Passivity in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty

Donald Jack Beith

Department of Philosophy

McGill University, Montreal

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Abstract

Modern philosophy, from Descartes and Kant to early articulations of the phenomenological method, is based upon the premise that nature is synthetically established by human consciousness. In his late thinking, Merleau-Ponty rethinks the notion of passivity, a concept he opposes to the pure activity of constituting consciousness, and through which he explains how novel meaning can emerge in nature without being the product of constituting activity. While Merleau-Ponty's early works are systematic studies of human consciousness, and though many interpreters thereby take these works to be premised upon the primacy of consciousness as a constituting activity, I argue that there is a pivotal redefinition of passivity underway throughout his corpus.

I explicate Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of passivity by drawing three progressively richer concepts of passivity out of his works: first is a structural passivity through which conscious or vital activities are mediated by an environment, second is a genetic passivity according to which the activities of consciousness and life are formed out of developmental processes, and third is a more radical sense of passivity which generates living activities without itself being a mode of constituting activity. Explaining this notion of generative passivity requires a complex investigation of the temporal structure within which original meaning emerges in life. I explain this temporal "institution" of meaning by studying specific phenomena: animal embryology and growth, as well as human development in childhood and puberty. Based on these studies, I make the case that the notion of generative passivity can uniquely explain the emergence of different forms of meaning in nature.

Résumé

La philosophie moderne, de Descartes et Kant jusqu'aux premières articulations de la méthode phénoménologique, est basée sur la prémisse que la nature est établie synthétiquement par la conscience humaine. Dans sa pensée ultérieure, Merleau-Ponty repense la notion de passivité, un concept qu'il oppose à l'activité pure de la conscience constitutive, et à travers laquelle il explique la manière dont de sens nouveaux peuvent émerger de la nature sans être le produit d'une telle activité. Puisque Merleau-Ponty tente, dans ses premières oeuvres, d'analyser systématiquement la conscience humaine, une tendance est née parmi ses commentateurs d'interpréter ceux-ci comme étant fondée sur la primauté de la conscience comme activité constitutive. Je soutiens au contraire que tout au long de son corpus, Merleau-Ponty entreprend de redéfinir la passivité.

J'élucide la repensée de la passivité chez Merleau-Ponty en soutirant de son oeuvre trois concepts progressivement plus riches. En premier nous trouvons une passivité dite *structurelle* à travers de laquelle les activités conscientes ou vitales peuvent se déployer dans un environnement qui leur sert de médiateur. En second nous découvrons une passivité dite *génétique* en fonction de laquelle les activités de la conscience et de la vie se forment grâce à des processus de développement. Finalement nous dévoilons une passivité plus radicale, une passivité dite *générative*, qui produit les activités vivantes sans étant elle-même une modalité de l'activité constitutive. Pour expliquer ce dernier concept de passivité nous devons effectuer une analyse complexe de la structure temporelle au coeur de laquelle le sens original émerge dans la vie. J'explique cette 'institution' temporelle du sens en étudiant des phénomènes spécifiques tel que embryologie et la croissance animale, et le développement humain à l'enfance et à la puberté. Sur la base de ces études, je soutiens que la notion de passivité générative est la mieux placé pour expliquer l'émergence des différentes formes de sens dans la nature.

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A Note on the Text:

For all translated quotations of Merleau-Ponty's works, I include the English pagination followed by the French (e.g. PP Eng. #/Fren. #). For the lectures on *Institution and Passivity*, I cite Merleau-Ponty's original pagination numbers, from the Belin edition. When using primary texts from other philosophers translated from French or German I similarly provide dual pagination. For other texts I use abbreviated titles, with full information in the appended bibliography. Works by Merleau-Ponty are abbreviated as follows:

SB *The Structure of Behaviour* (trans. Alden L. Fisher). 1963. Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press. (*La structure du comportement.* 1942. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.)

PP *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. Donald Landes). 2012. Oxford: Routledge. (*Phénoménologie de la perception.* 1945. Paris: Éditions Gallimard).

SNS *Sense and Nonsense* (trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus). 1964. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (*Sens et non-sens*. 1948. Paris: Nagel.)

CP *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures* 1949-52 (trans. Talia Welsh). 2010. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (*Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfante* 1949-52. 2001. Éditions Verdier.)

IP *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the College de France 1954-5* (trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey). 2010. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (*L'Institution, La Passivite: Notes de cours au College de France* (ed. Claude Lefort). 2003. Belin.)

AD *Adventures of the Dialectic* (trans. Joseph Bien). 1973. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (*Aventures de la dialectique*. 1955. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.)

N *Nature: Course Notes from the Collége de France* (trans. Robert Vallier). 2003. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (*La nature: notes, cours du Collége de France* (ed. Dominique Séglard). 1995. Paris: Seuil.)

S *Signs* (trans. Richard McCleary). 1964. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (*Signes*. 1960. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.)

VI *The Visible and the Invisible* (trans. Alfonso Lingis). 1968. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (*Le visible et l'invisible*. 1964. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.)

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[1] PP 21, my translation.

Introduction

In the Shadow of Philosophy:

The Problem of Passivity in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty

> Physis kruptesthai philei. [Nature loves to hide.]
>
> -Heraclitus, Fragment 123

> The renewal of the world is also the renewal of the mind, a rediscovery of that brute mind which, untamed by any culture, demands to create culture anew. From this point on the irrelative is not nature in-itself, nor the system of apprehensions of absolute consciousness, and not humanity either, but that [teleology] Husserl, writing and thinking in parentheses, speaks of, that jointing and framing of Being realizing itself through humankind.
>
> -Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (S 181/179)[2]

Merleau-Ponty's thought, as he explains at the outset of his writings, has a "goal to understand the relations of consciousness and nature." (SB 3/1) Revealing ambiguity in these relations, Merleau-Ponty uncovers irreducible arenas of meaning in consciousness and vital awareness. Yet he genealogically discloses the traces within these structures of a preconscious, pre-vital past from which they emerge and that, as I will demonstrate, they ontologically transcend.

[2] My translation, from "Le Philosophe et Son Ombre." For this quote, I have modified the translation from the French, choosing to translate "l'homme" as humanity. For all other quotations, I use the standard English translation.

Commonplace interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's development hold that while his early work is premised on a "philosophy of consciousness," his later shift from a phenomenological to an ontological method discloses that consciousness is passive and relative to a sense-making capacity proper to nature.[3] I do not share this view. My argument is that Merleau-Ponty's earliest thinking already locates a passivity of consciousness and has a signal ontological concern for the natural underpinnings of consciousness. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's focal critique is not simply directed at the primacy of consciousness, but at meaning constituting activity as such, particularly the vital activity of the living body. I argue that there is a line of thinking throughout Merleau-Ponty's texts that discloses a passive genesis of sense in nature prior to a constituting activity of consciousness or the vital body. Yet, rather than rejecting the domains of meaning in the vital body and human consciousness, I argue that these fields of experience do in fact have an irreducible sense, though a sense that is not self-constituting but derived from a temporality in nature by which distinctive dimensions of meaning "become true."

I will explicate this generation of sense by drawing three progressively richer concepts of passivity out of Merleau-Ponty's work: a structural passivity of life, a dynamic passivity of development and learning, and a more radical passivity that ontologically precedes living beings and determinate events in time. I am indebted to Anthony Steinbock's phenomenological study of Husserl, in

[3] Such a view, which is a textually consistent reading of some of Merleau-Ponty's works, is asserted by such thinkers as Mauro Carbone, Gary Madison, and Taylor Carman. See Carbone, "Thinking of the Sensible," 7-10, 22-6; and Madison, "Phenomenology," 272; and Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 120-2, 134.

Home and Beyond, for these three concepts of passivity.[4] Though these concepts are not isomorphic in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, particularly in Merleau-Ponty's nuanced sense of "generative passivity," I use the concepts of static, genetic, and generative phenomenology developed by Steinbock to serve as three interpretive keys to work out the different logics of passivity in Merleau-Ponty's thinking. Despite my focus on Merleau-Ponty, and some peripheral comparisons to Husserl, it is also necessary to note the origins of these concepts of development and passivity in Husserl's thinking, particularly insofar as Merleau-Ponty develops his notion of "institution" from Husserl's concept of *Stiftung* in such texts as *The Origin of Geometry* and Husserl's development of a radical, generative sense of passivity in his *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*. A further study would be required to adequately trace these origins, but Merleau-Ponty's work on Husserl's notions of embodiment and generative temporality, from his early visit to the Leuven archive before the Second World War is evident even in the pages and footnotes of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In chapter three, I work out the logic of generative passivity in this early work, but this thesis hinges upon Merleau-Ponty's later redevelopment of Husserlian "institution" at play in the late lecture courses. I think that it is this last sense of passivity that can uniquely explain the becoming of meaning in all forms of life.

[4] My tripartite interpretation of passivity in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is based on Steinbock's methodological distinctions between a static, genetic, and generative method. I developed this approach when studying Part Two of *Home and Beyond*, where Steinbock makes careful distinctions between genetic and generative methods. Steinbock's development of Husserl's concepts of home, earth as ground, and the past of living beings provided pivotal insights and conceptual articulations for me to discern different structures of sense and passivity in Merleau-Ponty.

Interpretive Method

I draw on Merleau-Ponty's texts from across his career, but I do so with the goal of presenting the philosophical problems opened up by them rather than the exact theses asserted in them. The prime task in reading philosophically does not involve "reducing given phenomenological motifs to what they were in their original contingency and their empirical humility," because originary philosophical insights, in their earliest formations, are necessarily ambiguous, since they must use existing concepts to say what has not yet been said (S 160/161). Thus reading is an act of going from what a writer literally says to what she is attaining to think.

There is an interpretive fallacy, explains Merleau-Ponty, when "we want the meaning of a man's works to be wholly positive," and admit of a philosophical inventory of argumentative claims. But a philosophical text, like a living body, is not simply a codex, a mere thing, but a certain kind of activity, an attempt at an original expression. Invoking Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty levels a Socratic injunction at his reader to move past the positive letter and follow the original difficulties in texts, to follow the search a thinker undergoes in them and to work to further her insight:

> 'When we are considering a man's thought,' Heidegger says in effect, 'the greater the work accomplished... the richer the unthought-of element in that work. ... To think is not to possess the objects of thought; it is to use them to mark out a realm to think about which we therefore are not yet thinking about. Just as the perceived world endures only through the

> reflections, shadows, levels, and horizons between things (which are not things and are not nothing...), so the works and thought of a philosopher are also made of certain articulations between things said. There is no dilemma of objective interpretation or arbitrariness with respect to these articulations, since they are not objects of thought, since (like shadow and reflection) they would be destroyed by being subjected to analytic observation or taken out of context, and since we can be faithful to and find them only by thinking again. (S 159-60/159)

The text is not a thing, but a horizon for thought, an opening to a beyond that is not ever immediately given but which presents or reorients what is given. The text is a finite entity that opens onto an infinite work, it is an inexhaustible horizon. Thus to read a text is neither to "inevitably distort" it nor to "literally reproduce" it, because the mode of givenness of a text--like that of the passivity of all meaning in life, the central thesis in my work here-- is in part posthumous, in the thinking it generates and the new domains of inquiry it marks out. Reading, like what Merleau-Ponty later calls "institution," also involves both a receptive and a creative endeavour, such that being honest to a thinker means holding open the *possibility* of thinking in her writing, rather than distilling her work into a positive actuality. Thus, to read is to resume while also transforming a thought, to institute this thought anew by following its inner logic of development and the possibilities it reveals for the first time.

Three Concepts of Passivity

This strategy of reading is a token of the very thesis I am asserting in this work: that meaning is never literally given or passively fixed, but is in a process of becoming which involves receptivity and transformation, a mixture of activity and passivity. The notion of meaning as positivity, and the correlate notion of a passive reception of a given meaning by living beings, is rejected by Merleau-Ponty. This sense of passivity is prevalent in certain theories of meaning, such as empiricism that posits a simple sensory given, positivist biological accounts which posit the organism as determined by causal reflexes and environmental factors, or social constructivism which is premised on the idea that meaning in human life is fixed by socially constituted norms which precede individual human lives or acts. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls a "bad ambiguity" or mere external relationship between activity and passivity, constituting and constituted, such as in naturalism where human sense is passively determined by nature, or conversely idealism where nature is a passive being constituted by consciousness.

The first operative concept of passivity, I find, in Merleau-Ponty's works comes as a rejection to this naive notion of passivity *tout court* and involves an inner, mediated dialectic of passivity and activity. On this view, passivity and activity, environment and organism, are inseparably implicated notions, rendering the concept of positivist realism impossible. In *The Structure of Behaviour*, for example, Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that organisms mechanically react to a positive external environment, because reflex activity does not strictly correspond with the anatomical parts of the organism but involves a total activity of

coordination in the organic body as a whole. (SB 61/65-6) This means that the "external" world does not have a meaning given outside the total activity of the organism. The so-called external world is always a function of the organism's activity of exposing itself to affection, yet this affection is not constituted by the organism alone, but partly passively depends upon the environment. The organism's living activity amounts to a kind of interpretation of what counts as environment, and the environment constrains the possibilities of organic action, such that both terms are moments within an irreducible whole. In the case of consciousness, which might putatively seem to be a cognitive and disembodied activity, consciousness is defined by its intentional relationship to an object, as consciousness-of something. Consciousness is embodied and must move in order to effect the givenness of an object, such as eye movements that enact focused vision of differences in the visual field. On this view of passivity, the living activity of the organism is mediated by passivity, but this passivity is not objectively given because activity and passivity are mutually mediating coefficients in an irreducibly *embodied* relation that characterizes awareness, whether vital or conscious.

As I read Merleau-Ponty, a second concept of passivity is required because the first presupposes the organism-environment relationship without explaining its origination. While the first sense of passivity as structurally integrated in activity can explain the holistic meaning of an organism, this view works by presupposing an already established organism-environment relation. To avoid an infinite regress of this relation into the past or a circular logic of the

organism as self-enacting, an original passivity of the organism is needed insofar as the organism emerges through growth and development. Before the organism enacts a relation to its environment, it emerges out of processes which are not yet fully formed modes of behaviour. Unlike the first, structural sense of passivity, which held that the organism and the environment are mediated in a continuous time that integrates activity and passivity, this notion of developmental or "genetic"[5] passivity is premised on a *discontinuity* within time where decisive moments inaugurate new meaning-structures. This notion of a "decisive now" which reconfigures existing structures of organic behaviour or human habits is, I think, the central insight of *The Structure of Behaviour*, and the conceptual lynchpin of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. (SB 125/136)

These developmental moments are "decisive" because they do not merely elapse, but they continue to function tacitly within the present, providing the present with its significance. The present is structured according to these decisive moments which endure and proliferate as the meaningful context of the present. This structural past is thus what gives the present its meaning, it is the "true

[5] I do not mean the organization of life by genes here, but a more literal sense of the term, as is technically used by Husserl. Husserl distinguishes a static method that analyzes given forms of experiences, apprehension-object structures, with a "genetic" method that recognizes a history of genesis behind these established forms of experience and activity: "in a 'static' regard, we have 'finished' apperceptions. Here apperceptions emerge and are awakened as finished, having a 'history' that reaches way back... Another 'constitutive' phenomenology, the phenomenology of genesis, follows the history, the necessary history of this objectivation and thereby the history of the object itself..." Husserl, "Passive Synthesis," 644/344. Analyzing the origin of a mode of activity, Husserl argues, uncovers preceding processes which cannot themselves be characterized in terms of that activity. With respect to these preceding processes, the activity statically studied is passive: "genesis in the sphere of pure passivity, even though formations which have their origin in an earlier activity may play their part in them, but they themselves emerge passively." Husserl, "Passive Synthesis," 640/342. Though the "static" method seems most immediate because it yields a complete object, it is in fact less concrete than the genetic method, because it presupposes an object without considering its origins.

present." (PP 87/114) This past characterizes a passivity of the organism because it constitutes the present without ever being manifest as an object of awareness or means of volition. Past structures that are originally contingent become necessary scaffolds of meaning in the organism. Crucially, then, prior to their actual realization as behaviours, these structures are not determinate. Qua sedimentations of meaning, these structures are not static but diachronic, continually developing according to events that sediment into new forms of sense. These structures can only be explicitly given in retrospect, but at that point, they are no longer operative and already rely on new orienting structures to accomplish the very reflection that makes them explicit. This is because while activities of development orient and motivate the activities they will later actualize, these mature activities are never as yet active. We can only reflectively go backward from established activity to establishing processes, but can never explicitly possess the processes that motivate and develop a given experience. Whether organic behaviours or habits, these sedimented parameters of past meaning and activity render the notion of a neutral present that has a meaning in-itself nonsensical, because the present is always conditioned by past structures of meaning that are tacit. Organisms are passive both insofar as they are in the first place enacted by these sedimented behaviours or habits, but secondly because they are caught up in the becoming-structure of these developments, which obscures the meaning of the present qua developing, structuring activity at the same time as enabling it as an immediate vehicle of action and awareness. This concept of passivity, by revealing the organism as *developmental*, entails that the

organism is not originally given as a self-aware or active perspective, thus rendering vitalist and voluntarist conceptions of action, as well as idealist and Cartesian notions of subjectivity, impossible.

The third notion of passivity emerges in response to what I take to be a problem with the developmental notion of passivity, in that it harbours a vestigial concept of self-constituting activity as the synthetic principle of sedimentation. A move to defer this capacity of sedimentation from consciousness to habit or even to the living body merely displaces constituting activity to another ontological register, relocating it in a series of nascent acts but retaining the premise of a transcendental, world constituting activity. On this view, the organism is problematically both emergent *and* self-enacting. The power that enacts the organism is conceived of circularly, as both belonging to and preceding the organism. Moreover, the very conception of this development as an activity or power presupposes a metaphysics of some preexisting form or mechanism that enacts the organism. This concept of passivity cannot ultimately explain how activity determinately arises out of non-activity. What is required is a sense of passivity that is not a constituting activity, a sedimentation of meaning that is not driven by a spontaneous synthesizing power.[6] In the concept of what I call radical or generative passivity, there is a becoming of activity out of non-activity, a nascent meaning which is not yet an activity.

[6] For an account of phenomenological method that goes beyond static structures of consciousness to examine the becoming of meaning in the lifeworld, nature, and other "generative" historical dimensions, see Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 172, 267-74. It is from Steinbock's articulation of Husserl that I drew the basic notion to articulate these levels of method in Merleau-Ponty's thought.

I call this sense of passivity radical because there is a sense in which it cannot be easily contained within the terms of activity and passivity. Radical passivity will come to appear as having been the generative origin of an activity, that within which the activity was not active but out of which it passively emerges. However, this complex temporal structure means that from the stance of the present, this "passivity" cannot be captured by reflection, and thus cannot be simply named by a philosophical concept, because it will only have been passivity for a future activity it enables, which is not yet in existence. This sense of a generative past thus entails futurity, and it is passive not only because it is that out of which activities emerge, but insofar as it is not given in temporal presence but marks a futural reference which exceeds and grounds, or will have grounded, our capacities of awareness and thought. I think there is an inherent difficulty in the term "passivity" itself, insofar as it already refers to activity, whether negatively as a non-activity that is nevertheless the underside of an activity, or developmentally as a process which remains a minimal activity, or even temporally as an activity to be which implies a kind of preexistence or inertia of activity. Radical passivity is in no way a mode of givenness, nor genetic self-effectuation underlying givenness. This sense of passivity marks an absolute limit to the notion of activity, and it names an aporia, a limit to what philosophical consciousness can attain. This term radical, as I use it, must be taken to indicate an inability we have to articulate the origins of activity itself. Yet this radical passivity serves to ground being, such that it is not a mere epistemological blind spot of consciousness, but a metaphysically ungraspable origin to movement and

activity, a kind of past which ontologically, and not simply chronologically, precedes the activities that emerge from it.[7]

This entails that activity takes time to come into being, such that an activity is only an activity post-factually. The "past" of this activity was not a former activity that is contracted into the present, but a past which becomes active and thus *will have become* a past. This difficult temporal predication means that events appear as having predated themselves even though such a past can never have chronologically preexisted the present. The "past" of these activities is not a chronological past, but an ontological past of "nature," a "past that has never been present." (PP 252/289) This becoming elides the original non-presence of the past by imputing its own form of established activity into the past. Events that generate new meaningful activities in nature have to happen in order to fully establish their own conditions of possibility, though this possibility itself was held in a pre-determinate, pre-active past. Meaning in nature thus "becomes true," as Alia Al-Saji demonstrates, illuminating Merleau-Ponty's reading of Bergson, who

[7] Merleau-Ponty argues that from the stance of philosophical reflection there is no origin as such, but that "the originating breaks up, and philosophy must accompany this break-up, this non-coincidence, this differentiation.... What is given, then, is not the naked thing, the past itself such as it was in its own time, but rather the thing ready to be seen... the past such as it was one day *plus* an inexplicable alteration, a strange distance--bound in principle as well as in fact to a recalling that spans that distance but does not nullify it. What there is is not a coinciding by principle or a presumptive coinciding and a factual non-coinciding, a bad or abortive truth, but a private non-coinciding, a coinciding from afar, a divergence, and something like a 'good error.'" VI ,124-5/163-4. The past as grasped has already been diverged from by that grasping it enables. Moreover, this means that with respect to ontological origins, philosophical concepts cannot aim at co-incidence, because it is precisely non-coincidence by which they function. The concept can reveal something, because that concept is not that something, but a means of openness for it. What I am calling radical passivity thus not only includes this intrinsic difference within the concept, but exemplifies it because we cannot use it as a concept without simultaneously acknowledging this limit to its capacity: it can only point to an absolute past, but can never coincide with it. On the other hand, this concept of radical passivity is closest to the generative past because, while not coinciding with it, it signals its absence while articulating its generative character insofar as it articulates the ontology of sense as temporal divergence.

develops a new account of the generation of original, "organic" possibilities in a "retrograde becoming of the true."[8] Crucially, this is not a mere retrospective illusion of an already established consciousness into past origins which are themselves metaphysically meaningless, because *the "past" of nature is not determinate and present in-itself*, but neither is it meaningless and empty, a mere projection of consciousness.[9] This natural "time before time" is, as I will demonstrate, understood as "dimensions" which are not fully formed structures or given moments but enable and shape possibilities of meaningful events and activities within time.[10] Like developmental passivity, it is possible to catch a glimpse of this "nature" at work retrospectively, particularly in the emergence of life from non-life, or the emergence of new orders of meaning in life, such as personal out of vital significance, but unlike genetic passivity this generative sense of passivity, the ontological past, radically exceeds awareness because it was never a present.

Our real nature is difficult to name conceptually, because this passive origination of sense obscures itself in its own temporal becoming. I argue that while this full account of passivity emerges in the *Phenomenology*, albeit

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[8] Al-Saji demonstrates that one of Bergson's central insights involves a rethinking of the idea of genuine possibility, and connects this analysis to a study of the emergence of meaning in life. Al-Saji, "Past Which Has Never Been Present." Citing: Bergson, *Creative Mind*" 22/14.

[9] "Since constitution is neither just the development of a future which is implied in its beginning, nor just the effect which an external ordering has in us, it escapes the alternative of continuous or discontinuous. It is discontinuous, since each layer is made from forgetting the preceding one. It is continuous from one end to the other because this forgetting is not simply absence (as if the beginning had not existed) but a forgetting what the beginning literally was to the profit of what it has subsequently become..." S, 176/174.

[10] "In such cases we do still have a grouping of intentional threads around certain knots which govern them, but the series of retro-references which lead us ever deeper could not possibly reach completion in the intellectual possession of a noema." S, 165/164. For the past as "time before time" see VI, 243/292.

ambivalently where this "natural" account is presented against a genetic account of consciousness of the primacy of habit formation, and comes into relief in his later lectures and *The Visible and The Invisible*, that it is nevertheless logically implied by Merleau-Ponty's criticism of constituting activity in his earliest work. This sense of passivity which precedes a synthetic principle of activity is what I take to be Merleau-Ponty's most important insight, one which all of his other insights prepare and anticipate. This reading is not a retrospective reading of his later ideas into earlier ones, but a logical consequence of the abrogation of constituting activity with which his work commences. That is, as an "institution" of meaning, Merleau-Ponty's thought furnishes us with progressively richer resources for insight into the passive generation of meaning in life.

Summary of Chapters

The goal of this work is to show how a generative passivity undergirds both living organisms and conscious, human personality. The first, of three, chapters serves as a propadeutic for this task. Focusing on *The Structure of Behaviour*, I demonstrate that a static method devolves upon a genetic one, both with respect to vital and conscious behaviour. Merleau-Ponty, on my interpretation, does not root the genesis of sense in either conscious intentionality or in the activities of the living body, but goes deeper to genetic levels of learning and development which structure life from the ground up. However, I demonstrate that this genetic passivity remains conceived on the model of activity, and requires a radical sense of passivity which precedes activity in order

to explain the genesis of sense in life. I turn to the generative, radical sense of passivity in the second chapter, and develop an account of how sense can emerge in nature from a past that is not the past of organic activities or specific living bodies. What Merleau-Ponty calls nature, I argue, is not an external reality or even a self-constituting activity, but a potency for meaning which is characterized by generative absence or "institution." I conclude the dissertation by conducting a similar investigation of generative passivity, but with respect to human consciousness and the formation of the person, exploring how not only the institution of nature but also childhood "syncretic sociability" serves as a generative origin for individuated personality and adult agency.

In Chapter One, "Consciousness and Animality: The Problem of Constituting Activity in *The Structure of Behaviour*," I present Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy not only as a critique of consciousness as constituting activity, but also as a critique of any attempt to defer constituting synthesis to the vital activity of living organisms. Contrasting my reading of Merleau-Ponty with the auto-poietic notion of Francicso Varela, I argue that a "vital structure of behaviour" in the organism cannot be a self-sufficient source of meaning. Such an account, I argue, only serves to defer a constituting activity of consciousness to life. I argue that this move is valid insofar as consciousness itself is a living structure that must grow and develop in relation to other organisms, particularly other animals. Like these organisms, consciousness develops by moving in, responding to, and expressing a vital environment. Consciousness proliferates genetically out of animal behaviour, rather than transcending the vital activities of

non-human organisms. On my view, Merleau-Ponty does not reduce animal structures of being to constructs of human consciousness, but this ontological shift raises the difficult problem of how sense emerges not only prior to consciousness, but prior to a similarly subject-like synthetic principle in organisms. Merleau-Ponty, in his early work, grapples with the philosophical issue of how the world can emerge as meaningful without being constituted by a synthetic principle of world-constitution in either conscious or vital organic activity.

In Chapter Two, "The Passivity of Life: The Problem of the Genesis of Possibility in Nature," I develop an account of the generation of new possibilities of sense in nature prior to constituting activity. Here I develop Merleau-Ponty's account of generative passivity, primarily drawing on his later thinking and specifically his lecture courses on *Institution and Passivity* and *Nature.* I argue that possibility is genuinely created in nature in developmental processes which are neither contingent nor determinately preexistent in a positive nature. Against such constructivist or naturalist accounts, I argue that Merleau-Ponty discovers an "autoproduction of meaning in nature" which creates possibility in the very moment of actualizing it, which in turn recasts the past as having held such possibilities. In articulating this difficult temporal logic, I argue that Merleau-Ponty uncovers a new philosophical terrain beyond the alternatives of mechanism and vitalism, evolutionary contingency and finalism, because meaning emerges from a natural "past" in which vital structures were not determinate, but nevertheless had a nascent, developing sense irreducible to determinate or indeterminate form. I borrow insights from Al-Saji's reading of Merleau-Ponty's

analysis of Bergson's "retrograde movement of the true" to expose how possibility is not generated in determinately given moments of activity, which I think is the underlying premise of all naturalistic, finalistic, and deterministic accounts.[11] Rather, the "event" of meaning is passive because it must have happened in order to be, it is withdrawn because possibility cannot be formed or given in a moment prior to its actualization. This chapter proposes a renewed understanding of time, event, nature, and passivity. I conclude the chapter by addressing some remarks of Michel Foucault, who charges Merleau-Ponty with at once nostalgically positing a nature in-itself while also reducing this nature to an idealized construct of human consciousness.

In my final, third Chapter, "The Passivity of Selfhood: The Institution of the Person," I address the problem of how there can be an irreducible sense of personal life if this sense is not originally constituted by humans. I take up different tendencies in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the first of which suggests that human meaning emerges from habit formation and sedimenting power of the living body. I argue that the passivity of human development cannot merely depend upon human growth and learning, but as the *Phenomenology* already indicates and the later lecture courses demonstrate, human becoming draws on a more primordial becoming of meaning which can be articulated by a generative sense of passivity. It is our originary incompleteness and passive

[11] I developed this reading by studying Al-Saji's study of Merleau-Ponty and Bergson: Al-Saji, "The Temporality of Life." This insight into temporality applies, I think, as a critique of transcendental accounts. Even though a transcendental activity is said to be prior to time, it nevertheless serves to structure determinate moments in time. I fully articulate this criticism in the first chapter. This difficulty in conceiving of an activity that seems to be both inside and outside of time is presented in Kant's "Third Antinomy." Kant, "Pure Reason," 496-503/A465 B493-A476 B504.

dependence upon others that will come to render our lives an issue for us, by way of formative encounters we undergo in becoming more independent and personally developed. This development becomes an explicit issue when past structures of familial behaviour and new demands of non-familiar others diverge. A person is instituted in, and as this divergence or tension between past and future, and while this tension can emerge at different points in life, it has a pivotal significance in its earliest incarnations, such as puberty. As the issue of our own personality emerges, our familial past is polarized in such a way that we can no longer simply identify with it, but must find ourselves by both diverging from it and continuing it. Becoming a person then, is learning to navigate this temporal "institution" of sense between past and present, in taking up transformations of the past, transformations which nevertheless only our past can serve as a basis to understand, enact, and navigate. Thus, our sense of personal agency cannot be accomplished in advance or once and for all in some structure of our body or consciousness: it is achieved as a kind of temporal balance between self-expression and other determination, a temporal equilibrium through which we relate to our past in such a way that a new, personally significant future is held open to us.

Concluding the chapter, I take up, the way in which we receive ourselves from other beings before we ever enjoy a sense of agency or personal independence. I argue that this originary belonging to others, what Merleau-Ponty calls syncretic sociability in his "The Child's Relations with Others," is crucial to understanding the passive generation of personality, and moreover that

it can offer a unique explanation of human sociality. Even though the form of our personal agency and adult interpersonal relations irrevocably reshape the *form* of this original institution of humanity, they nevertheless bear the traces of this syncretic sociability that continues to undergird intersubjective agency and personhood. I outline how the shared, intercorporeal sense of bodily life, a sense which precedes subjective awareness, structures social relations which enable or oppress individual and group senses of agency. Juxtaposing Merleau-Ponty's conception of the social with traditional liberal, voluntaristic and structuralist, social constructivist approaches, I point to the way in which shared bodily gesture functions as a pivotal, often overlooked, means of interrogating and reshaping social institutions.

Chapter One

Consciousness and Animality:

The Problem of Constituting Activity in *The Structure of Behaviour*

> The deep dialectic seen by the phenomenological observer goes on behind the back of consciousness itself. Science includes in its content the road to science...
> -Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*[12]

Human awareness of animal behaviour harbours a philosophical dilemma. We bear witness to original creativity and responsivity in the animal body, what Merleau-Ponty terms its dynamic "structure" of behaviour. (SB 137/148) Yet we understand this structure from the vantage of our own conscious perception, modeling animal behaviour on the subjective perceptual motifs of occupying an individual perspective and acting to affect the world. We explain animal behaviour with these abstract concepts of vital perspective and environment-forming behaviour. How can we be conscious of animal behaviour as such, given that these distinctions render animality intelligible within the limits of our consciousness? *The Structure of Behaviour* addresses this question, with Merleau-Ponty arguing that we are aware of animals as distinctive "structures" or "forms" of behaviour. Prima facie, he declares that it is only within the human "structure" of self-consciously aware behaviour that there is consciousness of "structures" as such. *The Structure of Behaviour* is criticized as an account which

[12] M87-8.

equates this epistemological criterion of structure, our consciousness-of-structure as form, with an ontological criterion—the reduction of all "structures" of behaviour to the synthetic structure of human consciousness.[13] In this chapter, I address some of these critics and advocate a reading of Merleau-Ponty's early work as a proposal against an account of human consciousness as a transcendental, constituting activity. Instead, I argue that consciousness is itself ultimately characterized by static passivity, that it is an animal activity which *develops* by way of moving in, responding to, and expressing a vital environment. I further demonstrate that consciousness as emerging from animal behaviour is grounded in genetic passivity, because it is achieved in a process of education within and alongside, and not beyond, these "vital" structures of behaviour.

While, on my reading, Merleau-Ponty does not reduce natural and animal forms to human consciousness, the question remains whether animal behaviour itself is understood as a world-constituting, transcendental activity. There are descriptions in *The Structure of Behaviour* of the animal as enacting an active constitution of its environment, which suggests that Merleau-Ponty has in his early work merely shifted the constituting activity of subjective, human consciousness to a synthetic, constituting activity proper to life, resulting in a kind of vitalism.[14] At various points in *The Structure of Behaviour,* animal behaviour is understood as a set of "acts which are addressed to a certain milieu." And yet, at other points, the animal's original behavioural activities are understood as implicated in what I have defined as static passivity, insofar as they are realized

[13] This view, as I will demonstrate, is put forward by M.C. Dillon and Gary Madison.
[14] By vitalism I mean a super-physical, self-effecting activity which constitutes the organism.

and shaped within a history of developing environmental sensitivities. On the one hand, the animal never simply passively receives the environment, because this "receptivity" is always a function of its vital behaviours. Conversely, though, these vital behaviours are not simply spontaneous activities, because behaviour is from the beginning sensitive, and develops embedded within a meaningful environment. On this account, the putatively passive and active moments of environmental sensitivity and animal movement are in fact inseparable—the animal structure of behaviour is reciprocally activity and passivity. In concluding the chapter, I argue that instead of relocating a constitutive principle in vital rather than conscious life, Merleau-Ponty is in fact, in his early work, already offering conceptual resources to rethink the synthesis of the world, undermining an active and subject-like principle of world-constitution.

By revealing the organism as a melodic and open-ended proliferation of developing expression, communication and environmental sensitivity, Merleau-Ponty discloses an arena of generative passivity, of meaning that precedes and passively mediates structures of vital and conscious activity. And, while Merleau-Ponty does not develop the terms to adequately characterize this "institution" of meaning in its own right until his later work, I make reference to some of his later terms, from his later lecture courses *Institution and Passivity* and *Nature,* in order to work out the necessary logic of this generation of living meaning. While Merleau-Ponty's early works do not fully articulate this logic of institution and generative passivity, they do begin to intimate it, on a certain reading of the genetic origins of behaviour, and I think that such a logic is implied

on this reading of the texts, particularly in the discovery of meaning-making prior to conscious or vital activity. This early development furnishes the conceptual kernel of Merleau-Ponty's later critique of the self-sufficiency of consciousness and constituting activity.[15] I hold that Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "form" of living behaviour, despite connotations of transcendental consciousness and synthetic activity, in fact serves to criticize a conception of self-sufficient, constituting activity. Form is not constituted in advance, nor is it self-constituting--it develops in reciprocity between activity and passivity, and it is fundamentally an expressive and open-ended phenomenon—a "melodic" temporal structure. In *The Structure of Behaviour*, I contend, Merleau-Ponty has cleared the ontological ground for his conception of generative passivity, or the "institution" of meaning, by means of an account of dynamic natural structures of meaning-making, out of which animal and conscious life are developments.

1.1 Consciousness and the Problem of Animal Form

If living bodies are not merely physical things in-themselves, but appear as original *forms* of meaning, does this presuppose a consciousness to perceive them? In *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty argues that animals are not parts of a physical world, but rather that putative "parts" of the animal body in fact derive from the animal as a total form, a principle of self-organization. The animal body is not a static anatomy or a set of physiological mechanisms, but a

[15] I am not claiming that these later concepts are already maturely at work in the earlier texts, which would be an objectionable retrospective reading. Rather, my goal is to demonstrate that the issues revealed in these texts anticipate and motivate these later developments, and thus are the beginnings of a logical account the genesis of sense prior to living activity.

dynamic and vital structure which appears, via this self-coordination, as a self-originating form. Merleau-Ponty uses these terms, structure and form, interchangeably to describe self-organizing systems which are indecomposable into component parts or preexisting, external causes. Form is defined as a self-regulating system in which the whole precedes the parts, in the sense that parts of the organism function globally rather than in isolation: "We will say that there is form whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves." (SB 47/49-50) The notion of an independently functioning or changing part is an abstraction, because form is a circuit in which all parts interrelate. This interrelation is not comprised of independently working parts which effectuate a whole, because Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that form persists even when all of the parts are discernibly changed. Form names the appearance of this structure of self-actualizing, self-regulating activity. The organism as a whole is prior to its parts, both in the ontological sense of a *structure* that holistically orchestrates the parts, and in the perceptual sense of *form* as the appearance of this structure as a meaningful figure that stands out however its parts are arranged. By rendering ontology and perception metaphysically commensurate, Merleau-Ponty risks eliding animal behaviour by reducing it to a structure of perception. Do structures of living behaviour, as perceptible forms, require the existence of a consciousness? There is evidence that Merleau-Ponty seeks to define form and structure this way.

