through an embodied competency of being. The quasi-transcendental ‘I can’ drops out in the final unfinished work, leaving no ontological ambiguity. The implications of cutting out the transcendental ‘I can’ are clear: no ontological separation can be fixed between what is ‘subject’ and what is ‘object’. The thesis of reversibility maintains, as an explicit treatment of what was already implicit in the earlier work, that the object thoroughly interpenetrates the subject and the subject thoroughly interpenetrates the object.

There are two stages in unfolding the ontological implications of the reversibility thesis beyond this:

- 1) Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘..between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things.’(Merleau-Ponty,1968:123) From the point of view of *my body*, I can no longer determine what is *my own* in terms of the separation of subject and world. Authenticity, ownness, *jemeinigkeit*, are all annulled by reversibility. Merleau-Ponty therefore has taken the

²² See the “Phenomenology of Perception”, p327.

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phenomenology of ekstasis to its logical conclusion: my embodied projection towards the world is the primordial layer of worldhood available to me. This projection does not overlay a previously existing world, rather this projection is the very means by which we inhabit the world, and the very means by which we can say that the world inhabits us. By this stage, Merleau-Ponty has become the thinker to match and support the poet of reversibility discussed at the end of the previous chapter: Rilke. The interpenetration of the 'outside', of the perception of nature, with an alleged interiority leads to the poetic installation of the ambiguity of reversibility. All reference to the 'personal' in Rilke, the 'heart', the 'Open', the 'pure perception' and so on, are not, as Heidegger believed, a recapitulation within a grand metaphysical subjectivity. Rather, the Rilkean interior always leads itself to the outside according to a poetically and conceptually rigorous transcendence within immanence. As with our fingers tracing the 'surface' of the mobius strip, the Rilkean inside leads inexorably towards its outside.

- 2) But this limitation to the personal itself is no longer tied to an implicit resistance to monism grounded within quasi-transcendentality. The transcendental privilege of the 'I' is no longer maintained. The primordially of depth, renamed as 'flesh' or 'wild being' *displaces* any

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residual privilege ascribed to the subject. Instead however of a reversion to a Kantian double-aspect theory or to a psycho-physical parallelism, Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis plays an ontologically more primordial role. Again, as was stressed at the outset of the chapter, an ontological clefting is derivative upon an originary conjunction. The embodied subject's relation to the world is reversible to the extent that the two poles of the relation are ontologically equiprimordial. In Heideggerian parlance, the twofoldedness of immanence and transcendence is at the same time a onefoldedness. Flesh is, ontologically, an 'absolute within the sphere of the relative.' But, given the reversibility of (1) above, the separation or spacing between subject and world is an *intertwining* gap. It guarantees therefore that the possessive is no longer absolutely fixable. We uncover a deeper level of anonymity to that of the "Phenomenology of Perception"; a nomological ambiguity over what is addressed as 'subject' and what is named as 'world.' Henceforth, the equiprimordiality between subject and world holds only for a subject and world that themselves are reversible.

In a key passage of chapter 4, "The Intertwining", Merleau-Ponty condenses the twofold explication of the ontology of reversibility into one

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dense passage, which is worth quoting in full,

If the body is one sole body in its two phases, it incorporates into itself the whole of the sensible and with the same movement incorporates itself into a “Sensible in itself.” We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?..The world seen is not “in” my body, and my body is not “in” the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it. A participation in and kinship with the visible, the vision neither envelops it nor is enveloped by it definitively. The superficial pellicle of the visible is only for my vision and for my body. But the depth beneath this surface contains my body and hence contains my vision. My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visible with it. There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other. Or rather..there are two circles, or two vortexes, or two spheres, concentric when I live

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naively, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentered with respect to the other..(Merleau-Ponty,1968:138)

There is scarcely any mention of the 'night' in "The Visible and the Invisible". By decentering the subject's quasi-transcendental spacing *apart* from primordial depth, the anxiety of a recrudescence of an englobing monism evaporates. The rationality of the embodied subject is no longer accorded the tenuous position of an epi-phenomenal suspension over the abyss of the anonymous thickness of being. Rather, the distance of a rational embodied subjectivity is maintained by the gap of reversibility: the subject envelops its world as the world enfolds the subject within it. The reversibility of this envelopment is, unlike double-aspect theory or psychophysical parallelism, non-coincident. The transcendental function of an embodied intentionality is no longer the sole guarantor against the night; any such intentionality is interpretable as englobing a world and as englobed by that world- but not at one and same time. The gap of non-coincidence allows for 'subject' and 'world' to sediment themselves from out of the flux of emergence. Only thus does the subject attain 'rationality'.

