

INTRODUCTION

In the main, I agree more with the artists than with any philosopher hitherto: they have not lost the scent of life, they have loved the things of “this world”- they have loved their senses. To strive for “desensualisation”: that seems to me a misunderstanding or an illness of a cure, where it is not merely hypocrisy or self-deception. I desire for myself and for all who live, *may* live, without being tormented by a puritanical conscience, an ever greater spiritualization and multiplication of the senses; indeed, we should be grateful to the senses for their subtlety, plenitude, and power and offer them in return the best we have in the way of spirit. What are priestly and metaphysical calumnies against the sense to us! We no longer need these calumnies: it is a sign that one has turned out well when, like Goethe, one clings with ever-greater pleasure and warmth to the “things of this world”:- for in this way he holds firmly to the great conception of man, that man becomes the transfigurer of existence when he learns to transfigure himself.           Nietzsche, 1885.

## *Introduction*

It is a suggestive contention to say that the most important issue in philosophy today is that of the body. In the history of Western philosophy, thought's treatment of the body has tended to follow one of two paths. Either the body has become increasingly absent (such that one can progress quickly to the core of what is problematic in Kant's critical philosophy by asking after 'the body' in his thinking), or increasingly universalised. An example of the universalisation of the body in philosophy would seem to be Maurice Merleau-Ponty's treatment of it in the "Phenomenology of Perception", whereby an account of the 'normally functioning' body is derived from a protracted theoretical examination of one of its pathological and damaged instantiations.

In terms of contemporary thought, I contend in this thesis that in response to the hegemony of the universalised body, poststructuralist thought has failed to articulate the *experience* of difference.<sup>1</sup> As such, it has failed to return thinking to the concrete. It has at the most thought the difference proper to language itself. This failure has its origins in the nature of the poststructuralist project as a whole. There is an unbridgeable gap between the thesis that difference occupies

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<sup>1</sup>The gross injustice of collating a massive multiplicity of thinking under the banner of 'Poststructuralism' is evident to the author himself. However, in order to proceed, a simplification and a periodisation was required. Sometimes, for the sake of maximalising an articulation of one's own intellectual position with regard to the broadest context, such devices as 'polemical prefaces' are necessary. Poststructuralism, as a theoretical complex that emerged within late-capital academic institutions in many way spans the dynamic between the abstract and the concrete introduced in the first paragraph. However, to the extent that the diverse discourses of poststructuralist thought are obsessed with language is the extent to which that project bears the mark of an exaggeration, and ultimately, a failure.

## *Introduction*

the core of the production of meaning and the reality of the experience of difference. This wave of theory has elaborated, in the most technically accomplished manner, the lack of presence 'meaning' has to itself. But it remains caught within a conception of signification that cannot respond to the conditions of existence from which it takes its cue. As one writer puts it, referring in particular to Derrida's 'notion' of *différance*, 'it responds to a world to which it cannot allow itself to refer.'<sup>2</sup>The proponents of poststructuralism locate its value in eschewing ego-centrism and 'presence' in thought. This mode of avoidance itself is open to question however. In a sense, it is possible to say that poststructuralism substitutes a privilege accorded to the immanence of the sign for a privilege accorded to the immanence of the subject. Poststructuralist thought traps itself within *linguistic immanence*. It reduces every mode of expression to a form of signification or textuality. In these terms, poststructuralist thought is once more caught by the philosophical seduction of privileging immanence over transcendence. To spell it out, the immanence of signification is the reductive frame into which the transcendence of experience is slotted. The gain for such a manouver is a grand theory appearing a modest guise. Its cost is that real difference gets dissimulated by a theoretical impostor. As such, I would argue that the articulation of the desire to return to the

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<sup>2</sup>M.C. Dillon, 'Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism', pxxii, the preface to the collection "MERLEAU-

## *Introduction*

concrecity of difference through the theoretical frameworks of poststructuralism must end in oblique textuality, frustration and failure.