A structure of behaviour, such as the living body as whole, is irreducible to separate causes working on discrete parts. The structure of animal behaviour is described by Merleau-Ponty as an original principle, as an expressive manifestation of a vital meaning. Despite the terms being used interchangeably, structure connotes vital, immanent activity, but form has the idealistic connotation of a perceived figure. The notion of form, explains Merleau-Ponty, originates in Gestalt psychology as a "criticism of the 'anatomical' spirit in physiology." (SB 47/50) This discovery of intrinsically meaningful structures of organization within "anatomy" leads Merleau-Ponty to assert that even the most ostensibly "physical" structures are immanent to the ontological register of conscious perception, rather than existing in an order of material things that exist in extended space *partes extra partes*:

> But the very fact that we had to borrow the terms 'figure' and 'ground' from the phenomenal or perceived world in order to describe these 'physiological forms'--just as above with the metaphor of melody--leads us to wonder if these are still *physiological* phenomena, if we can in principle conceive of processes which are still physiological and which would adequately symbolize the relations inherent in what is ordinarily called 'consciousness.'" (SB 92/101)

On the one hand Merleau-Ponty seems to recognize structures of meaning that are irreducible to a physical world or the mechanics of anatomy, and he therefore moves to cede a meaning-making, intentional activity to the living animal body. But this move is cut short, on the other hand, because the explanation of vital,

animal structures in the terms of consciousness only amounts to an expansion of the field of consciousness to encompass the structure of animal sense-making. This effectively elides the animal as a being that generates meaning by effectuating itself as form. The language of "form" situates the living animal body within the synthetic terms of consciousness. The difficulty lies in explaining the animal body as a dynamic structure that is neither reducible to causal explanation, nor to an abstract form constituted by consciousness. Merleau-Ponty is charged with attempting at once to explain animal "structure" by reference to the living activity of the animal, while simultaneously eliding this animal activity by attributing its explanatory principle to "form," which is a term uniquely proper to "symbolic," human consciousness.[16]

In *The Structure of Behaviour* Merleau-Ponty argues that there are three forms of structure: physical, vital and symbolic. The first and most basic structure is that of a "physical" thing, the (perceived) form of a self-ordering whole, where "each local change in a form will be translated by a redistribution of forces which assures the constancy of their relation; it is this internal circulation which is the system as a physical reality." (SB 137/147) The formation of an oil-drop, for example, is the manifestation of an "internal whole" or intrinsic principle of organization, because the oil forms a convex shape that is preserved as a whole when its specific parts are manipulated. (SB 91/100) In one sense, based on interpreting the term "structure," Merleau-Ponty identifies physical "structures" as

[16] In my opinion, it is Bernhard Waldenfels, in his essay "Perception and Structure in Merleau-Ponty," who best presents this difficulty in *The Structure of Behaviour* and offers resources to provide a solution to it.

genuinely spontaneous, self-regulating systems. On another reading, following the connotations of the term "form," structure is defined according to perception, by reference to meaningful forms which presuppose the existence of a perceiver. Insofar as structure is defined according to the perceptual logic of form, this account seems to reduce the world to a structure of consciousness, namely to the perceptual form of a whole, a figure which stands out against a background of changing perceptual adumbrations: "Thus, far from the 'physical form' being able to be the real foundation of the structure of behaviour and in particular of its perceptual structure, it is itself conceivable only as an object of perception." (SB 144/156) Apprehending the physical form as a unity across its different manifestations is an act of perceptual synthesis. Merleau-Ponty's description of these phenomena simultaneously as both structure and form generates a tension between form as self-constituting and form as constituted by consciousness.

Organic bodies, the second order of structure or form, are more complicated in their self-organization than things in the physical order. These "vital" structures appear as meaningful wholes that both reflect and expressively shape their environments. Where a physical structure enacts a whole only with respect to itself, through preserving relations among its parts, the animal body manifests itself as an open whole that is vitally responsive to the world. We see the environment expressed inwardly in the animal, through the sensitive behaviours of its body, like a dog that pants in heat, sheds fur in summer, and growls when threatened. Correspondingly, we find in the world a site of the animal body's outward expression, its incorporation of the world into its bodily

space of behaviour, in the changes the animal renders in its environment, such as the bird's nest, the ant's hill, or humanity's roads, words and laws. (SB 148/161) Perceptually, the organism can be the figure, as its sensitive behaviour reflects its environmental situation, or, conversely, the environment can serve as the figure in which the organism's transformative behaviour is manifest. There is what I call a static passivity in the organism, insofar as its activity is mediated and contextualized by passivity, while this passivity is not a mere inert given. Neither pole, environment or organism, passive or active, is ontologically prior, since the animal's sensitive reception of the environment is not simply passive but a function of its activity, and conversely, because the animal's vital activities must always respond to and occur within its environment, they involve passivity in that they are not environment-constituting:

> One cannot assign a moment in which the world acts on the organism, since the very effect of this 'action' expresses the internal law of the organism. The mutual exteriority of the organism and the milieu is surmounted... Thus, two correlatives must be substituted for these two terms defined in isolation: the 'milieu' and the 'aptitude,' which are like two poles of behaviour and participate in the same structure. (SB 161/174)

Where the physical structure was a Gestalt qua dynamic bodily whole, the whole of the animal is the bodily-environmental unity of its behaviour. The animal body is not a self-contained response to its surroundings; rather its very living activity is an openness to and transformation of those surroundings--in the animal the "physical" order is always already subtended by vital values. The animal's bodily

behaviours and the environment are not related as two separate things, interior perspective and external world. The notion of behaviour undercuts this dichotomy by situating the animal's environment and "behaviour" as a reversible figure-ground relation. Here, unlike the case of physical structure, there cannot be the issue of consciousness simply imputing form on a material body in the physical world, because of the structure of static passivity by which the organism's relates to and transforms the environment around it: the environment reflects the organism's transformative activity in the changes enacted there, while the organism is a distinctively aware body for which the environment uniquely matters. There is no significance of the environment in-itself, distinct from the organism's behavioural relatedness to the environment, yet the organism only exists as a distinctive inflection of an environment. But does this figure-ground relation between organism and environment imply a consciousness as the third term or synthetic principle of the unity of these two aspects?

Consciousness, the third, but perhaps first in terms of finalistic priority, structure or form of behaviour, is the structure which can perceive wholes as such, as explicit forms. Merleau-Ponty opposes consciousness to the vital structure which merely reacts to more generalized and undistinguished "themes" without ever having them as explicit objects, or reflectively distinguishing these forms from its own activity of apprehending and relating to them. (SB 108/118) This attentive ability to distinguish specific forms, the figure-ground distinction, is fundamental to apprehending structures as meaningful forms, because it allows meaningful figures to be disclosed by allowing other appearances in the perceived

field to withdraw into the background. Merleau-Ponty uses the ontology of the Gestalt not only to explain how a form precedes its "parts," but also to explain the relationship between different levels of form or structure.[17] Physical structure is the background to a supervening vital order, for example. So when we see the organism, we look past or beyond its parts, anatomical processes, and simple sensible qualities to see the animal in its vital, environmental situation. As a synthetic unity of figure against background, however, the Gestalt cannot actively ground itself. A third term is presupposed which mediates this figure-ground relation: the synthetic activity of consciousness of form, which alone can attentively discern the appearance of form. Merleau-Ponty is most often criticized for the circularity of this alleged thesis, because consciousness is at once described as a structure realized in nature while at the same time being described as the privileged perspective to which all natural forms—physical, vital and symbolic—refer.[18] Is this the remnants of a transcendental philosophy, an activism of consciousness in the face of reductionist animal biology and psychology, which amounts to a humanist exceptionalism? Or in the insight that form is a dynamic structure, is Merleau-Ponty already discovering pre-conscious structures of meaning-making in the perceived world and the animal body?

In *The Structure of Behaviour*, there are express statements that structures

[17] Toadvine clearly articulates the meaning of the term: "A gestalt, in Merleau-Ponty's usage, is a meaningful whole composed of internal relations and having emergent properties not attributable to its parts. As gestalts, life and mind are ontologically continuous, and mind is conceived as being 'founded' on the structure of life, which is, in its turn, founded on physical form. Reality may therefore be understood as a nested structure of such meaningful wholes, with each gestalt entering into multiply more encompassing gestalt relations with its environment." Toadvine, "Jellyfish," 45.

[18] Scott Churchill, as I will show, points out what he takes to be this contradiction in *The Structure of Behaviour*.

are situated within the epistemological parameters of consciousness, in that structure is defined as manifest and conceivable within a perceptual ontology. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty imputes an almost human form of awareness to animals as self-constituting forms. Taking up an argument from Jakob von Uexküll, Merleau-Ponty in places makes the strong claim that animals have a perspective through which their environment is expressed, and in which it matters. But on the other hand, animals do not respond to a world thematized as such, but as Uexküll argues, merely react to the signals and themes of their environments, because the animal constitutes its environment:[19]

> [The] space peculiar to each animal, wherever that animal may be, can be compared to a soap bubble which completely surrounds the creature at a greater or lesser distance. The extended soap bubble constitutes the limit of what is finite for the animal, and therewith the limit of its world; what lies behind that is hidden in infinity.[20]

Despite the undeniable way in which the environment is relative to the life of the

[19] Uexküll argues, in an essay defining his notion of "*Umwelt*," that "No one, who has the least experience of the *Umwelten* of animals will ever harbour the idea that objects have an autonomous existence that makes them independent of the subjects. The variability of the objects is the norm here. Every object becomes something completely different upon entering a different *Umwelt*. A flower stem that in our *Umwelt* is a support for the flower, becomes a pipe full of liquid for the meadow spittlebug who sucks out the liquid to build its foamy nest. The same flower becomes an upward path for the ant, connecting its nest with its hunting ground in the flower. For the grazing cow the flower stem becomes part of a tasty morsel of food for her to chew in her big mouth. [...] Kant had already shaken the complacent position of the universe by exposing it as a merely human form of perception. From there on it was a short step to reinstall the *Umwelt* [...] in its proper position." Uexküll, "Umwelt," 109-10/11-17; Brett Buchanan describes how Uexküll adapts Kant's argument that the subject is the condition of possibility of the world to interpret the perceptual activity of any organism as such a transcendental condition of possibility for reality. There is, on this view, no reality external to the vital perspective of living beings: "There is no objective reality in the form of objects, things, or the world; there is nothing outside of the individually subjective experiences that create a world as meaningful. [...] Reality is created through the experiences of each and every subject, and this, as we shall see, holds for all animals just as much as it does for humans." Buchanan, "Onto-Ethologies," 13.

[20] Uexküll, "Theoretical Biology," 42; cited in Buchanan, "Onto-Ethologies," 23.

organism, this need not entail that the organism constitutes this relation. Yet Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Uexküll's notion of an *a priori* structure of transcendental subjectivity in animals amounts to doubling down on the privileged activity of human consciousness, first by imputing to the animal a subject-like activity, dichotomizing animal and environment, second by arguing that this animal perspective is in fact a "form" that is only recognizable and explicable within the human domain of symbolic consciousness. Even though human consciousness is encountered as a structure, a type of form among other forms (vital, physical), consciousness is nevertheless the unique condition of possibility of form as such. And this is because, to be conceived as a unity in difference, a figure against a background, or a melodic temporal extension, all invoke the precedence of a synthetic moment: a perceiving consciousness that can hold these otherwise different moments together under a theme as such, or symbol. Where the form of animal life was a living relationship with the environment, the unique character of human life is the ability to perceive this relationship as such, that is, to render relations with the environment explicit in symbolic form. The bifurcation of animal and environment, and their formal unity as figure-ground, for example, is a distinction derived from consciousness, not from the vital expressive life of the animal. This adherence to a philosophy of consciousness is one of the most common criticisms leveled at Merleau-Ponty,[21]

[21] Notably, Renaud Barbaras, remarks that it is not until Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy that a problematic dependence upon the concept of constituting consciousness is overcome, something Merleau-Ponty "did not take into account [even in] the *Phenomenology of Perception*: a philosophy of consciousness is always a philosophy of constitution--that is, in the end, an idealistic philosophy." Barbaras, "Being," 63.

one he himself took seriously in his later work.[22] However, for various reasons to be explored, this cannot be a straightforward criticism.

As a criticism of reductive scientific methodologies, M.C. Dillon and Scott Churchill contend that *The Structure of Behaviour* comes down on the side of idealism, by privileging perceived form over the scientific units of "antecedent events and consequences."[23] Merleau-Ponty explains that there are physical structures, but that "it should not be concluded from this that forms *already* exist in a physical universe and serve as an ontological foundation for perceptual structures." (SB 144/156-7) Gary Madison detects a Hegelian influence in Merleau-Ponty, who dialectically concludes that "what one designates by the name of life is already the consciousness of life" because "the very description of form presupposes a consciousness which takes note of it."[24] Indeed, Merleau-Ponty includes a reference to the perceived in the notion of form, in that "far from the 'physical form' being able to be the real foundation of the structure of behaviour and in particular of its perceptual structure, it is itself conceivable only as an object of perception." (SB 144/156) The difficulty here is that in spite of moving synthesis into immanent "physical" and "vital" orders, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless subjugates these orders to an idealizing consciousness of form, such that, as Bernard Waldenfels notes, "in the course of a transcendental turn

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[22] In a working note from February, 1959 to *The Visible and the Invisible,* Merleau-Ponty explains that his *Phenomenology* requires an "ontological explicitation" because there are "problems that remain... due to the fact that in part I retained the philosophy of 'consciousness.'" VI, 183/234. I think it is telling that Merleau-Ponty does not renounce the earlier work as erroneous, but argues that its full implications need to be worked out, and also that the earlier work was only "in part" characterized by a privileged account of consciousness, indicating that there are different lines of thought open and philosophical concepts at work in that text.

[23] Churchill, "Nature and Animality," 174; see also Dillon, "Ontology," 69.

[24] Madison, "Limits of Consciousness," 16.

consciousness expands to become a universal milieu, and phenomenology assumes the role of an 'inventory of consciousness.'"[25] If physical and vital structures owe their synthetic conditions to the symbolic activity of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty's account has, in the end, rendered animals and the perceived world no different than objects entirely constituted by human consciousness.

1.2 Genetic Passivity in the Structure of Consciousness

But the criticism that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of "structure" reduces the animal to a construct of human consciousness meets with complication, because the hypothesis of *The Structure of Behaviour* is also that consciousness itself is a structure or dynamic form, founded in the natural (i.e. physical and vital) world. On the one hand, consciousness is a structure that develops naturally, on the other hand it purportedly grounds nature as the (symbolic) synthesis of structure as such. Scott Churchill argues that "one can already observe here the ambiguity at play within Merleau-Ponty's thought, in this case his alternating between the givenness of nature to consciousness and the 'foundedness' of consciousness in nature."[26] Merleau-Ponty identifies this antinomy of founding-founded as a short circuit in every attempt to explain perception:

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[25] "Explanation could in principle be coextensive with description. One would have to grant only that, in biology as well as in physics, an exhaustive analysis of the *de facto* structures is inconceivable: the physical and chemical actions into which we decompose a function can themselves be produced only in a stable context." Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 154; citing SB, 199/215.

[26] Churchill, "Nature and Animality," 174.

> Every theory of perception tries to surmount a well-known contradiction: on the one hand, consciousness is a function of the body—thus it is an 'internal' event dependent upon certain external events; on the other hand, these external events themselves are known only by consciousness. In another language, consciousness appears on one hand to be part of the world and on the other to be co-extensive with the world. (SB 215/232)

Bernhard Waldenfels notes that as described, consciousness "appears as a structure among structures," but as describing consciousness it is a "structural order [that] assumes here the position of a transcendental and constituting subjectivity."[27] As scientists, this is the inextricable epistemological predicament: our perspective on the world is biased because it must come from within the world. As phenomenologists, though, the world is not a positive, external being and consciousness is not an estranged, monadic perspective. Perception and perceived, in *The Structure of Behaviour*, are related dialectically, because conscious perception is itself an emerging and developmental "structure" of behaviour. Human consciousness, the very structure in which form will come to appear as such, begins as just another emergent, genetically passive "structure" in a universe of dynamic, developing forms.

It is a developed human consciousness that is uniquely attuned to the "structure of structures," by virtue of its own capacity to apprehend symbolically. That is, where animal structures express a relation to their environment, they do

[27] Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 26. This recalls Husserl's paradox of the human being as both a subject and object. For a discussion of this paradox see: Husserl, "Crisis," S.53 178-9/182.

not explicitly represent or reflect upon this relationship, or its terms. Merleau-Ponty invokes Hegel, who argues that nature is a mind, but a "hidden mind," and argues that "the object of biology cannot be grasped without the unities of signification which a consciousness finds and sees unfolding in it." (SB 161/174) Human, symbolic behaviour is capable of recognizing whole-part relations as such, and transposing these relations into different perceived structures, like oil drops, animal reflexes, and human consciousness. Ted Toadvine notes that "only at the symbolic level of behaviour characteristic of humanity do we find an orientation toward the theme as such."[28] Human consciousness is not beholden to the meanings in its immediate environment, but is free by virtue of its ability to detach itself from this immediate concern and unite different significances in "a single common nucleus of signification," such as the way that a melody, its notational representation, and the movements of the hands on the instrument are all united as one theme.[29] The appearance of nature in distinctively meaningful forms is accomplished by the ability of human consciousness to transpose and unite different perceived characteristics, such as shapes and sounds, or names and things, as explicitly unified forms, thematic figures of meaning. Whereas animals are instinctively captivated by their environment, fixed by an "*a priori* of the species," Toadvine quotes Merleau-Ponty as arguing the human can simultaneously occupy a "multiplicity of perspectives."[30] In its form of orientation, Toadvine notes that humanity transcends a merely vital signification.

[28] Toadvine, "Strange Kinship," 20.
[29] Toadvine, "Strange Kinship," 20; citing SB, 122/133.
[30] Toadvine, "Strange Kinship," 4; citing SB, 122/133.

The human "symbolic order" gains ideality and creativity, such that "human behaviour no longer *has* a signification but *is* itself signification."[31] Even though it depends upon the vital significances of its environment (*Umwelt*), the human has always already passed these significances over in a movement of symbolic transcendence toward the world (*Welt*) of symbolic forms, which is uniquely its object. Toadvine contends that the autonomous significances of the vital and physical orders are assimilated into a human order, and thus epistemologically distorted. Yet I think that in the very admission of a "multiplicity of perspectives," Merleau-Ponty has invoked alterity and incompleteness as definitive of consciousness, features to which consciousness owes its original significances.

Human consciousness does not take the form of an all encompassing survey, or "pensée de survol," because consciousness is characterized by what I term static passivity, and is inextricably embodied in a physical milieu, and given to itself in a vital environmental setting (*Umwelt*). Even when we render this embeddedness in physical and animal nature explicit, in abstract thought or scientific symbolization, these dimensions have merely receded into the background, as in the way that I do not notice that the seemingly timeless truths of mathematics are operations that I move through as a body and which take time, or conversely as these abstract thoughts disappear when I stub my toe or encounter grief in sudden difficult news. On my reading, consciousness retains a pre-thetic and lived connection to its physical and vital participation in structure.

[31] Toadvine, "Nature," 36; citing SB, 122/133.

Consciousness is not reduced to nature, and it does not transcend nature. Consciousness is rather a unique grasping of nature thematically from within nature. On this view, consciousness itself retains and indeed exists by virtue of its own "physical" and "vital" significance as a natural development, even though it is only *thematically* aware of these significances as symbolic forms.

I think that we can better understand what is going on in *The Structure of Behaviour* if we separate the voice of the scientist (empiricist), and the idealist philosopher, from that of the phenomenologist. The scientific method of mechanistic, empirical analysis, which Merleau-Ponty criticizes for losing the meaning of form, seeks to analytically disassemble structure into analyzable units. Transcendental consciousness, which Merleau-Ponty is criticized for veering toward in his critique of empiricist reductionism, possesses the ideal unity of structure, the thematic or "structure of structures." What this account of consciousness cannot account for is precisely how consciousness participates in the world as a structure, emerging in the order which it serves to epistemologically ground. There is another account of consciousness in *Structure* which entails that consciousness is a structure of genetic passivity, that it comes to be alongside and within physical and vital structures without prepossessing them; this form of awareness is attuned to the third term without claiming to usurp it. This third term is neither a constituted form, nor a constituting activity, but rather the very relation of structuring out of which these terms emerge. Merleau-Ponty's term "structure," despite its realist connotations, in fact names a process of development here in which constituted form and constituting activity are not yet

decipherable as determinate, distinct moments. So consciousness, far from meeting itself in the world and finding there a plenitude of ideal forms correlate to its own constituting structure, encounters its own genetic passivity in the face of a world bearing an "autochthonous sense" toward which it is always in a standpoint that requires education. (PP 466/504) In this sense, going against a fundamental claim of Heidegger, we can perhaps assert that it is fundamentally the human, as world conscious, who finds herself in the original position of being poor in world, insofar as she must suffer through development and learn from encounters with other beings in order to ever possess anything like a thematic knowledge of the world.[32] But what is the character of this original passivity of consciousness?

Bernhard Waldenfels argues that Merleau-Ponty escapes the circularity of a philosophy of consciousness because the consciousness of form is a "decenterized" consciousness. Consciousness is not decentered by way of being amalgamated into an external, naturalistic order, but rather by being resituated on "another scene" whereby "the known is outweighed by the experienced, the intellectual by the structure."[33] The circularity is avoided because, even though it is consciousness of form, in its weakened, genetically passive, form consciousness is imbricated in a world of form that exceeds its possession. As a structure, consciousness too is located in the order of the phenomena of structure, outstripped by the emergence of this experienced being which is not known in

[32] Lawlor provocatively asks whether all life is not defined by the experience of being poor in world, which he considers to mean that all life shares in a common suffering. Following Lawlor's suggestion, I suggest that this form of suffering manifests itself in our fundamental existential crises, or what Hegel calls "Unhappy Consciousness," the notion that we are destined to a world which is not, in the first place, of our own making, yet to whose norms, meanings and events we are answerable. Lawlor, "Not Sufficient," 65.
[33] Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 30.

advance. While this is "certainly not a radical revision" of consciousness, for Waldenfels it nevertheless represents a "weakening of the principle of consciousness."[34]

There are two ways to interpret Waldenfels' claim, which pertain to whether form is regarded as actual but unknown to consciousness, or whether form is more radically a potentiality that cannot be circumscribed by a (godlike, omniscient) consciousness. In other words, does the de-centering of consciousness mean that it is decentered by ignorance in a world of otherwise actual symbolic forms? Or, conversely, must we think of form other than as an actual mode of consciousness, and conceive of the possibility of form more radically? On the first view, consciousness is decentered because there is a universe of form in which it has no privileged starting point. Notice here, that consciousness retains the conceit of an epistemological prepossession: the light of consciousness is not bright enough to shine everywhere—though it could be. Consciousness is originally de-centred, but its tendency as symbolic form is to be centering. Earlier structures anticipate later ones, so it can be said that the animal signal is just an impoverished version of the symbol, that amovable vital structures are not-yet conscious. All forms are privative modes of conscious form. So Waldenfels can assert, the idea of consciousness is still the synthetic lynch-pin of the world, but each consciousness must nevertheless find itself genetically in process as an experience of the world; here transcendental and empirical consciousness remain separate and distinct. On this view,

[34] Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 26.

consciousness is the governing ideal of reality, though ironically each conscious being suffers the misfortune of having to reach conscious awareness through bodily experience. This view, what I call the idealist or transcendental view, is operative at various points in *The Structure of Behaviour*.[35]

The second option is a "radical revision" of the idea of consciousness, and I think that it too is operative in *The Structure of Behaviour*.[36] This view takes form, and its corresponding consciousness, not as the form of all reality, but as generative passivity, itself as an emergent reality. On this reading, nature is not a "universe" of forms, though it may appear this way in retrospect, from the standpoint of an already established consciousness. Instead of existing statically, form, including consciousness itself, is emergent, becoming, and diacritical. Form is novel not only perceptually, when we discover a new form for the first time, but also ontologically, in the sense that we witness its very emergence as form. Consciousness itself emerges as a form of behaviour when it is educated, and it is educated by the manifestation of other forms--it does not prepossess a

[35] There are some suggestions that consciousness is passive only in the weaker sense of a perspective that remains capable of being aware of all forms, even if it is limited at any given point in time; for example "Every form of consciousness presupposes its completed form: the dialectic of the epistemological subject and the scientific object." SB, 201/217. In his conclusion of the section on the human order, Merleau-Ponty describes a preordination of consciousness to a reality which is ordered to its knowledge: "At the beginning we considered consciousness as a region of being and as a particular type of behaviour. Upon analysis one finds it presupposed everywhere as the place of ideas and everywhere interconnected as the integration of existence." SB, 184/199.

[36] Conversely, the reading of consciousness as radical passivity is suggested in claims where consciousness cannot access the processes of learning in and through which it is engaged: "[All] our habits are an impalpable body for the ego of each moment." SB, 210/227. Similar support comes from one of Merleau-Ponty's concluding claims in the work, where Merleau-Ponty recognizes that: "If, however, one acknowledges... an existence of consciousness and of its resistant structures, our knowledge depends upon what we are; moral theory begins with a psychological and sociological critique of oneself; man is not assured ahead of time of possessing a source of morality; consciousness of self is not given in man by right; it is acquired only by the elucidation of his concrete being... [The] contingency of the lived is a perpetual menace for the eternal significations in which it is believed to be completely expressed." SB, 223/240.

symbolic capacity to apprehend form and the figure-ground relation. I interpret Merleau-Ponty's argument that form only has a meaning within an ontology of the perceived world as a claim that the very meaning of form must be discovered, indeed learned, from the developing structure of perception. (SB 92/102) On my account, consciousness is doubly decentered: not only must it discover forms by perceiving them, but it must also discover within perception *what* form is. In other words, consciousness cannot *a priori* reduce the meaning of other beings, like animals, to the terms of its own awareness, because its awareness of the figure-ground structure is a learned aptitude, acquired through familiarity with these structures themselves. Indeed consciousness is bodily, and it develops generatively out of preconscious, embryological phases, is born, and then must be progressively learned, and this learning owes its earliest familiarity with the world not to a reflection on symbolic meanings, but to vital and affective life. This grounding in vital, animal life undergirds our symbolic consciousness and thus exceeds our capacity to ever ultimately thematize it. On my view, already operative in *The Structure of Behaviour* is the "radical revision" of consciousness which Waldenfels finds lacking, precisely because consciousness is a structure of radically revising its terms of what form is. Consciousness is passive, in the genetic sense, inasmuch as it owes its ontological origins to pre-conscious, non-symbolic forms, but also in the generative sense because it is out of these forms that its symbolic capacity establishes and maintains its symbolic, figure-ground orientation.

If there is idealism in Merleau-Ponty's view, it comes as a counterpoint to

the empirical scientist, though his view is hardly univocal. Against the scientist, writes Merleau-Ponty, consciousness cannot be the "analogue of a force" or a "thing", but against the transcendental philosopher, consciousness cannot be the "cause" of experience. (SB 4-5/2-3) Critical philosophy must surrender the notion of a "pure and simple return to transcendental thought" precisely by affording a place to the discoveries of science (SB 4/2) Merleau-Ponty takes structure phenomenally, as an invitation to philosophy and an "opportunity to define [concepts] anew." (SB 4/2) Here philosophy proceeds by "starting 'from below,'" which is a reminder that consciousness does not begin as the analytic mastery of the scientist nor as the all-encompassing sense-ground of the transcendental idealist. We find a reference to communication and an imperative to understanding in our nascent consciousness of the developing form of animal bodies. Consciousness must be educated by these and other dynamic forms in order to develop its aptitude for symbolic form. It is easy to overlook the myriad relationships which effect this education. Kelly Oliver compellingly uncovers the way that the presence of animals in our lives is primordially educative, focusing not on the difference between human and animal essence, but on the actual relations, particularly the unacknowledged pedagogical relations, between humans and animals.[37] On Oliver's view, consciousness is not an original possession which can then delineate its difference from animals, because anything

[37] Oliver explains how humanity cannot constitute animality separately of participating in it: "It seems to me the more adamantly these authors insist on an absolute distinction between man and animal, the more their arguments depend on animal pedagogy. Despite the explicit message of these texts-that humans are radically distinct from animals-animals function to teach man how to be human." Oliver, *Animal Lessons,* 21.

like this difference, or indeed the ability to posit differences as such, is effected out of a prior affective and non-thematic relationship. Human thematic awareness emerges from its behavioural, bodily orientation to other animals, and consciousness bears the trace of this animality in its educative life.

My interpretive strategy requires reading Merleau-Ponty's claims about consciousness in his text against each other, because they do not all cohere[38] and Merleau-Ponty does oscillate between a hypostatic and more radical vision of structure, and necessarily thereby, of consciousness. In reading *Structure,* I see this radical, not completely presented, view of consciousness as offering the most philosophical insight, even though Merleau-Ponty's concepts in the text fall largely within a static or genetic analysis, and do not yet consider the generative origins of structures. This strategy of reading as critical engagement with the "unthought" in a work is something Merleau-Ponty himself advocates in his late commentary on Husserl, "The Philosopher and his Shadow." Later in his career, Merleau-Ponty focuses on how consciousness is ballasted by the pre-conscious sense-making capacity of being itself, what he terms "institution."[39] In his later period, Merleau-Ponty develops more fully this notion of a consciousness that

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[38] "Merleau-Ponty's work, especially the early work, resembles in many respects a palimpsest in which various strata are superimposed on one another. There simply is no straight and clear-cut development, to say nothing of a closed system which stands there once and for all." Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 22.

[39] Cf. "…institution [means] establishment in an experience (or in a constructed apparatus) of dimensions… in relation to which a whole history of other experiences will make sense and will make a history." IP, 9/[6](5). Throughout this lecture course, particularly in the "Course Summary," Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that this establishing power is not the constituting power of subjectivity. He proposes a "solution to the difficulties found in the philosophy of consciousness" by locating this power of sense-making *between* subject and world, or different subjects. The issue, he writes, is not the continual re-creation of the world for discrete, inassimilable perspectives, but rather the continuation of shared, mediated meaning structures. IP, 77/106.

finds its footing within a more primordial “jointing and framing of being," such that there is a passivity within consciousness that propels and orients it. (S 181/179) But already in *The Structure of Behaviour*, there is a trajectory of thought in which consciousness is not in full possession of the dynamic forms of nature. Consciousness reads, rather than inscribes, form in nature, because consciousness is a developed structure of animal behaviour. It is by turning to nature, and the dynamic becoming of living bodies we find there, that we become educated into consciousness.

1.3 The Epistemology of Form: Learning to Perceive (as) Animals

In this section, my thesis is that that consciousness, which can grasp vital awareness as a thematic object, is itself a species of vital development, and that it is realized through sensitivity to and education by other animal bodies. We understand animals through ongoing contact and learning, not by possession of a taxonomic form of animality as such, although it is true that the specific character of our bodily engagement with reality limits the parameters of this engagement. Like the animal’s dependence on an environment and other animals, so too our consciousness cannot be its own ground, and depends upon bodily engagement with other animals to educate it and a history to ground it in habit and education.

In *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty signals that form is in the first place a reality that appears, rather than one which is known. Form is not an object of consciousness, but marks the very transformation that is coming to consciousness. Not yet existing at the level of thought, form is perceived by

consciousness as an original, pre-conceptual expression of sense: “Therefore this phenomenon must still be conceptualized. The structure of behaviour as it presents itself to perceptual experience is neither thing nor consciousness; and it is this which renders it opaque to the mind." (SB 127/137-8) Merleau-Ponty is seeking what Waldenfels calls a third dimension that undergirds the distinctions of fact and essence, materialism and idealism. Form, despite its intellectualist connotations, points to a sense of the auto-figurative character of the perceived in its emergence for, and not pre-possession by, a knower: “this notion saves us from the alternative of a philosophy which juxtaposes externally associated terms and of another philosophy which discovers relations which are intrinsic to thought in all phenomena. But precisely for this reason the notion of form is ambiguous." (SB 127/138)

Renaud Barbaras argues that *The Structure of Behaviour* remains installed on the level of a criticism of the objective sciences and thus does not adequately see “the impossibility of conceiving its constituting work in terms of an intellectual possession.”[40] In this text, Barbaras sees Merleau-Ponty as troubled by a Kantian reference.[41] In contrast, I read this text as presenting consciousness as not an inviolable perspective, but a field of phenomenal, diacritically becoming

[40] Barbaras, "Being," 5.

[41] Barbaras, "Being," 5. The Kantian reference can refer either to the first *Critique* and the I-think which can in principle accompany any representation, or also to the third *Critique* and Kant’s argument that the very structure of consciousness requires that we perceive animals as teleological and purposive, even if this is merely the form of intelligibility by which we apperceive the animal, without making claims about what it is in-itself. Unlike Kant, Merleau-Ponty has curtailed the order of the in-itself, arguing that the physical order, like the oil drop, is already immanent to the expressive manifestations of structural forms. As such, there is no issue of “reducing” the animal body we perceive to mere matter, because matter is already dynamic form. The issue, indeed, is reducing matter and animality to “form.”

meanings.[42] In this regard, Merleau-Ponty calls structure not an invariant law or reality unto itself, but rather a "dialectical moment." (SB 142/153) In this exchange consciousness does not impose form upon what it encounters nor does it emerge unchanged. Perception is at once receptive and creative, on this view, because habitual sensitivity is a mode of expressive creativity.[43]

Following this more radical take on consciousness, Gary Madison argues that Merleau-Ponty refuses to take the "short cut" of transcendental philosophy because the world "is not a spectacle produced" by "consciousness in perfect possession of itself." It is precisely the question of "what exactly is a concept before it has become conscious of itself" which Madison sees as vexing transcendental philosophy and calling for the more radical grounding of structure as dynamic emergence of meaning.[44] The point here is that consciousness has unconscious or non-conceptual origins, that the past of consciousness is not only the chronological past of the living present, but a more radical past. This "past" that is nature is not the past of consciousness, not a past of meaningful figures or symbols, but rather a vital past which cannot be present as the object of consciousness. There is a trace of this past in our inter-bodily, vitally oriented

[42] Merleau-Ponty rethinks sense impression, challenging the empiricist conception of inert hyletic sense data, but in equal measure, denying consciousness the sole right of "spontaneity" or synthesis, such that "behaviour remains defined, according to the simplest schemata, as an imitation of things; consciousness remains a part of being. ...It matters little that the ultimate explanation is physical if the physical structures posited in nerve functioning imply relations just as complex as those which are grasped by consciousness in the actions of a living being or a man." SB, 135/145-6.

[43] "There are not these impersonal forces on the one hand and, on the other, a mosaic of sensations which they would transform; there are melodic unities, significant wholes experienced in an indivisible manner as poles of action and nuclei of knowledge... Perception is a moment of the living dialectic of a concrete subject..." SB, 165-6/179.

[44] Madison, "Limits of Consciousness," 16-7.

life. Qua vital behaviour, each organic body, whether human or not, is a unique locus of behaviour. Merleau-Ponty situates human and animal alike in a sphere of expressive, unique forms. Rather than lacking the worldly being of humans, animals express another kind of relation to existence, which must be taken up positively, in its own right: "In a philosophy which would genuinely renounce the notion of substance, there would be only one universe which would be the universe of form: between the different sorts of forms invested with equal rights." (SB 133/144) However, the bodies of non-human organisms do not simply appear in human terms. The animal, both specific animals and our own animality as such, is not the object of consciousness, but a kind of vital, bodily comportment whose significance orients but cannot be translated into an abstract, symbolic form. There is perhaps a new sense of the transcendental in *The Structure of Behaviour,* not in a universal constituting consciousness, but in the specifically novel, bodily expressed meanings that arise in each vital structure.[45]

The challenge with this new conception of the transcendental[46] is that the

[45] I use the term transcendental here to indicate conditions of possibility. However, instead of *a priori* conditions, secured in advance (such as Kantian categories, or Heidegerrian *existentiale*), I indicate more radical conditions which must happen in order to be. That is, these conditions will have come to have been the conditions of the event of meaning in organic or personal development. . These generative events must happen in order to establish their own conditions of possibility, unlike the genetic acts which are contracted into the present from the past, this process names the way in which a past becomes foundational post-factually. Borrowing from an insight shared in a discussion with Alia Al-Saji, I think that we can call these conditions that come to be and "according to which" meaning emerges, rather than pre-existing, universal structures or categories "without which" there could be no meaning in life or consciousness. Meaning, on this view, improvises local, developing conditions within the very time of organic and inter-corporeal development. In this more limited sense, I call these conditions transcendental.

[46] I use the term transcendental to mean a sense-making capacity that transcends precedent causes and events, such as the vital order that takes up and transforms the physical order, or the way that physiology transcends mere anatomical mechanics. However, unlike other senses of transcendental, I do not mean an *a priori* form or fixed schema of sense-making, because each

parameters of animal meaning-making are inassimilable to human consciousness, despite being open to encounter with it:

> Behaviourism, solipsism, and 'projective' theories all accept that behaviour is given to me like something spread out in front of me. But to reject consciousness in animals in the sense of pure consciousness, the *cogitation*, is not to make them automatons without interiority. The animal, to an extent which varies according to the integration of its behaviour, is certainly *another* existence; this existence is perceived by everybody. (SB 126-7/137)

Kelly Oliver asserts that while Merleau-Ponty offers resources to abrogate a privileged conscious ground for humans, he does not extend abstract consciousness to animals, but resituates human and animals alike on a terrain of behaviour. In place of an ontological difference between humans and animals, there are idiosyncratic differences which must be understood from within the communicative, expressive relations between specific "structures" of life.[47]

Ted Toadvine sees in this strand of Merleau-Ponty's early work an attempt

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"structure of behaviour" uniquely and dynamically makes sense. In this way, transcendental "structures" are local and expressive, rather than universal and law-like.