The reversibility thesis therefore explicitly opposes an individualistic thesis of the transformation of the world. The individual is at most the *conduit* of

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the world's transformation. Merleau-Ponty's last work does not undermine a first-personal perspective upon action, embodiment and its grounding within culture, however it does, through the notion of reversibility, force the tendency towards a covert ontological separation through a quasi-transcendentalism to be stopped in its tracks. The 'biggest picture' of an expressive development and transformation of the world folding back upon itself through the conduit of individuals is the non-coincident correlate of all first-personal accounts of experience. As M.C.Dillon holds,

..we must learn to think of the relation of body to world as relation of flesh to flesh after the model of one hand touching the other- but we must think this folding of the flesh back on itself as decentered, as taking place at a level prior to the emergence of conscious, I-centered, personal reflection. At the level of perceptual faith, where I do not see, but "one perceives in me", it is misleading to think of a body-subject in relation to a world-object; it is more accurate to think of an anonymous perceptual unfolding, dehiscence, *ecart*.(Dillon,1988:164)

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In both the “Phenomenology of Perception” and “The Visible and the Invisible”, Merleau-Ponty positions the transformation of history within the present of embodied subjectivity. The ‘communication more ancient than thought’(p254) produces an origin of embodiment that is reconstructed at each of its instances. Prior to the individuality of personal embodied existence, our bodies partake of a general manner of being which reworks the ground of that being, and thereby its past and its future. The world unfolds through the transformations and reversibilities of the flesh. The name of this unfolding is history. The site of this unfolding is the present of transformation. In order to achieve linguistic as well as conceptual rigour, all reference to ‘structure’ must always be grounded therefore in the difference of a repetition. The embodied transformation of the present leads to novel formulations of the structure of being, but this structure always supervenes upon an anterior drama of difference. In this way, some commentators have begun to think of Merleau-Ponty’s work as offering a way out of a prevailing phobia against the present.²³

²³ I refer to M.C.Dillon’s penetrating phenomenological critique of deconstruction in his preface to the compendium entitled “Merleau-Ponty Vivant”. Dillon argues that Derrida holds phenomenology’s treatment of the present to be reducible to Husserl’s main contentions on the matter- that is that the present is the arena for the subject’s self-coincidence. By introducing Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the present as always-already fissuring from itself, as a non-coincident unfolding that works through the body, Dillon argues that existential phenomenology offers a way through the impasse of a-referentiality he takes to be intrinsic to the ‘linguistic immanence’ of *differance*.

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In the final section of this chapter, I want to introduce a further level of reversibility that can be seen at work in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. This reversibility is always only ever *implicit* in his overtly non-political works. It is a reversibility between a *poetics* of the embodied present and a *politics* of that present. Although I have called Rilke the *poet* of reversibility, it is vitally important to see that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology itself has serious ramifications for developing a political ontology.

In order to begin this work, I will focus on the "Phenomenology of Perception". It would be equally possible to begin to explore a political ontology of the later work, however I will suspend that task for a future project. In both texts, this political ontology, although implicit, remains so for a reason. This reason is the legacy of a Leibnizian tendency in phenomenology that neither Merleau-Ponty nor his most recent readers have begun to challenge. In my reading, I find the grounds for a challenge within his work itself.

The Leibnizianism of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is found in most explicit form in a passage that has already been alluded to. I will now quote it in full in order to begin its deconstruction,

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Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; but the back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it 'shows' to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as guarantee of the permanence of those aspects. Any seeing of an object by me is instantaneously reiterated among all those objects in the world which are apprehended as co-existent, because each of them is all that the others 'see' of it. Our previous formula must therefore be modified; the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but the house seen from everywhere. The completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden.(Merleau-Ponty,1962:p68-69)

As the subject perceives the thing, the limitations of perspective entail that only one spatio-temporal facet of the thing reveals itself. The possible locations beyond the subject represented by the furniture of the room act

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therefore as guarantors of the thing's depth. At the limit, the accumulation of depth would render the thing absolutely transparent, a totality. This view from everywhere is of course, given the limitations of embodiment, an impossibility. But as a hypothetical extrapolation, the monadological manouver of the above passage allows Merleau-Ponty to distinguish between what he calls the 'world' and the 'universe'. The universe is the thought experiment of every object seen from all possible perspectives. The universe would therefore involve a 'completed and explicit totality'(Merleau-Ponty,1962:71). The universe would be the world re-viewed as an absolutely clear space. Again we return to the line diagram set out above in order to revise it. Clear space is depth at the limit. The collapse of the night is therefore very close to that which was previously considered as its opposite. Absolute interiority folds out upon absolute exteriority, as in the previous chapter the transcendence of transcendence turns out to be the dissimulated strategem of a displaced immanence. The difference between clear space and the night is that with the former, the interrelationality is explicit. Instead of a solipsism, the subject is shrunk to a point in the field of totality. Standard accounts of perception must repeat this reductive alienation by assuming perception occurs on the basis of a 'point' in the visual field. Instead of the insanity of the night, clear space, as a mode of subjectivity, leads to absolute alienation. The Copernican Revolution is indeed put to its

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limit, for with clear space there is no space for God or for the soul. The soul looks out upon a universe that denies it its own space for being.