That being stated, no-one would want to deny the power of the name, its violence, violations and reductions of multiplicity. It would be oversimplistic and reactive to damn wholesale the trends of the last two decades of thinking. The valuable legacy of poststructuralist thought will be its powerful articulation of the risk involved in treating the sign as neutral. Signification in the text has been shown to operate always on the basis of exclusion and supplementarity. In an alternative register, codification always involves a dynamic of territorialisation and de-territorialisation. Henceforth, the rational, the male, white-ness, order, ‘and so on’, have been shown to be installed within an unstable economy of privilege. Or again, a ‘perverse’ or minor language always threatens to break up the apparently calm surface of molar identity. Beneath the apparent neutrality of the sign, a limited economy of power coerces language’s users to repeat its values without question. Poststructuralist thought has therefore donated a vital new level of critique: of power in language itself. Through the diverse styles of its leading lights, language has come to be seen as a prime sight of contestation. As such, language, as the instrument of power, has been revealed as one of the deepest modes of conditioning. This novel and

## *Introduction*

positive form of critique has unfortunately not always met with a positive response. In recent times, what might be called an ‘apolitical critique’ of the political in language has arisen. That hackneyed term of abuse, ‘political correctness’, reveals the reactionary backlash against the exposure to juridical and general critical attention of one of the most entrenched totems of privilege - language itself. We will therefore continue to require something like what poststructuralism opened up in order to be vigilant against the reactive forces of privilege at work in the world.

In the same gesture, no-one would want to lessen the insights into an ‘ethics of speech’ by the ‘great’ thinkers of our time. In response to the limited economy of the coercive sign, an awareness of the potentiality of speech opening itself up to a dialogue with the different has been made available. To begin claiming an ethics of speech involves the contention that speaking to the other involves a relation between the finite and the infinite. The other to whom one speaks can be *touched*, but not *grasped*, to use a distinction from Descartes which shall be explored later on in the text. To try to grasp always involves the potentiality of violation, of reducing the other to one’s own horizon of comprehension. Henceforth, the ethical conversation one can adopt with the other becomes

## *Introduction*

that of *l'entretien infini*.<sup>3</sup>In an ideal world without violation, one could never be done with realising the difference of the other in speech.<sup>4</sup>

Without neutrality, within the regulative ideal of an ethics of speech and an ethics of writing, poststructuralist thought has also importantly suspended and problematised a distinction between the 'literal' and the 'metaphorical'.<sup>5</sup> The non-neutrality of the sign entails that there is no literal given. But then the sign is not merely a 'metaphor', as if the literal has been merely deferred and not rejected. Rather, words and names exist within their signification context. These contexts, as the saying goes, can never be saturated.<sup>6</sup>The significance of this work in one direction lies in ramifying the discussion of an ethics of speech. Beyond an ethics of speech being at the same time an ethics of writing, it is also an ethics of all relations of signification between any form of author and any modality of reader. There are no merely 'metaphorical' or 'simply literal and factual' interpretations of any form of signification available. Therefore, an

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<sup>3</sup>Here of course I referring to the original french title of Maurice Blanchot's book, translated as "The Infinite Conversation".

<sup>4</sup>And as an author, one can never be done with realising the difference of the audience assumed within the text. I have to ask myself who I am writing for: is it a white male readership adopting the privileged guise of the universal (again)? This entry-point into an ethics of writing, be it academic or otherwise, is therefore at the same time a *politics* of writing.

<sup>5</sup>The most important essay on this topic is Jacques Derrida's "White Mythology" in "Margins".

<sup>6</sup>The notion that 'meaning depends on context, but contexts can never be saturated', originally comes from Jonathan Culler's book "On Deconstruction".

## *Introduction*

ethics of speech implies a vigilance that is vigilant at every level of signification, in every context.

However, having acknowledged all this, it is clear to me that the conditions of existence and experience cannot simply be reduced to forms of language or textuality. Or rather, if we take 'language' and the 'sign' to have a more general extension than the usual, such that they refer beyond the structures of linguistics, even in this case a reduction would be said to have occurred. Not all existence and not all experience conform to or can be articulated within the structure or post-structure of the sign. Conversely, the problematisation of the categories of 'experience' and 'perception' by poststructuralist thinkers must be contested, for the salvation of any utility to theory.<sup>7</sup> After the poststructuralist turn, a desire has arisen to figure existence and experience once again, as embedded within difference.