[47] Oliver writes that: "Throughout his work, Merleau-Ponty reconsiders behaviour along with perception as the ground of his phenomenology. He starts with animal embodiment in order to prove his theses about human embodiment. Heidegger, on the contrary, distinguished between behaviour, which he attributes to animals, and comportment, which he maintains is unique to man. By so doing, however, Heidegger reinscribes the split between body and consciousness integral to the split between subject and object that he rejects. Merleau-Ponty addresses the subject/object split at the levels of behaviour and perception, where body and consciousness cannot be distinguished so easily." Oliver, "Animal Ethics," 209. Similarly, Barbaras situates a transcendental sense locally, beneath the level of universal symbolic consciousness, at the level of pre-theoretical vital behaviour: "The meaningful relation of the organism to its environment is still a relation to a reality, to a transcendence, and is not therefore based on a consciousness transparent to itself; it is not based on an act of knowledge. The study of behaviour reveals rather what Merleau-Ponty already calls an existence, a being-in-the-world, a tacit relation to a presence rather than a possession of something in a representation." Barbaras, "Being," 4-5.

to conceive human and animal alike as "a melodic unity [which] aims to respect the originality and irreducibility of the animal level of structure."[48] The challenge lies not in explaining how human consciousness has a non-human past, but rather how something like human consciousness emerges and attains to science from within animality.[49] The problem is no longer the metaphysical question of how a pure consciousness can exist in and relate to the world, but an epistemological question of how consciousness can practically discover relations with other structures. Here Waldenfels sees "decisive significance" in Merleau-Ponty's search for "a mode of access to phenomenology via the empirical field of the behavioural sciences" rather than "an appeal to an intellectualism of pure form and consciousness."[50]

In his reading of *The Structure of Behaviour* Bernhard Waldenfels held that Merleau-Ponty merely weakens the concept of consciousness there without abandoning it, but adds that a proper philosophical thinking of the concept of Gestalt will bring with it a radical transformation of the phenomenological method.[51] I contend, though, that the living, vital body is the ground that allows for a living contact between animals, and later serves as a basis for consciousness as a structure of behaviour. It is only later that the animal can be known as a specific figure or form, as a symbolic *representation* of this pre-thematic bodily ground. Just as the "physical" environment is a ground for the vital activities of

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[48] Toadvine, "Strange Kinship," 1.
[49] Waldenfels argues that "consciousness is not a pure consciousness *of* structures; it has a structure of its own … thus, consciousness is not the locus of an embracing survey." Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 24-5.
[50] Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 23.
[51] Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 22.

the animal body, the animal body is a lived, affective ground of the structure of consciousness.[52] Merleau-Ponty writes that we tend to hypostasize the structure of lived embodiment as an object of reflection, but this tendency is a "motivated error" because "reflexive thought… encounters only significations in front of it. The experience of passivity *is not explained* by an actual passivity. But it should have a meaning and be able *to be understood*." (SB 216/233) The lived body does not belong to the order of symbolic structure; it is a vital, lived structure.

Merleau-Ponty explains the task of his philosophy in *Structure* as making this passivity of the understanding explicit, rendering the "bodily conditioning of perception, taken in its actual meaning" open to phenomenological study. This means looking into the bodily origins of consciousness and symbolization, uncovering the motivational and affective structures which enable an objective standpoint without themselves being objects for objectivating operations:

> The body in general is an ensemble of paths already traced, of powers already constituted; the body is the acquired dialectical soil upon which a higher 'formation' is accomplished, and the soul is the meaning which is then established. The relations of the soul and the body can indeed be compared to those of concept and word, but on the condition of

[52] Here I do not use the term ground to denote an ontological condition of possibility, but in a descriptive manner. There is an ambivalence in Merleau-Ponty's attempts to ground these structures: on the one hand, the physical structure seems to be a material ground for the vital, but it cannot be a formal or final ground of the vital, and so on. Indeed, the very difficulty of *The Structure of Behaviour* is the ambivalent grounding character of these relations, particularly the way in which vital structure is said to ground conscious, symbolic structure while also being intelligible only within the conscious structure as a symbolic form. My goal, as previously stated, is to ground consciousness in vital structures by way of genetic passivity, because consciousness must grow and be educated as a living body. However, I will also argue that, since *both* structures have genetic origins, neither can be self-grounding

> perceiving, beneath the separated products, the constituting operation which joins them and rediscovering, beneath the empirical languages—the external accompaniment or contingent clothing of thought—the living *word* which is its unique actualization, in which the meaning is formulated for the first time and thus establishes itself as meaning and becomes available for later operations. (SB 210/227)

It is a bodily contact with and orientation to another--prior to distinguishing it as other--that affectively enables this meaningful relatedness. Just as any "structure" always has a futural reference, so too "consciousness" as structure, and via its bodily ground, is open to new modes of contact. The structure, before it is a fixed form, is that name we give to an original site of emergent meaning—the Gestalt of a structure beckons our awareness, it presents a figure of sense, but as a nascent, unformed sense:

> What is profound in the notion of "Gestalt" from which we started is not the idea of signification but that of *structure*, the joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible, the contingent arrangement by which materials begin to have meaning in our presence, intelligibility in the nascent state. (SB 206-7/223)

Meaning is inherently expressive, which means that consciousness is not a synchronic grasping of a meaning before it, but is rather a process of meaning coming to be through engaged, movement of differentiation.[53]

[53] "It is not primarily a question of whether or not that which is meant is there or not, whether it is given in an originary or derivative manner, whether it itself is present or is represented by something else, as is assumed by a theory of perception which places presence in the center;

In his later lecture course on *Passivity*, in the introductory section "The Problem of Passivity," Merleau-Ponty comments on *The Structure of Behaviour*, and remarks that the issue of consciousness is not of how it can possess an objective relation to a foreign world, but rather of how such consciousness can ever attain to objectivity given its incarnation in the world of phenomenal (i.e. expressive) structures:

> But, by restoring the phenomenal body, we sought neither to show the ideality of the body, nor to reintegrate it with consciousness as one of its objects. …One will be able to ask how we, being incarnate subjects, have the idea of science and absolute objectivity, but not how the universe of science intervenes in the universe of perception…[54]

There is one world, but the very plurality of structure in this world means that there is not a consciousness which is what Madison calls "master." Instead, there is "only a consciousness which finds itself face to face with a world of existences, one which looks about and which, at this stage, is nothing other than its look, one which lives outside of itself in the world."[55] For Madison, we are always in the position of "beginning consciousness" such that clarification and interrogation are perennially endogenous to the form of our life.[56] The ideal of objectivity remains, on one level, not a spontaneous activity of reflection, but a process of the

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rather, the decisive thing is the degree of differentiation in experience and the direction this process of differentiation takes. The formation of sense becomes a process of continual structuring, restructuring, or transformation, which at the same time extends to the world and behaviour, and brings about an organization and articulation of specific experiential fields." Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 24.

[54] IP, 123/[216].

[55] Madison, "Limits of Consciousness," 18.

[56] Madison, "Limits of Consciousness," 17; citing SB, 110/120-1.

expression of meaning, a living structure of behaviour.

Instead of falling into a debater's regress of knower and known, consciousness has a capacity for knowledge in the first place by virtue of affective contact and the expressive, not merely reflective, development of this contact.[57] Kant famously argued that though we must perceive the animal according to natural purposes, as having its own finality, this was the mere form of perception and had no purchase on reality in itself.[58] Yet a central thesis of *The Structure of Behaviour,* as well as the later *Phenomenology of Perception*, is that perception is not merely cognitive or subjective, but that it is a motor-engagement with reality. Thus to perceive is always already to be in affective contact; perception is not mere reception but a mix of activity and passivity, by which the organism opens a relation to the environment, where "the form of the excitant is created by... [the organism's own] manner of offering itself to actions from the outside." (SB 13/ 10)[59] Other animals are not merely passively impressed upon my sensation, but

[57] For Toadvine this means that consciousness must accede to an "immanent and self-organizing intelligibility." Toadvine, "Strange Kinship," 12.

[58] Varela discusses Kant's point that we encounter organisms as expressive wholes: "'In such a product of nature every part, as existing through all other parts, is also thought as existing for the sake of the others and that of the whole, i.e. as a tool (organ); . . . an organ bringing forth the other parts (and hence everyone bringing forth one another). . .; and only then and because of this such a product as an *organized* and *self-organizing* being can be called a *natural purpose*.' Kant's way to look at organisms, however, is also transcendental: the teleology we observe in natural purposes is not necessarily the mode in which they really exist but merely our way to view them." Varela, "Life After Kant," 107.

[59] In Husserl's account of affection, for example, before there can be an explicit activity of the ego perceiving or thinking something, there is a prior moment of affection which acts as an "allure" to awaken the ego. Husserl subtly explains, however, that this prior moment is not a mere reception or passive givenness of an impression, because it already includes the awakening, orienting activity of consciousness, such as "a soft noise becoming louder and louder takes on growing affectivity... the vivacity of it in consciousness increases. This means that it exercises a growing pull on the ego. The ego finally turns toward it. However... the modal transformation of affection has already occurred prior to the turning toward... even if only in the antechamber of the ego. The ego already detects it now in its particularity even though it does not yet pay attention to it by grasping it in an attentive manner." Husserl, "Passive Synthesis," 166. Thus receptivity is already

rather call for me to bodily engage with and perceive them through the movement of my body. This relationality is passively mediated, because it inaugurates a sense of contact between different forms of living behaviour, revealing a potential to develop new meaning. Consciousness only gains sense in a circuit of exchange with other existences, like a "keyboard which moves itself in such a way as to offer--and according to variable rhythms--such or such of its keys to" resonate with other “melodic” forms of bodily behaviour, or what Merleau-Ponty describes as sensory unities which are not sums "indifferent to the order of [their] factors," but "whole" "constellation[s]" of meaning. (SB 13-14/10-11)[60] Other forms are encountered not as representations, but as modulations of my own bodily rhythms of behaviour.

Objectivity is an achievement and an expression, rather than a drive to reconcile the dynamic activity of expression with an expressed absolute. Merleau-Ponty explains that human reality is intelligible in the first place because of its participation in structures, and not its pre-possession of the structure of consciousness: “The fact of becoming conscious adds nothing to the physical structures. It must be said of these structures, and not of consciousness, that they

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activity what Husserl calls "already detecting," albeit the lowest level of conscious activity, one that is nominally "conscious" since it is "pregiven." Husserl, "Passive Synthesis," 162. Affection is at the limit of the passive synthesis of sensation and the activity of perception, and it also blends passive givenness and tacit conscious activity as inseparable, united terms. In this way, writes Husserl, "within a genetic analysis, we are obliged to observe that affection precedes the receptive." Husserl, "Passive Synthesis," 84. There is thus a zone of attunement prior to the workings of consciousness, which is neither passive reception nor active constitution, but a genuine contact between sensing organism and sensed environment.

[60] Merleau-Ponty notes that this metaphor is imperfect, because there are not a given set of "keys" or sensory receptors in the organism because the sensory apparatus functions as a dynamic whole; also, such a notion of fixed sensory parts implies an action upon them by equally fixed parts of a world in-itself, rather than an environment that is itself dynamic and a coefficient of the activity of living beings.

are indispensable to the definition of man [sic]." (SB 136/147) The implication here is that consciousness is a structure defined by genetic passivity, that is by coming to be or "*becoming conscious*." Further, this quote indicates that consciousness is in the first place dependent upon structures that have been established in advance of it.[61] On my reading of *The Structure of Behaviour,* the language of consciousness need not invoke the *recovery* of an ideal structure, despite moments in the text that in fact assert this, but a reality that is fulfilled as an educative *project*, grounded in a more foundational layer of passive synthesis:

> …our knowledge depends upon what we are; moral theory begins with a psychological and sociological critique of oneself; man is not assured ahead of time of possessing a source of morality; consciousness of self is not given in man by right; it is acquired only by the elucidation of his concrete being and is verified only by the active integration of isolated dialectics... (SB 223/240)

Consciousness, as implicated in structures of existence, cannot know an ideal liberation, but only "real" one, says Waldenfels echoing Marx, by taking up a consciousness that lives by transforming itself and its world: "wherever cognitive and practical structures or modes of organization change, there is a 'real *Umgestaltung*' [transformation] at work, and only in this way can it come to a 'real liberation.'"[62] Like all animal forms, consciousness is a dynamic one, built

[61] These conditions might include physical structures like sunlight and air to breathe, or vital structures like organic nourishment and a growing body, or conscious structures like parents and laws. Rather than constituting other structures or self-effectuating itself, consciousness in the first place consciousness relies on these developed structures for its own growth and education.
[62] Waldenfels, "Perception and Structure," 25; citing SB, 221/238.

up and developed through sedimentations. The history of consciousness is a history of real relations developed between living individuals.

Merleau-Ponty concluded *The Structure of Behaviour* by asserting that "all the problems which we have just touched on are reducible to the problem of perception" yet he adds that structures "exist only by their meaning" such that consciousness itself is a structure and "the intentional life which constitutes [structures] is not yet a representation." (SB 224/240, 224/241) In the next section of this chapter, I address how animal bodies exist as generative "meaning" prior to conscious "representation," asserting that each animal exists as a meaning-engendering life, but not in terms of constitutive activity akin to a conscious mind. The animal lives by both taking up and transforming a sense in nature, existing as the expressive enactment of meaning through a melodic, developing sedimentation of sense, or what Merleau-Ponty calls in his *Nature* lectures, in a pivotal philosophical shift, an "autoproduction of meaning."

1.4 The Auto-Figurative Origins of Animal Behaviour

The reading of form in *The Structure of Behaviour* as emergent and the corresponding need of consciousness to be educated by form implies that form, whether vital or conscious, is developmentally open-ended. To logically develop this notion, and to better demonstrate that it is at work in a developing and immature form in *The Structure of Behaviour*, it is necessary to turn to Merleau-Ponty's later work, such as his lectures on nature. In these later works, Merleau-Ponty holds that there is meaningfulness prior to conscious life, such that this

meaning cannot be circumscribed as form in advance. There is thus autonomy in the sense-making originality of animals, which is irreducible to a structure of consciousness.

In *Nature,* meaning emerges prior to existing in localizable, established forms. If we can discern development and exchange of meaning in and between animal bodies, then there can be no reduction of animals to mere vital responses to environmental themes and signals. Animal behaviour is not exhausted in the vital "themes" it expresses and nor is it captivated by its environment as by a "signal,"[63] because it is the capacity to develop and express new meanings. The primary "institution" of sense is nature, and the "auto-production" of natural meaning occurs apart from the abstract perspective and symbolic awareness of human consciousness which imputes meaning-making to specific *forms*. (N 3/19)[64] It remains to discuss whether this auto-activity of animal sense making remains a transcendental principle of world-creation, a deferral of transcendental subjectivity to a fixed form of transcendental vital activity. In concluding the chapter, I refer to Merleau-Ponty's later notion of "institution" as a sense-making that precedes constitutive activity, in which activity and passivity are inter-related through a temporal structure of sense-accumulation. I will explain this notion of

[63] Merleau-Ponty cites Köhler's criticism of the signal as a simple conditioned environmental reflex: ""In signal behaviour, the 'situation' to which the organism adapts is the simple temporal or spatial contiguity of a conditioned and unconditioned stimulus. But, as we indicated...signal learning is not a simple transfer of this de facto contingency into behaviour." SB, 105-6/115-6; citing Köhler, "Mentality," 194/140.

[64] In this passage from the introduction to his first course in *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty invokes the Greek notion of *physis* and describes nature as an "auto-production" of meaning, but meaning where "there is not thought" because life exhibits a meaningfulness irreducible to the "positing" character of thinking. Here Merleau-Ponty underscores that nature is not instituted by humanity, but rather precedes humanity as an imperceptible origin of sense.

"institution" and demonstrate how, in *The Structure of Behaviour,* despite its reliance on hypostatic concepts like "structure" and "form," there is already an operative understanding of the animal as a blend of activity and passivity, which requires a developmental synthesis that depends upon a temporality of accumulating and sedimenting meanings, prior to fixed forms.

To introduce this notion of the dynamic sedimentation of sense, I want to refer to the human behaviour of habit formation, which shares key temporal characteristics with this notion of "institution."[65] Merleau-Ponty defines institution as a meaning making that is prior to the constituting activity of subjectivity or even the vital body. In the "Course Summary," institution is proposed as a "solution to the difficulties found in the philosophy of consciousness" which locates sense-making *between* subject and world, or different subjects, bodies or events. (IP 77/106) The issue is not the continual re-creation of the world for discrete, inassimilable perspectives, but rather the continuation of shared, mediated meaning structures. Briefly, I want to summarize two aspects of human habit-formation which are hallmark ontological structures of "institution." First, Merleau-Ponty articulates habit formation as a dynamic recasting of self, body and world from within. That is to say, at one stroke, a new sensory-motor orientation equals the emergence of a self with new

[65] Cf. "…institution [means] establishment in an experience (or in a constructed apparatus) of dimensions… in relation to which a whole history of other experiences will make sense and will make a history." IP, 9/[6](5). Throughout this lecture course, particularly in the "Course Summary," Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that this establishing power is not the constituting power of subjectivity. He proposes a "solution to the difficulties found in the philosophy of consciousness" by locating this power of sense-making *between* subject and world, or different subjects. The issue, he writes, is not the continual re-creation of the world for discrete, inassimilable perspectives, but rather the continuation of shared, mediated meaning structures. IP, 77/106.

capacities and a new orientation to the world. Following Merleau-Ponty we might call this coupled development of bodily movement and the manifestation of the world a proliferation of new "levels" or, following Barbaras who draws on *The Visible and the Invisible* to define "dimensions"[66] of meaning which restructure the frame in which our being-in-the-world is cast:

> The perceived thing possesses me as much as I possess it: I perceive according to or *with it* rather than perceiving it itself. Perception is then perception of something only if the perceived continues to be the 'according to' of this perception—the measurement, level, dimension of this perception: 'With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated.[67]

The development of animal behaviour is concomitantly a development of the environment. Animals are not "captive" to the stimuli and signals of their environment, but rather play a creative role in shaping it. Conversely, animals do not simply constitute their environment according to their vital processes, because these processes are in part a response and orientation to the sense of the environment.

This points to the second character of habit that derives from an ontology of institution: habits, as sedimentations of sense, are not a discrete set of individual capacities compiled in an assemblage of behavioural activities, but

[66] See, for example, a working note from November 1959. VI, 219/268-9.
[67] Barbaras, "Being," 174; citing VI, 151/198.

rather are dimensions within a constellation of mutually influencing meaning-structures. Habits do not establish meaning additively, by developing *new* capacities atop of *past* ones, but transitively modulate the "instituted" manifestation of meaning. In the development of behaviour we discover the animal not as constituting its environment *ex nihilo*, but rather we discover one selfsame process of the animal learning to sense by moving, and move by sensing. This behaviour develops according to stages or "dimensions" which movement and perception enact new structures of meaning. To see how such a logic might have played out in *The Structure of Behaviour*, we can examine the following quote:

> … each moment does not occupy one and only one point of time; rather, at the decisive moment of learning, a 'now' stands out from the series of 'nows', acquires a particular value and summarizes the grouping which have preceded it as it engages and anticipates the future of the behaviour; this 'now' transforms the singular situation of the experience into a typical situation and the effective reaction into an aptitude. (SB 125/136)[68]

Like the notion of institution, this means that animal behaviour does not exist within a uniform temporal horizon of selfsame instants, because some instants

[68] The similarity between this formula and later formulations of this idea of "institution" is striking. In each definition, we see the way in which a decisive moment withdraws in order to structure a meaningful history and open new sensitivities for future activity. The "now" does not cause these future activities or contain them in advance, but rather inaugurates a field in which they will have sense. This now remains operative in the present, but not as an activity, but rather as the generative passivity according to which future activities will make sense. In *Institution*, Merleau-Ponty's central definition of institution coheres with this early articulation: "Therefore institution [means] establishment in an experience (or in a constructed apparatus) of dimensions (in the general, Cartesian sense: system of references) in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense and will make a *sequel*, *one* history." IP, 8-9/[6](5).

stand out as formative, they are retained because they inaugurate new meaning between the living body and its environment. This decisive "now," as I understand it tacitly operates according to a logic of institution whereby events structure the dimensions of their own significance from within. It is possible, on another reading, though, to take this passage as demonstrating a constituting activity within the structure of behaviour . As I see it, however, there is enough evidence in this text to suggest that the animal body, and consciousness, progressively develop through growth and education: they are primary loci of this sedimentation of meaning, although they do not initially possess he power that enacts it. Any capacity of action that a living being has, within the logic of institution, is only accomplished out of this sedimentation, never spontaneously self-effecting itself. Merleau-Ponty's idea of the animal as musicality means, importantly, that we cannot think of the animal in subjective terms of creative activity, attributing a kind of constituting intentionality to the animal: "Vital acts have a meaning; they are not defined, even in science, as a sum of processes external to each other... 'Every organism,' says Uexküll, 'is a melody which sings itself.'" (SB 159/172) This motif perhaps finds its strongest contemporary support in the concept of the animal as *auto-poiesis* put forward by Francisco Varela.[69] Varela conceives of the animal as an active power of self-making and

[69] For Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the vital structure of behaviour as characterized by a temporally mediated meaning which is a unity across difference, rather than a spontaneous constituting activity and its concomitant constituted temporally extended moments, see SB, 87/96. For a detailed discussion of this motif in *The Structure of Behaviour*, see Toadvine, "Nature," 21-32. Toadvine deftly questions the tension in Merleau-Ponty's notion of the melody, noting how it suggests an integral, irreducible meaning to the animal, while also indicating that a melody is only a melody for-consciousness. Toadvine compellingly argues that this ambiguity is later resolved in the *Nature* lectures, where Merleau-Ponty clearly develops the logic of the melody as

meaning-constituting, or what he calls *auto-poiesis.* For Varela, organic methodology needs to incorporate the Husserlian notion of intentionality as sense-donation (*Sinngebung*) and the animal is to be regarded as a creative, subject-like perspective:

> By accepting that *organisms are subjects having purposes according to values encountered in the making of their living*. This means clearly to reintroduce value and subjectivity as indispensable organic phenomena, a theory of the organism as the dynamics of establishing an identity and, hence, as a process of creating a materially embodied, individual perspective.[70]

For Varela the animal is a finitude, an individual activity of making itself within a material world not ordered to its own survival. To be animal is to be a certain mode of care or valuation of self in an oppositional world.[71] This is a bodily activity, which is most readily understood by the animal's metabolic capacity to convert parts of the environment into itself.[72] The organism constitutes itself by regulating its body as a stable principle of exchange with the environment:

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developmental and defined by its relations with contingent occurrences, such as environmental events and relations with other beings.

[70] Varela and Weber, "Life after Kant," 102.

[71] Varela thinks of the organism according to Hans Jonas' subjective categories: "as precarious existence it is always menaced by concern (*Sorge*), the need to avoid perishing, and to do this, it is again completely dependent on matter whose characteristics are the reason for its concern, already the simplest forms of life have thus a subjective perspective as a result of this existential need. Therefore life as such will always be captured in the antinomies of freedom and necessity, autonomy and dependence, I and world, relatedness and isolation, creation and mortality." Varela and Weber, "Life after Kant," 113.

[72] John Russon sees the process of nutrition and growth not as pure creation, but translation, as the organism enacts itself through an other, the environment: "The most primitive natural relationship is, indeed, the process of nutrition in which the organism maintains itself by assimilating its environment to itself. Note, then, that the very logical structure of living is one of *interpretation* and *translation:* to eat is to enact the claim that "these are the determinate features of the world which matter, and what they really are things which are to-be-me." Russon, "Embodiment," 297.

> As a consequence, we discover the elusive notion of a "constitution of an identity" as the governing of an autonomy principle. Metabolism keeps organisms materially in a steady flux: their substance in no moment is one and the same but at the same time they constantly keep their identity – and this unchanged identity is kept exactly by the means of an underlying exchange.[73]

The animal's living activity, on this view, is free creation limited by "substrate" dependence and bounded by death. The organism is a power of acting to be understood according to these subjective categories.[74]

Against the auto-poietic view, I contend that the environment-engendering activity of the animal is not pure. The beaver does not simply react to a fixed world, nor does it create one *de novo*. Animal behaviour is in each case a certain transformation of the world from within. The animal is not passive because the environment it receives is always already transformed by its living activity. But its living activity is in the first place a passive moment, a gathering of what is afforded by its environment. The animal is spontaneous insofar as it is a gathering of *what was* the environment into a new sense—but this "was" is only in retrospect, the past of a present, for there is no "world" prior to the environment engendered by life. For the animal, then, "the" world is already a kind of ontological and temporal background, out of which its activity figures as a meaningful sense; as biologist R.C. Lewontin explains:

> Are the stones and the grass in my garden part of the environment of a

[73] Varela, "Life after Kant," 112-3.
[74] Varela, "Life after Kant," 113.

> bird? The grass is certainly part of the environment of a phoebe that gathers dry grass to make a nest. But the stone around which the grass is growing means nothing to the phoebe. On the other hand, the stone is part of the environment of a thrush that may come along with a garden snail and break the shell of the snail against the stone. Neither the grass nor the stone are part of the environment of a woodpecker that is living in a hole in a tree. That is, bits and pieces of the world outside of these organisms are made relevant to them by their own life activities.[75]

Behaviour involves an activity of the animal engendering an environment, not out of nothing, but rather as Lewontin has described it as an interpretive activity. Where Lewontin describes the animal as selecting already formed parts of its environment according to an interpretive activity resembling an intentional consciousness, however, Merleau-Ponty's point in *Structure* is that what counts as the environment depends, in part, on the vital activity of the organism, and vice versa.[76] Vital activity does not simply receive an already formed environment, nor does it spontaneously create one: it transforms what is previously nonsense, a potential for sense that is not the sense of life, into a vital, lived one, like the electro-chemical gradients that become neural pathways, or the way that the human incorporates things into her body, like a pen, shoes, or eyeglasses, in order to accomplish greater expression, movement and sensation. In other words, "grass" does not have a meaningful sense until it taken up within animal life, as when the Phoebe fashions it into a nest, the goat eats it, or the human plants it.

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[75] Lewontin, *Biology as Ideology*, 84.

[76] "It should not be concluded …that forms *already* exist in a physical universe…" SB, 144/156.

We cannot so sharply distinguish between expresser and expressed, except in retrospect. This ordering is reversible: it functions by a self-organizing principle which, in shaping, is shaped by what it shapes. Body and world form an ambiguity irreducible to exact forms. The animal and the environment are terms established and put en route by a more basic phenomenon: the movement of animal life itself.[77] This movement is not an exchange between creative power and material dependence, as Varela might have it, because here activity and passivity are internally, and not externally related, what Merleau-Ponty will later describe as *ineinander* or *entrelacement*. The animal is an expression of the "physiognomy" of its environment, a new figure that arises out of an environmental background. This background is not made of determinate things, except in retrospect: "The truth is that there are no things, only physiognomies… [Structures] are lived as realities, we have said, rather than known as true objects." (SB 168/182) Merleau-Ponty argues that the animal is not *in* its environment as a thing in a container, but rather that its living "action" and environmental "milieu" are internally related, the organism as expression and manifestation of the milieu. The environment is not comprised of objects, *partes extra partes* but it is nevertheless the ontological *background* and scaffold of vital figures.

On this account, activity and passivity, implicate and point back to each other. On the one hand there is this activity which is also passivity, because the animal's first activity is to render itself sensible to the environment. On the other

[77] Paraphrased from my book review of David Morris' *The Sense of Space.*

hand, this receptivity is always modulated by living activity, and thus is not the transparent reception of a world in-itself. The reception of the environment is not a passive matter of impression: “the excitation itself is already a response, not an effect imported from outside the organism; it is the first act of its proper functioning." (SB 31/31) The animal undergoes the environment, yet this passivity is always a function of the vital activity of its own organism:

> When the eye and the ear follow an animal in flight, it is impossible to say, ‘which started first’ in the exchange of stimuli and responses. Since all the movements of the organism are always conditioned by external influences, one can, if one wishes, readily treat behaviour as an effect of the milieu. But in the same way, since all the stimulations which the organism receives have in turn been possible only by its preceding movements which have culminated in exposing the receptor organ to the external influences, one could also say that the behaviour is the first cause of the stimulations. (SB 13/10)

In *The Structure of Behaviour* we are presented with this movement out of which active and passive, individual and environment are dialectical moments. Consciousness can reflectively isolate active and passive moments, but only after these aspects are achieved and can be objectified, rather than in their coming to be and developmental structuration. In the first place, as we have seen, neither environment nor animal behaviour possesses a privileged principle of meaning independent of the other. Animal behaviour, including human consciousness, does not begin as a moment of synthetic activity, but as the birth of a blend of

receptivity and activity in a decisive "now" which inaugurates behaviour. It is out of this event that a living relationship between organism and environment is engendered.

We encounter this blend of activity and passivity when we discover other animal bodies within their sense "instituting" life, that is, within the very environments that animals respond to and fashion for themselves. Kelly Oliver sees the melodic becoming of animal life as sharing in many of our forms of sense-making:

> Already in behaviour we find futural projections, responsivity, interrogative gestures, imitation, imagination, interpretation, expression, pleasure, and ultimately even logos and culture. Merleau-Ponty's analysis of behaviour also points to a transformation in what we might consider access to world and world formation.[78]

Just as I might get to know my friend by seeing her at home with family, at work on a painting, or in discussion, so too the beaver is much more than a mute set of rodent actions to study: I find it in the sharp ends of chewed aspen and birch rampikes, in the dam of tree and plastered mud that it repairs with its yearlings (if I come too close to it, it will express itself aggressively, slapping its tail on the water, upsetting the whole pond to warn me off and alert the others of my presence), or by how this dam forms a ford in a stream and how the dam has caused a low-lying area to fill with water, transforming it into a wetland for other animals to inhabit. The point is not that the beaver has an experience of shaping a

[78] Oliver , "Animal Ethics," 212.

world akin to my self-consciousness, so caution is needed in using terms like "poiesis," "culture" or "logos" here, nor is it that I have access to animal experience, but rather that our animal bodies encounter each other within the co-creative, communicative institution of nature. Nature is not a cold order of things, but a living nexus of mutually developing and overlapping forms of sense.

The structure of organism behaviour partakes in this natural potential to unfold new meanings, but these meanings are not purely creative acts by the organism, as Varela would have it, because they hinge upon timing and place. We can infer this from Merleau-Ponty's analogy to the organism as a melody, because here the organism's potential for expression depends upon the sense of its environment, just as the melody hangs on the timbre and rhythm of the notes in the opening bar:

> Thus we are led to a type of coordination very different from that [of a machine]. Here the coordinated elements are not only coupled with each other, they constitute together, by their very union, a whole which has its proper law and which manifests it as soon as the first elements of excitation are given, just as the first notes of a melody assign a certain mode of resolution to the whole. While the notes taken separately have an equivocal signification, being capable of entering into an infinity of possible ensembles, in the melody each one is demanded by the context and contributes its part in expressing something which is not contained in any one of them and which binds them together internally... Coordination is now the creation of a unity of meaning which is expressed in the

> juxtaposed parts, the creation of certain relations which owe nothing to the materiality of the terms which they unite. (SB 87/96)

The first "notes" or environmental meanings do not deterministically give what will come next, because here these meanings are already correlates of the organism's vital activity, but they do anticipate and call for (what will be) distinctive modes of expression. The first bars, or the head, of an improvised jazz tune, for example, give an orientation (*sens*) for what follows, without rigidly determining it, allowing for improvisation and collaboration.

The Gestalt of the organic structure, its ontological "melody," is dynamic because there is always a futural reference and openness to the environment of living form. The Gestalt of the living form is inherently ambiguous: at the perceptual level it appears as the givenness of other possible adumbrations, but in the vital form we experience these potential manifestations of the "whole" organism not merely as its unperceived "other" sides, but in terms of radically new manifestations of behavioural relationships and activities. This futural reference in the organism body is not self-contained, but is environmentally embedded in the rhythms, places and other life forms in its milieu. Songbirds learn to sing, for example, differently according to the timing required to emulate and communicate with the song of the specific birds around them. Songbird learning generates an open range of outcomes:

> There are several aspects to this learning process, one of which may indeed involve practicing the song at the beginning of the young bird's second season. But another critical aspect is simply exposure to the adult

> song at some point during the autumn of the young bird's first year, at a time when the young bird does not practice signing at all. Deprived of such experience, chaffinches and song sparrows produce an extremely impoverished version of the adult song, some finches may develop a song more characteristic of another species if that is what they heard during this period.[79]

The melodics of birdsong habit depend upon exposure, mimicry, and the local variety of birdsong—this is a structure instituted amid contingently timed encounters with other singing animals. Song sparrows have been raised by other birds, even non-bird species. This is what Merleau-Ponty will call, in *Institution,* a "supra-normal stimulus" or "experimental Platonism," (IP 17/[17](13)) the cross-pollination between animal behaviours that exceeds individuated, predetermined forms of behaviour. These cases of extra-species learning shed light on the way in which animals develop their expressive, sense-making behaviours not through spontaneous action or a pre-determined plan, but through inter-related environmental processes of education.

In the first place, the organism is not a pre-determined activity, a mechanistic or finalistic blue-print, but a living being which develops through learning. The organism is originally present as a horizon of possible expressions. Not a determinate structure, but a kind of possibility, the organism is realized in and through its relatedness to other organisms and its environment through developmental stages. Importantly, these stages are not pre-determined, because

[79] See the discussion of bird learning in: Kroodsma, "Bird Song;" Slater, "Bird Song Learning."

the character of living possibility is not merely unrealized actuality: it is a genuine source of meaningfulness because it is a "decisive now" or original expression of sense. Returning to the example of the figure against a background, we say that we never *see* an object as such, but perceive it through its *seen* adumbrations. In the case of organisms we see the organism *through* what it does and how it moves—and like the object these adumbrations cannot exhaust the object. But unlike the mere object, the organism *expresses* new significances, and it moves in new ways by learning, being put in new contexts or by its own learning. In other words, we discover the organism's capacity through expression not as an object with many sides, but rather through the possibilities for objects to be transformed, as dimension, via nutrition and growth, birth, enactment of a habitat, communication, and so many other behaviours. The organism is not a thing, but perceptible to us through a transformation of sense within the things themselves. And in organic development we discover a clue to the origins of our own consciousness not as a primordial possession or synthesis of the world, but as a transformative event of sense within living relationships in the world.

Like the habitat of the animal, our own objective worldview is a habitat engendered by developed modes of behaviour. In *The Structure of Behaviour* Merleau-Ponty argues that we can only get the idea of a fixed world of things by creating a scientific environment, a laboratory like a beaver dam arrests a flow of meaning: "that, in biology as well as in physics, an exhaustive analysis of the *de facto* structures is inconceivable: the physical and chemical actions into which we decompose a function can themselves be produced only in a stable context." (SB

153-4/166-7)[80] This is Lewontin's radical ontological thesis, that reality is always primordially the *Umwelt* of an organism: "Not only do we consult the organism, but when we describe the environment we describe it in terms of the organism's behaviour and life activities."[81] The environment is not a reality in-itself, but is a reality via the vital actions of the organism and their inter-corporeal significance. The world of science is an accomplishment out of a lived world of behaviour. Behaviour is not determined by its place in an objective world, but is the very engendering of that scientific world from within the practices and bodily activities that take place in classrooms, laboratories and texts. This means, then, that rather than originally situating organisms in a world of scientific consciousness, that we first discover organisms through lived behaviours endogenous to their environments. This lived relation to organisms, particularly animals, enables scientific consciousness, and it situates it alongside and within living, bodily behaviour.[82]

Merleau-Ponty's first work posits consciousness as the epistemological condition of form, but it also opens the way for a phenomenological genealogy of "transcendental" and "scientific" structures of living behaviour. This analysis reveals consciousness as a living activity, which in its environmental sensitivity

[80] Also, Merleau-Ponty remarks that: "The truth is that there are no things, only physiognomies..." SB, 168/182.
[81] Lewontin, *Biology as Ideology*, 84.
[82] We can situate our awareness of animals on the order of knowledge, but also through acquaintance via our shared animality. A veterinarian, for example, knows horses in a different manner than the stable keeper: "The gestures of behaviour, the intentions which it traces in the space around the animal, are not directed to the true world or pure being, but to being-for-the-animal, that is, to a certain milieu characteristic of the species; they do not allow the showing through of a consciousness, that is, a being whose whole essence is to know, but rather a certain manner of treating the world, of 'being-in-the-world' or of 'existing.'" SB, 125-6/136.

and original need to be educated in terms of animal life, implicates passivity in conscious activity. This means that the "symbolic" consciousness of form remains, on one side, a living, vital activity, while attaining to abstract consciousness on the other side. Our practices of science, and the transcendental perspective they involve, are expressions of our vital, embodied behaviour, rather than self-grounding activities of world-constitution. This establishment of consciousness out of animality reveals a sense-making capacity, temporally akin to the accumulation of dimensions of meaning in human habituation, within animal life and prior to conscious representation. Just as consciousness is not the pure activity of constitution, animal behaviour involves passivity, in the sense that this activity must first resume a past, respond to an environment, and learn from other animal behaviour. This "universe of form" is not a world of already constituted structures, but of a diacritical becoming of sense, a movement of "institution" which ontologically precedes established forms of organic behaviour and human consciousness. This movement of "institution" in nature cannot be the object of consciousness, or given as an already articulated structure of behaviour. This origin of behavioural and perceptual meaning precedes perceptual presence or constitutive activity, a sense-making that is prior to already established loci of constitutive activity. Within the very structure of perception, then, is an ontological reference to the pre-perceptual, imperceptible origins of meaning.