As finite beings, the thought of the universe must necessarily remain an impossible hypothesis. The world on the other hand refers to the possibility of other locations for perception that are not given or are not what Merleau-Ponty calls a 'presumptive synthesis'.(Ibid:70) The world is, in Merleau-Ponty's words, that 'open and indefinite multiplicity of relationships which are of reciprocal implication.'(Ibid:71)

Given the limitations of embodiment, the above portrait of the other horizons for perceiving the object situates it somewhere between a world and a universe, or between a world and a 'system'. The extrapolation of co-existence and co-implication *could* result in a space that is both absolute and clear, if we read the passage in isolation. We *could* assume that co-implication itself implies a coincident and absolute unfolding. To do so would however be to ignore the indefinitions of embodiment. Moreover, the other locations for perception, the chimney, the lamp and so on, are not themselves simple locations. Perhaps the deception of the above passage lies in its assumption of other spaces *as* simple locations, as if an embodied being could be replaced by a lamp without reduction. But this deception would only be the deception of objectivity, by which it is taken to be primary reality instead of

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the asymptote of a totality.

Prior to the clear space of objective being, the embodied perception of the thing places it in competition with other features of the visual field. By concentrating attention on this object, one necessarily must background other objects. The perceptual field works by *occlusion*. To be presented by one object is to put other objects out of view, on the lee-side of the percept. Merleau-Ponty writes, "To see is to enter a universe of beings which *display themselves*, and they would not do this if they could not be hidden behind each other or behind me." (Ibid:68) The embodied nature of perception entails therefore that the object before me inhabits a world, and by this term is meant both a field of open and extendable relations and a set of limitations to the perspective on offer.

Just as between clear space and the night, this gap between the universe and the world has ontological significance. Beyond the question of how phenomenology sets up the relation between the finite and the infinite, the significance lies in the direction of how *difference* is thought. In the preamble to Part One of the "Phenomenology of Perception" entitled "Experience and objective thought", the section from which the above citation was taken, there is a fundamental ambiguity as to where Merleau-Ponty draws the line. On the one hand, he wants to begin introducing the

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phenomenological value of *depth*, whereby one can contrast an atomistic, isotropic account of space with the lived experience of an embodied perspective on the world. This leads Merleau-Ponty in the direction of Leibniz's monadology. On the other hand, the fact of embodiment at the same time restricts the possibility of an infinitisation of perspectives, towards the 'indefinite', and henceforth openness of a 'world'.

The stakes for this tie-off between the infinite extension of views and the limitations of an embodied perspective are therefore not 'purely' ontological. The most important question to be addressed in this section is not what relation the body has with possible other locations and thereby with infinity. Rather, the most pressing reading of the section is *political*. Between the infinity of perspectives explicit with the notion of a universe (an ideality which is revealed as such by the unresolvable tension between the universe's infinity and the requirement for the universe at the same time to be a totality) and the limitations of embodiment in the world lies the question of difference. On the one hand, the Leibnizian passage above suggests the smoothness of a logical passage of co-implication from the finitude of embodied perception to the universe. On the other hand, at other moments in the section, Merleau-Ponty attempts to show how this infinitisation is always resisted by the specificities of incarnate being. The

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closest he gets towards thinking difference occurs on the page following the above quote,

But, once more, my human gaze never *posits* more than one facet of the object, even though by means of horizons it is directed towards all the others. It can never come up against previous appearances or those presented to other people otherwise than through the intermediary of time and language.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962:69)

Here we have the problem: how do we think the other in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology? In terms of depth and its implications, the other is merely the facilitator of extrapolation, the representative of worldliness. The other therefore functions as the token of community, and of the Same. The other is therefore the stranger who yet belongs, who belongs to the polis of the One. There is only one world, however indefinite. In terms of difference however, the other must be something in sharp contrast. The other as other *does not* belong to the same community. The other would not therefore *recognise* the object in terms of a different one of its 'facets'. The other advances as the threat of not recognising the object as such. In this case, the other resists the community that wants to extend itself. The other is the strange avatar of the impossible. Is this other thought in Merleau-

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Ponty's phenomenology?

The danger of a phenomenology that wants to place objective thought in relation to an embodied situatedness that precedes it is that it gets caught up in the chimeras of infinity that the former appears to require. Merleau-Ponty's section under discussion is full of tensions between the finite and the infinite. It is my contention that these tensions must always be read in terms of a *political ontology*, for what is always at work in thinking the infinite is of course a transcendence of finitude. But all attempts to think transcendence, I hold, are always already attempts at thinking community in relation to difference. Merleau-Ponty is implicitly aware of this in his reference to 'other people' in the last quoted sentence. The question of a phenomenological political ontology is apparent in this reworking of the simple locationism of the lamp and the chimney from one page to the next.

How are we to negotiate between an other who encourages us into a world that promises more and more depth within our experience, an other who promises to redeem us from the insanity of the surface, from the unbearable lightness of being, and an other who transcends the boundaries of that experience? Is there merely a for-itself in community, who encounters the other as alien, as an object, like a lamp or a chimney? Or does the other occupy a more *ambiguous* role, such that its status is neither one of

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community *or* difference, but both, in varying degrees? In order to advance further towards a phenomenological thinking of embodied difference, the next chapter will examine Franz Fanon's reading of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in an effort to think how race is just such an ambiguity that can be clarified by a political ontology.