But how can one legitimate this desire? On what basis can it be grounded? Do we turn to the body in despair, in the face of theory's recent inadequacies to speak of our experience and to articulate our places in the world? Or is the body itself an exigency that demands recognition of its place? That is, is the

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<sup>7</sup>In "Speech and Phenomena", Derrida writes, 'There never was any 'perception'; and 'presentation' is a representation of the representation that yearns for itself therein as for its own birth or its death.' Derrida, 1973 p103.

## *Introduction*

body there by default, as that which remains after a necessary exaggeration of the limits of language, or does the body issue in an ontological primordially of its own accord?

The following questions therefore arise: how do we think the return to the body philosophically? What method do we use? And how do we figure this return in terms of the differences at work in the world that can no longer be kept silent in theoretical discourses? These are the questions of this thesis. I propose that the beginnings of an answer must be thought in terms of *ontology*. Only in relation to ontological difference can the body be affirmed philosophically, as a positive conception. The body, as the site of return, is no longer taken to be merely just another entity in the world. Rather, the body is taken as playing a crucial role in that world's construction. The body is therefore much more than *just another sign* in the horizontal and shifting economy of difference. The body is both the site of an unstable shifting of its very meaning and that upon which history, pain, privilege and abjection are inscribed. The body is both just another sign and so much more than that. And by claiming that the body must be thought in terms of ontological difference this 'so much more' is allowed an initial opening towards expression.

But how can this ontological difference ascribed to the body be thought? How do we allow the body to become more than just another sign? I will argue that

## *Introduction*

there is a twofold answer to these questions, firstly in terms of the form of critique demanded, and secondly in terms of an alternative methodology that must be formulated. In terms of critique, the suggestion of this thesis is that the body can be thought ontologically only through a critique of *transcendentalism*. As the foremost transcendental thinker, Kant, was himself a ‘critical’ thinker, what is being suggested is something like a ‘critique of critique’. Our experience of embodiment is not, as a transcendental argument would claim, fixed within apriori conditions. The Kantian apriori forms of space and time are abstractions from a more fundamental experience of corporeality. In these more fundamental terms, the body is seen as a form of work, or put linguistically, a *verbality*, that *spaces* and *times* itself against the background of a world it is in communication with. The subject is not therefore most primordially a temporal being, as both early-critical-Kant and early-quasi-transcendental-Heidegger maintain. Interiority, the form of inner sense, as the locus of a synthesis of representations across co-existences, or as the site of an impossibly ecstatic being-towards-death, is not privileged over exteriority. The body is not introduced as an invariant factor in our experience only to be devalued ontologically in the face of a primordially ascribed to time. A transcendental space should not be considered as inferior to a transcendental time. And yet this refusal is the moment of disruption of the transcendental itself, at least in the fully determined sense of its *aprioricity*. One of the key

## *Introduction*

elements of the apriori, its universality, is replaced by contingency. We shall have to see what becomes of the apriori in the face of this replacement.

The downgrading of time is achieved once an oppositionality between the inside and outside is questioned to the limit. Through such a questioning, the subject becomes the site of both an interiority and an exteriority. The subject is therefore no longer merely the ‘site’<sup>8</sup> of a temporality that always differs from its own present, a succession that itself reaches at least as far back as Augustine, passes through Kant, and closes with Derrida. Refusing to equate and equiprimordialise the subject with its own differing time allows thinking, for the first time, to actually consider a form of transcendence that is not a dissimulated immanence. For this refusal of the primacy of the subject’s temporality first signals a return to the body. With the opening towards a *space* of the subject, an acorporeal transcendental horizon of possibility is radically questioned. The space of the subject is itself not a purely subjective space, and not the only horizon of possibility. Rather, the subject’s space exceeds the sphere of immanence itself. The subject’s space *is* its envelopment within transcendence. In other words, the subject, as a spatiated being, unfolds upon a

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<sup>8</sup>As we shall see in the first chapter, it is always impossible to avoid even a preliminary spacing of time in language.