Merleau-Ponty's assertion that all "structures" of behaviour are comprehensible within the ontology of perception is pushed to its limit, because inaugural events of vital meaning are at once inside and outside perception: their

inaugurated meaning is manifest perceptually, but the "decisive now" of their inauguration withdraws from perception. It is within perception itself that we find a developmental, genetic reference beyond perception, for at the limit of perception we discover an intended trace of that perceptual source which perception cannot manifest. The taking up of meaning within a living perspective, whether conscious or vital, is an event which is not constituted by an organism, but in the wake of which an organism emerges. Living activity, therefore, is first given to itself out of this event of sense, and is originally grounded in this passive moment.[83] Activities are generatively passive; they are mediated insofar as they draw their *sens* from the dynamic institution of meaning in nature. Activities take time to come into being, and as they do so they show up the traces of orientation they draw from the past, a phenomenon I examine in detail in the subsequent chapter.

Just as human consciousness cannot be its own ground, neither can the environment-forming capacity of the animal body take the form of a self-grounding activity. Consciousness is grounded in animal development, and animal development is not self-grounding but the expressive continuation of past development, how can we think of this history in depth of animal expression as ground while avoiding a regress? As with consciousness, animal behaviour occludes its own origins, because its living is the expressive transformation of these "origins." The living perspective always comes to itself in the wake of this movement of expressive transfiguration. Prior to the activities which constitute a

[83] "The world is already constituted, but never completely constituted; in the first place we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities" PP, 480/518.

symbolic or vital perspective, there is an originary sense-making or "institution." Merleau-Ponty's critique of mechanistic biology in *The Structure of Behaviour* is more forceful than his criticism of transcendental philosophy; nevertheless his work is equally a criticism of world-constituting activity. His early critique of activity, on the reading I have shown, goes all the way down, revealing a method of thinking of activity as rooted in generative passivity, and even though not developing terms adequate to it, Merleau-Ponty develops a method of looking into nature as an edifice of this historical and embodied activity of expression. It remains to take up this question of the natural "institution" of meaning in its own right, independently of the mantle of conscious perspective and constituting activity, whether human or animal.

Chapter Two

The Passivity of Life:

The Problem of the Genesis of Possibility in Nature

> We made our speech from all things
> weaker than us and the sounds moved
> when our tongues moved
> as if they were alive...
> We made our speech from the beast's growl
> the bird's chirp and dumb thunder muttering
> and from the ice-spirit at the glacier's edge
> desolate voices of the lost one's calling
> And we changed the colours of things
> into sounds of themselves
> for we were the great imitators
> and spoke the strong words
> that invented men
> and became ourselves.
> -Al Purdy, from *Piling Blood*

> The spirit is not what descends into the body in order to organize it, but what emerges from it...
> -Merleau-Ponty, *Nature* (N 140/188)

Against the idea that the world is constituted by an intentional act, I have argued that conscious activity and even the environment-forming vital activity of the organism are inadequate to explain the emergence of sense in nature. I argued that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, from its earliest stages, is an endeavour to think outside the terms the problematic "philosophy of consciousness," a dualism between body and mind, and a correlate dichotomization of passivity and activity,

carried over from modern philosophy and endemic to early articulations of the phenomenological method.[84] I suggested that Merleau-Ponty's early thinking challenges us to see consciousness as emerging from nature, rather than presupposing an activity which preexists nature. Following Barbaras, I interpret Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project not as a "clarification of nature [but rather] a reform, indeed a calling into question, of consciousness."[85] Moreover, I demonstrated that not only does this criticism apply to a "philosophy of consciousness," but also to any attempt to defer constituting activity to the vital body, in what Merleau-Ponty earlier deems a "vital structure," or what Varela describes as the "auto-poiesis" of living organisms. But in Merleau-Ponty's earlier works, this argument is not explicitly made, and the meaning intended by the organism is still retained as an explanatory principle for life. The problem of how sense can emerge from sources prior to the awareness of living beings, of how vital activities can owe their orientation and potentiality to a sense which is not yet active or determinate, remains largely unanswered.

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[84] Critics from many quarters have argued that Merleau-Ponty's earlier works exhibit a psychologism that his later works avoid, arguing in particular that the *Phenomenology of Perception* remains within the subjective tradition of idealism or transcendental philosophy, and that his later works are a decisive departure from this subjectivism. See Carbone, "Thinking of the Sensible," 7-10, 22-6; Madison, "Phenomenology," 272; Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 120-2, 134. Carman labels Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy as "standard Gestalt theory" and then problematically characterizes Merleau-Ponty's turn away from consciousness as a reconciliation with naturalism: "Why does Merleau-Ponty renounce the primacy of consciousness? The answer, I think, appears ... fifteen years after his reflections on Schneider in the *Phenomenology*, considers once again the potentially catastrophic effects of brain damage. As we have seen, he rejects any sharp distinction between the mental and the physical, in light of which purely mechanical events in the brain could be straightforwardly correlated with discrete psychological effects described in abstraction from the subject's bodily being in the world." Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 121. As I have argued, there is a reading of consciousness as educated and developed in nature that is possible from Merleau-Ponty's earliest works. Basing consciousness in nature, I argue in the present chapter, does not amount to naturalism nor to a positivism of "purely mechanical events."

[85] Renaud Barbaras, "Nature," 28.

The question of the emergence of sense prior to presence and activity becomes the focal question of Merleau-Ponty's later writing and especially his lectures on *Institution* and *Nature*. His studies contextualize the activity of consciousness and vital activities within a natural "autoproduction of meaning." (N 125-138/169-185) Yet this rejection of constituting activity does not entail that meaning exists in a nature in-itself. Instead of ontological alternatives between materialism and idealism, mechanism and vitalism, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that "structures" of meaning in nature derive from a natural past in which they were not yet formed, but were developing. These are only "structures" nominally, in retrospect—their past was not yet determinate, and thus it was not on time, but arrives after the fact, once the possibilities that emerge from it establish it as past.

Developing the implications of Husserl's notion of *Stiftung*, Merleau-Ponty rejects the division between constitutive activity and statically constituted meaning, and instead argues that meaning emerges as self-differentiating developments of possibility in life. The possibility of meaning is neither formed in advance, nor strictly spontaneous, as in mechanist and finalist conceptions of life respectively, but arises out of a productive difference between past and present. Constituting and constituted, past and present are thought together as one ongoing "instituting-instituted" time. Appropriating Bergson's notion of a "retrograde movement of the true," Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how developmental "events" that realize possibility are not determinately given, which is the assumption in all causal, final and transcendental methods of explanation.

Rather, the so-called event of possibility is withdrawn because it needs to happen in order to be--by definition possibility cannot be formed in advance of its realization. Yet this realized possibility, once developed, appears to have predated itself, because it shows up nature as something which held its possibilities. Instead of this possibility being a mere retrospective projection, I argue that Merleau-Ponty turns to nature, studying cases of embryology, evolution and ontogenesis, to reveal how possibilities really do proliferate and develop in nature in a way that draws on a developmental past without positing this past as a reality in-itself.

The key to understanding how sense emerges in nature involves understanding this retrospective constitution of the past which is equally the genuine development of possibility. Possibility, on this view, is neither strictly preexistent nor spontaneously created. This entails that there cannot be a separation between the past and future of meaning, or an essentialization of the difference between static and developing structures of being. Possibility is genuinely created in nature insofar as the being of nature is not characterized by completeness or totality. The being of nature has sense only between layers of accumulated and emerging meaning structures. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's studies of embryology and vital developments furnish the conceptual tools to study a conception of possibility that emerges in life, between past and emerging structures in organisms. I take up Merleau-Ponty's assertion, following Vladimir Jankélévitch, that the true nature of possibility is not logical but organic as the key to understanding the genesis of sense in nature.

In developing this concept of organic possibility, I address two potential criticisms. First, I address the criticism, leveled by Foucault that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy amounts to naturalism, to a nostalgic return to coincidence with nature. Secondly, I address the seeming alternative provided by Foucault, that Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of the "retrograde movement of the true" renders nature a construct of human consciousness. Instead of a constituted nature or a constituting consciousness, however, Merleau-Ponty temporally relativizes these notions and traces their emergence to an open-ended history of developing possibilities. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy culminates then, neither in a naive realism nor in a phenomenological idealism, but in an ontology that grounds the activity of living bodies in the organic becoming of natural, yet not pre-determined, possibilities.

2.1 The Genetic Passivity of Life in *The Structure of Behaviour*

In *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty rejects the possibility of explaining life by a cause that precedes the organism or its environment. Rejecting the possibility that "vital structures" of behaviour are either passively constituted by environmental or biological causal mechanisms, or actively constituted by a vital force of the organism, Merleau-Ponty asserts that a vital structure of behaviour is one in which organic activity and environmental inputs exist in a co-dependent circuit. In a discussion of the reflex, Merleau-Ponty argues that the organism-environment relation can neither be accomplished by isolated sensor activities in the organism or by preexistent features of the sensible

environment. These terms of activity and passivity, organism and environment, are what Merleau-Ponty deems “truly dialectical relations" (SB 148/161) which exist in a circuit of co-dependence:

> When the eye and the ear follow an animal in flight, it is impossible to say, ‘which started first’ in the exchange of stimuli and responses. Since all the movements of the organism are always conditioned by external influences, one can, if one wishes, readily treat behaviour as an effect of the milieu. But in the same way, since all the stimulations which the organism receives have in turn been possible only by its preceding movements which have culminated in exposing the receptor organ to the external influences, one could also say that the behaviour is the first cause of the stimulations. (SB 13/11)

There is neither an environment which precedes the organism nor an organic activity which activates and realizes a sensitivity to the environment. Sensing organism and sensed environment are mutually requisite aspects of organic behaviour—and this is the meaning of “dialectical” entailed by Merleau-Ponty’s description. As such, neither a closed mechanism that constitutes the organism, nor a transcendent vital activity by which the organism constitutes its actions and environment can explain the interrelated structural relationship that characterizes vital life. On the one hand, to conceive the organism as actively aware depends upon an object or “milieu” of awareness, such that awareness is only ever awareness-of a situation. Conversely, to conceive of a sensed environment entails the active sensing of the organism. On this interpretation of the dialectical

relation, activity and passivity are dialectical concepts which genetically presuppose each other and cannot be thought apart.

Because these terms are coeval, there can be no appeal to a prior moment in time in which the organism was constituted by something outside of itself or was constituting of itself. This means that the vital structure of behaviour cannot be unraveled into separable precedent factors, such as a mechanical cause or finalistic vital activity. Merleau-Ponty rejects a "regressive analysis" which seeks a chronological origin for the organism in either the environment or in some self-enclosed activity of the organism. (SB 160/174) As such, the time of the organism cannot issue from some preceding "natural" time. Merleau-Ponty argues that both mechanism and vitalism conceive of the organism as a natural being in-itself. Mechanism requires the reduction of life to physical events in nature, whereas vitalism proposes that there is a pure activity that lies beyond the spatio-temporal natural events which are its effects. Thus, "in reality, the two arguments consider the organism as a real product of an external nature." (SB 159/173) Searching for a cause that is temporally outside the organism (whether a determinate mechanism of the past or an unrealized teleological form in the future) presupposes a sense that owes its reference to the already established organism-environment relationship. Temporally, there cannot be a natural past in-itself that was completely independent of the organism, but neither is the organism capable of constituting itself independently of meaningful environmental events and developments.

Notice that both mechanism and vitalism depend upon the notion of a past

in-itself, comprised of determinate events. The premise of mechanism is that the past is self-enclosed, such that the organism is an event that merely continues the past rather than a development which constitutes a new meaning. The premise of vitalism is that there is a rupture in the continuous causality of the past, and as such the present is no longer continuous with the past but breaks with it in the new order constituted by the organism. Here the organism as a new constitution within physical space is still conceived of as a piece of mechanical nature, only its ordering principle no longer belongs to natural causality but exists as a mysterious force exerted to constitute the organism. Even though this force is super-natural, what it constitutes is still conceived of as a component of a physical nature *partes extra partes* rather than a different form of bodily organization than the physical, such that "one needs to introduce an active principle of order, an entelechy, only when one tries to compose the organism by means of the summation of separated processes." (SB 159/173) Vitalism denies the continuity of the organism with the causal past of nature, but still depends upon this notion of a naturally determinate organism, located in the physical space-time of nature. Where the mechanistic view reduced the cause of the organism to the causal determinacy of the past, the vitalist maintains that there is a cause that completely transcends this past, affirming that the organism is discontinuous with natural causality, and thus exists only as futurity. On the first view, there can be no account of the spontaneous vital awareness and creative development of the organism, and on the other view, which succeeds in describing this activity, there can be no explanation of the organism's passive dependence on the past. The premises that cleave the

conditions of vital behaviour into vital activity and mechanistic passivity, then, simultaneously dichotomize a past in-itself (which mechanism fully affirms but finalism fully rejects) from a future-oriented creativity of the organism (which mechanism flatly denies but finalism upholds). So long as nature is conceived of as determinate, fixed being, and so long as the past, present and future are conceived of as separate, substantial dimensions of existence, in short so long as we remain in "the plane of being" then there is no avoiding a "return the antinomies." (SB 160/173) Thus, instead of separating activity and passivity, mechanistic past and pure future, Merleau-Ponty rejects these ontological and temporal dichotomies in favour of the unity of active and passive dimensions of vital behaviour, and the irreducible meaning of the organism as a temporal meaning or "melody."[86] (SB 159/172)

Since it can neither be traced strictly to a material, natural past nor to a teleological form that transcends this past, the difficulty lies in explaining the origin of the sense of the organism. Like mechanism, vitalism is not an account that can explain how the organism enacts a holistic meaning not reducible to the action of parts upon parts, nor can it explain how the ordering or constituting principle of this organization is proper to the space of this embodied form of the organism itself, rather than to a super-natural force. On one reading of *The*

[86] Ted Toadvine articulates Merleau-Ponty's use of the melody as "the circular relation of parts and whole, the orientation toward a norm, and the transposability that allows its essential structure to be detached from any particular physical embodiment." Furthermore, melody implies that behaviour or structure is not given in point-like instants, but within a temporal horizon, such that "the temporality of organic behaviour, like that of melody, cannot be understood as the juxtaposition of 'now' points... each moment of the melody virtually contains the whole, as it has a meaning as this-note-in-the-melody only by virtue of its global reference to the entire temporal structure." Toadvine, "Nature," 31-2.

Structure of Behaviour, which I do not hold, but that finds support in the second chapter distinguishing vital from physical and symbolic forms of existence, the organism is transcendentally self-constituting.[87] On this view, the antinomy of past and future, passive and active causes entails that the organism effects its own sense and temporality.[88] There cannot be a time that precedes the organism, whether from a causal mechanism or preformed ideal, because these two times are co-dependent components of a time of life that is transcendental and primordial. The vital structure of behaviour names an ontologically irreducible temporal intentionality which is at once past-conditioned and future-oriented. There is not a past in-itself behind the organism nor a teleological form awaiting it, because the vital structure inaugurates a temporal horizon in which these terms have sense. Just as activity and passivity depend upon each other, the vital structure of behaviour is a unique domain of established sense—this sense is not completely reducible to "physical" structures of nature, nor is it entirely independent of them: "Even its elementary reactions cannot be classified, as we have said, according to the apparatuses in which they are realized, but according to their vital significance." (SB 149/162) These natural structures play a role in vital life, but vital life is irreducible to these structures and has sublimated them toward its own vital purposes: "A physical explanation of behaviour supposes that physical forms can possess all the properties of biological… relations for which they serve as

[87] Bernard Flynn suggests such an interpretation of vital behaviour in his summary of Merleau-Ponty's thought: "The stimulus does not unilaterally affect the organism in virtue of its absolute physical and chemical properties; it becomes a stimulus only insofar as the organism constitutes for itself a vital milieu which it projects around itself." Flynn, "Merleau-Ponty," 1.
[88] I will argue that the organism is a unique site of temporality, but that this temporal ground in the organism is not self-constituting because it operates according to a logic of institution.

substrate." (SB 136/146) Vital structures exhibit a meaning which transcends simple physical structures by responding to them, but vital structures do not constitute new meanings as such (which later figures as a capacity of the symbolic, human structure). Neither pure creativity nor pure receptivity, vital structures exhibit a structure of static passivity that mediates activity and passivity. A vital structure neither strictly continues a past nor constitutes time anew, but exhibits an irreducible horizon of temporality and sense that relates to a natural past while transcending it.

Merleau-Ponty, on this reading of the organism as transcendental, describes how the organism develops not according to merely natural events, nor according to an "ideal unity" but by a meaning which is the very existence of the organism: "It does not seem possible to understand life by a regressive analysis which goes back to its conditions. It will be a question of a prospective analysis which will look for the immanent signification of life..." (SB 160/173) This antinomy of the priority of active constitution and passive conditioning, futural or past causes of meaning, cannot be resolved because the mediation of activity and passivity, future and past, is a transcendental condition of the very meaning life. On this reading, which precludes a logic of institution, the vital structure is, by virtue of its constituting activity, its own condition of existence and sense. On this interpretation, Merleau-Ponty is merely naturalizing constituting consciousness, imputing it to the activity of the organism. Thus there cannot be a pre-vital cause of vital meaning, because vital meaning is transcendentally given and cannot have natural antecedents. Any such "past" is constitutively the past

for or within the vital structure:

> The ideal structure of behaviour allows us to link the present state of the organism with a prior state taken as given, to see in the former the progressive realization of an essence already legible in this latter (without ever being able to go beyond the limit or make the idea of a cause of existence). (SB 160/173)

Thus the correlate of the living activity of the organism can never be a physical universe which chronologically preceded it, because even these so-called physical precedents are in fact meaningful from the standpoint of a particular form of vital awareness. The organism, as vital structure, does not belong to a physical order that precedes it, and its life is an "equilibrium… obtained, not with respect to real and present conditions, but with respect to conditions which are only virtual and which the system itself brings into existence." (SB 145/157) The organism and its environment, vital organization and natural events, derive their sense from the transcendental priority of the meaningfulness of life, without which neither can be conceived. In this way, writes Merleau-Ponty, "life is not a special cause" (SB 152/165) that takes the form of a physical force or immaterial ideal, but a first principle of meaning which is the very domain of anything like organic norms or environmental events.

On the one hand, this transcendental origin of vital structures of behaviour actively constitutes a temporal meaning, but on the other hand, it presupposes a constituted order of time that has meaning as the orientation of this or that particular life. On this transcendental interpretation of vital structures, this vital

"event" of meaning must then precede a chronological horizon of antecedent causes. This is not an "event" at a specific moment in time, but the transcendental givenness of a meaningful relation of time in the organic horizon of a life. The self-grounding of vital temporality did not happen in the past, chronologically, but is rather an ontological ground that precedes and structures any moment of time, present or past. This transcendental constituting activity, on this account, forms the static mediation of activity and passivity that characterizes the structure of vital behaviour, and it furnishes sense for the references "before" or "origin." The self-given structure of vital behaviour does not involve a temporal regress of causes because it is self-grounding. Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to describe "nuclei of signification" ("*noyaux de signification*") which are proper to the organism as

> animal essences—… walking toward a goal, taking, eating bait, jumping over or going around an obstacle—unities which reflexology did not succeed in engendering from elementary [physical] reactions, and which are therefore like an *a priori* of biological science. (SB 157/170)

The vital structure transcends the physical time of mere events in nature toward meaningful, lived relations, in what Barbaras refers to--citing Merleau-Ponty's unpublished note which in turn cites Goldstein--as an ontological difference where the events of nature do not, in themselves, "belong to the being of the organism."[89] An organism's grasping at food is not a series of muscular contractions or reflex stimuli, but an internally ordered and intrinsically

[89] Barbaras, "Nature," 34.

meaningful task. Merleau-Ponty writes, at the end of the section on "Vital Structures," that there can be no "universe of naturalism that is self-enclosed" because "perception is not an event of nature." (SB 145/157) Thus, in order to explain the synthetic unity of activity and passivity within time, an origin for this order must be transcendentally posited outside of chronological time.

Yet, here the chronological and the transcendental temporal registers presuppose each other, such that the transcendental cause that lies outside of chronological time is nevertheless the orienting principle of the specific time of this or that particular organism. The question of how this vital structure nevertheless genetically comes to be in time (i.e. how organic life can emerge in the first place) remains deferred beyond the character of its own self-grounding temporality. While the insight that life projects its meaning into the past is a valuable insight, this transcendental explanation of life precludes the birth and becoming of life in a natural past prior to the organism. In *The Structure of Behaviour,* Merleau-Ponty suggests both that life is passive in a generative, developmental way, issuing from non-life, but also that the time of life is transcendental and without a prehistory. While there are powerful resources in this work to conceptualize developmental structures of life, there is not a full-fledged account of how the meaning of life becomes necessary, how its irreducible structure nevertheless begins as a moment of facticity. It will take another understanding of life and interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's texts to account for the origination of the vital structure in a pre-vital past, because the precise difficulty in the transcendental view is that life cannot be oriented by any

temporal pre-conditions, since life is only conceivable within its own parameters.

There is no way to describe, within this transcendental view, how or why a vital structure emerges—it remains an advent and epiphany, a mysterious and irreducible expression of the living body. Below I will argue, after considering this transcendental view, that this mystery is one of a creative becoming which generates its own terms of intelligibility that must be uniquely understood, but on this view the origination of life out of non-life remains shrouded in opacity. The meaning of life, on this view, is its own cause, orienting its own temporal field, in which anything like a prior "cause" or a future "goal" has sense. Since the notion "cause" requires living structures of behaviour to have sense, it cannot truly antedate them. The question of the origin of the meaning of life, then, remains unanswerable within the static mediation of activity and passivity that characterizes the already-established organism, because the only solution there is a circular presupposition of the vital structure. Merleau-Ponty notes that within the primal sphere of vital meaning, the notion of an outside, of a future organization that is not yet present, but will come to be as a new cause remains nonsensical:

> Since the physico-chemical actions of which the organism is the seat cannot be abstracted from those of the milieu, how can the act which creates an organic individual be circumscribed in this continuous whole and where should the zone of influence of the vital élan be limited? It will indeed be necessary to introduce an unintelligible break here. (SB 158/171)

It is only in life that we find a temporal horizon, and it is only to organisms that "events" in the evolutionary and developmental past have a formative significance. And yet, this transcendental field is said to constitute this or that specific temporal sequence of a specific organism that has a determinate birth. It is this fact of birth, the origination of activity from passivity, that a transcendental account cannot explain. The problem is to conceive of passivity not just as a co-efficient of vital sense, but more radically as generative passivity, an origin which is "unintelligible" in the form of an identifiable cause or pure transcendental principle.[90] The issue revolves around the fact that structures of vital meaning exhibit an intrinsic meaning that is not reducible to merely physical, chronological events which preceded them, while nonetheless owing their sense to a preceding source that is, from within these established structures, nonsense. There must be a principle of the past which is not yet the determinate chronological past of the organism, and thus is not a mere construct that fits within the transcendental parameters of sense that ground life.

I propose a second, more difficult reading of *The Structure of Behaviour*, in which I posit that life has both an irreducible meaning and owes its origins to processes of emergence and development.[91] On this view, life is originally incomplete and must temporally develop, but the question will be whether life effects this development itself, or whether this development is oriented by a

[90] The precise character of the indirect, developing intelligibility of this "origin" is the topic of section 2.5.

[91] I share this reading of *The Structure of Behaviour* with John Russon, who explains how humans and animals alike are not born as already formed beings, but must develop and learn to be in a process of involvement in the world which involves the accumulation of increasingly adapted practices. For this reading, see section one of "Embodiment and Responsibility: Merleau-Ponty and the Ontology of Nature."

generative passivity that is temporally and ontologically the *outside* of life. In *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty describes how developmental events suddenly become noticeable when new orders of behaviour emerge in life. Notably, he remarks that we can only objectify these moments of becoming in retrospect, after a new meaning is established:

> In order to make a living organism reappear, starting from these reactions, one must trace lines of cleavage in them, choose points of view from which certain ensembles receive a common signification and appear, for example, as phenomena of 'assimilation' or as components of a 'function of reproduction'; one must choose points of view from which certain sequences of events, until then submerged in a continuous becoming, are distinguished for the observer as 'phases'—growth, adulthood—of organic development. One must mentally detach certain partitive phenomena from their real context and subsume them under an idea which is not contained, but expressed, in them. (SB 152/165)

Vital structures, on this reading, do not preexist themselves, but emerge genetically through phases of development, through embodying new modes of behaviour which are not reducible to those that preceded them. In regarding life, we are prompted to notice (Merleau-Ponty problematically says "choose," but then qualifies this by saying that we must choose according to the vital structure's own expression) stages where a new meaning comes on the scene and transfigures the sense of the body: flexion, for example, becomes grasping, and at some point grasping becomes expressive gesture. Life is understood by a particular

consciousness, and thus must be understood relative to consciousness, but it is not constituted by consciousness. Life exhibits an immanent signification that is not natural mechanism anymore than it is the projective construct of consciousness, but a true becoming of meaning. Consciousness reads, rather than projects, this becoming of meaningful forms in nature.

On my reading of *The Structure of Behaviour*, life is developmental, neither a nominal construct in a mechanistic universe, nor is it a pure *a priori* meaning, but the expression of a meaning which takes up and elaborates its own conditions of possibility as it comes to be. While life has an "immanent signification," this is immanent not only to the organism itself, but to the other organisms that relate to it. Expression, not mechanism or ideality, names the process by which structures exhibit and progress into sense, and from which causes and effects or ideas can only be retrospectively posited as origins. Merleau-Ponty explains that the processes of life support endless scientific and ideal analysis, without ever being decomposable into purely empirical or ideal terms. Thus, life is not a pure and transcendental meaning that can be circumscribed in advance, but an expressive meaning which comes to be, mutates, grows, and ceases to be in a temporality of development and change. "Vital acts" are an ongoing progression of meaning that are not a pre-established but are an "unfolding ideal unity," such that the organism, and here Merleau-Ponty quotes *Uexküll*, "is a melody which sings itself." (SB 159/172) There is not an ideal plan innately in the organism, nor is the idea a simple projection of consciousness onto the organism: the meaning is "expressed in it." (SB 152/165) Like a melody,

certain themes modulate and transform prior notes—drawing upon them without being reducible to them. As such, at a certain point there are "cleavage[s]" which introduce a new order that is genuinely original yet situated amongst the prior orders, and contextualized by their meaning, just as a piano player might improvise a riff through the melodic arpeggios that had only been intimated in the harmonic chords of the "head" of the tune, picking up but completely transforming the sense of the notes. Similarly, a physical contraction or extension becomes--at the decisive moment--a sensitive grasping of the world.

And yet, even though Merleau-Ponty has here gestured beyond a transcendental account of life to a sense of life as developmental and genetically passive, the issue of how inorganic events can be the motor of organic expression, how the sense of life can issue from a generatively passive origin that is not yet life, remains unanswered. We can say that life is not self-grounding because of its history, but we cannot explain this history outside of the synthetic conditions of life.

The developmental account remains at a genetic level, then, and retains the problems of a transcendental philosophy of life, despite pointing beyond them. Each specific development in organic life is, on this view, a unique transcendental principle which inaugurates a new meaning, but this meaning cannot be explained by anything except its own melodic character. This meaning can never exactly be an event because it can never be "first," which is to say that by the time it "happens" it has already invoked and presupposed its own meaning, transcending

any meaning of structures "prior" to it.[92] So long as nature is understood as a constituted reality in itself, and *a fortiori* so long as time is understood as a series of separate, demarcated instants then the question of a causal origin remains a valid but unanswerable problem. There is no past in which there was not already constituting activity, and thus constituting activity remains its own condition of possibility, despite the passive mediation by which it gains determinacy in organic development.

Much of the problem is that activity and passivity are still being thought separately, and their transcendental unity remains ambivalent, an oscillation between opposed extremes. Activity requires passivity, but we cannot say that activity begins as passivity and owes its orientation and emergence to a history in which it was not yet active. Because we cannot think the two apart, we have to think them together, but they remain conceptualized as separate, co-requisite factors. The ontological co-conditionality hinges upon a pure meaning, beyond and prior to the time of discrete natural events. Here constituting activity is just displaced one level, to the now mediated vital cause of the organism and its vital meaning. Though activity requires the mediation of passivity, this passivity is a mere coefficient of the developmental activity of the organism, delimited within the scope of the self-effecting phases of genetic development. Outside of this mediation there cannot be a dependence on other conditions prior to the organism

[92] This is the difference between what is, in analytic philosophy, called type and token. Here the token cannot make sense without the type, but conversely, the type must problematically emerge through the creation of a token, for which there is not yet a type. The issue of how a "first" event can happen that inaugurates and participates in a type without yet belonging to it is a perennial problem. A similar version of the problem in terms of natural causality, is the subject of Kant's "Third Antinomy." Kant, "Pure Reason," 496-503/A465 B493-A476 B504.

qua (developmental) activity. This genetic passivity remains an inertia of activity, still contextualized within organic powers of acting, and thus serves to demarcate their scope, rather than to radically reorient them within structures of passivity and generativity. We saw the same problem with consciousness, and its attendant and itinerant constituting activity, which entails an infinite regress of acts—its origins remain the referents of its own intentional activity. There is an insurmountable problem with any account in which vital meaning is purely given and self-grounding, even if it genetically traces this meaning to an organic history, because such an account presupposes that there can only be meaning within the temporal field of life, and thus posits a transcendental self-constitution of life. In these terms, there cannot be an account of life which articulates the radical passivity of life in its generative, pre-vital origins, in an archaic becoming of natural sense prior to the already grounded meaning and temporality of life.

2.2 The Generative Passivity of Life in *Nature*

Merleau-Ponty's insight in *The Structure of Behaviour* is that the active and passive moments in an organism's life require each other, such that the organism and its environmental conditions cannot be thought apart, but these conditions remained construed as temporally coincident and mutually dependent, and thus this mediated structure remains at the level of what I have defined as static passivity. Even prior to the existence of such mature structures, though, their origination is already conceived according to developmental activity, and thus they are limited to a concept of genetic activity, which remains a counterpart

of activity. What is required, and what I develop in this section, is a sense of passivity that is not merely an immature form of activity, a genetic passivity of life, but a more radical sense which precedes even developmental activity and out of which such activities emerge and are oriented. In Merleau-Ponty's later thought, particularly the lectures courses *Institution* and *Nature*, we see that he deepens the notion of a dialectical environment-organism relationship, and describes orienting and motivating developments that are not, in the first place, referents of this vital activity. Furthermore he complicates and enriches the notion of an organic "form" or "structure" of vital activity by pointing out the ways in which living bodies develop and take on new, divergent, and unpredictable structures of meaning. Like mature vital structures, developmental activities are not temporally self-grounding or complete, because they take time to develop, and are not originally self-effecting. To understand this generative passivity that precedes organic activity, it is necessary to turn to empirical studies of the formation of life. First, though, I will consider how Merleau-Ponty changes his articulation of the organism as a melody, which amounts to a redefinition of his notion of form as more open, developmental temporal structure, in order to provide a basic conceptual template to characterize organic development.

In *The Structure of Behaviour* Merleau-Ponty cites Jakob von Uexküll to describe the organism as "a melody which sings itself." (SB 159/172) Like a melody, the organism is a temporal unity across different moments, and as in a melody, the organism is defined by its "form" rather than by the material which realizes it, whether musical instrument or anatomical parts. Further, here the

melody is conceived as something which enacts itself according to a given form, and is thus self-effecting and normative.[93] While helpful in conceiving the organism as a whole, this conception nevertheless retains an active-passive binary, in which activity is already present, if mediated by passivity. Moving beyond such a notion of a melody as a temporal, self-enacting form, Merleau-Ponty later reflects, in *Nature*, on the way that a melody is built up out of contingent and emergent modulations and resonances, and thus how it neither has a pregiven form nor is simply self-effecting.[94] Merleau-Ponty writes that it is as if the melody is what enacts the organism, insofar as "the melody sings in us much more than we sing it; it goes down the throat of the singer, as Proust says... the body is suspended by what it sings: the melody is incarnated and finds in the body a type of servant." (N 174/228). Like a melody that compellingly stirs the body to dance before we notice we are hearing it, developing behaviour moves the organism in advance of the organism constituting the behaviour. Also, despite the presence of a reference to the future in the organism, like the melody, it is clear each is going somewhere without this end being determined in advance:

> In a melody, a reciprocal influence between the first and the last note takes place, and we have to say that the first note is only possible because of the last, and vice versa. It is in this way that things happen in the construction of a living being. There is no priority of effect over cause. Just as we

[93] I draw this reading from Toadvine's insightful discussion of the Merleau-Ponty's use of the melody in *The Structure of Behaviour*. Toadvine, "Nature," 31-2.
[94] Also, Toadvine points out how, in *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty reconceives the motif of the melody as a developmental structure: "Whereas Merleau-Ponty's earlier use of the musical metaphor had emphasized the fixity of the organism's melody by the *a priori* structures of vital need, here the accent is on the ecological relationships formed between the organism, other creatures, and their milieu." Toadvine, "Strange Kinship," 27.

> cannot say that the last note is the end of the melody and that the first is the effect of it, neither can we distinguish the meaning apart from the meaning where it is expressed. ... It is impossible to distinguish the means and the end, the essence and the existence in it. From a center of physical matter surges an ensemble of principles of discernment at a given movement, which means that in this region of the world, there will be a vital event. (N 174/228)

The melody is not a fixed form, but a diacritical one. The presence of a futurity in the melody does not mark the determination of a fixed end, but an orientation that calls for new meaning and according to which certain events and developments will come to have a sense within the melody, or the vital behaviour. Like the possible changes in an improvised melody, new possibilities can play out which transfigure the sense of what came before. The so-called "form" of organic behaviour, then, is worked out along the way as a temporal progression, a developing rhythm which can organically inhabit new temporal possibilities as they come to resonate with it.

To better see how the organism exists as open-ended, melodic becoming rather than a fixed form, Merleau-Ponty points toward organisms without well-formed anatomies, since "the structure hides the construction of the structure." (N 169/223) Turning to protozoa, Merleau-Ponty explains that in the amoeba there is no discernible difference between form, the construction of form, and the decay and regeneration of form. The amoeba moves by an oscillation, the impetus of which places a pseudo-pod of plasma forward while displacing the previous

location of the plasma and leaving a vacuole in its wake. There are not fixed parts of the amoeba whose functions are determined in advance; rather a vital orientation to the environment provokes a self-differentiating dynamic of movement within the pseudopod, according to which "parts" are assigned their roles, but in a way where the parts are provisional and oscillate fluidly between extending pseudo-pod and collapsing vacuole. A call to move in one direction is accomplished by a total modulation of the organism qua melody, because protoplasm is shifted into an organ where there previously was none while another organ fades back into the amoeba's body, just as a note is called for by the elapsing note which it succeeds. Merleau-Ponty notes that whereas animals are born, and have superseding developments, the birth, development, and proper functioning of the amoeba are indecipherable:

> In the animal-machines there is a difference between functioning and birth. For the amoeba, to maintain itself and to function are the same thing. The amoeba is continuous birth, pure production, 'much less a machine than the horse,' according to Uexküll. (N 170/223)

The amoeba serves to demonstrate how development is an ongoing process in organisms, how function is undergirded and continually achieved by development, such that all life is, in varying degrees, characterized by an open proliferation of behaviour, rather than fixed species-forms. This is not, however, to say that the developments in life are merely contingent and reversible; we can clearly see that this is not the case by turning to more complex forms of organic development where specific rhythms of development qualitatively build upon

each other.

Development is not a pure activity that creates new forms *ex nihilo*, because it is always provisionally oriented, without being determined, by preceding processes of development. Biological structures are not mere spatial structures, things in-themselves, but are stages within a moving process of development. These provisional "structures" or "institutions" resume a past while transforming it, such that the prior function is neither an already formed mature function, nor a total lack of orientation. When lungs are forming in embryo, they do not fashion themselves out of inert parts according to a disincarnate plan, but rather take up the movement of "semi-circular canals" of flowing fluid in the embryo. These rhythms of flow anticipate, without yet being, the tidal pulmonary rhythms they will, or perhaps might, come to be. Merleau-Ponty explains this phenomenon in *Institution*, quoting the French biologist Raymond Ruyer, as a dialectic between the developing structures of the embryo and the functions they will come to enact. Merleau-Ponty reconceives organic "structure" as a dynamic, functional concept inconceivable apart from development:

> 'Structure and function,' 'structure and behavior' are not at all like 'machine and function,' with the structure being the sufficient cause of the function. They develop together, nearly in step, the one at times anticipating a bit of the other, and calling forth the other according to the needs of the living. The structure's massive anticipation of the function, represented by the fact that the embryo i*n utero* forms the organs of free, breathing life, is more apparent than real. The embryo, floating freely,

> probably itself contributes to its equilibrium, the semi-circular canals being very precocious in their growth. Even the respiratory movements are outlines *in utero*, the embryo absorbing and expelling the amniotic fluid. (IP 85/[16](12))[95]

Like the melody, the developing circular flow-structures have a generative form, rather than a static one, because they exist provisionally, not as fixed structures. It is *as if* these developmental structures are oriented toward a mature function, albeit which is not yet actualized. Yet, this organic function, though not yet present or guaranteed, cannot be said to constitute the developing structures because it depends upon these developing rhythm-structures. It is not pure activity because it must resume this older movement, but neither is it a mere continuation of this movement or a product of it because, in the transformation that occurs within these rhythms, a new rhythm with a new function is born. The "form" or function of behaviour is dialectically achieved within this melodic structure: there is one kind of movement, but then a development inhabits this movement, transforming it into a different kind of function (breathing is different in kind than fluid flowing). Even though this development draws upon the previous movement, it cannot be determined in advance by it, and thus its motivation or orientation by this past can only be manifest post-factually.[96] Thus

[95] Merleau-Ponty is citing Ruyer, "L'instinct," 829.

[96] These differences are not yet determinate principles of orientation for the organism—although they might appear this way retroactively. The organism is enacted in a movement that transcends these natural differences without leaving them behind. Within this logic of "institution," which I explicate in section four of this chapter, Merleau-Ponty abandons the idea of the organism as a fixed vital perspective *Erlebnisse* and thinks of it as an originary institution or *Ur-stiftung* which resumes as much as it constitutes the past—indeed these notions of passive conditioning and active constitution break down here. VI, 221/275.

developmental organic structures are not complete in-themselves but out of their movement issue transfigurations which become vital structures, which themselves might serve as the platform for other structures (such as birdsong, or the aspirated speech of human beings, or the artistic breathing of Qigong, for example).[97] Each developed structure can, in turn, serve as a take-off point for other structures, although these developed structures will only become apparent as a platform for new structures after the fact.

To understand how, rather than reconstituting a new order of space and temporality, the organism originates in a developmental dialectic of premature and mature structures, Merleau-Ponty turns, in his *Nature* lectures to the embryologist George Coghill's discussion of axolotl embryology.[98] Coghill describes how an organism takes up and recasts spatio-temporal rhythms, enacting a behaviour which amounts to a new modulation within the rhythms of the environment. Yet prior to this development these factors cannot appear as having predated and oriented the organism. Thus initially, prior to its adult functionality, the mature structures of the organism are not manifest or present in the environment. Like the opening bars of a melody, there is a premature function or structure that is open to subsequent developments, even though these developments are not present or even necessitated *in utero*: "We cannot define the animal by its immediate functioning; here the apparatus has meaning only for a future." (N 144/193) Merleau-Ponty explains that Coghill provides a new concept

[97] As a vital orientation resumes and transforms a pre-vital movement, a cultural orientation can similarly come to fruition within, and transfigure, the vital body.
[98] Merleau-Ponty is referring to Coghill's *Anatomy and the Problem of Behaviour.*

of development which amounts to the organism having an ability,[99] or "what it can do," but one that owes itself to "… a growing possibility interior to the maturing organism." (N 144/193) Coghill demonstrates that before the motor and neural specification of its peripheral parts, the axolotl salamander first begins a contracting rhythm in its center in order to move its head independently from its body. Subsequently, the axolotl begins to curl in one direction, flexing its head in opposition to its tail. After reversing this movement, the head and tail can move autonomously such that, by flexing in opposite directions, the body can form an "S" shape. It is at this point, once there are differentiated proximal and distal points, and opposed vectors of movement between them, that functional neural pathways begin to be established in these distinct sections. A sensory-motor circuit does not initiate this movement, but can only grow into an established structure once this movement is already rhythmically repeating itself.

Before the nervous system is formed and there is a sensori-motor relation to the environment, the organism enacts a self-articulating movement along a proximal-distal axis, toward and away from its center. This movement establishes an orientation or *sens* in the organism, which the formation of the neural system will depend upon for its formation. Yet, this is not the sufficient cause of the development of the nervous system, but merely a kind of movement which the nervous system, to develop, needs to take up. The axis around the center of the organism, and the opposed directions of the movement, prepare distinct moving

[99] This ability is something that must be conceived according to the French *puissance*, which denotes a potency or openness to develop, rather than *pouvoir* which denotes already established power or capacity.

senses which are not yet, but can become, efferent and afferent nervous orientations around a nervous-center. The neural pathways can only form along these already existing directions (*sens*) of pre-neural movement:

> The two gradients are going to constitute the physiological and dynamic antecedents of the nervous connections. … One may believe that the difference between the motor and sensory systems is attributable to the gradients. At the origin, the nervous cells are of the same kind, and what distinguished them is the direction of conduction: toward the head or toward the tail, following from which they are motor or sensory. This direction of conduction does not depend on the nature of the cells, but rather on the pre-neural polarity. (N 143/192)

This premature, pre-neural dynamic is not merely furnished by the organism *ex nihilo*, as the finalist would have it, because the organism's movement issues along dimensions already at work in the environment. On the other hand, these dimensions are not what constitute the emergent form, as the mechanist would have it, because the form takes up these movements and transfigures them into a new, neural function, only showing them up as predecessors in retrospect.

Coghill considers an anatomical explanation, by which these movements are instead enabled by the prior connection of neural circuits, but Merleau-Ponty notes that the experimental evidence refutes this idea because neurons emerge out of moving connections, and not vice versa. One form of spatial relationship is the take-off point for another, such as in the non-neural rhythms discussed above which grow into superseding nervous or respiratory structures:

> This organization is not so much due to the functioning of the neuron as to the growth of the whole organism. The pre-neural system of integration 'enjambs' the nervous functioning, and it does not stop with its apparition. The nervous system is thus not the ultimate explanation. (N 143/192)

The principles which condition behaviour are not determinately causal nor are they transcendental meanings of the organism, but rather emerge as "enjambments" of space from within, such that within one system, another can be prefigured and motivated, but emerge on its own original terms that contort and recast the preceding ones.[100] There was nothing in the opposed physical movements in the organism that necessitated neural activity. But like the rhythm of the walking bass line which becomes modulated by harmonic and melodic shifts of the saxophone and singer that enter the melody, these premature rhythms are contracted into the present of the new function of the organism, and are exhibited there indirectly as traces of a developmental past, as transfigured rhythms of nature.[101] Form is anticipated but emergent, not preexistent—its emergence occludes and transfigures the preexisting stage in development, showing it up as predecessor or cause. But what later emerge as efferent and

[100] I will elaborate this spatial character of development in section 2.3. The term of enjambment literally means "encroaching upon" or "straddling" or "going beyond," and describes a spatial promiscuity by which different spaces qualitatively interact and flow into each other, modulating space such that restructurings of the organism emerge. The development of new behaviours and functions in the organism is this reorientation of space from within, such as the heart blood vessel growth which motivates a looping movement of heart-tube growth, which in turn constricts and becomes folded into the heart chambers, which are then capable of enacting a circulating flow of blood in the body. These basic intensities within space are the take-off point, but not the sufficient condition, of these mature structures. The mature structures emerge within, and indeed as a re-folding, and intensive reorientation (i.e. "enjambment") of spatial movement in which one spatiality takes up and transfigures another.

[101] I will elaborate this temporal sense in sections 2.4 and 2.5.

afferent nerves begin as differential gradients in movement, electricity, temperature and premature features which do not yet exhibit the sense of the vital structure.

Vital awareness, the *Umwelt,* is not a transcendental cause of the organism, but is an acquired, learned aptitude, such that Merleau-Ponty can say in *Institution* that "[o]rganic maturation is genuine learning." (IP 85/[16](12)) Life develops by taking up and transforming pre-organic rhythms in the "pursuit of its own melody. And it must discover them at the right time." (IP 85/ [16](12))[102] The organism's developments are temporally oriented by sense which is neither constituted by the organism nor preexistent in the environment. Mechanism and finalism depend upon a total activity or passivity of the organism; neither view can account for how there is an orienting sense in the environment which does not precede the organism as a fixed meaning, but which will come to unfold as an orienting dimension of the past[103] *within* the temporal becoming of the organism. In Barbaras' words:

> The organism is not the sum of its parts—and thus we escape from mechanism—without however referring to a transcendental principle, and this is why vitalism is just as inadequate: the living is like a whirlwind, which is nothing more than water and which gives it however its form.[104]

Finalism cannot account for accidents, or how an ideal form can be transfigured by environmentally sensitive developments in organisms, especially what

[102] Citing Ruyer, "L'instinct," 831.
[103] For a definition of the dimension see section 1.4.
[104] Barbaras, "Nature," 34.

Merleau-Ponty will call “supra-normal” and “monstrous” cases.[105] Merleau-Ponty sees an open development between the environmental milieu and the organism's trajectory rather than a fixed cause or final theme: “The means denature the end, that their resistance, their inertia, gains the end.” (N 61/90)[106] The organism is not a fixed form, but a generative one, and it is radically passive because it is characterized by developmental openness to new structures of meaning. The organism is open because it does not prepossess these activities, in a final or even a developmental sense. Thus, in development the so-called "causes" are reversible, because the organizing "principle" is, in shaping life, oriented by a history which it, once enacted, melodically inflects. So the organism's passivity is not deterministically given either, because its passivity is characterized by dynamism and is recast by the very future that it opens, as Barbaras states that: "mechanism does not explain how the organism changes, becomes more than it is and mutates, how the organism is polarized by a

[105] Ruyer writes of stimuli that affect an organism beyond a hypostatic and pre-given set of sensory receptors, such that in the very act of sensation the organism must adapt its body to receive a new sense. As such, the organism's form is characterized by meaningful adaptations and educative developments, rather than being a set of exact physiological functions: “The method of simulacra, the study of supra-normal stimuli, allows us then to speak of an experimental Platonism, by means of which, beyond the organic type, the type in the philosophical sense of the word is revealed – beyond Lamarckian and utilitarian adaptation, the ‘adaptation’ to a world of essences. The efficaciousness of the supra-normal triggers, especially the social triggers, explains very probably the effects that people attribute to sexual or intra-species selection.” IP, 107/[17](13); citing Ruyer, "L'instinct," 838-39.

[106] Merleau-Ponty defines this potency for development within nature as beyond the terms of classical metaphysics which posits being as substance, and opposes the roles of cause and effect. This positing of being as a plenum of causes and events, in Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, hinges on the habitual tendency to conceive of time as comprised of instants, each with their own determinate antecedent and consequent aspects as effect or cause, passive or active. Merleau-Ponty describes time not as a linear sequence, but a back and forth “interrogation,” driven by a quasi-finalism, a directedness that is not pre-established, what Ruyer deems the oxymoron of “experimental Platonism." IP 107/[17](13); citing Ruyer, "L'instinct," 838-9.

future."[107] Conversely, activity is never pure constitution, because by the time it comes on the scene it has already been shaped by its development.

Passivity is not a mere co-efficient and determinacy of activity, because the very motor of its actualization, however, is absent, such that life is, as Merleau-Ponty describes, like "a pure wake which is not attributable to any boat." (N 176/231) These distinctions of form and matter, shaping and shaped, are comprehensible, but only in retrospect—in its immediacy this zone of passivity must be acknowledged as an auto-figurative field of sense-generation irreducible to the activity of individual bodies or to preexistent chronological moments or natural structures. I use the term generative passivity to capture the way in which activity owes its orientation to an origin which is not pure nothingness, but which is nonetheless not a functional, formed activity. "Structure" and "activity" are not, despite their connotations, already established modes of actuality, but are provisionally and developmentally ordered in an ongoing movement of organic development. There is thus passivity in the developmental openness and prehistory of activity which is more than a mere correlate of this activity.

This "passive" developmental past is not an object, nor a figure of determinate sense. It is an ontological background that is not a constituted field, but an open intercorporeal milieu for creative developments. It is not the set of all possible things, as I will argue in the fifth section of this chapter, because genuine, original possibility develops and emerges according to contingent developments and encounters. Life is doubly passive in the face of the natural

[107] Barbaras, "Nature," 34.

becoming of possibility insofar as it depends upon a sense it does not constitute, without, secondly, ever being able to continue or possess it as such. This sense (*sens*) is not yet a given figure of sense, but can be better understood as a kind of originary non-sense which orients a sense to be, without yet possessing that sense.[108] The whole scale of musical notes, of possible sounds, for example, is not something we can hear directly—we can only hear it when contextualized in a melody, when played as a successive scale or simultaneous chord. There is no objective, universal way to play the spectrum of sounds. Melodies, rhythms, harmonies only make sense in particular measures of time, when they are lived out as successions or simultaneities.[109] There is no way to hear the spectrum *as such;* despite the fact that it can be arranged into basic orders or musical "modes," such as Dorian or Phrygian, we cannot hear the sound of the spectrum apart from its enacted context, from a specific configuration of sounds played together, in sequence and harmony. Similarly, nature is not a simultaneity or succession of meanings—not some kind of whole that exists as a temporally successive or simultaneous substance. Rather, nature names the ontological ground, the differences that orient events within time, but which are only present in time as background dimensions or traces, transfigured by the very melodies of behaviour

[108] As noted, I will turn to this notion of a dependence upon the past in coming sections. However, there is a difficulty here if we take sense to mean an already constituted meaning. Instead, following the French *sens*, I mean here an orientation, or direction. Particularly, the past sets up an orientation, a tendency that is not yet accomplished, the beginning of a movement which is not yet given, until the movement itself transpires and accomplishes something. The orientation, or *sens* of the past, then, is necessary and orients what follows, without ever being given as such in the present. It will be possible, as I will demonstrate, however, to more determinately view this sense after the fact, in a reflection upon the past once it has become something.

[109] For a discussion of the philosophical significance of rhythm, harmony and melody, see Chapter One, "Initiations: On Method," of Russon, "Bearing Witness."

which they enable.

Nature is an “obscure principle,” says Merleau-Ponty, and life “hides itself to the extent that it is realized.” (N 145/194) The organism is not a constituting activity or constituted object, because its being is always expressed as a certain sense while harbouring the potentiality of unexpressed, unformed possibilities, such that the organism qua developmental indeterminacy is also characterized by a kind of non-sense. As an instituting-instituted existence, Merleau-Ponty argues that the global principle by which the organism develops is self-occluding, that it covers itself over as it is progressively developed into various functional rhythms, which is why he looks to organisms more caught up in the rhythms of development, like the amoeba or the embryo, to discover the ongoing generativity of organisms. Behind its determinacy is the organism's temporal and meaningful lability. Thus the "melody" of the organism is not merely the apperception of different times within one meaningful horizon or a fixed, self-enacting form, but the open future in which senses can fuse and transform into new meanings, senses which in their becoming enact the organism. In the following sections, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy, particularly in his *Nature* lectures, reveals that the processes of development and education discovered in consciousness in *The Structure of Behaviour*, in fact go all the way down, insofar as life itself is realized in, through, and as a process of development which motivates and realizes levels of meaning and behavioural aptitudes.

The categories of mechanism and vitalism fail to account for this prodigiously developmental character of life because they share ontological

premises that reduce the embodied development of the organism to static events in constituted space and time—each account depends on the premise that the body of the organism exists in a physical universe of discrete parts and isolated temporal moments, as well as the premise that the organizing activity of life derives from a principle of activity external to the organism. Where mechanism situates the organism within eternal laws which govern its organization, vitalism posits a transcendental, atemporal organizing cause or principle outside of the physical world in which the organism is embodied. Neither view is capable of accounting for how the organism's organization occurs intrinsically--within the bodily space and specific lifespan of the organism--and neither can explain how organization and bodily development are not preformed activities or laws, but passively generated in the organism. Understanding this development requires moving beyond a conception of the organism's body as a physical reality comprised of determinate pieces of matter and isolate instants of time. The notions of a constituting vital activity, or a mechanical cause, reduce the organism to a mere physical product of a super-bodily principle, rather than tracing the organization of the organism to its own bodily development. Merleau-Ponty's studies of organisms have shown us, however, that space and time are not completely determinate in processes of development. There is more truth, I think, in the vitalist account because it implicitly requires a moment of indetermination in the physical order of discrete spatial parts and temporal moments, and because it begins to treat activity developmentally, although it rests on an attribution of the physical indeterminacy of the organism's body to a super-physical, atemporal vital

force, and thus elides the way in which there is spatial and temporal indeterminacy in the heart of the organism's body.[110] In the next section, I will briefly consider this notion of spatial indeterminacy and how it passively mediates the temporal generativity of organic activities.

2.3 The Spatiality of Generative Passivity in Life

Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy calls for us to rethink organic bodies not as fixed substances or forms, but as generatively open, and in this section I develop the logic of spatiality that is required to account for the organism as a dynamic, generative form of spatial existence. There is an indetermination within the space of organic bodies, explains Merleau-Ponty in the "First Sketch" of his final *Nature* lecture, that is not a mere lack of substance, but an openness to being, as in birth when "...a new consciousness surges forth (as does life in physico-chemistry) by the arrangement of a hollow, by the irruption of a new field that comes from the inter-world and is not the effect of antecedents, not necessitated by them, even if it depends on them." (N 210/271)[111] It is the indeterminacy in space, its "hollow," that allows, but does not cause, new orders of meaning to emerge there, such as a neural system, lungs, eyes, or a newborn organism. Against the mechanistic idea of a space of fixed parts, or the vitalist idea of a space that is driven by external life-forces, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a

[110] Merleau-Ponty teaches that "the organism is not a failure of physico-chemistry" that would have to "oppose causality to causality, but goes beyond causality only by the detour of a reinterpretation of a new dimensionality, by integration and qualitative differences." N, 213/276.
[111] For a sustained discussion of the "hollow" and explorations of how it plays out in embryological development, as well as human and animal orientation, see Morris, "Place of Animal Being."

"negativity" which resides in the "interiority of the living organism," pointing out that "it is not that life is a power of being or spirit"[112] but an openness, a potentiality to unfold new meanings. (N 210/271) Merleau-Ponty likens this potency in the organism to

> Eros, which is not an "effect or an oriented force, but rather as an elevation toward ... [something else], or a kind of seething, an 'always future hollow'--desire posits the same problem as perception, that is, a mind would not desire more than it would perceive. What is the I of desire? It is obviously the body. (N 210/272)

The body of the organism is an erotically charged space, such that its spatial "hollow" is not a fixed, purely negative lack, but a more radical absence, an ontological indeterminacy that orients the living body to a future, opening it to new possibilities. While the body is not a power (*pouvoir*) of self-effectuation, its ontological incompleteness is a potency (*puissance*) to become meaningfully oriented in new ways.

Merleau-Ponty explains that "the organism is not only its local-instantaneous reality,... nor moreover another reality." (N 213/275) The organism is an "envelopment-phenomenon" which neither is "engender[ed] from [the elements" of existing space nor is to be found "behind" them, but "rather between the elements" of space. (N 213/275) The organism is "an intrinsic *potential* for growth, a dynamic system reacting to its surroundings" such that the structures of

[112] Merleau-Ponty, or perhaps whoever transcribed or edited the lectures, uses the term "*pouvoir*" here, though clearly *puissance* would have provided a better sense of the potential being discussed here.

its development are “a consequence and not a principle of the system.” (N 143/192, my emphasis) [113] We saw such "envelope-phenomena" at work in the axolotl, where pre-neural gradients of self-opposed movement set up a two-directional rhythm and center-to-periphery differentiation which motivated the basic orientations of the neural system. In the institution of organic nature "trans-spatiality" names the way that kinds of movement and orientation are folded into each other in the body of the organism.[114] Rather than supervening from different orders these dimensions of spatial meaning become intensive temporal structurings within space. There are other cases of organic development that articulate this trans-spatial "hollow" more clearly.

The human heart does develop not by organizing parts according to an ideal plan, but grows in a way that is uniquely situated by spatial feedbacks and rhythms of development in the embryo. The heart would never emerge as a closed, beating chamber unless it grew in the specifically constricted spaces of the

[113] Morris, "Place of Animal Being," 200; citing N, 213/275.

[114] Merleau-Ponty appropriates the term "trans-spatial" from Ruyer and elaborates upon it in a discussion of Whitehead. In *Institution*, Merleau-Ponty draws upon Ruyer to explain how institutions of sense unfold new meanings within the very space of preceding institutions. Unlike mechanically functioning things, events in space are not separate products from the movements that inaugurate them. Rather, as we see in heart development, movements take up and transform the movements that preceded them, articulating new structures within the same sphere of spatial movement: “Automatic machines function like calculating machines, the only difference being that, by means of feedback, the effect of the function or rather the difference between the effect obtained and the ‘ideal’ effect imposed on the machine controls the later function. But everything happens in space and is actual. The organisms in contrast are regulated by trans-spatial feedbacks, with a non-materialized ideal.” IP, 16/[13]12; citing Ruyer, "L'instinct," 846-7. Toward the end of his first lecture course in *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty explains how this concept is operative in Whitehead's thinking: "And so, in order to describe life, Whitehead will refuse mechanism, which leads back to the routines of Nature, but he will also refuse vitalism as too imprecise and as that which believes to have attained a new substance when it has attained the transspatial at the level of the physical... whereas life is not substance." N, 122/165; citing Whitehead, *Nature and Life,* 195.

embryo.[115] The heart first exists as two separate tubes which require the development of gastrulation, an asymmetrical development which divides the organism along a proximal-distal and an anterior-posterior axis. The first of these axes provides a movement within which the heart tubes can fuse into a spatial whole, where their separate movements become--around the twenty-third day of development--a unified, but differentially articulated tube capable of a new movement: beating. The new rhythm of this beating heart does not yet provide blood circulation for the embryo, but due to asymmetrical blood vessel growth and the development of the constricted space of the heart chamber, the heart tube begins to grow small articulated constrictions, kinks which reorient its growth pattern from a bidirectional linear path to a spiral looping movement. This looping movement, in turn, pushes the heart down into the chest while pushing the larynx upward into the neck, and the growing heart winds back upon itself, its contortions--around the thirtieth day of growth--twisting into the ventricles and

[115] In a critical inflection of Bergson, who compared evolution to a road where matter named the inertia that slowed and made vital activity determinate, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is through the material "accidents" of its embodiment that a vital form of behaviour can ever determinately develop a meaningful structure: "If we compare evolution to a road, we must say that the accidents of the terrain are not impediments, but that 'at every moment they furnish it with what is indispensable, namely, the soil on which it lies.' Living nature is a mixture, a mixed principle… Matter, as an obstacle to life, gives it not only the terrain on which it can be realized, but also the way in which it is realized… " N, 61/90-1. Compare with Bergson's account in *The Creative Evolution*, which offers a more finalistic version of organic form and conception of matter as inert and contingent: "The truth is that adaptation explains the sinuosities of the movement of evolution, but not its general directions, still less the movement itself. The road that leads to the town is obliged to follow the ups and downs of the hills; it adapts itself to the accidents of the ground; but the accidents of the ground are not the cause of the road, nor have they given it its direction. At every moment they furnish it with what is indispensable, namely, the soil on which it lies; but if we consider the whole of the road, instead of each of its parts, the accidents of the ground appear only as impediments or causes of delay, for the road aims simply at the town and would fain be a straight line." Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 102/685.

atria of the blood-circulating heart.[116] The heart cannot grow on its own, requiring the rhythmic developments of the embryo and the specifically constricting spaces within the chest and the self-contorting asymmetrical growth of gastrulation, as well as localized blood vessels. In this way, the heart is a spatial "hollow," because its maturation and emergence is, while in some sense a function of its own growth, oriented and developed into progressively differentiated qualitative structures by the growing spaces of the embryo, all of which, in turn, presupposes and depends upon the nourishing rhythms of the maternal body. Indeed, lacking any of these pivotal developments, spaces, and others, the heart would never come to be: it is neither formed in advance of its growth, nor necessitated by factors prior to the development itself.

In this way the heart, and more generally the organism, is less than being an already established structure—it is not a statically determinate reality, but one in development. Yet this being less than itself entails that it is generatively more than itself, for its determinacy is won dynamically, by the very openness to growth and development.[117] Space is not mere extension, because instead of things existing *partes extra partes* there are imbricated, mutually enveloping structures affecting each others' development; and organization is not meta-spatial but instead nested in and oriented by the very spaces it envelops and

[116] I drew specific details from an article which described this method of spatially and temporally regulated growth, as well as a genetic explanation of these factors. Although the researchers argue that this growth can be explained by genes alone, I interpret the situated growth of the heart tube, and its reliance on extrinsic spatial and temporal cues as proof that heart-development cannot be driven by a genetic blueprint alone. This tissue grown outside the chest cavity, for example, would not grow to become a heart. Abdulla, Blew, and Holterman, "Cardiovascular Embryology."

[117] In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the organism as a "hollow" cannot be understood as a mere lack in being, but a productive absence or indeterminacy, an incompleteness in the present that is characterized by futurity.

structures.[118] In the lecture on "Animal Institution," Merleau-Ponty remarks that "the functional viewpoint is necessary in order to explain [the] structure itself." (IP 16/[13](12)) Organizational structures are not preexistent and they do not supervene upon spatial being—but by virtue of an "enbjambment" of space, a tension propelled by its own ontological incompleteness and motivated, as if erotically, by environmental factors that call out that growth, just as the growing tensions in the embryo double the heart back upon itself and fold it into a new structure, and thus a new kind of movement.

This discussion of the space-enveloping-enveloped body no doubt recalls the discussion of the "synthesis of one's own body" in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, whereby the human body is not "in" space as in a container, but primordially "envelopes" space and is constitutively "of space." (PP 140/174) In this later account this "envelope" phenomenon is not an original, synthetic property of the human body or of human consciousness, but an orientation that precedes and orients any living body. This is not a set, determinate spatial field, but a developing orientation and reorientation of the lived body. Space is not a fixed, given plenitude, but has centers of indetermination within it, particularly in the "hollow" space of organically developing bodies, in their potentiality to develop. We saw, in the preceding section, that in the salamander the embryological tissue was initially undifferentiated in neural cells, and only

[118] Morris explains how the organism's development is an ontological center of expression: "Merleau-Ponty finds that this complex onto-logic resonates in the embryogenesis of animals: the visible organization of the animal body inseparably implicates invisible morphogenetic processes that are not reducible to the embryo's visible fabric here and now, yet are not realizable as anything other than an invisible *of* the visible, since these processes are not independent of visible material. Animals thus manifest an onto-logic of being: they manifest the way that an invisible *of* the visible operates in being." Morris, "Place of Animal Being," 194.

formed into the efferent and afferent neural senses subsequent to the directions intrinsic to pre-neural developmental movements. Merleau-Ponty notices in Coghill's study that the plasticity and potential for growth of this tissue is continuous and open-ended:

> If higher vertebrates have a greater capacity for learning, unlike insects, it is because the nervous tissues are surrounded in a matrix of embryonic tissue, Coghill tells us. The higher vertebrates develop sophisticated functionality due to *less* determinate embryological tissues and stages. This matrix must be the depository of a potential for growth, and the neuron must continue to grow once in function, and this in a purely embryonic way. (N 143/192)

Elsewhere, specifically in his brief remarks on institution in animals, Merleau-Ponty notes that this lability and latency is crucial to animal life, even if it is more fleeting in non-human animals it begins as a difference in degree: "The weight of these events is even much greater in species that are more 'premature.'" (IP 18/[17](13)). Humanity must continue to grow in order to be realized—it does not begin as humanity, but within animal institution. It is telling that our ontological "weakness" is that much more pronounced than animals, in our years spent in biological and emotional dependency and psychological upbringing—and yet it is this lack that enables the possibility of interpersonal and cultural human significances. Merleau-Ponty reminds us that we "have to start from animal institution," however, "in order to explain human institution" because just as humanity is an institution of animality, animality is an institution within the

organic self-differentiating movement of nature. (IP 16/[16](12))

The organism is not a positive thing or complete force, but must be thought outside the bounds of positivist, substantial concepts as a potentiality to be.[119] This ontological incompleteness of the organism means that the organism is, rather than a fully constituted being, a site of exposure, vulnerability, and potentiality for the development of meaning. Merleau-Ponty reveals how the organism educates us to the true nature of possibility, insofar as possibilities are genuinely developed in processes of organic growth. Possibility is neither a pure creation by the organism nor is it determinately grounded in nature in advance. That is, possibility in life is oriented by continuing developmental achievements but it emerges radically, as uncaused and novel. This orienting history of vital activity, its natural development, is not present as such in the organism, although there are traces there, in retrospect, of this natural sense.

2.4 The Time of Life in *Institution*: Beyond *A Priori* and *A Posteriori*

The organism was not driven by a mechanistic or finalistic cause because it is characterized by an indeterminacy within space, out of which new organic activities can potentially emerge. Thus, the spatial indeterminacy or "hollow" of the organism is equally marked by temporal indeterminacy,[120] insomuch as the

[119] Again, I do not mean that the organism has a power or capacity to effect itself (*pouvoir*), but an open, indeterminate potentiality (*puissance*) to develop new, unforeseen meanings: in this sense of the word, the organism's power of activity is inextricably linked to, and derivative from, its potentiality to develop and its becoming. The organism itself is such a birth of new possibility in the world.

[120] Indeed, as Bergson says, and I will explain in the next section, time *is* this very indeterminacy within things: "Would not the existence of time prove that there is indetermination in things? Would not time be that indetermination itself?" Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 75/67.

organism's developing structures furnish an orientation for themselves, within the embodied space of the organism, *as they develop.* Neither continuing the past nor constituting it, these emergent activities take up the past and are instituted within it, but only post-factually, such that they are equally instituting of this past. Organic development is not a pure activity of constitution, nor a process constituted by the past, but a movement which Merleau-Ponty calls "instituting-instituted," such that "Therefore [there is an] instituted and instituting subject, but inseparably, and not a constituting subject; [this entails] a certain inertia... [of] an event, the initiation of the present, which is productive after it." (IP 6/[3](2)) In this section, I elaborate the concept that is necessary to understand this temporal structure, Merleau-Ponty's notion of "institution," which cannot be understood according to a notion of time as constituted, punctual instants, because the past and present are not separate, successive entities, but dialectically unfold together.

The trans-spatial "hollow" of the organism is spatial but it is not fully spatially determinate: it is a lack with respect to extended, constituted being. However, this "lack" is more than nothing, insofar as it is an "absence which counts in the world" by virtue of its "exceeding" given structures.[121] The lack is that latency in the organism which opens the possibility of new structures of behaviour and forms of meaning in life. The organism is defined as a place of proliferating possibilities: it is oriented by its structure not to a "given" world but to the elaboration and expression of new developments, oriented to a future. Instead of occupying isolated instants of time, the organic structure is a diacritical

[121] For a discussion of the temporal logic of this "hollow" see Al-Saji, "Absence," 207-229.

structure defined by its concomitant orientation by the past and reorientation in the future. Here, past and future are not separable, ontologically or developmentally: just as the organism envelops a holistic space rather than occupying points in a fixed space, so too the organism straddles or envelops different times by taking up past structures and transforming them into a new sense, retaining them but in a modulated sense, like the lungs retain the tidal rhythms of the embryonic fluid flows, or like the salamander's nervous system continues the proximal-distal, self-differentiated movement of the pre-neural system in the efferent-afferent neural conduction.

This lets us think outside of the bounds of mechanism and finalism, which seek a deterministic cause in points in the past or a final cause in the future—because here we can see that the moving, situated context in which the organism develops and its functional enactment of a form are two imbricated sides of a unified process of development. Structure and function are inseparable, but while this takes us beyond the antinomies addressed by and sometimes demonstrated in Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy, it leaves the question of how the organism can be at once oriented by past structures and future possibilities—without either of these being separable aspects of its being.

By abrogating the origin of world-forming activity in consciousness and the transcendental priority of the organism's *Umwelt*, Merleau-Ponty sets up the terms to think time in its nascent, pre-vital basis. Indeed, if we can account for this origin which orients the temporality of human and animal life, then we can think the grounds of our "kinship" with other forms of life apart from the

problems imposed by our "symbolic" consciousness of objects or animal awareness of environments. Organic awareness emerges after birth, and in birth the organism is exposed to a future which is not yet meaningful:

> In birth [the] possibilities of the situation, *exposed*, solicited by hunger, cold, weight, lights, something can happen to them, there is the openness of a field, i.e., from the moment of conception and still more after birth, there is an encroachment towards a future which is made from itself, under certain given conditions, and which is not the act of a '*Sinngebung,*' Birth [is not an act] of constitution but the institution of a future. Reciprocally, institution resides in the same genus of Being as birth and is not, any more than birth, an act: there will later be decisionary institutions or contracts, but they are to be understood on the basis of birth and not the reverse. (IP 8/[5](4))

Birth is the precondition of activity, it is not a constituting act or an event that is yet meaningful for the life it establishes, but rather an event which polarizes a future and establishes possibilities that will belong to the organism. In this sense, birth is a paradoxical "event" or an institution because it is an event that will come to be, or rather, will come to *have been*. The origin is doubly passive—in that it is given without being constituted, but moreover in that this very givenness is, paradoxically, not itself given, except in retrospect. This nascent meaning is not nothing and yet not yet a determinate something, but will have been something. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls an institution. Rather than a conscious or vital activity, institution is the basis of meaning in nature and life,

and it is on the basis of institution that there can be a constituting consciousness or constituting vital awareness.

"Institution," as Merleau-Ponty instructs, is "of the same genus as birth" for nothing is born fully formed, or adequately self-aware, and yet the birth of an organism at birth is already characterized by openness to a future, by *"*prospection" immanent to natural space. (IP 19/[13](12)) This institution is not a protended horizon of awareness, but an accruing significance of developmental events which foster a meaning, but only after the fact, once the organic activity has been accomplished. This past is not the given past of the organism until it emerges, but neither does the organism preexist this past and constitute it. There is not an order of facts which accrue meaning any more than there is an ideal norm of the organism--these two terms, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, essence and fact, are undermined and relativized in a philosophy of institution.[122] In *Nature* the embryo is characterized not by its fully formed awareness or its enactment of a blue-print, but by futurity: "The embryo is not simple matter, but matter which refers to the future" such that the organism issues from "problems" out of which "it takes possession of its body and its milieu." (N 144/193) This orientation to the future is not a pure finality, but an openness that is achieved progressively by vital events which motivate the institution of a meaning. Merleau-Ponty's studies of embryology are motivated by this attempt to think of organisms outside of

[122] Merleau-Ponty explicitly defines institution against constitution, which entails an order of punctual, mutually exclusive, constituted moments on the one side, and an infinite series of spontaneous, disincarnate constituting acts, on the other, such that: "The instituted makes sense without me, the constituted makes sense only for me and for the 'me' of this instant. Constitution [means] continuous institution, i.e., never done. The instituted straddles its future, has its future, its temporality, the constituted depends entirely on the 'me' who constitutes." IP, 8/[5](4).

material facts or biological essences. Merleau-Ponty, in a study of the embryologist Hans Dreisch, points out that material disruptions and even bisections of urchin embryos do not necessarily amount to deformations in or a cessation of the maturation of the organism, such that "there is something other than the properties of the elements defined by their localization." (N 230/294) But where Dreisch resorts to an "entelechy" of the organism, Merleau-Ponty argues that, in a characteristic dialectic of rationalism and empiricism, that in embryogenesis a novel development occurs *within* the embodied space and time of the organism, such that there is:

> the arrangement of a certain place where forces get stuck, which allows other forces to come into play...[Such that] an action that breaks an equilibrium (loss of a part of the body) gives rise to a modification of suspensions... [where the] form is fashioned, not by a positive factor, but by a set of vanishing equilibria... Thus it is not an aspatial substance--and yet is not [given] 'in the locale' [of the organism]. (N 236/300)[123]

Here there was no "cause" of the organism, but an inter-related system of movement between a plastic form, environmental factors, and significant "events." At the "time" of their occurrence, however, these factors are not isolated "events" but remain indeterminate, "vanishing" equilibria, which are traceable after the fact of the embryological regeneration. The organism's "form" or "essence" and its "material" or the eventful "facts" of its development are mutually implicated in development, impossible to isolate until the organism is

[123] For a discussion of the antinomy between mechanism and finalism Dreisch's embryo bisection, and how Merleau-Ponty avoids it, see Morris, "Place of Animal Being," 8.

established. It is thus impossible to locate a formative developmental event prior to the actual process of development.[124]

Thus the organism, in progressing developmentally, appropriates its own "birth" as a meaningful event. Indeed, its "birth" is ongoing insofar as the organism continues to take up nascent significances and establish meaningful structures of behaviour out of them. Merleau-Ponty notes that in all life, to varying degrees, there is lability, an openness within living events which shape the meaning of each life. Irreversible differences, like the sensory-motor system, are formed where structures were previously open. In the *Institution* course Merleau-Ponty notes the case of a paw-graft, where an animal is not "handed" prior to its actual, manual orientation in an environment. Merleau-Ponty observes a surgical paw-grafting operation in an animal, and concludes that early in its life, there is a "fleeting" openness instead of an "absolutely given… innate structure" of chirality. (IP 16/[16](12)) The animal's oriented sense is an establishment not of an innate functionality or of anatomical properties, but of development, such that a grafted "left" paw can come to function as a right paw. The graft of a paw adapts itself to the territory in which it is inserted in order to become a right or a left paw. Yet if the paw is already determined as right, it cannot adapt itself: "There is…in the determination of the destiny of an organic outline a very

[124] Morris, for example, criticizes the notion that genes are the cause of a fixed animal form, because form is an open notion which is mediated by the actual embodied, moving development of organisms: "Genetic 'form' and bodily 'content' are interdependent, modulate one another, are not really separable from one another in terms of their real operation. For example, Brian Goodwin argues that the leaves of vascular plants and the limbs and digits of vertebrates acquire their radial or branching patterns (the variations of which are pervasive across and distinctive of vascular plant and vertebrate species) not through genetics merely but through tensions (due to inter-cell adhesion, etc.) endogenous to the very growth and multiplication of cells through which alone a single cell becomes a plant or animal." Morris, "Faces," 154.

fleeting moment of lability in which what the outline will become is irreversibly fixed by the place in which it is found." (IP 16/[16](12))[125] The handedness is not an innate given, but an institution within movement at a formative stage and place. The animal's "destiny," Merleau-Ponty says, is "instituted in the sense that… it is never independent from the givens (time and place)" even though it institutes a new order which is irreducible to mere givens. (IP 16/[16](12)) Even seemingly fixed anatomical features of organisms are, then, developmental achievements within an instituted history. Anatomy is not an organic *a priori*, but a trans-spatial ordering that derives from the embryological latency and the moving developments of the organism.