## *Introduction*

world which transcends it. Until this 'chiasmic' space is brought to thought, all primordially gets locked within different modes of the immanent.

As a spatio-temporal unfolding upon the world, the subject's communication with the world becomes its 'apriori'. Instead of universal conditions of possibility for experience and representation, conditions which proscribe the incarnation of historicity if not historicity itself, *contingent* conditions of possibility are announced. The body is the site of these conditions being inscribed. The body is the surface of all cultural meaning. Culture, the practice of difference, is fundamentally embodied. The body therefore becomes what was required of it above: it is both a sign and so much more than a sign. It is, that is, the way in which history, pain and privilege get inscribed. Moreover, without the inscription upon the body, these words would make no sense.

First of all, there is then a body, in communication with the world. The body is not therefore the equivalent of a merely *physical* entity, it is not, in Merleau-Ponty's words, the 'momentary' body of this present and then that present. The body does not simply see *or* be seen, touch *or* simply be touched. The body is not simply 'my' body, the grounding site of my subjectivity and my sense of interiority. Nor is it simply, from an external point of view, 'his', 'her' or *the* body, the grounding marker for recognition. As the ground of being, that from which the subject emerges in relation to the world, the body is therefore seen *in*

## *Introduction*

*the act of seeing, touched in the act of touching.* The body is the quintessential site of ontological difference, opening up, in each act of perception, the limits of the subject and the object. It is not reducible into either a sphere of immanence and interiority or to that which exceeds it, transcendence and exteriority. The body is the ground of all subsequent abstractions: subject, object, Being, beings. It is then, as the phrase above- ‘envelopment within the transcendent’ suggests, a *transcendence within immanence*. The body is prior to the orders of subjectivity and objectivity, grounding both in a pre-oppositional communication of worldly contingency.

Secondly, as I stated, this ontology of difference requires a method. The method chosen here is that of *phenomenology*. In this thesis, I am in fundamental agreement with Heidegger when he holds, in “Being and Time”, that only through a phenomenological method is ontology possible. Phenomenology, as will be clarified in detail in the first chapter, is the project to uncover how things appear in their appearing, *as* appearance. Phenomenology is the attempt to raise us to the surface of existence, resisting a fall back into the depths of a conventional mode of perception. In phenomenology, one does not simply accept what one sees. Doing phenomenology requires a vigilance on the part of its subject and its object. More simply, phenomenology requires, in my view, a suspension of the habitual (ways of seeing, ways of doing). Phenomenology in

## *Introduction*

this sense is not a conservatism; it does not seek to return us to what we already knew but had somehow forgotten. For phenomenology, at least under my reading and within the terms of this project, leads by its own light towards rethinking its ontological ground. In other words, when we begin to ask after seeing, after touching, after experiencing our bodies in space and time (both in the sense of the time-space of our bodies and the time-space *situation* within which the body itself is grounded), what is demanded is a rethinking of the subject, and a rethinking of the object. Phenomenology and ontology are therefore reciprocally determinative; only through phenomenology can an ontology of difference be clarified (and the only ontology available is such an ontology of difference), and yet only through ontology can phenomenology be clarified.

To return to the point just made, that of refusing to consider phenomenology as conservative: this refusal can be seen to take place on two levels. At the level of theory, phenomenology attempts something radically new in the history of philosophy. In returning to the surface of existence, as Nietzsche desires in the opening citation, phenomenology is refusing to capitulate to the patterns of devaluation conventional in philosophy for most of its history. As M.C. Dillon writes of the positive import of phenomenology,

## *Introduction*

For the first time, the phenomenon began to assume positive importance (against the predominantly negative connotation it traditionally had as something less than real), and the mere-ness of appearance, the essentially negative definition of appearance in contrast to reality, began seriously to be questioned. In short, it became increasingly viable to accord to phenomena some kind of positive ontological status. (Dillon,1988:4)

This radical positive-ism accorded to the phenomenon has its second level, the correlate of a radical interpretation of our experience itself. Phenomenology returns us to a place from which we were not aware we had come from, let alone left. That is to say, phenomenology's reworking in this thesis towards a new formulation of ontological difference has ramifications for our interpretation of concrete experience. We return to the body, as that from which we have been absent.<sup>9</sup> And this return is not the moment of a fall back