Merleau-Ponty borrows an oxymoron from Ruyer, "experimental Platonism," to describe this movement according to which a form is not given in advance, but has a sense which is oriented through contingent yet formative events. (IP 17/[17](13)) This term is clearly meant to overcome the dichotomies of fact and essence, as well as matter and form. The organism's form is not fixed, but prospective and open to being defined along the way by significant events. The organism is thus neither a preformed plan nor a totally arbitrary construct of circumstance. Therefore the dichotomy of organic form and environmental events, indeed the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori*, in life, breaks down.

At any given "point," then, the organism is at once conditioned by a past and oriented toward a future. This conditioning by the past, though, is only

[125] Citing Ruyer, "L'instinct," 835.

provisional, because these "conditions" derive from the very results they produce—that is, they require the establishment of a "dimension" or "level" of meaning in order to be sensible as events or conditions. Here, I follow Barbaras' definition of the dimension as that according to which perception or action is oriented, without itself ever being an object of action or awareness. The dimension or "level" is ahead of these activities, providing them with orientation.[126] *Pari Passu*, in the case of development, the so-called "past" of the organism is oriented by a "future" which, qua dimension is ahead of the organism, such that development must have occurred in order for this past to have been.[127] But, secondly, this future, qua temporal "level," never definitively arrives, because the organism's living structures are always provisional—they are ongoing achievements within the indeterminate, trans-spatial "hollow" of the organism's body, and as such, they are characterized by dynamism and openness to further "levels" of meaning. This is the logic of "institution," by which a founding event's determinacy hangs on a future that is not yet here: "trans-spatial feedbacks: *what acts in reverse upon the cause* is not only the deviation between the result and the existing, material aim, but between the result and the 'idea' or 'mnemonic theme.'" (IP 17/[16](12)) The current structure is rendered

[126] Cf. Barbaras on the level in: Barbaras, "Being," 59.
[127] The argument I am making here is akin to Merleau-Ponty's argument in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that the level or dimension according to which perception is given is neither constituted by the subject nor an object of perception. He writes that the level is "on the horizon of all our perceptions, but this is a horizon that, in principle, can never be reached and thematized in an explicit perception. Each level in which we live in turn appears when we drop anchor in some 'milieu' that is offered to us. This milieu is itself only defined spatially for a previously given level." PP, 264/302. Every level can only be understood, then, post factually, on the basis of a new level. The level, a term I use interchangeably with dimension here, is an epistemological and perceptual blind-spot.

determinately manifest by the realized structure, but only provisionally because that future was contingent and will itself be displaced by future structures. Further, the newly established level or structure is not given as such, but is cast against the temporal background of the structure it exceeds (*dépasser)*, such that its only determinacy is retrospective and itself open to being recast by future structures. Structure, like a spatial dimension or level, is only given in a backward turning perspective.

Instead of events which influence or pervert a preexisting vital idea, the "essence" or "idea" of the organism is defined as a negativity or "hollow," but not a mere lack, because this very "hollow" is a space of potentiality. This non-identity takes on determinacy between the ongoing developments of events, and it takes on meaning not by becoming a positively determined being, but by a deepening of structures within the organism, by possibilities and levels of meaning proliferating there. These possibilities do not confirm or diverge from an original absolute possibility of the organism—they are the very deepening and realizing of the organism qua possibility.[128] These are genuinely emergent, new possibilities, not something contained logically in a set of all possible physical events. The organism institutes a space of meaning beyond the mere inorganic features in which it is realized. This environmental place of the organism too, is not a fixed reality, but rather a "field" or ontological background around which the organism is polarized by meaningful "events" which establish ongoing dimensions of sense in the organic body—such as left or right paw, efferent or

[128] For a discussion of this logic of possibility as a lack that deepens itself, see Morris, "Place of Animal Being," 160-1.

afferent nerves, and circular lung breathing rhythms. Yet these cathecting events of emergent life are, counter-intuitively, not events at all—because these "causes" presuppose the existence of their own "effects" and are events only in retrospect. It is impossible to understand these events as "behind" the organism chronologically, on a horizon of antecedent and consequent events. There is an interconnection of past and present in the organism beyond the mere appearance of the past against the horizon of the organism's present. Instead, there is a becoming true of possibilities in life which proliferates sense prior to the organism, which is a species of the institution of natural time.

2.5 The Becoming True of Possibility

In his lengthy discussion of Bergson's *Creative Mind* in the first *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty provocatively demands that we distinguish a "logical" from an "organic" kind of possibility in order to understand the novel genesis of sense in life. This distinction comes from Vladimir Jankélévitch, who, in his book on the philosophy of Bergson, states that "there are grounds [...] to distinguish between logical possibility and organic possibility."[129] Jankélévitch suggests that logical possibility is "nothing, that it is meaningless, since it is by definition not the object of any actual or particular existence" and that it accomplishes nothing new, whereas organic possibility does accomplish something new, and it is a "seed."[130] "Logical possibility" is not the possibility of

[129] Jankélévitch, *Bergson*, 216 (note: all quotes from Jankélévitch are my translations); cited in N, 69/100.
[130] Jankélévitch, *Bergson*, 216, my translation; cited in N, 69/100.

anything new, because it is already formed; it is the "possibility" only of what is already known to be. In this way, logical possibility is not genuine possibility because it is based on the form of what *has already happened*: it is derived from a past present. The logical possible is derived from what is already real: it is what Bergson calls, in his chapter "The Possible and the Real," a "phantom" of the real, which in becoming real gains nothing, but merely has existence added onto it as something incidental, "becom[ing] reality by the addition of something, by some transfusion of blood or life."[131] Logical possibility is thought, erroneously, to precede reality, such that "it is the possible which becomes real."[132] On this view of possibility, argues Alia Al-Saji, possibility is thought to come before reality so as to determine and delimit what can become realized.[133] Yet, on this view, nothing genuinely *becomes*, because possibility is already determinate in form, and this is why Jankélévitch argues that logical possibility is a meaningless notion. There are no real events, just different permutations of already established being. This view cannot account for the contingency of possibilities, because they are presupposed as formally predetermined. But, by its very definition, possibility cannot *be* something already real, something simply waiting to be realized.

If possibility cannot be pre-established, and depends upon a future moment of what Jankélévitch calls "organic" possibility, how can we characterize this moment if it lies outside of predefined possibility? Logical possibility was

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[131] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 82/72.
[132] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 85/74.
[133] "Possibility is taken to precede, to prefigure, and to be less than reality. More precisely, present possibilities are understood to delimit and contain future events." Al-Saji, "Thinking Hesitates," 352.

not true possibility, indeed it is an oxymoronic notion, because its pre-established character is incommensurate with the genuine becoming of a radical, founding event. Jankélévitch introduces another notion, that of "organic possibility," which he metaphorically likens to a "seed," such that

> Organic possibility, on the contrary, is a positive promise of reality, a hope. Possibility is nothing now, but it will be, [and] we are sure of it, just as everyone feels themselves at the threshold of a distant future. Organic possibility speaks to the future, not to [immediate] potentiality. This is not a Platonic claim, but a true commitment that life makes to itself. Not only does the seed (for that is its true name) promise where logical possibility only permits, but it holds right now. Can we indeed say that it itself is nothing, a zero of existence? On the contrary, organic possibility is already something, but it represents the concentrated state of an existence which will blossom freely in the adult.[134]

Where logical possibility is thought to predate the real and "permit" it to be, organic possibility is not defined by preexistence, but is instead characterized by emergence, by a sense of "promise" that exceeds the real. This promise is not the kind of contract one makes to do a particular thing, the avowal of something specified in advance, like promising to cook soup for dinner. This promise is more radical, and as yet unspecified, like the "promise" of a young student of art. Unlike logical possibility, which already exists in the present, organic possibility is something inexistent, or better, indeterminate, which "holds in the present."

[134] Jankélévitch, *Bergson*, 217.

There is an orientation (*sens*) of something to come, but without being given in advance as the logical sequel of the present. With Deleuze's account of the virtual, in his *Bergsonism*, we can say that organic possibility comes to be according to divergence and difference from what is real. Its "actualization" involves creativity, rather than resemblance; it take up the past differently, rather than something dependent upon and limited by the past.[135] Thus, rather than the possible preexisting the real, as we are accustomed to thinking, Bergson argues that: "We must resign ourselves to the inevitable: it is the real which makes itself possible, and not the possible which becomes real."[136] The organic possible is not the opposite or "zero" of existence, a lack or pure negative, but a generativity within the present, a productivity or "seed" which cannot, in principle, be given.

Organic possibility names the way in which genuinely novel meaning occurs in life and experience, meaning which cannot be preconceived logically, but can be, in retrospect, the object of a reflective conceptualization. As I argued in the previous section, an "event" can only be founding of an order after the fact, once that order has been established. In this way, the actualization, which is equally the creation, of organic possibilities is not unintelligible, not a total break

[135] Deleuze argues that what is typically called possibility is derived from reality, such that the two share the same "concept." What can be "realized" as possibility is, on this view, already contained in what is real. Realization accomplishes nothing new. Deleuze develops a notion of the virtual which opens a future space for something to happen, without prescribing its form. Unlike the fictive possible, the virtual denotes the space for something new, and unlike the "realization" of the possible, the actualization of the virtual creates novelty and difference, rather than just continuing the same: "The virtual, on the other hand, does not have to be realized, but rather actualized; and the rules of actualization are not those of resemblance and limitation, but those of difference or divergence and creation. ...in order to be actualized, the virtual cannot proceed by elimination or limitation, but must *create* its own lines of actualization in positive acts. The reason for this is simple: While the real is in the image and likeness of the possible that it realizes, the actual, on the other hand does *not* resemble the virtuality it embodies." Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 97/99-100.

[136] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 85/84.

with the past--but this continuity comes afterwards. There is a way in which, after the fact, we can and do trace organic possibilities to structures which predated them in the past, and this retrospection is, in fact, what motivates the idea that logical possibility preexists and "permits" the real to exist. This is a difficult structure of temporality to understand, particularly because we must discern whether this projection of meaning of the creative events into the past is a mere imputation, a "retrospective illusion" of consciousness, or a genuine becoming of meaning in being, what Bergson calls, in the introduction to his *Creative Mind*, "a retrograde movement of the true."[137]

The idea that possibility precedes the present and enables it to happen is an illusion, insofar as when something happens it appears as having predated itself. The "radical novelty" of possibility that brings the new into reality, is for Bergson, elided, because the established *reality* of the new thing appears to be "more" than its previously unformed possibility.[138] I think that, precisely because of its purposive and meaningful form, the appearance of what is new seems to contain in it something more than contingency, but something necessary, such that it carries with it "the possibility of representation beforehand," as if it could have been conceived of before coming to be.[139] This conception of what Jankélévitch has deemed the logical possible, however, is erroneous, and it in fact involves something *more* than what is real. And this is because the so-called possible involves what is real *plus* an extrapolation by consciousness, a

[137] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 22/14.
[138] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 81/71.
[139] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 81/71.

retrospective projection of this reality into the past, what Bergson calls a virtualization (in a different sense of the virtual than Deleuze), of the present.[140] Bergson argues that, whereas time transpires of its own accord in a novel way, consciousness falls prey to the illusion of seeing the new by virtue of what has already happened, by interpreting novelty according to an image copied from the past. This reflective act that copies what is real makes the so-called "possible" more than what is already real, for "the truth is that more is needed here to obtain the virtual than is necessary for the real, more for the image of man than for the man himself, for the image of the man will not be portrayed if the man is not first produced, and in addition one has to have the mirror."[141] This mirror is "the addition of an act of mind which throws its image back into the past, once it has been enacted. But this is what our intellectual habits prevent us from seeing."[142] Because of this habitual penchant to identify being with what is thinkable and graspable, we have a false notion of the possible, which is merely a copy of the real, and which elides the way that radical novelty emerges from the past.

We must notice how, as Alia Al-Saji suggests, this illusion of the false possible not only works backwards, between the present and the past, but also how this retrospection involves prospection, and a relationship between present and future.[143] When the present is copied into the past, and projected there as if to

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[140] Bergson, *Creative Mind,* 7/9.
[141] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 83/73.
[142] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 81/71.
[143] The retrospective projection is equally a prospective projection, and a relationship between present and future. Al-Saji distinguishes this dual logic of becoming, such that "When this retrograde movement is projected onto the future, however, a second logic appears, one that takes the possibility of the future to be contained in the actual present. This shift is significant, for it can be accomplished only by making the future into an anticipated present and the actual present into a

predate itself, this act also serves to delimit the field of what is logically possible in the future, albeit a future reduced to the past:

> The possible is therefore the mirage of the present in the past; and as we know the future will finally constitute a present and the mirage effect is continually being produced, we are convinced that the image of tomorrow is already contained in our actual present, which will be the past of tomorrow, although we did not manage to grasp it. This is precisely the illusion.[144]

The retrospective illusion not only occludes the genuine novelty of what has happened, but also of what can happen. As Deleuze says in *Bergsonism*, this projection into the past works according to the presupposition that "being, order and the existent [...] precede themselves, or to precede the creative act that constitutes them."[145] Instead of seeing the radical creativity of time, consciousness is oriented by a desire to find order in the past, and to understand time as a process in which order necessarily unfolds. Deleuze argues that there is a conscious drive to understand everything that occurs as a mere difference in degree, as continuous with the past, rather than to see how unprecedented things happen, how time has a genuine futurity, or what he calls differences in kind.[146] The future is elided when it is falsely understood only as difference in degree, as something continuous with the present, and like the present, conceived as

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past to come. The asymmetry that separates the future from the present is erased, eliding the difference, newness, and unpredictability of futurity." Al-Saji, "Thinking Hesitates," 353; citing Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 101/111.

[144] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 82/72.

[145] Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 18/7.

[146] Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 35/27-8.

something enabled by the preexistent possibilities of the past.

There is, however, ambivalence in Bergson's account, and in this phenomenon itself, as to whether this retrospection is a mere illusion, or a genuine becoming of truth in time, a "retrograde movement of the true."[147] As well as describing the projection of possibility into the past by consciousness, there is a second interpretation possible, which is Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, that takes this projective character of becoming to be intrinsic to the movement of being itself.[148] Bergson sometimes describes this projection as a movement within time itself, insofar as there is not a future that is, but a future that *will come to have been*:

> As reality is created as something unforeseeable and new, its image is reflected behind it into the indefinite past; thus it finds that it has from all time been possible, but it is at this precise moment that it begins to have been always possible, and that is why I said that its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once the reality has appeared.[149]

Even though it was unforeseeable, the future-become-present appears as having predated itself, as bearing an intrinsic relation to the past which is revealed in and through its very happening.

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[147] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 22/14.
[148] Al-Saji notes that "since the future is divergence with respect to the present, this reflection is also a refraction of sense; the present is not given in-itself. Despite Bergson's hesitations, this non-coincidence is not an illusion for Merleau-Ponty but the structure of meaning by which an event 'has to become what it is.'" Al-Saji, "Temporality of Life," 191.
[149] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 82/72.

What occurs *will have been* possible, in the future anterior tense of a "retroactive possible."[150] Thus, instead of a mere projection, the future emerges from the real and shows itself up as having done so, but not by merely continuing, or resembling the past. Rather, as Bergson argues, the future involves not just a forward thrust of new meaning into existence, but also works "[backwards] over the course of time [in] a constant remodeling of the past by the present, of the cause by the effect."[151] Al-Saji notes that this temporality by which the present occurs and restructures the past must be thought outside of chronological time, as a generative movement within time that is at once the ontological condition of novel meaning *and* a meaningful, continuous past: "This is the retrograde movement--the temporal ripples propagating through being--that events and truths effect once they come into existence; the past is constantly recast by the present, in a non-chronological and reversible time."[152] I find this temporality helpful for understanding the time of nature for Merleau-Ponty, like the post-embryological, formed human heart or the salamander's accomplished neural system which radically take up and transform a past, showing themselves to have been possible on the basis of this past, without being contained in or necessitated by it, the creation of possibility in the world works by emerging out of, while at once shaping, its own origins.[153] This is not a mere projection of consciousness, but an

[150] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 82/71-2.
[151] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 84-5/74.
[152] Al-Saji, "Thinking Hesitates," 353.
[153] There is an issue of species typicality at stake here, insofar as organisms inherit the past but also exist as evolving mutations of it. Merleau-Ponty grapples with the way in which natural history is shared generally and specifically between different beings. But species are not defined according to taxonomic similarities alone, where as in Husserl's method of eidetic variation an animal would fall outside the species essence if it does not admit of a minimum of shared

opening and creativity of the past. The past is thus generatively passive--not just the genetic backward-reference of consciousness, but something more than consciousness not only as its illusory re-production (of the present), but as a genuine, organic possibility.

In this way, there is a movement of truth in time, albeit a retrograde one out of which the posterior reestablishes the prior, and the fact gives birth to the essence. I think, following Al-Saji, that there is only an illusion when an essence of what has happened becomes projected into the future.[154] There is a prospective illusion hidden in the retrospective illusion, when we impute the form of the past to the future, and conflate the present's relationship with the past with its relationship with the future. Whereas the past is generative, and should be seen in its provisional, promising developments as a matrix of becoming meaning, projecting a meaning onto the future closes it down.

Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Jankélévitch's notion of "organic" allows for a delineation of how possibility emerges in tension between past and

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characteristics. Rather, since he considers sense as divergence, Merleau-Ponty articulates a complex notion of dynamic species, whereby species are not positive essences but are styles which are defined diacritically, according to the relation to other putative species, and even according to drastic divergences within the same species: "If life is in the establishment of the bases of history, and if this history is different than the history of a human being, then it is a natural history. It is not an individual history; it is the future of a type, a collective being. Moreover, the regulation of the species is not all-powerful, although monstrosity testifies for the species [while remaining the] product of the [self-same] regulations which assure the conservation of the type. And so cyclopic animals are produced by the same regulations that assure binocular vision. There is here more a sort of sliding than a rupture of the regulative principle." N, 157/209.

[154] Al-Saji productively interprets an ambivalence in Bergson's writings to a genuine difference in thought, which marks allows this structure of the present moving into the past to be understood, in a nuanced way, under two, both illusory and veritable, aspects: "Although there is some ambivalence in Bergson's presentation of the retrograde movement of the true, I would argue that this temporality becomes illusory only when it closes down the openness to futurity. In the present-past context, in contrast, this retrograde temporality can be read to be generative, even liberatory." Al-Saji, "Thinking Hesitates," 353.

present. The structure or the determined "form" of possibilities in life is not logical but meaningful in a developing and provisional sense. This tension means that there is always a sense in life but that this sense does not strictly adhere to the categories of contingency and necessity. This later development, I think, goes beyond the historical materialism of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, where contingent events and dimensions of meaning or possibility are put into a dialectical relationship. In a long footnote at the end of the "Temporality" chapter, Merleau-Ponty argues that in human life contingent events have become necessary dimensions of sense, since "our open and personal existence rests on an initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence. But it could not be otherwise, if we *are* temporality, since the dialectic of acquisition and future is what constitutes time." (PP 502) Merleau-Ponty's insight in the *Phenomenology* is that humanity is an "historical idea" in which contingent factors, like the joints of our opposable thumbs are taken up accidentally yet serve as the necessary foundation of subsequent movements, the "transformation of contingency into necessity by the taking of it in hand." (PP, 198) Yet, this conception of time, in my opinion, while capturing the dialectical becoming of meaning, wrongly posits "stability" and "foundation" as the basis of temporality, rather than that indeterminacy which Bergson revealed at the heart of time. The past is thus not a ground that becomes fixed by acquired necessity, and which would (in a retrospective illusion) delimit the form of what can follow. This is because the past is only provisionally structured, a living soil which changes retrogressively

with each novel creation. This movement of time cannot be captured in such a logic of substance.

Merleau-Ponty's later thought moves away from any such notion of the past as a stable foundation, but this does not entail that the past becomes an arbitrary or meaningless entity. Instead, the past becomes provisionally structured, within the dynamic organic developments that emerge from it. Organisms exhibit a "hollow" of indeterminacy within their present, a seed or promise which is irreducible to the logical possibilities of inorganic structures. Yet once actualized or created the vital structure transcends inorganic, physical possibilities, transfiguring the very nature of possibility. As such, the previous inorganic sense is not present in life as such, but is there as a trace in the melodics of living structure, and as a retrogressively restructured temporal background:

> By describing the organism, Bergson leaves behind substantialist thinking, which saw in the end an immutable form, both at the origin and at the end of development. He defines the organism and life as types of temporality and thereby places them outside of every comparison with a physical system. The physical system is its past. The organism, and the whole universe defined as natural system, is defined, on the contrary, by the fact that the present is not identical with the past. ...Duration becomes the principle of the internal unity of it. 'Wherever anything lives, there is, open somewhere, a register in which time is being inscribed.' And this register is neither a consciousness interior to the organism, nor our consciousness, nor our notation of time. What Bergson thereby designates

is an institution, a *Stiftung*, as Husserl would say, an inaugural act that embraces a becoming without being exterior to this becoming. (N 59/88)

The vital development borrows from possibility that was not yet fully there, organic possibility, and in taking it to a new actualization, realizes it as possibility. Organic development accomplishes new possibility in the very movement that actualizes this possibility as life. It is incorrect to say that the pre-vital sense caused or anticipated the vital sense. The past is not passively given, but passively generative, and only appears as such post-factually. It is the "hollow" or indetermination within the present that calls for the growth and development of the new, for the divergent trajectories of organic life that the present initiates without causing, and that it "embraces."[155]

So far we have seen how the creation of new possibilities in life emerges by restructuring the past, diverging from it but then showing itself up as continuous with the past. The question remains to be answered, however, about how the present is capable of orienting the future, or whether the future occurs through a radical rupture from the present, what Deleuze articulated as a complete difference in kind.[156] For Merleau-Ponty the future does not only come as a rupture, but is already in the present as a *seed*, as a futural reference within the

[155] Al-Saji explains this way that the present drives a development which is neither contained in or external to that very present. In this sense the there is an alterity but not an externality of the future in Merleau-Ponty's late thought: "There is an indetermination, openness, even virtuality, to the present on Merleau-Ponty's account; the present does not fully exist in itself; it requires an elaboration, a future. Only by means of this detour can it become itself; its meaning is hence deferred, created afterwards, given in the future anterior. It is in this sense that possibility is not external to the present for Merleau-Ponty." Al-Saji, "Thinking Hesitates," 354.

[156] Deleuze argues that "[...]the characteristic of virtuality is to exist in such a way that it is actualized by being differentiated and is forced to differentiate itself, to create its lines of differentiation in order to be actualized." Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 98/99.

developing structures of the present. This is indeterminacy in the present is open to, without prefiguring, future meaning. In retrospect it is easy to miss this indeterminacy, and see either a set of environmental causes or an entelechy that was proper to the vital structure. After development normativity sneaks in because the transformation the present appears to be the teleological fulfillment of the past. The past cannot but *appear,* as argued in the *Phenomenology of Perception,* as necessary for consciousness, but this appearance is understood as contingency and as only essential from the projected horizon of consciousness. Later, Merleau-Ponty explains how the development of a new level of meaning sets up the past as the term of its own reference, rather than being merely relative to the conscious perspective it later realizes:

> There is truly a retrograde movement of the true (and not only a retroactive effect of the *discovery* of the true). The trunk of the circular tree had equal radii, [which means that] manual operations on it would have obtained results which for us presuppose this equality; but this equality as such does not exist absolutely before geometry. … Can we say that the properties which will be discovered are already there? No. They will hold retroactively. (IP, 52/[55](42))

The measurement of rings on the tree is true, even if they did not have a geometric existence beforehand—this is not a mere construction of consciousness. This meaning does not exist "absolutely" beforehand in a preformed way, *and yet* manual examination *will have* discovered it. The past harbours possibilities which are organic and unformed, which are the promise of a meaning, that which

is indeterminate and yet *awaits* a present according to which it can become, or will have become, perceived as truly meaningful.[157] But what is this preexistence which is not absolute or substantial, which orients the becoming of a truth without determining it in advance?

In our study of the melody, we saw that the first note or bar had an incomplete sense. It was heard, but it promised something more, something which it oriented without determining, and something which, perhaps, could have completely recast the original harmonics of the opening of the melody. Similarly, in the study of embryological development, there were basic orientations within growth, which were differences that did not cause or guarantee the appearance of mature structures, but which nevertheless prompted a different growth in the organism, its becoming in a new direction. We cannot say that one blast from a trumpet, or even the player picking up her instrument, is a complete song, not even the origin of a song, nor can we say that an embryo is yet an instituted human life. And yet, these rhythms mark out something that could become, in unforeseeable, novel ways, something with promise. Bergson, for example, recounted a story that when asked about what his future writings would contain, he responded that a writer and thinker could never answer this question; genuinely new philosophical work, he said, is like the birth of a genius.[158] And yet, he is inclined to write and to think. The French word *sens* captures the way in which,

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[157] "What is at stake for Merleau-Ponty is the way in which a present event makes itself *dimensional*, that is, it becomes that according to which the past is perceived. This reconfiguration of the past is not, however, anachronistic. The past receives its meaning and date by means of this 'envelopment' in the present: it becomes what it was, a process of institution that opens onto a particular present.'" Al-Saji, "Thinking Hesitates," 354; citing VI 244/297.

[158] Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 82/72.

without being a constituted, explicit meaning, there can be an orientation or a direction. *Sens* implies movement, and specifically here, I mean the bearings of a movement prior to that movement transpiring: not the fixed cardinal points of the compass, but that nascent orientation of place which is not yet perceived or thought as an established position in space but which lets such an objective space have its orientation. Al-Saji describes this indeterminate being in the present not as negativity, but as "tendency," such that:

> Borrowing from Bergson, I would call this temporality 'tendency.' Tendency connotes not simply movement, but 'nascent change of direction.' [...] Tendency is 'tâtonnement,' to use Bersgon's term; it is a search without finality, an experimentation and elaboration that does not dictate the future it will find.[159]

Organic possibility emerges as new but not absolutely different from the past; it is organic possibility because it is a seed, the promise or tendency to grow. In this way, life grows out of the soil of the past, and it resumes a melodics of sense already at play in nature.

Rather than preexisting the present as causes or logical possibilities, this organic possibility is nested (not grounded) in generative passivity, or what Merleau-Ponty calls a "matrix" of past meanings, a constellation of mutually mediating dimensions of sense.[160] Past and present, then, are not-self-contained

[159] Al-Saji, "Thinking Hesitates," 359-60; citing Bergson, "Creative Mind," 101/93.
[160] Merleau-Ponty defines the genus of institution as a kind of generative past which orients and calls for a future: "Institution in the strong sense [is] this symbolic matrix that has the result of there being the openness of a field, of a future according to dimensions, and from this result we have the possibility of a common adventure and of a history as consciousness." IP, 13/[10](9).

separate moments, but must be thought together, as temporally and ontologically imbricated structures: “Other moments of time and the past, but [time] has them really *behind itself* in simultaneity, inside itself and not it and they side by side ‘in’ time.” (VI 267/315) None of these "meanings" are determinate or separable because their mutual influence--their difference--allows new meaning to emerge. This compacting of time upon itself generates difference, or diverges and ramifies as a tendency, a seed whose growth is the call for novel creation. Yet this past is not a cause of or explicit meaning for consciousness. This originary difference is irreducible to exacted forms. That nature is a total constellation of meanings despite being irreducible to a totality of objective meanings is a central thesis of the *Nature* lectures.

Further, just as the past is not an elapsed piece of a substantial being, so too the present is not a self-contained morsel of actuality. This entails that the sense that is “present” is doubly not on time: first, the past is contracted into the present, but second, the “presence” of the present entails that it is already an actualization of a developmental temporality that has already exceeded it; the present is characterized by temporal passivity in that it depends upon its future to be event, to be activity; as Al-Saji explains:

> The generativity of life means that it can be conceived under two aspects: as invisible vital impetus and as visible actualizations or offshoots of that impetus. Life is at once a continuous vital force and the discontinuous, material sedimentations of that force. It is at once an instituting *élan,* or winding, and the instituted dimensions, forgotten along this winding and

sedimented in the form of organisms.[161]

Rendered determinate and present by this "matrix" of becoming dimensions of meaning, the present is already passed over as a momentary and provisional residue of sense. In this manner, events have happened already once they are manifest, such that, as Renaud Barbaras puts it, the true "happening" of organic life is ahead of the immediate structures and functions of this life.[162]

This gap between the founding of meaning in nature qua futurity and consciousness as a retrogressive structure of understanding the past is not a mere epistemological limitation to consciousness, however. Jankélévitch argued that our understanding of the past was characterized by "infirmity" and "delay."[163] However, in this so-called weakness of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty uncovers the possibility of tracing, by backward reference, the becoming of meaning in nature. In this way, consciousness has the promise of partaking in, and following, the new meaning instituted in nature, of thinking new thoughts and discovering new truths. Indeed, consciousness itself is another such institution whose meaning must become according to divergence instead of attaining to an immutable realm of ideas:

> Of course other ways of structuring are possible, formalizations, from which it results that the current way of structuring is surpassed, that the current way of structuring looks to be a particular case, but not an absolute

[161] Al-Saji, "Temporality of Life," 196.
[162] Renaud Barbaras explains the logic of this dimension as an interplay between actuality and possibility that precedes and grounds the subject-object distinction: "The world proposes dimensions just as much as it is posited by them. The dynamism of the flesh must be grasped as institution rather than as constitution: the flesh is made of these levels, of these axes around which 'subject' and 'object' turn." Barbaras, "Being," 205.
[163] Jankélévitch, *Bergson*, 21.

> decentering, an indifferent equilibrium, the end of problems, the intelligible world. The history of knowledge is contracted upon itself insofar as it advances, but it never pierces through the order of structures; its light is never entirely in the present: there is a double relation of *Fundierung*. This history creeps along backwards like a crab, looks toward the past, does not see the world of ideas directly. (IP 55/[55](42))

To say that activities are instituted is to admit a gap within the presence of form to consciousness, an indeterminacy within structures of meaning, but nevertheless an absence by which they emerge and develop. When consciousness "hesitates," according to Al-Saji it can catch sight of this movement, or at least its trace.[164] This consciousness does not have the past as an object, but qua institution this past exists as a kind of difference or movement, rather than a static entity, as Al-Saji explains: "There is a constitutive distance, or difference, that holds past and present together, but prevents the past from simply becoming present."[165] This past harbours multiple trajectories of development prior to conscious awareness. The natural past is not simply left behind and transcended: it is folded into our being, vertically,[166] as a condition of our sense. This unreflective sense precedes and grounds the body and its vital awareness by establishing its field of

[164] Al-Saji, "Thinking Hesitates,"358-9.
[165] Al-Saji, "Temporality of Life," 188; citing VI, 124/166.
[166] For Merleau-Ponty on the notion of verticality, contrasted with a horizon of presence, see: VI, 175/227, 223-4/272-3, and 234-5/283-4. Verticality is a concept that thinks different temporal phases, such as present and past, not as exclusive entities, but as co-existing structures of mediation and self-differentiation. Further, Merleau-Ponty suggests that this temporality of difference within coexistence can explain how different subjects and different times can partake of the same world, rather than existing as incompatible, discrete temporal horizons. In this way, "institution" is a species of vertical time, like a "hinge" between past and present, self and others, and organisms and the world. IP, 4-5/[3](2).

possibilities.

At the start of the second *Nature* course Merleau-Ponty explains that as well as moving beyond a concept of substance and time as actuality, he is also extending a conception of memory to nature. Without making nature a kind of subjectivity, he describes it as a past which harbours tendencies and trajectories of meaning. (N 118-9/160-1) Our own body carries the natural traces of these becoming meanings, as it is instituted as the resumption of the motion of other bodies. To have sense is to resume and transform another, older sense. The expressive body of *Phenomenology*, in other words, is not its own ground, but owes its origins to a birth for which it was not present. Reality appears as ordered to our hands, our bodies, our joints, but only because these joints, which were first the joints of non-human animals, have grasped at and fashioned pieces of nature prior to nature's being conceptually graspable. In a sense our birth is a past event that does not belong to us, because it had no significance for us--though it did for others, particularly for our mothers who laboured for and cared for our organic possibility. But conversely, there is a sense in which our birth works in perpetuity behind the new meanings that transform the context of our life. So our evolutionary past is not an ossified fossil record of static forms, but a natural memory which is the ongoing well of possibilities for moving and living. As Ted Toadvine explains, "the perceiving body is itself one event within the overlapping series of events that constitutes space-time, and the mind equally participates in this 'passage of nature.'"[167] Consciousness does not possess nature as an object

[167] Toadvine, "Natural Time," 214-8.

before it in perception or thought, but phenomenological reflection upon natural and living meaning reveals consciousness as a species of this retrograde movement of meaning becoming possible in nature.

Consciousness is relative to nature because consciousness is a species of institution, a retrograde movement which projects its own meanings back into the natural past that in itself held an indeterminacy, an organic possibility, which was and continues to be an absence of a completed sense. The meaning promised in nature is a productive "matrix" and not a "possibility" conceived under the guise of reality. Renaud Barbaras explains that this past sense is temporal, because it "corresponds to the open ensemble of its possible renewals" which are not yet manifest, which may come to have a new sense, a future which is more than just what has already existed, but which will come to have existed.[168] Comparing this sense to language, Barbaras explains that the "unity" of natural meaning is not just an "axis or principle of equivalence according to which… expressions are accomplished" because meaning "institutes itself a future" and transfigures its sense every time it is spoken.[169] The expressions of nature are equally actualizations and also creations of possibility. The background or "past" of nature is not a sense that is in principle already determinate in itself, perhaps accessible to a more powerful form of consciousness than our own: "Nature is an enigmatic object, an object that is not an object at all; it is not really set out in front of us. It is our soil—not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, which

[168] Barbaras, "Nature," 26.
[169] Barbaras, "Nature," 26.

carries us."[170] Language is an open and diacritical system, a system that is itself an institution of an older, more basic diacritical institution: nature, which moves according to a sense that is "Ur-stiftung" or instituted, and thus "opposed to man and not instituted by him." (N 3/3) Nature is not what is given to us, but that by which we are given, the soil of our possibility. This "soil" is never present as a preformed reality, but is that which carries us into new arenas of meaning, that which--in its unspeakable originality--will come to have been our nature.

2.6 Foucault's Criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's Naturalism

Within a logic of constitution, nature is either a constituted being which predates consciousness, or else it is a past constituted by consciousness. Within such a dichotomized ontology, to speak of a nature prior to consciousness invariably involves an unjustified presupposition: either nature is posited as being-in-itself prior to our relation to it, or else this relation is collapsed because nature is posited as a construct of consciousness. It is precisely this dilemma that Foucault articulates as the irresolvable problem of phenomenology: that it cannot adequately explain natural being. While this criticism holds true if the proper object of phenomenology is constituting consciousness, I claim that this criticism cannot apply to a phenomenological method which is premised upon the study of being as institution.

In *Theatrum Philosophicum*, a philosophical commentary on the works of

[170] Barbaras, "Nature," 26; citing N, 4/2. It is also worth noting that Merleau-Ponty compares the way that nature "carries" us as our soil to the modern conception where "the human subject ... carries being." N, 40/21.

Deleuze, Foucault briefly levels a powerful critique against the methodological limitations of phenomenology, arguing that this method cannot adequately characterize the meaning of events in nature.[171] The phenomenological observer is caught in an impasse: on the one hand, if she puts the events of nature within the sphere of lived meaning, she renders these events relative to consciousness. On the other hand, if she claims to describe an order of meaning outside of consciousness, she presupposes "primal" and "privileged" meanings in themselves, undermining the phenomenological method, and reverting to a positivist conception of nature:

> Phenomenology, on the other hand, reoriented the event with respect to meaning: either it placed the bare event before or to the side of meaning—the rock of facticity, the mute inertia of occurrences—and then submitted it to the active processes of meaning, to its digging and elaboration; or else it assumed a domain of primal significations, which always existed as a disposition of the world around the self, tracing its paths and privileged locations, indicating in advance where the event might occur and its possible form: Sartre or Merleau-Ponty.[172]

The second horn of this dilemma raises the difficult question of how, as phenomenological observers, we can speak of a nature prior to consciousness. Foucault charges Sartre with the first extreme and Merleau-Ponty with the second,

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[171] Foucault, "Theatrum," 165-8.