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<sup>9</sup>The use of the first person plural in this paragraph can well be questioned. But first of all, for whom of the readers was it an obvious problem? Who are the 'we' being referred to? Is it human-being, or does it conceal a culturally and historically specific event of humanity? My own view is that I write as someone from the West, and as a white male westerner it is always necessary to be aware of constructing false univesalisations of human experience. Therefore, at the most, the collectivity being implicitly brought into question is that of a western collectivity. The 'at the most' here is however significant, and should not be silenced. It leads to another question: that of the evasions of complexity at work in attributing the possibility of reducing experience and difference within the west to a 'we'. In the fifth chapter, using James Baldwin and Frantz Fanon, I will contest such a reduction. Thereby, even such a designation of myself as 'a white, male westerner' will be seen to be inadequate. At this moment in the text however, I leave the 'we' as it is, to display both its power to conceal itself in the guise of stylistic familiarity, and to allow the reader to question his or her own relation to the aporetics of textual construction.

## *Introduction*

into an incorporated subjectivism, or an incorporated objectivism. The body we return to, as irreducibly in communication with the world, leads to a phenomenological grounding of both community and history. Chapters four and five will be essentially concerned with clarifying this relation.

These last two chapters require preliminaries. After outlining the significance of the phenomenological method in the first chapter, I go on to problematise Heidegger's neo-Kantian privileging of time over space in "Being and Time". I will argue that for three reasons, this privilege is untenable. Firstly, because Heidegger himself calls it such in "On Time and Being" years later. Secondly, because in the thirties, Heidegger started referring to "Zeit-Raum", therefore implicitly rejecting his earlier ontological distinction between the primordially of time over space. These first two points however are merely background to my main argument, which is that section 70 of "Being and Time" itself cannot privilege time as the transcendental horizon of Dasein's being without involving an irreducible spacing of time. Beyond this, I will show that Heidegger's distinction between space and time from the point of view of ontology leads to a treatment of death which pushes his own phenomenological methodology to the limit. I shall argue that Heidegger's purely temporal notion of "Being-towards-death" cannot be sustained as phenomenological.

## *Introduction*

This questioning of the move to split space from time leads to an exploration of its 'original' site, that of the first edition of the "Critique of Pure Reason", in the first part of the second chapter. I will show that this privilege gets put into unstable crisis with the second edition of Kant's first Critical work. The reason for this is because of a textual insertion which works to undercut the privilege and primordially of time and subjectivity. This comes about principally with Kant's addition of the "Refutation of Idealism" and the "General Remark on the System of Principles". I shall argue that just as Heidegger's "Being and Time" is fundamentally destabilized because of an illegitimate devaluation of space in relation to time, so too is the second edition of Kant's first Critique. The move towards inserting a *spatio-temporal* schematism in the second edition brings Kant's first Critique into an unresolved tension with itself. In response to this, the second part of this chapter undertakes to explore how a spatio-temporal conception of the object can be constructed, from a phenomenological point of view. In other words, I try to explore how Kant's second edition of the first Critique can be developed in the direction of a spatio-temporal schematism. In order to achieve this, I shall draw on the philosopher Alfred Whitehead and Marcel Proust. We will see that Whitehead's notion of a processual 'object' is a combination of a process of synthesis *and* analysis (what he calls the prehensive and the separative). In other words, behind appearance, the phenomenon *actually* appears as a gathering of what is

## *Introduction*

always already dispersed. The object individuates itself in the present as a distinct and unique mode of being that nonetheless relates essentially to itself by way of difference.