[172] I discovered this criticism from Foucault in the following essay by Ted Toadvine, who demonstrates that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical is neither a positivist nor constructivist conception of nature, but an ontology which explicitly rejects these concepts. Toadvine, "Sense and Non-Sense," 121-34.

but points out that either extreme requires presupposing the primacy of a privileged, meaning-constituting consciousness. Either events are simply constituted by consciousness, or else consciousness has privileged, transparent access to nature, such that meaning in nature and meaning for consciousness are ontologically identified. Though Foucault addresses half of his critique at the *Phenomenology of Perception*, I think that it equally could apply, as well as the other half of the critique leveled against Sartre, to Merleau-Ponty's account of the institution of nature.

Basically, these charges of idealism and realism are premised, respectively, on the notions of a meaning-constituting activity of consciousness or an already-constituted, positive meaning in nature. In response to Foucault's criticisms, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy rejects the premise that consciousness must be either strictly continuous or discontinuous with nature, so that the two would be external terms. There is not a "constituting" or "constituted" source of meaning in either consciousness or nature, but a structure of generative passivity operative according to the "becoming true" of meaning, of which natural events--including consciousness--are species.

Foucault's first criticism, on my interpretation, is that the retrograde movement by which events remodel the past, disclosing it as having held the possibilities that emerge from it, is in fact a projection of consciousness. If Merleau-Ponty claims there cannot be a past in-itself, because the past is always perceived according to the present that emerges from it, this would seem to entail that the past is only ever given according to our consciousness of it, that it is a

construct of human consciousness. If meaning does not exist in nature, prior to one's experience of it, and the past is inaccessible as such, then the condition of possibility for the past would seem to be the lived present of a conscious being. This seems to entail in turn that what sense there is must be a sense that exists within the horizon of consciousness. Renaud Barbaras, in a criticism of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, argues that, as in that text, such a metaphysical adherence to consciousness means that "the ontological question of being cannot be asked: the perceived was grasped ...in the perspective of consciousness, and its sense of being became exhausted therefore in that … correlative of lived consciousness."[173] Meaning is not in the past, on this view, but is projected into an illusory past from the present. If this is the case, there would be no past, in any ontologically robust sense of the term.

Consciousness falls prey, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, to a retrospective illusion of presently experienced nature taken as past nature. Consciousness elides its own workings and its own pre-conscious origins insofar as the past is perceived as continuous with the present world of meaningful objects. In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty explains that perception works by a kind of crypto-mechanism. (PP 59/85) That is, the very act of perception motivates its own elision, such that a completed perception passes this act over in favour of the completed object of perception. Perception covers over its own workings because it intends a world of meaningful objects in which there is no room to perceptually encounter the spontaneous, non-objective act which accomplishes this very order:

[173] Barbaras, "Nature," 27-8.

> Perception opens a window on to things. This means that it is directed, quasi-teleologically, towards a truth in itself in which the reason underlying all appearances is to be found. The tacit thesis of perception is that at every instant experience can be co-ordinated with that of the previous instant and that of the following, and my perspective with that of other consciousnesses--that what is now indeterminate for me could become determinate for a more complete knowledge, which is as it were realized in advance in the thing, or rather which is the thing itself. (PP 54/80-1)

Perception functions anonymously. I do not perceive *myself as enacting* the perceiving, but perceive anonymously as "one" perceiving a world that is meaningful and simply there, and moreover that *has always been here*. However, within phenomenological reflection, this tacit thesis of perception becomes exposed, and the act by which it operates retrospectively is revealed. The question remains, however, whether this is an act of consciousness, or a movement of being itself.

In his later thought, Merleau-Ponty sometimes speaks as if the retrograde movement of truth in time is in fact a production by consciousness or thought: "'Retrograde movement of the true' that phenomenon that one can no longer undo oneself from what has once been thought, that one finds it again in the materials themselves…" (VI 189/240) Though this language connotes a projective, and thus constituting, activity of consciousness, a careful distinction between a retrospective illusion and the "retrograde movement of the true" exists, as I

showed in the previous section. Merleau-Ponty argues that there is more in the past than we can ever be conscious of, but not more in the sense of preformed meaning that exceeds our perspective, but an organic possibility which we cannot, in principle, perceive as such, though we can post-factually perceive its creative actualizations. Our inability to perceive this true possibility is not a weakness or failing. Merleau-Ponty, in the section describing organic possibility, remarks that our awareness of nature need not only be defined as "vicious as soon as it does not coincide with being[.] Is every valid knowledge a knowledge without distance?" (N 69/100) Merleau-Ponty explains that while "the divergence between knowledge and the object is always a fault" in traditional metaphysics, here it is taken as a condition of possibility of the emergence of the two. (N 69/100) And this is because the past of nature is "not only a retrospection made after the fact [but] a being in the making." (N 69/100) Perception is passive not just because it overlooks its intentional act for its intended object, but insofar as it must continually await to understand what new possibilities will have been harboured in the indeterminate, generative passivity of the past.

Consciousness does not merely impose meaning upon the past, as Foucault's criticism would have it, because there is a genuine becoming in the past which orients consciousness. When consciousness falsely imputes an objective being to the past, it is not only the activity of consciousness which is being elided, by the movement of being which enable and motivates this illusion in the first place. This delay between nature qua organic possibility and consciousness, then, is not a trap that consciousness falls into or an illusion that

prevents consciousness from coincidence with nature, because Merleau-Ponty redefines knowledge as a species of this being in the making. The difference in kind between consciousness and the past does not mean that consciousness makes the past, but that there is an indeterminacy which makes meaning possible. By recognizing that consciousness does not create the meaning of the past, phenomenological reflection not only delimits the scope of consciousness, but in doing so genuinely opens it to think, or better to witness, the emergence of meaning in life.[174]

Foucault's second criticism of Merleau-Ponty could be reformulated as a critique of his philosophy of nature as institution in the following way: if the past really harbours novel evolutions of meaning, then this involves imputing a meaning to the past, positing a natural past that is in-itself. Particularly, when Merleau-Ponty describes a "tendency," "seed" or "promise" of meaning in the present which orients a future, yet goes on to claim that this orientation does not determine but leaves the future open qua organic possibility, this in fact amounts to positing determinacy in nature. In other words, by claiming that there is *any* orientation of the future in the present, even if consciousness cannot possess it, Merleau-Ponty is imputing difference in degree to difference in kind, reducing the future to a given, preexistent nature.

This criticism, however, is premised upon understanding the past as predating the present chronologically, and also on the notion that the modality of

[174] This is essentially Merleau-Ponty's articulation in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception* where the procedure is not to reduce nature to an ideal structure, but to "step back" and watch "transcendences spring forth" in an "unmotivated" and genuine becoming. PP, lxxvii-viii/14-15

all sense is that of a preformed, constituted meaning. Premature structures like the pre-cardial heart tubes or the electro-kinetic gradients in the axolotl embryo are not fixed forms in themselves, causes of subsequently developed meaning structures. First, these structures are only structures in retrospect, a "past" only for the meanings that will have emerged out of them—the electrochemical gradient is the past of living awareness, not a past in itself. On the other hand, however, these structures are not nothing because organic possibilities can emerge out of them, taking up but radically transforming their temporal rhythms or melodics. This past is not given or posited as such, or as fully formed, but as Merleau-Ponty explains it is given "as it was one day *plus* an inexplicable alternation, a strange distance."[175] Actualized structures in life are creative and novel, but they are not a complete rupture from the past, although they mark out a birth in being of something different in kind, and unprecedented. Foucault's criticism does not account for the way that instead of preexisting and causing the present, past and present are caught up in a reversible structure where the emergence of a new present comes to have reshaped the very past from which it emerges. The past does not elapse, but is contracted into the present, in an ongoing process of development driven by futurity. Within this development meaning is not ever fixed or determinate, but is a melodic, which means that it depends upon while re-inflecting the time of the past.

With the premise that sense is constituted, Foucault's second criticism can itself be objected to on the grounds that the retrospective movement of truth

[175] Al-Saji, "Temporality of Life," 188.

which posits meaning in the past is overlooked. That is to say, this criticism is based upon an elision of the way in which meaning is diacritically established, and exists in the modality not only of already formed meanings, but also of tendencies of orientation which cannot be given, but can be made manifest post-factually, after new events sediment their emerging sense in time:

> [O]ne will always have to make an ascending movement from the situation to the sense; never will the necessity be posited in itself. The necessity will be made only by the *forgetfulness* of the analytic step, sedimentation of the result: the triangle will appear right away as having the sum of the angles = 2 right angles. But the sedimentation is the cause, not the effect, of the order 'in itself.' This is where Bergson comes in: retrograde movement of the true, I.e. Not openness of the duration onto a timeless order, but the appearance of the time of a truth. (IP 54/[57](44))

The temporal horizon of consciousness is preceded and undergirded by the vertical time of sedimentation, such that consciousness is generated passively, and such that even consciousness of objective truth unfolds within a temporal horizon which is generatively accomplished--not actively constituted. There is not, for example, a natural cause or teleological form of consciousness already prepared in the embryo, but a kind of work that is set forth, such that "birth [means] first of all the openness of a future." (IP 8/[5](4)) The passivity of consciousness should not entail a passive *given* outside of consciousness in the external world and in natural history, which follows from the alternatives proposed by Foucault. Rather, this passivity entails a generativity, a meaning that is not yet complete, and whose

sense (*sens*) is originally indeterminate, calling for a future rather than preexisting in a past. The past of this generativity is not, as Al-Saji articulates it,

> a secret lost and to be rediscovered.' It is neither an empirical past, once present and now forgotten, nor a layer of positivity, underlying experience but hidden from view. The immemorial is, Merleau-Ponty says, an 'impossible past'-one that has never been present and that cannot be made present in a representation or act of recollection.[176]

This absence of the past, while marking a passive limit of human awareness, is also that which enables growth and creativity in all life, the sense which charges time with significance. In answering these criticisms from Foucault, I think that it is clear how Merleau-Ponty avoids the alternatives of idealism and naturalism, and the dichotomy of constituting activity and passively constituted being, instead revealing a logic of how possibility genuinely emerges out of generative passivity. Although this possibility can never be given as such, we must use the utmost care in calling it "passivity" or by any other concept. This autoproduction of sense is characterized not by coincidence or spontaneity, but by divergence and passivity, by delay—it is taken up and resumed in perception, language, and thought. All of these activities are enabled by this generative passivity yet at a constitutive distance from it.

Thus, against Foucault, there is a primordial coming to be of meaning in life which cannot be conceptualized by binary concepts, particularly the categories of an active, self-effecting consciousness or a passive nature in-itself.

[176] Al-Saji, "Temporality of Life," 84; citing VI, 124/165, 122/162, 158/209-10, 123/164.

The passive generativity of nature works as if to cover over its own tracks, and while consciousness emerges as an arena of truth, it does so in a qualified way, at a distance from nature, ballasted by that mediating, retrograde sedimentation of meaning which Merleau-Ponty refers to as a wild intentionality. (S 181/179)

Just as Foucault's criticism misses the mark by eliding this generative passivity of sense in nature, imputing it to either an already constituted nature or a constituting activity that forms nature, so too we would go astray if we did not seek to understand how this understanding of generative passivity requires us to change the way we explain and think of our second nature, the human sphere. The role of generative passivity as the foundation of consciousness becomes clear in Merleau-Ponty's later works, particularly in his lecture course *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*, and especially if we link this account to the logic of radical passivity at work in *Institution of Passivity* in order to discover how our necessarily intercorporeal nature turns on ongoing but always tentative institutions. In the third chapter of this dissertation, I explain how the logic of generative passivity is at work in the institution of the person. The issue of our human personality emerges when we discover that our lives are accountable to and responsible for these intercorporeal institutions--nature and culture--which we did not constitute. Because our agency is rooted in this passive generativity, we require a different notion of responsibility. The idea of the institution of personhood out of pre-personal nature underscores the import of Merleau-Ponty's later political writings, which articulate an amplified notion of responsibility and to which we can turn for an adequate understanding of the demands of ethical and

social life. But we must begin this study by examining the emergence of human consciousness within the passive generativity of nature.

Chapter Three

The Passivity of Agency:

The Intercorporeal Institution of the Person

> Man's unhappiness, says Descartes, is due to his having first been a child. And indeed the unfortunate choices which most men make can only be explained by the fact that they have taken place on the basis of childhood. The child's situation is characterized by his finding himself cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish...
>
> -Simone de Beauvoir,
> *The Ethics of Ambiguity*[177]

The immediate form of our everyday life is characterized by a sense of our own personhood and agency. Yet, as I have argued, human consciousness is not an original or self-enacting power of acting upon the world. The concept of personhood requires a philosophical method which can doubly explain our immediate sense of personal agency in its own right, while also explaining how this sense nevertheless issues from pre-personal institutions in nature. This question of the passive generation of personhood in nature, I think, particularly exposes the opposed tendencies of Merleau-Ponty's early texts, especially in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Yet, it is in these texts that his critique of the notion of constituting consciousness is most at stake because it is here that the

[177] Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 35/51.

alleged primacy of consciousness must be addressed where it is most immediate: in the experience of personhood.

Against the notion that consciousness is a static function, I begin the chapter by arguing that the focus in the *Phenomenology of Perception* on growth and education should be read as an abrogation of constituting activity in favour of a generative passivity of personhood. I argue that human learning and development cannot be considered as activities enacted by consciousness or the human body alone, because such a merely genetic account reduces the genuine passivity of growth and education to already-established forms of activity. Moving past this genetic concept of passivity, I trace the roots of learning--what Merleau-Ponty calls the temporal process of *sedimentation*--beyond the individual human body to deeper, intercorporeal and temporal developments within the institution of nature. I argue that this interpretation of habit and growth is the correct reading of the *Phenomenology*, because human habituation and growth must be understood as founded in an ontology which precedes any bodily or conscious capacity (*pouvoir*) for activity, and roots these temporal sedimenting structures in a generative potentiality (*puissance*) of nature.

Having traced the origin of human habitual growth and development through the living body to nature, the question of how the human person can emerge from this pre-personal sphere remains to be answered. To fully work out this logic of generative passivity in personhood, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's lectures on child psychology to explain how our second nature as persons begins within a structure of intercorporeal, "syncretic sociability" that precedes our senses of

consciousness, agency and relations with other selves. In *Institution,* Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how the spatial and interpersonal distinctions of adult life are not constituted from outside this syncretic social and spatial matrix of childhood, but emerge within this intercorporeal field through bodily developments and encounters with others. It is when these tacit intercorporeal relations with others become explicitly lived, primarily in the formative events of puberty, that an explicit sense of self-conscious agency begins to emerge. However, this sense of agency is never final or absolute because, as cases of pathological habits and social structures of oppression demonstrate, human personality and interpersonal relations tacitly depend upon the intercorporeal structures which institute personal agency.

Thus, while this intercorporeal, syncretic institution that structures adult life is not explicitly present in mature experience, neither is it transcended by adult life absolutely, because adult life continues to depend upon this tacit intercorporeal structure of generative passivity. Merleau-Ponty's notion of syncretic sociability is, in my view, crucial to offering a new and more effective conception of the social as the intercorporeal matrix of personhood and agency. I will briefly elaborate, by turning to Merleau-Ponty's later political writings, how intercorporeal sociality remains at work in adult life, juxtaposing his conception of the social as intercorporeality with both liberalism and social constructivism. Against liberalism, I argue that persons are formed out of an intercorporeal, pre-individual sociability, but against social constructivism, I explain how this sociability is not a super-personal, disembodied norm which constitutes the

person. Rather than operating according to a logic of constitution, the social is the shared, dynamic matrix of bodily practices and significances in which individuals come to inhabit senses of personality and agency.

In this way, Merleau-Ponty discloses how responsibility is an irresolvable demand, insofar as our agency becomes an explicit, indeclinable issue for us in the midst of social structures which are not of our own making. The issue of responsibility is compounded by the fact that these structures, and our agency within them, are not objects of our transparent awareness or direct manipulation. This binding difficulty of responsibly understanding and acting within our intercorporeal sociality is overlooked by traditional accounts that take the social to be an explicit structure *constituted* by the *constituting activity* of either individual consent or social normativity. In order to uncover the workings of this tacit, generatively passive matrix of sociality, I turn to experiences of bodily oppression. These experiences disclose how certain shared bodily behaviours of privilege unconsciously work to violently constitute the ways in which we come to inhabit our bodies, rather than recognizing and fostering bodily development as an open domain of personal potentiality. Attending to the social development of bodily comportment and gesture, I argue, allows us to obliquely expose--and perhaps indirectly effect changes within--this shared structure of pre-personal generative passivity, which is the intercorporeal soil of our personhood and agency.

3.1 Static Phenomenology: The Person as Irreducible Form

A first solution to the problem of the origins of personal significance is offered by a "static phenomenology" which orients the conditions of possibility for the meaning-structure of "person" according to its prima facie mode of givenness.[178] On this view, the person is what I have characterized as static passivity, and what Merleau-Ponty would call a meaningful *Gestalt*, a unified significance which is irreducible to precedent parts or processes. Though there is not a methodological univocity in the text, one of the strongest tendencies in *The Structure of Behaviour* is a method of static phenomenology, which takes "form" to be an essential being that is constituted by consciousness. On this reading, the things and people of the human world are not mere empirical facts or historically contingent entities, their sense as perceptual form derives from the symbolic character of a synthesis of consciousness:

> The simple *de facto* presence of other human beings and of use-objects or cultural objects in the infantile milieu cannot explain the forms of primitive perception as a cause explains its effect. Consciousness is not comparable to a plastic material which would receive its privileged structure from the outside by the action of a sociological or physiological causality. If these structures were not in some way prefigured in the

[178] A static method presumes the existence of its object of study without reference to its genesis: "While I can also grasp such experiences in terms of their essential possibilities for a subject who emerges in and through them, Husserl insists nevertheless that 'I do not inquire here into the genesis of the monad, into the way in which such phenomena originate or develop [*erspringen*].' That is, I can vary myself as monad *qua* correlate of the objects, but I do not inquire into its genesis as self-temporalizing or developing. Here the monad is treated simply as a 'fixed' essential possibility, as an 'already 'developed' subjectivity.'" Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 39; citing Husserl, "Passive Synthesis," 643/40.

> consciousness of the child, the use-object or the 'other' would be expressed in it only by constructions of sensation, a progressive interpretation of which would slowly disengage the human meaning. (SB 169/183-4)

Consciousness is not an event that takes place within the order of given, constituted meanings. Consciousness names the immediate form of givenness of all of these contents as well as their synthetic principle. There can be no "other" person unless consciousness is primordially attuned to the presence of another person as person. Consciousness is *a priori* in that the forms of meaning manifest there are irreducible to prior parts or antecedent events. A person is not an assemblage of sensations or behaviouristic reflexes, and an idea is not immanent to a naturalistic event. Attention to the givenness of any meaningful form shows up the self-givenness of consciousness as a constituting structure which is the form of every experience, prior to its content.[179]

This separation of prior and posterior modes of being as synthetic activity and synthesized products is inherently problematic. I will enumerate the problems here, but the arguments are developed at length in the first chapter of the dissertation, which demonstrates that neither consciousness nor the living body could suffice as a synthetic principle of activity for the meaning intrinsic to conscious life. First, it is not clear how or why a transcendental consciousness is rooted in a specific body, why it is born when it is, or why it owes the ongoing

[179] There is a subordination of physical to vital, and vital to conscious synthesis: "Physical nature in man is not subordinated to a vital principle, the organism does not conspire to actualize an idea, and the mental is not a motor principle in the body; but what we call nature is already consciousness of nature, what we call life is already consciousness of life and what we call mental is still an object *vis*-à-*vis* consciousness." SB, 184/199.

realization of its very possibility to contingent events and contents. Indeed, how can there be any "past" prior to consciousness at all, if chronological time is constituted by consciousness? Consciousness is divorced from the very reality it serves to ground, because it is presupposed as a static form.

Second, there is the related criticism that, on this view, form is regarded as a static being that is constituted by consciousness and thus separable and distinct from its specific embodiments in things, bodies, and persons, as well as relations that hold between them. On this view, it is not clear how form can ever be established in the world or, moreover, learned by the subject. If form is constituted by consciousness, why is consciousness in the original possession of some forms (such as "thing" or "other") while having to learn what other specific forms are from the things themselves? Going back to the debater's paradox in Plato's M*eno*, it is generally not clear how a constituting consciousness *learns* because it is said to possess form in advance.[180]

Lastly, and combining both criticisms, this notion of static form elides the way that consciousness as the form of experience is itself dynamic, and develops in natural growth and later by habitual learning. This static view also cannot explain how the form and content of experience exhibit a dynamic, rather than a static form. There are, for example, meanings which come to be in and through experience and bodily movement, such as differing colour perceptions or melodic scales, and even different senses of what it means to be a person (such as childhood and adulthood, and the phases of transition between them). None of

[180] Plato, *Meno*, 80d-81e.

these senses of development are given in advance or entail a given outcome, as is evidenced by cultural differences in perceiving and understanding all of these phenomena.

The notion of form as static *Gestalt* elides the becoming true of form in experiences, including the form of consciousness itself. Static "form" provides a way to account for the apperceived unity of bodily, thingly and social structures as the irreducible form which personal experience takes, but it can only presuppose the existence of a constituting consciousness as the explanation for the genesis of this sense. How such a consciousness grows and develops --what I have termed genetic passivity--is, on this view, elided. Instead of presupposing this sense and linking it to a constituting consciousness, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy develops toward an explanation linking this personal sense to the habitual development of the living body. The static structures of personal sense, on this view, derive from genetic passivity: the sedimented achievements of a pre-personal world.

3.2 Genetic Grounds of Personality: Habit and Bodily Temporality

3.2.1 The Temporality of Habit

The driving insight behind the *Phenomenology of Perception* is that there can be no consciousness separate from the actual workings of the body, and that this relationship of body and world is not statically given but genetically accomplished as motor-perceptual learning. Merleau-Ponty compellingly argues that there can be no perception that does not involve motor dispositions and

movements of the body, such as focusing the eye. Conversely, the motor orientation of the body is not a self-enclosed sphere because the body's movements are oriented by a perceptual world which they play a role in accomplishing. The world appears as ordered to the body, in terms of things and meanings that can be grasped at a distance that unfolds relative to the spatial orientation of the body. This graspable, bodily-oriented character of the world, however, does not entail that the world is given to the body as a complete plenum of determinate objects. In *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty offers different conceptions of consciousness, the first of which is "defined by the possession of an object of thought or by transparence to itself." (SB 164/178)[181] In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty argues that consciousness does not take the form of a transparent knowledge of things, and that things do not take the form of fully constituted objects.[182] Merleau-Ponty rejects rationalist and empiricist theories which posit an already formed object, whether as an ideal form or a thing in-itself. Neither of these views, he argues, can account for "consciousness in the act of learning," because rationalism presupposes that the

[181] It is worth noting that the other tendency in *The Structure of Behaviour*, as I argued in the first chapter, Merleau-Ponty immediately calls this notion of consciousness into question: "To do it justice completely it would have been necessary first of all to stop defining consciousness by knowledge of self and to introduce the notion of a life of consciousness which goes beyond its explicit knowledge of itself." SB, 164/174. Merleau-Ponty goes on, in the same section on the "Human Order" to redefine perceived forms as "lived as realities, rather than known as true objects." SB, 168/182.

[182] Merleau-Ponty argues that the "tacit thesis of perception" is that there is a world of things that exist independently of consciousness. He calls this tacit thesis a "cryptomechanism" by which the object of intentionality elides the intentional act, such that the constitutive workings of consciousness are covered over. He concludes that if a single object was ever posited truly as in-itself, this would amount to the "death of consciousness" because the actual activity of consciousness would accomplish nothing, and be unable to relate to this alien object. Consciousness then, is defined by an ongoing activity which intends but never accomplishes a complete object. PP, 54/80-1.

object is already possessed by consciousness, and because empiricism can never establish anything new in consciousness or explain how partial sensations can be synthesized into meaningful forms. (PP 30/52) In this section, I articulate the temporal logic of genetic passivity through which we become *habituated* into personhood.

Consciousness emerges in the body, and the immediate form of consciousness is developmental: it does not possess already formed objects, others, and spaces, but begins as oriented toward an indeterminate world which progressively calls to be differentiated. Thus, consciousness does not begin as consciousness-of an object, but rather as directed by an intention which is directed toward learning, at rendering the world and consciousness itself more determinately oriented. The resolution of this intention into a perceived form and a perceiving consciousness happens concomitantly as the body integrates new capacities of movement. Merleau-Ponty describes the way that perceptual forms materialize together with consciousness of them, such as a ship's mast that is obscured in a tree-line. Before discerning the mast, we encounter a furtive lack in the perception of the forest horizon. Here the mast is not yet given as object, nor are the sensations clear because the tree-line appears as incomplete. The "object" of perception is given as incomplete yet suggestive, the sensations themselves present an ambiguity, neither of which "were given as reasons" before perceiving the mast, but as an indeterminate allure "imminent in this tension, as the storm as imminent in the clouds." (PP 17-18/40) It is only once the body has moved close enough to distinguish the individual trees, and to focus adequately on their

sensory characteristics, that this ambiguous field reveals itself as mast and trunks. This is not a mere clarification of an already given object by a more focused act of attention. The point is that the incomplete perceptual field calls the body to action, but the body's action brings the perceptual field toward further, but never to full, givenness.

Edward Casey presents this dual character of the body's responsivity to and accomplishment of a world as an irreducible limit between activity and passivity, echoing a focal tenet of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.[183] The body *learns* to move according to the indeterminate intentions of the perceived field, and the perceived field is established as determinately meaningful only within the context of these learned bodily movements:

> The analysis of motor habit as an extension of existence continues, then, into an analysis of perceptual habit as an acquisition of a world. Reciprocally, every perceptual habit is still a motor habit, and here again the grasping of a signification is accomplished by the body. (PP 154/189)

Body and world are concomitantly established in successive acts of learning, the development of sensori-motor habits, such that "the body, then, has understood and the habit has been acquired when the body allows itself to be penetrated by a

[183] Casey points out that the body can equally be characterized as belonging to space or accomplishing space, and asserts the correlate thesis that this means that the body depends upon the sedimentations of habit while also working to further them: "In fact, the habituation which such inhabitation accomplishes involves a delicate dialectic between the implied passivity of enclosure (for space and time undeniably act to contain us) and the activity of getting to know our way around in a given circumstance. This is why it is true to say both that 'I belong to [space and time]' and that in turn 'my body combines with them and includes them.' Inhabiting, taken as a paradigm of the bodily expression of habit memory, is at once 'wholly active and wholly passive,' in the world and of it. It is made possible by sedimentation even as it carries sedimentation itself to new depths." Casey, "Habit," 285.

new signification, when it has assimilated a new meaningful core." (PP 147/182) In the case of the ship, walking and visual focus were called for by the visual field in order to recast it in a more determinate manner. Long before this, more basic lessons, such as distinguishing colours and discerning objects were necessary perceptual lessons called for by the perceptual field, lessons which were equally motor accomplishments such as moving the eyes or moving toward a vague object. Prior to grasping a completed object, the body possesses this practically oriented, precocious sensitivity toward developing elaborations of movement and perception.

The developing schema of moving and perceiving is not present as a capacity of the body in advance of its realization. The body generates meaningful possibilities of moving and perceiving by increasingly particularizing itself. Habits form when contingent, arbitrary movements become integrated into more complex movements in a "change of contingency into necessity through the act of taking up" specific movements, such that these movements become the necessary ground of further movements. (PP 174/209) These movements cease being arbitrary or optional, because they become called for by the perceived world, and summoned as parts of more complex movements. Thus contingent and difficult movements become inconspicuous and fluid features of more complex movements. Whereas flexing my knee might have initially required express focus and volition, now it is an automatic feature of walking. Indeed, this walking itself

becomes an as if automatic,[184] world-sanctioned activity, such as when I find myself in the vector of a speeding car and step out of its path before reflecting or explicitly deciding to do so.

In this way, habits are not spontaneous activities, because they depend upon a past which integrates and continues previous forms of activity. These initially acquired habits, such as knee flexion or eye-focusing, are not simply elapsed and left in the past. These specific moments of the past remain active and determinately structure the way in which the present appears as a context of movement and perception. These past moments inhere in the present, giving it its form: they are what Merleau-Ponty calls the "true present." (PP 85/112) As early as *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty discovers that time is not a uniform succession of mutually exclusive moments which are continually extinguished by the passage of time, because some moments persist in their significance. For the present moment to have any significance whatsoever, there must be such a persistence of a meaningful past which furnishes the present with a sense. This entails that there are decisive moments which do not elapse, but continue onward as scaffolds of meaning for any present:

> Behaviour, inasmuch as it has a structure, is not situated in either of these two orders. It does not unfold in objective time and space like a series of physical events; each moment does not occupy one and only one point of time; rather, at the decisive moment of learning, a 'now' stands out from

[184] Habit is not mechanistic, as the behaviourists understood it. However, there is an involuntary aspect of habit, which is markedly pronounced in familiar contexts, or urgent contexts where there is not time for considered action.

> the series of 'nows', acquires a particular value and summarizes the grouping which have preceded it as it engages and anticipates the future of the behaviour; this 'now' transforms the singular situation of the experience into a typical situation and the effective reaction into an aptitude. From this moment on behaviour is detached from the order of the in-itself (en soi) and becomes the projection outside the organism of a *possibility* which is internal to it. The world, inasmuch as it harbours living beings, ceases to be a material plenum consisting of juxtaposed parts; it opens up at the place where behaviour appears. (SB 125/136, my emphasis)

This dependence on past habits is not mechanistic in character, because the past does not merely repeat itself, though neurotic and pathological habits can tend toward this form.[185] Past habits do not simply mandate a repeated behaviour, but they open a domain of general significance in which a certain type of action can have a meaning. I can walk over various types of terrain without explicitly adapting my footing, or play a classical or electric guitar without systematically adjusting each movement. As such, habit, rather than condemning us to repeat a past, in fact opens up broader dimensions of possibility for future action, such as

[185] Casey contrasts the way in which habit is narrowly understood as repetitive behaviour, as characterized in Merleau-Ponty's studies of pathological habits such as in the patient Schneider, from habits proper, which genuinely establish a field of possible meanings and actions within the lived body: "Habituation of this sort lives on the capital of virtuality inherent in all habits that have not degenerated into the strictly habitual customary routines. The latter lack the depth of innovative habituation precisely because they are the already fully actualized forms of response that limit adaptation to new circumstances." Casey, "Habit," 286.

how we can understand sentences which we have never heard before.[186] Of course, the possibility established by habit is not completely open, since once I have learned the language I cannot but hear these sentences as English.

Within our habitually structured action and perception there is no indifferent present moment as such, because the present is progressively structured by a past. The "truth" of the present is thus imbricated in this habitual past. Habits are not mere reflexes or abilities added on to our neutral consciousness of the world: they accomplish this consciousness, and thus our own identity as persons and the meaningfulness of the world is inextricably caught up in our habits. Habits like speech, eating, posture, and so many others are not so many neutral skills we perform or impersonal ways we regard the world. Rather, how I enact each of these things is an expression of my very self. For example, speaking might be an arena where I perpetually feel challenged by others, whereas I find confirmation for myself in eating privately; or perhaps I feel most confident in myself when I can stand upright and occupy the space around me, whereas eating is a means of control over my body rather than a sphere of self-indulgence. These are only caricatures, but they point to the way in which our personality is at stake in habits, just as how all habits are imbued with a sense of

[186] In his Sorbonne lecture on "Structure and Conflicts in Child Consciousness" Merleau-Ponty makes this connection between habit and the generation of possibility explicit, arguing that habits involve an activity that transcends the immediate terms that realize it: "If habit were a sum of reflexes, we would not understand how it is possible to transfer a habit without needing new training. Moreover, a habit always has a general, relative character. What is acquired by habit is not a series of determined movements, but a possibility, an aptitude to invent a valuable solution to a situation... This general character of habit is found in the phenomenon of habit transfer: for example, a habit acquired by the right hand is partially transferred to the left. Therefore a relative independence of habit form the motor apparatus exists. Consequently, in man there is an organizing capacity that is not reducible to our motor apparatus." CP, 196/246.

our personhood. Secondly, as habits accrue, previous habits do not persist in a simple unchanging form. Habits are not reflexes which are mechanically learned and added onto each other, because one new habit can transitively modify the habits which preceded it.[187] In learning the Japanese martial art of Aikido, for example, many students report new sensitivities in their feet that modulate the way that they shift their balance while walking, or transfer their weight while turning. Habits are not developed ex nihilo, but draw upon previously established habits, but once these new habits are developed they retroactively reconfigure previous habits. When one learns to stand upright, or to walk, or to dance, or to pedal a bicycle, the form of simple movements like knee-flexion become modulated and re-oriented in each case, just as we might learn to reconfigure our basic speaking habits in a different social setting. Habits then, are not isolated from the perceptual world, and they are not isolated from each other, but form a moving, developing motor-perceptual whole. Merleau-Ponty declares that "it is in this sense that our body is comparable to the work of art[:] It is a knot of living significations and not the law of a certain number of covariant terms." (PP 153/188) New habits transform habits without transcending them, because these habits persist as the ground of the perceptual world and any new habits. In this way, developing bodily movement depends upon a past that is the progressive self-grounding of that bodily movement itself.

[187] A reflex theory of habit cannot explain the plasticity and creativity of habit: "For reflex theoreticians, it can be thought of as memory's explanatory principle. They consider behavior to be an edifice of increasingly complex conditioned reflexes, acquired by a transfer of reflexogenic power. The child's responses become increasingly nuanced. Even symbolic behavior comes from this same mechanism." CP, 195/245.

Of course, not all habits transcend the motor-perceptual schema of the body toward a more sophisticated, developed hold upon the world. In fact, because habit involves becoming insensitive to particular aspects of the world and of bodily tasks in order to free up attention for other activities, there is a sense in which *any* habit marks a kind of loss of awareness and ability. In learning to read, for example, there is a way in which one can no longer see the shapes of the letters as mere shapes (indeed it is more accurate to say that we, who can hear, see words as sounds rather than as mere shapes), or as individual letters apart from the *Gestalt* of the word. But while habits like reading and speech close off perceptual sensitivities in order to open access to new worlds of expression and understanding, not all structures of habituation are equally ameliorative. Simone de Beauvoir describes the manner in which women are, in Western societies, often taught not to respond critically to or to interrupt men in conversation, but to expect correction, criticism, and instruction from men. Explaining that this habit limits more than just women's ability to speak to men, de Beauvoir articulates how this habit becomes a general style that limits expression in other relationships, such that it "[is] not merely through male-violence that women comment on and criticize the behaviour of their friends interminably; in order to pass judgment on others and to regulate their own conduct, women need much more moral ingenuity than do men."[188] Thus learning to speak as a woman, while endowing her with new communicative capacities, can at once close down a woman's sense of language as an expressive, critical medium. Moreover, this is a

[188] de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 518/II, 329.

pernicious habit because it is a self-reinforcing structure, what Simone de Beauvoir describes as complicity on the part of the woman, whereby her own habitual activity is a form of internalized oppression.

Thus, these pathological habits not only result in a loss of self-expression, but also in reflective self-awareness. Even though a habit might increase one's ability to express oneself, in one sense, and expand one's grasp of the world, in another, it might do so by occluding habits of self-reflection and the recognition of the spaces, experiences, and criticisms of others. The formation of habits, in both women and men, which oppress women, for example, largely stems from masculine habits which refuse the criticism of women, denying them the role of equal interlocutors. But this refusal, as Shannon Sullivan points out with respect to habits of racialization and white privilege, runs deeper than a straightforward refusal to listen to and respect women's perspectives, because it includes a "forcefully compulsive and obstructive character of some habits" which motivate a refusal to examine habits of privilege as such.[189] It is not uncommon to hear stories of men who have had their behaviours called out as, if not overtly sexist, based on sexist assumptions. Often, the man or men would calmly and flatly explain, at length, in what amounted to a lecture, which never took the criticism seriously, the ways in which they were not in fact sexist, were aware of the sexist implications of their behaviours, and were even in favour of equal rights, or were themselves feminists. Yet, how they spoke directly contradicted what they said! And this demonstrated that, even seemingly open-minded intentions, they were

[189] Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 5.

unaware of their own behaviours of listening and speaking, and the way in which this constituted the spaces of discussion around them. Sullivan explains, to borrow from an analysis of other privileged habits, how certain habits of white privilege involve repression, not only to reinforce the abilities that habits enable, but also to protect and insulate a person from difficult and potentially self-undermining examination:

> They instead are a site of repression that actively subverts attempts at transformation because such transformation would risk bringing the traumatic event or shameful values to conscious attention. In cases such as these, the body is an expression not just of 'I can,' but also of 'I won't.'[190]

Whereas neurotic habits work against the formation of more developed habits, these self-delusive, other-oppressing habits go further, and work to conceal and resist self awareness. It is to this passivity of habit, and the ways in which we can phenomenologically understand or ethically comport ourselves toward it, that I now turn.