This line of research leads to the question of the subject. The question can be raised as follows: if the object can be reconsidered as always already complex, differing from itself within space and time, what implications does this have for the subject? What relation does the object now have for the subject? Or, if it is possible to establish that the subject itself is spatio-temporally *ecstatic*, (to use a word that will have much mileage in the work to come), what difference is there between subject and object? The third chapter will open up a phenomenological return to the subject and its work, in the face of its disappearance by the time of Heidegger's post-turn work. Heidegger's error, I suggest, is to displace subjectivity onto certain forms of apparent transcendence, for example the work of architecture and the saying of language. As displaced modalities of subjectivity, these forms of monumentalist signification are in actual fact dissimulated forms of immanence. What goes missing is the subject, experiencing built space and working with language. In response to Heidegger, I will develop a conception of the subject's *worklessness*, as expressing the way in which the subject re-works what is given (in space, in language). On these terms, meaning is therefore neither the sole domain of the

## *Introduction*

subject or that which transcends it; it is rather produced from within a relationship between the given and the present of its possible transformation. It is in the poetry of Rilke that I locate the most lyrical expression of this possibility of transformation.

This poetic opening will then be developed, in the following chapter, by a reading of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. I suggest that Merleau-Ponty provides the spatio-temporal schematism that Kant's second edition of the "Critique of Pure Reason" suggested without resolving. In the late Merleau-Ponty's work, "The Visible and the Invisible", this schematism is called "The Intertwining". In order for a schematism to be more than just temporal, it must involve the transcendence of the other, beyond the subject. In this chapter, I find myself in agreement with M.C.Dillon when he argues, in his book "Merleau-Ponty's Ontology", that the difference between the early Merleau-Ponty and the late Merleau-Ponty is linguistic, not conceptual. The "Phenomenology of Perception" repeats a Kantian transcendentalism only at the level of appearance. Beneath this superficial reading, I will develop an interpretation which brings to the fore the issue of the embodiment of difference, and the difference of worlds. An apparent universality to Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology lies in extreme tension with a radical specificity and phenomenology of singularity. As such, the prevalent embodied

## *Introduction*

normativity of much of that work is undercut by an implicit ontology of difference.

At this point, we arrive at the goal of the thesis: rethinking a phenomenology of embodiment from the perspective of an ontology of difference. Such a goal would of itself act to reposition how we think of Merleau-Ponty's beautiful, often voluptuous prose. Phenomenology, as much as it involves a poetics, will be seen as the site of the *political*. A phenomenological ontology of the body leads to thinking difference, community and historicity. As such, a phenomenological ontology of the political is broached and opened up to thinking. In my final chapter, I attempt to outline this project first of all by looking at Frantz Fanon's essay 'The Fact of Blackness.' I read this text in terms of its overt relation to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and the way in which Fanon provides a powerful critique of Merleau-Ponty on the basis of a corporeal capacity to act being undermined by the fact of having a differently coloured skin. This critique of Fanon's is not condemnatory of Merleau-Ponty however; I will argue that Fanon merely develops a capacity for thinking difference that is made available through Merleau-Ponty's work. The importance of Merleau-Ponty today lies just in this fact: that he can be used as a resource for thinking the embodiment of difference. That phenomenology of difference was only ever implicit within his text however. As such, a critique of

## *Introduction*

Merleau-Ponty from the position of a thinker like Fanon is a wholly *positive* critique.

After this, I will perform a reading the black American author James Baldwin, specifically passages from his novel “Another Country”. I will read into this work a brilliant thematisation of what is involved in the embodiment of difference. Difference lies prior to epistemology, before questions of what is or is not known. Embodied difference determines the parameters of the known, and as such, grounds it. I argue therefore that Baldwin enacts, in prose form, the very argument of this thesis: that epistemology must be grounded in a phenomenological ontology of the body. It cannot be regarded in itself as primary, for to do so would be to fall into the universalist mode of an ahistorical, aspecific aprioricity; a mode which cannot think its own ontological commitments.

This thesis, in sum, will attempt, through a phenomenological ontology, to think the politics of difference. By doing so, it will *firstly* contribute to the debate on the present and future of phenomenology. *Secondly*, it will ground the current moves away from the abstractions of an overplaced emphasis on the sign and codification. *Thirdly*, it will lead philosophy back to a relation with concrete experience itself. In particular, it will ground everyday discourses on the embodiment of difference within theory. *Finally*, it will re-evaluate the

## *Introduction*

position of various themes within philosophy. In particular, epistemology will be shown to be derivative upon a phenomenological ontology.