3.2.2 Habit and the Passivity of Conscious Activity

The logic of habit reveals a double passivity of consciousness. As structures in the making which genetically undergird our powers of activity and awareness, habits are neither complete objects of our awareness or direct objects of our volition. These developing activities that sustain and establish consciousness are not objects of consciousness, and the activities of maturation

[190] Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 8-9.

which prepare explicit forms of action are therefore not themselves means or objects of our direct, voluntary action.

First, consciousness is passive epistemologically in that it can never have its habits as transparent objects of reflection. As we have seen, consciousness does not begin in full possession of the world but rather in indeterminate summons to develop meaningful habits of moving and perceiving. Consciousness, as developmentally accomplished in the genetic passivity of sensory motor habits, never takes the form of punctual presence or self-coincidence. Within the context of the habits that structure consciousness and the world, there can be no neutral present as-such which is a transparent object of consciousness. The present is always mediated by past structures of meaning, and is as such incapable of straightforward objective givenness. In fact, it is habit which allows the present to pass by unnoticed and fit into a general, ongoing significance, such as the cars and airplanes that buzz by as I write, which I am not interrupted by and often notice only afterwards, when I am finished typing.[191] Habit pushes some sense into the background in order to focus and develop other figures of sense, and thus is characterized by an increasing sensitivity that depends upon insensitivity.[192] The accomplished habits of the past are the "true

[191] Maria Talero sums up the selective character of habit which operates prior to explicit cognitive activity: "Habit is our body's power of carving its own paths through the sensuous multiplicity of being, so that we are not directly assailed by the radical novelty of each passing moment but instead able to rely upon structures of repetition that hold onto the past and recreate it for us, and in so doing, create a stable situation in which we can function." Talero, "Bodily Subject," 195.
[192] David Morris characterizes habit as an immersion in sensitivity accomplished by a detached insensitivity: "Habit is a kind of frozen perception. Yet this 'freezing' precisely enables new perceptual sensitivities. If I were sensitive to all details of each step, I would never get anywhere and would be incapable of perceiving stairs as general climbing surfaces. Habit is ambiguous: it renders us insensitive to actual situations, but is thus the basis of our power of perceptual

present" of consciousness not as its objects, but as the parameters of its very activity: it is precisely because I do not have to focus on flexing my knee or articulating consonants that walking and speech open novel realities to me. As "dimensions"[193] of perception and movement, these habits are not directly perceptible: "On the contrary, this past that remains our true present does not move away from us; rather, in lieu of being displayed before our gaze, it always hides behind it." (PP 85/112) Traces of these habits can be manifested in actions, but are thus only objects of reflection retrospectively. Further, these habits as a network or totality of behaviour cannot be enacted all at once. Indeed, few habits can be enacted at will, because habits are called forth by specific worldly situations, many of which are unprecedented.[194] Habits enable the present to appear as meaningful while obscuring any possibility of an "objective" perception, and as past these habits enable perception while withdrawing from explicit perception.

The second passivity of habit is that it is not achieved fully by a conscious act of volition.[195] At an experiential level, habits are not mere skills or reflexes that are somehow separate from the personality. Habits are intricately caught up in our personalities, such as habits which are defensive, obsessive, addicted,

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generalization, of skipping over detail, of treating situations the same way even if they are different; and, as a determinate insensitivity, habit is the basis of further sensitivity. Habit is a kind of frozen armor that at once dulls and crystallizes sensitivities." Morris, *Sense of Space*, 91.

[193] Barbaras, "Being," 174.

[194] Talero, "Bodily Subject," 196.

[195] Talero notes that habit precedes and accomplishes the parameters of conscious volition: "Commitment, therefore, begins not at the level of deliberative choice but in the anonymity and automatism of habit. My choices take shape first of all as general structures of commitment at the most basic perceptual levels, rather than determinate and explicitly formulated acts of will." Talero, "Bodily Subject," 200.

prideful, and significant in so many other personal and interpersonal ways. If a young man discovers, for example, after dealings with others, that his upright posture and loud voice are intimidating and aggressive, he is not immediately in a position to transform himself into someone who behaves humbly. Someone who finds social situations frightening cannot decide to be courageous and overcome their timidity by decisionary fiat. This is because habits immediately show up situations as prideful or shameful, and because these situations immediately call forth habitual behaviours. To act against habit, one must grapple with the ongoing difficulties of facing familiar situations and acting in unfamiliar ways, and there is no guarantee that the desired change will take place. It is not a matter of simply adding new courageous or humble habits, because habit is a totality that develops over a long time. As such, habit can only be changed through further habit formation, but this in turn means that the "truth" of any personal, habitual transformation cannot be enacted punctually, but must be awaited. In this sense habit enacts the person as much, or more than a person can enact habits.

There is another way to attempt to change habits, which relies less on a questionable self-awareness of habit, and which works not by volition alone but by attempting to change the very context in which habits are operative, and from which these habits are expected and called forth. Again, Shannon Sullivan deftly provides insight into potential means of disrupting limiting and obfuscating habits not by a fiat of willpower, but by choices which effect changes in the environments which summon and reinforce habits. Sullivan, while offering no

guarantees that it will work, offers a more nuanced approach to subvert self-occlusive habits, such as racism:

> This is not to say that merely having good intentions ensures that change will occur. Nor is it to claim that one can fully expose the hidden operations of unconscious habit. It is to suggest that the hidden, subversive operations of unconscious habits of white privilege requires altering the political, social, physical, economic, psychological, aesthetic, and other environments that 'feed' them. Correspondingly, a white person who wishes to try to change her raced and racist habits would do better to change the environments she inhabits than (to attempt) to use 'will power' to change the way she thinks about and reacts to non-white people.[196]

Recognizing our dependence upon the environment, and its role in the formation of our habits, we can effect change there by shifting the entire template of our habits. Of course, even though we cannot voluntarily change our habits, we can begin to recognize them and discern a need for their change. It could be that a change in environment is enough to drastically reshape oppressive habits into a potential for liberation, such as someone who leaves an abusive home. Sometimes leaving a familiar setting is enough to provoke habitual changes or to alert us to the workings of our familiar habits.[197]

However, by deferring our activity in effecting a habitual redevelopment to the environment, we do not thereby gain a new, second-order control over

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[196] Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 9.

[197] See Sullivan's account, in which: "The key to transformation is to find a way of disrupting a habit through environmental change and then hope that the changed environment will help produce an improvised habit in its place." Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 9.

habit. As Sullivan notes, the passivity of habit goes all the way down, insofar as deciding to change our (neighborhood, cultural, work, home, or other) environment is often itself an ability dependent upon privilege, and a "decision" which is itself undergirded by the very habits which we are seeking to undermine. The problem with our unreflective, privileged inherence in habits, argues Sullivan, in what amounts to a criticism of Merleau-Ponty's account, is that we take their expansive, developing character to be ordinary and normatively correct:

> [Changing our environment] can also be, paradoxically, one of the most powerful ways to reinforce [problematic habits]. This is because one of the predominant unconscious habits of white privilege is that of ontological expansiveness. As ontologically expansive, white people tend to act and think as if all spaces [...] are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish.[198]

Habits based upon privilege presume that space is an unmediated possession and can simply be adapted toward the goals, even the progressively self-critical ones, of the privileged person. A middle-class white person who moves into a multicultural suburb or job, a man who proclaims that he is progressive and teaches feminist texts, a Torontonian charity worker who travels to a remote and economically suffering First Nations village, and so many more examples, are cases of projects which--though when defined by intention, are praiseworthy--run the risk of further perpetuating the operation, while repressing the clarity, of oppressive habits that tacitly function by presuming that space is unmediated and

[198] Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 10

equally open to everyone. Thus, even by attempting to self-consciously recognize the unconscious operation of habits by disrupting the context of their operation, argues Sullivan, can work to tacitly reinforce them.

These experiential facts about the passivity of habit disclose the ontological truth that the subject is non-self-transparent and moreover, that the subject does not have an entirely constitutive power of acting. In an analysis of habit in Merleau-Ponty, Maria Talero questions who this non-self-identical subject truly is, if it is always awaiting itself:

> But let us ask further, who is the subject of habit? We find that to locate the site of habitual action is to enter into a zone where it is not entirely me who is in charge. It seems to be the essence of habit that it involves a renunciation of explicit control of my actions. This is known very poignantly to anyone who has ever struggled to learn a new skill.[199]

It is not precise to say that "I" am the one who enacts new habits, because I do not initiate these habits explicitly but rather, when trying to form habits I can only engage in kinds of actions that I hope will realize habits and then await their accomplishment. Indeed, as I have shown, many pivotal habits are formed in a context dominated by the habitual character of dominant classes. Once accomplished, new habits can transform consciousness and personality.[200] There

[199] Talero, "Bodily Subject," 196.

[200] In his Sorbonne lectures, Merleau-Ponty calls development a "paradoxical notion" because it transforms the person into something new while also continuing the past that the person was. The person then, does not cohere with a logic of identity. If habits are conceived of as dimensions or institutions, they evade this antinomy of identity and difference, since their very orientation enacts a self-differentiating futurity and becoming: "Development is a central notion in psychology, because it is not simply 'development.' It is a paradoxical notion because it supposes neither

is a retrospective logic at work here, because once these new habits are in play, I can reflect upon the past and impute the cause of a new habit to myself in the past. However, this retrospective step elides the way that the transformation of habits occurs as if behind my back, beyond my volition and awareness as a new realization of possibility and meaning in my body. It is more appropriate to say, with Talero, that it is properly the self-transcending body that is the subject or agent of habit.[201]

Habits are the "true present," or the past that is contracted into the present that enables action and perception to have meaningful dimensions of sense. As we have seen, this "past" of habit is not an object of consciousness, because it is an activity which is retained dimensionally, and which enables the very activity of consciousness. There is not a consciousness of this past, but a consciousness according to it. However, this does not entail that at the time of the formation of this habit, this now-integrated activity was already formed and thus capable of being an object of consciousness. Habits, as modes of activity, have a sense post factually, in the new present that they enable. At the time of the formation of a habit, the form of activity that the habit will come to realize is by no means clear. Such is the experience of trying to make spiral loops into words of cursive writing, or struggling to hear a sentence of another language as a meaningful

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absolute continuity nor absolute discontinuity. In other words, development is neither an addition of homogenous elements nor a continuation of stages without transition." CP, 195/245.

[201] This power of self-transcendence is enacted not by consciousness but in the lived body. It is this power of sedimentation and transcendence that enables consciousness to meaningfully exist: "For how else can we describe that distinctive automatism of habit that one day allows us to step out of our struggles as if they were molted skins and emerge anew, our bodies endowed with fresh powers? The proper subject of habit seems not quite to be me, but rather the body. It is this that makes it possible to learn." Talero, "Bodily Subject," 196.

whole; once these habits are accomplished, I can no longer hear the words of the language as mere sounds or see the cursive words as mere shapes. Similarly habits of privilege, such as whiteness or masculinity, and even some oppressed habits, as in de Beauvoir's account of femininity, occlude their own origins in the violent particularization of the world into noticed themes and unnoticed backgrounds.[202] These habits retrospectively show up the past as meaningful, but they cannot present the ambiguity in perception and action that preceded the established habit.

Habits are not given in advance, but are retrospectively traceable through the changes they effect in the world and in our bodies. The so-called "first" acts which work to enable a habit are not, in this sense, "first" in a genuine sense. Indeed, it is not correct to call them established modes of activity, and this is where we must move beyond genetic explanations of activity. Once the habit takes form and is meaningfully and reliably repeated, these "firsts" might appear as the predecessors of habit, but only in retrospect. The "first" instance of a habit is ambiguous, because it must at once enact the new habit while also participating in it and being oriented by its sense. Habits only have a meaning within a structure of repetition, after actions continue and stabilize into dimensions of meaning. In this way, habits are not formed out of preceding activities, even developing ones, but emerge on the basis of a temporalization which must be understood as originally passive, rather than derivative from activity. This

[202] In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, for example, Merleau-Ponty describes the development of our being-in-the-world as ”a violent act whose truth is confirmed through its being performed." PP, 21/lxxxv.

confirms that habits are not the issue of singular, spontaneous acts of "agency" or "constitution." As modes of activity, habits take time, and crucially, they cannot occur within a singular "event," but are a process that takes place *between* events. The foundational actions of habit are thus incomplete, and thus characterized by a genuine, generative passivity, because they will have come to serve as a past foundation only post-factually. Habits paradoxically need to arrive in order to provide their own foundations, rather than being founded by a decisional or reflective act. It is only within a framework of generative passivity, then, that the radical origins of activity in non-activity can be explained.

3.2.3 The Ground of Habits: Genetic and Generative Structures

In contrast to a static method which presupposes the immediate givenness of consciousness, Anthony Steinbock draws on a middle period of Husserl's thought to develop a genetic mode of analysis which avoids the "risk [of] conceptual idealization" by turning to

> a constitutional analysis of temporalization, an inquiry into how sense unities come into relief... It requires an inquiry into how past sedimentations can be reawakened through the affective force of the present, and how the sense of a present perception relies on the past institution of sense in order for the sense of an object to develop.[203]

While such a method seeks to ground consciousness in past structures, it is premised upon taking past structures of consciousness or the developments of

[203] Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 40-1.

temporalizing intentionality as its object, and thus excludes a "generative" source of meaning, prior to the developmental *activities* of consciousness, in nature or the preconscious. In Merleau-Ponty's account of habit in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, there is an ambiguity between such a genetic method which takes habit to be the accomplishment of an incipient, premature consciousness, and a generative method which attributes this so-called power of development or sedimentation to the living body, or natural structures. However, even his attempts at a generative account risk reinstating the body as a constitutive power (*pouvoir*), rather than reading the natural institution of time as a potentiality (*puissance*) rooted in the generative passivity of nature. In this section, I argue that with a careful reading, the *Phenomenology* can be interpreted as presenting habit as a structure of generative passivity which, rather than genetically constituting meaning, inherits its capacity for sedimentation from the becoming-true of meaning in nature.

The discovery that habit cannot be founded in a singular act poses the problem of the beginnings of habit in the past and the notion of habit as a self-grounding structure. Each habitual structure presupposes a prior configuration of habitual structures, because habit recasts prior habits and depends upon elapsing time to become sedimented as new habit. This generates an infinite regress unless we presuppose a preexisting human being who is the subject of habit. This presupposition need not take the form of positing actual humans existing indefinitely in the past, as Aristotle mused about.[204] The solution to this regress

[204] Aristotle, *Physics*, 3.6 206a25-27.

could be a transcendental one, if we posit the ontological unity of human consciousness and deny that such a unity can derive from a non-conscious, pre-human natural cause. But such a view is based on the thesis that consciousness spontaneously constitutes itself. On a reading of *The Structure of Behaviour*, it seems that Merleau-Ponty asserts that behaviour does emerge in such a punctuated, spontaneous act which transcends a nature of merely isolated events, a "decisive now" which sediments a new sense in, and for, the organism that transcends the order of the "in-itself." (SB 125/136) The notion of a constituting activity entails the correlate notion of nature as spatial extension *partes extra partes* and as a serial time of events each with a prior cause. On this view, there is no "past" of nature as such, because pastness itself is a kind of retention enabled within the temporal horizon that developed behaviours or habits unfold for themselves. On this view of habit as constituting activity, there is no natural past as such because the past is only a presence to consciousness. Even the past qua pre-conscious natural events does not genuinely precede consciousness, because such a past is incomprehensible without a subject. The notion of a past-in-itself presupposes a witness.[205] This non-presence of the past is not radical absence,

[205] Even though such a conception of natural time exposes itself as the foundation of subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty still defines this natural time negatively, as the correlate of or condition of possibility for consciousness: "Since natural time remains at the center of my history, I also see myself as surrounded by it. If my first years are behind me like some unknown land, this is not through some fortuitous breakdown of memory or the lack of complete exploration: there is nothing to be known in these unexplored lands. For example, nothing was perceived in intra-uterine life, and this is why there is nothing to remember. There was nothing but the sketch of a natural self and of a natural time. This anonymous life is merely the limit of the temporal dispersion that always threatens the historical present. To catch sight of this formless existence that precedes my history and that will draw it to a close, all I have to do is see, in myself, this time that functions by itself and that my personal life makes use of without ever full concealing. Because I am swept along into personal existence by a time that I do not constitute, all of my perceptions appear perspectivally against a background of nature." PP, 362/404. There is not yet a

because the natural past appears against the project of consciousness as its negative penumbra.

In his essay on habit, Edward Casey identifies a tension in the *Phenomenology of Perception* between two potential senses of habit. One of these senses reflects the transcendental view of habit just discussed, where habit is prior to the sense-making of the body, such that habit is "so encompassing of bodily existence that no part of this existence is *un*habitual; and in this way we would be constrained to approach body from its habituality."[206] There are numerous cases in the *Phenomenology* that suggest such a reading: as Casey notes, Merleau-Ponty opposes the habitual relation of *having* as ontological to the ontic relations of being which hold between things.[207] Furthermore we can notice Merleau-Ponty's express thesis that the body "comprises ... two distinct layers, that of the habitual body and that of the actual body" such that "the habitual body can act as a guarantee for the actual body." (PP 84/111) Indeed, at points in the *Phenomenology* it is as if habit and body are identical such that all

> the actions in which I habitually engage incorporate their instruments and make them participate in the original structure of my own body [*le corps propre*]. Moreover, my own body is the primordial habit, the one that conditions all others any by which they can be understood. (PP 93/120, my emphasis)

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genuine, radical alterity of the past on this view. Indeed, natural time is characterized here by an independent progression or succession of instants, and thus conflated with the horizon-character of the serial time of consciousness.

[206] Casey, "Habit," 289.

[207] Casey, "Habit," 289.

On this view of habit as self-grounding, there can be no generative explanation for the emergence of habit from nature. Only a genetic explanation is possible, which traces habits to structures of its own past, to previous habits. The ultimate source of habit on this view is transcendental, and it remains a mystery and epiphany of the living body. This view cannot explain the emergence of habit from vital structures of the natural body because the living body is an accomplishment of the synthesis of habit, nor can it explain how consciousness is a gradual accomplishment in phases, because every advent of consciousness here presupposes a prior synthesis of consciousness.[208] But as we have seen, habits begin in a nascent sense that is not yet a determinate behavioural form, and they only come to have a sense post-factually.

Casey suggests that the opposed tendencies which prioritize either habit or body in the *Phenomenology* can be resolved in the other direction. On this reading it is the temporality of the body which renders habit possible. Body is the ontological condition of habit, even though habit can open temporal structures of expression within which personal life comes to the fore of existence and takes an experiential, lived priority. Habit ontologically depends upon the body as a power of sedimentation, but habit explodes this sedimentation into myriad (linguistic, cultural, personal, sexual, and other) significances which outstrip the immediacy

[208] Merleau-Ponty himself offers the conceptual grounds to challenge such a logic of habit formation a few years after the *Phenomenology*, in the lecture course on "Structure and Conflicts in Child Consciousness," noting that: "Two conceptions of child development exist. The first conception, the mechanist one, says that development consists of an addition of homogenous elements. The second conception, the idealist one, estimate that the child's psyche is not prepared for the advent of an adult personality, a personality that arises all at once when the child is of age. The first conception denies all qualitative and structural change interior to development. The second denies that there is a transition between the child's state and the adult's state." CP, 195/245.

of the natural body, and which deepen and qualitatively restructure its relation to the past:

> [H]abit is at once primary and secondary in its relation with body, albeit in different senses. Habit is secondary to body insofar as it represents a particularization of the body's generalizing and sedimenting powers; it particularizes by establishing the special ways the lived body comes to inhabit the world in a regular and repeatable (rather than a purely spontaneous) fashion. Put differently: it gives the special depth of virtuality to a body that, lacking it, would be bound forever to the merely episodic and unrepeated. But habit in turn has a two-fold primacy. First of all, it is in more intimate connection with the past than is any other power of human nature. ... A second primacy of habit over body is located in the relationship between habit and the other so-called expressive phenomena with which Merleau-Ponty implicitly aligns."[209]

By ceding the power of sedimentation to the body, instead of positing habit as a self-grounding structure, this interpretation allows us to understand how consciousness emerges, via habit, from nature. However, this interpretation depends upon conceiving of nature as sedimentation rather than mechanism. Whether the account of nature in the *Phenomenology* is adequate to this task remains to be seen, because like the account of consciousness in that text, the notion of the lived body's nature and temporality has several senses.

[209] Casey, "Habit," 289-90.

As we have seen, there is one sense of nature in the *Phenomenology* which is defined relative to consciousness. In "The Body as an Object and Mechanistic Physiology" Merleau-Ponty argues, in another vein, that it is consciousness that draws its power of sedimentation from the body qua sedimenting temporality:

> [T]he specific past, which is our body, can only be recovered and taken up by an individual life because this life has never transcended it, because it secretly feeds this past and uses a part of its strength there, because this past remains its present, [...] What allows us to center our existence is also what prevents us from centering it completely...[T]he ambiguity of being in the world is expressed by the ambiguity of our body, and this latter is understood through the ambiguity of time. (PP 87/114)

Merleau-Ponty concludes the chapter with the argument that psychological and physiological processes are not separated by a mind-body dualism, or ontological difference between being-for-itself and being-in-itself. The opposition between biological structures as merely repetitive and cyclical, as opposed to consciousness which is "a series of events that not only have a sense, but provide themselves with that sense" is rejected. (PP 90/117) Nature is not repetition and consciousness is not spontaneous meaning constitution (*Sinngebung*). Rather, *both* exhibit a structure of sedimentation, where events come to have a meaning through the persistent structuration of a past which is the "true present." As such, both the body and consciousness are structured not by preformed powers of activity, but according to a potentiality, a temporal becoming-true of sedimented

events. Each relies on a stabilizing history to have a sense, and each is equally susceptible of undergoing destabilizing events:

> History, then, is neither a perpetual novelty nor a perpetual repetition, but rather the *unique* movement that both creates stable forms and shatters them. The organism and its monotonous dialectics are thus not foreign to history and somehow beyond the reach of history. Taken concretely, man is not a psyche joined to an organism, but rather this back-and-forth of existence that sometimes allows itself to exist as a body and sometimes carries itself into personal acts. (PP 90/117)

Embodied activities exhibit a potency (*puissance*) to accrue self-transcending developmental structures, and thus encompasses both organic and habitual structures of life. These workings of the body are not a power of constitution (*pouvoir*), because activity must be acquired in this "back and forth" reciprocity between past and present.[210] Activity takes time to accomplish, and this mode of sense-generating temporality entails that like consciousness, the activity of the body is passive inasmuch as it is accomplished post-factually as a sediment of this temporality.

The body is better characterized as a potency (*puissance*) to accrue activities than a power (*pouvoir*) of effecting activities. Thus the body is only a "power" of action retrospectively, once time has elapsed and the new meaning which enables this activity has been "assimilated." The body is passive before it is active, and characterized by potentiality, insofar as it awaits its sense and is

[210] See the differentiation between these terms I make in section 2.2.

open to a future. We can see a dependence of activity upon passivity in some of the equivocal claims about habit in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, what Leonard Lawlor identifies in Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy as an ontological condition of possibility for power in powerlessness:

> By undoing constructions of classical thought and of modern science, Merleau-Ponty intends to 'return to dynamism,' 'dynamism' in the literal sense, *dynamis*, potentiality. As we shall see, potentiality (or power) works this way in Merleau-Ponty's archeology of nature, because nature is *hollowed out*, it *carries* future developments. For Merleau-Ponty, we might say, a lack of power makes power possible.[211]

Possibility is not given in advance, and the organism--human or other--is characterized by an initial paucity of being. Because the organism is not all there, it is already oriented toward a future, as the melody already awaits the resolution of further developments. In this way powerlessness is a kind of power, qua powerlessness, what Lawlor calls a potent *dynamis* or generative movement of sense. However, this initial powerlessness marks an absence of sense, or a kind of non-sense that I will explain in the next section, and which means that generative passivity is never a given, static entity that can be conceptualized. Merleau-Ponty writes, in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* on "Freedom," that the body's activity emerges out of a prior moment of affection, which it does not itself constitute, in that "...in the first relation we are solicited, in the second we are open to an infinity of possibilities." (PP 480/517) Merleau-Ponty can call

[211] Lawlor, *Implications of Immanence*, 108; citing N, 23/7.

the body a zone of freedom not because it constitutes the world or its milieu, but rather because it is genuinely *open* to a future that is not yet contained in its present. Freedom does not consist in an action already possessed in advance, but in activity and perception that is yet to be.

Merleau-Ponty avoids a regress of conscious constituting acts by situating consciousness in the natural body. The natural body is itself a kind of temporal horizon, though not an explicitly conscious one or an object of consciousness, but is what enables a relation between perceiver and perceived, an operative intentionality. The accomplishments of the body bestow meaning upon the world such that "[o]ur body ... is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes." (PP 147/182) The body is defined as a power of sense-giving, where "'[t]aken in its pure state, motricity already possesses the elementary power of sense-giving (*Sinngebung*)." (PP 143/177) Here again, the text is ambiguous. I have argued that there are suggestions that the body must await and take on its powers, and is thus characterized by passivity. These suggestions are logically consistent with a notion of activity, either vital or conscious, that comes to be grounded in time. However, this interpretation goes against the grain of many of Merleau-Ponty's actual conclusions, many of which identify the body with a sense-constituting power or *Sinngebung*.[212] So long as this is the case, the generation of activity in

[212] For example, Merleau-Ponty concludes "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motricity" even more decisively, arguing that "[a]t all levels, the body exercises the same function, which is to lend 'a bit of renewable action and independent existence' to the momentary movements of

time cannot be explained, because the infinite regress that troubled a transcendental conception of consciousness is here merely displaced to the natural body. The past, on this model, is always the past as retrospectively intended (retended) by the body, but there is an obvious circularity here, because the body cannot constitute itself, as we have seen. Merleau-Ponty argues that this "temporal structure of experience" is rooted a bodily present which

> overcomes the dispersion of moments, [and] is in a position to give our past itself its definitive sense and to reintegrate into personal existence even this past of all pasts that the organic stereotypes lead us to notice at the origin of our volitional being... [O]bviously this *power* belongs to all presents. (PP 87/114, my emphasis)

Here the body is always conditioned by a past, but this past is a mere function of the present, and the body serves to constitute the natural past. So the text leaves the issue unresolved, or even in an antinomy open to resolution in opposed directions. Merely deferring the constituting acts from consciousness to the body preserves the regress of constituting acts, shifting it to the activity of the lived body.

On the view that the body is activity, power, or constitution, the emergence of the body in nature cannot be explained, and there cannot be a genuine natural past that is not already the past of the body. It is in his later philosophy that Merleau-Ponty will explicitly ground activity in a more radical

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freedom. Habit is but a mode of this fundamental power [*pouvoir*]." PP, 148/182. Habit is a species of the body's power of temporality, but this "power," for which Merleau-Ponty problematically uses the descriptive language of projecting-activity and the term *pouvoir*.

sense of passivity. This depends not so much upon a decisive shift away from a philosophy consciousness, but away from constituting activity as such, either conscious or vital. This work does not consider the body an original power, nor does it identify the individual lived body with the temporal structure of sedimentation. Rather, this philosophy requires us to think of the body as part of a field, and this field itself will exhibit the "back-and-forth" wending of becoming meaning between past and present. However, this "field" should not be conflated with a horizon of presence or temporal progression. The past of nature, on this view, is not conditioned by the genetic past of a living organism or human being. This is an absolute past, which grounds the activity of living organisms, but cannot itself be given within the terms of organic life. This is the "past which has never been a present," not because it was in a chronological past where there was no being to perceive it, but because it names that passive generative source and dimensionality out of which the possibilities of life proliferate. There is then, a generative past which undergirds the present of any living body, but this past is not itself any kind of present whatsoever, nor could it be given within the genetic horizon of habit or the meaning-sedimenting body. The body with its particular past or "true present" is a crystallization of this older time, this "time before time" which is not given in a body, but as a "hinge" or intercorporeal dimension of all bodies, that which cannot be given because it harbours their organic possibility.[213]

[213] For the past as "time before time" see VI, 296/243; and for the notion of "Institution" as "hinge" or "pivot" refer to: IP, 6/[3](2). In the "Course Summary" Merleau-Ponty articulates how " the instituted exists between others and myself, between me and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and the guarantee of our belonging to one selfsame world." IP, 76/123-4.

Consciousness draws sense-making powers from the natural body, but as we have seen here, and in the central thesis of the preceding chapter, the so-called power (*pouvoir*) of the organic body is in fact a passive potentiality (*puissance*) for the "becoming true" of new meanings that Merleau-Ponty calls nature. Now that I have traced the ontological conditions of personality and consciousness back to the generative passivity of nature, the task remains to follow the emergent movement of consciousness forward from nature, and to do this, we must take up a logic of institution, which is Merleau-Ponty's first full formulation of the logic of generative passivity. This study of institution is definitively broader than studies of the development of structures of organic or habitual behaviour, because it seeks out structures of generative passivity which establish and sustain personal existence. This generative passivity is not a mode of nascent activity, but must be conceived of as radical passivity; further, this generative passivity is not the mere chronological antecedent of developmental activities such as habit, but *ontologically* precedes and grounds such structures of genetic passivity. Thus, our study must go beyond a phenomenological account of habit in order to question the foundation of habits. A logic of institution is required to explain the very emergence of the kind of the kind of being who can have habits, an emergence which entails the *birth* of sense from non-sense, or generative passivity.

3.3. Generative Origins of Personhood: The Institution of Second Nature

3.3.1 Institution: The Birth of Sense in Non-sense

The driving insight of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy is that sense is not constituted by any form of activity, including that of the living body. Since sense emerges prior to its embodiment in specific forms or structures of existence, we can say with Merleau-Ponty that sense emerges from non-sense. There is a generative passivity of sense because it does not emerge from any specific locus of activity, or form in which it is constituted.[214] Referring to a determinate origin prior to sense is a retrospective illusion, because sense is only meaningful post-factually within the dynamics of living structures or institutions. In this section I argue how personal meaning emerges out of the sense of the living body. However, I will explain how the person transforms the living body and inaugurates a new institution of meaning there. I will demonstrate that, within the person's distinctive relation to time, the pre-personal past cannot appear as such, and thus is a kind of non-sense or generative passivity out of which the sense of the personal world emerges.

Merleau-Ponty argues that this emergence of sense out of nonsense, or institution, is exemplified by birth. Birth is not the activity of conferring a sense upon something lacking sense (*Sinngebung*), nor is it an event that has a sense unto itself. Birth is an event which orients a sense to be within the instituted dynamics of the world, without yet possessing that sense:

[214] Institution precisely names a process that generates sense without yet constituting it in a wholly active manner. Merleau-Ponty conceives institution as a temporally protracted development in which events are resumed, taken up, by the perceiver, in such a way as to "endow experience with durable dimensions." IP, 77/124.

> from the moment of conception and still more after birth, there is an encroachment towards a future which is made from itself, under certain given conditions, and which is not the act of a *Sinngebung*. Birth of constitution but the institution of a future. Reciprocally, institution resides in the same genus of Being as birth and is not, any more than birth, an act… (IP 8/[5-6](4-5))

The lived past of consciousness is a constitution by consciousness, even if it is retroactively uncovered within consciousness, it remains a past relative to consciousness, a genetic passivity that is not a true pre-conscious past.[215] In the subsequent section, I will explore how childhood experiences, while providing the matrix of significance for puberty and adulthood, are not capable of being remembered as such, because they were not lived in the mode of a self-aware individual with a sense of her own agency.[216] This childhood experience is thus a kind of formative, generative past which is not accessible in terms of adult experience.[217]

Yet when a new institution takes hold in the present there is a trace of the past, because even though the present is a novel structure of meaning, it

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[215] Merleau-Ponty replaces constitution with institution, and thus opposes the unconscious past of institution, which is characterized by alterity, to the thematic past of consciousness, which is characterized by presence and activity, such that "the past exists for this consciousness only as consciousness of the past." IP, 5/[2](1). Conversely, a philosophy of institution allows for a sense of the past that "makes sense without me" and which avoids the regress of continual constituting acts required to constitute this purportedly pre-conscious past. IP, 8/[5](4).

[216] Merleau-Ponty argues for a decisive toward a notion of a past that absolutely exceeds and decenters consciousness: "The Freudian idea of the unconscious and the past as 'indestructible', as 'intertemporal' = elimination of the common idea of time as a 'series of Erlebnisee'… [a past] which Piaget calls, badly indeed, egocentrism—which is, in reality, the 'monumental' life, *Stiftung*, initiation." VI, 243/291-2.

[217] Merleau-Ponty says that there is only sense *after* birth, in an "instituted and instituting subject, but inseparably, and not a constituting subject; a certain inertia, but puts activity en route, an event, the initiation of the present, which is productive after it." IP 6,[2](2).

nevertheless shows up continuity and resonance with the past: "On the contrary, the past takes on the outline of a preparation of premeditation of a present that exceeds it in meaning although it recognizes itself in it." (IP 77/124) Sense is not static or punctual, but dynamic and temporally extended. Transformations of sense which originate from the past, without having been present in it, modulate the past, so as to show themselves as having emerged from it. Nothing is born full-fledged, but rather borrows its activity by taking up the rhythms and activities of the past and transforming them from within. The person is not born as a unique power of constituting time, but borrows from the intercorporeal developments which preceded it, such as maternity, embryology, and evolution. There is a generative passivity in these structures, a potentiality (*puissance*) for the person to arise in a way that will come to have transformed these structures from within. Thus the past of a life is not a pure nothing, not an absolute lack of existence, because qua seed or tendency it will have oriented a context for new structures of sense to become within time.[218] In this way, the non-sense of this absolute past is an impetus to sense, an ontological incompleteness in being which is a *call*, the demand of a futurity that opens a space, potentially, and in the final *analysis* post-factually, for the birth of new forms of life.

New meaning issues from the past by diverging from it, rather than simply inheriting or continuing it:

[218]See section 2.5 for a discussion of the generative past as seed or tendency. In its emergence and its ongoing being sense is not "constituted" or "noematic" but rather there is "[sense] as divergence, difference, not closed." IP, 6/[3](2). No sense pre-exists its processes of development. Thus, even though they appear as meaningful, all events of sense involve a transition out of, and birth from within, nonsense.

> Rather, to be conscious is to realize a certain divergence, a certain variation in an already instituted existential field, which is always behind us and whose weight, like that of a flywheel, intervenes up into the actions by which we transform it. To live, for humans, is not merely to impose perpetually significations, but to continue a vortex of experience which is formed, with our birth, at the point of contact between the "outside" and the one who is called to live it. (IP 206/267)

Prior to the "instituted" there is not an "instituting" power, because institution is invariably "instituting-instituted" such that institution of sense retrogressively enacts a past that will come to have gathered the conditions that institute the present. This is not simply a constitution of past by present, but a becoming which shows up its own pre-active, incomplete origins, that in themselves are non-sense, but which nevertheless can come to be manifested in the developments that are enacted out of them.[219]

The past is present in the instituting-instituted movement of the present but only obliquely, as trace or dimension, in how meaning is at stake in any experience or life. The mode of presence of institution is that around which a life is invested: "'Investments,' 'cathexis,' how are we to understand these metaphors

[219] In a short paper on *Institution*, Robert Vallier rightly connects the sense of institution with futurity, because the meaning of institution is always yet to be. However, the terms of his description could be more precise, because an event is only itself post-factually, and it only has a meaningful form of activity in its ongoing becoming rather than being a "consistent... matrix event." It is problematic also to associate institution with a paradigm of knowledge or power, because it is in the first place a development of being, of which activities like knowing and acting are species of development:"An event in the most pregnant sense interacts by affinity—not by necessity or by pure chance—with other events and with other meaning-structures of a tradition, reconfiguring them in a manner consistent with the matrix-event, organizing a thinkable history, and producing what Foucault might have called an epistemic shift. A new arrangement or system of power is instituted and organizes meaning for us." Vallier, "Institution," 293.

and the mode of presence to the subject of this entire instituted." (IP 9/[6](5)) It is worth noting that Merleau-Ponty merely indicates the presence of the instituted metaphorically, rather than defining it, because the non-sense of the past cannot be defined.

Prior to organisms being defined by a species essence, Merleau-Ponty, as I argued in the previous chapter, borrows the notion of "experimental Platonism" from the French biologist Raymond Ruyer, by which organisms come to form behaviours according to the contingent bonds they make with other living beings and places.[220] These cathexes demonstrate the plasticity and openness of biological species, notably in cases such as geese who bond to humans,[221] children raised by animals, birds that learn to sing from squirrels, or, in Merleau-Ponty's case study of Leonardo the inventor who shuns social contact and finds solace in detached intellectual investigation after being abandoned as a child. (SNS 22-5/38-42)[222] In a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty holds that "any entity can be accentuated as an emblem of being." (VI 270/317-8) It is post-factually that behaviours become manifest, and they are

[220] Merleau-Ponty frequently refers to an article from Ruyer in *Institution*: Ruyer, "L'instinct."
[221] Merleau-Ponty cites Konrad Lorenz**,** whose studies of "*prägung*" or animal imprinting reveal the openness of animal and human structures of behaviour. He cites studies of geese where baby geese will cathect with other living beings but not with inanimate objects: "The imprint connected to a certain 'pace' of the trigger, 'expressive,' 'significant' stimulus: it is necessary that the experimenter move and speak. No cathexis by means of a stuffed duck." IP, 17/[17](13). The goose is open not to a pre-given species, nor to an object which merely resembles its own species, but to a certain rhythm of behaviour which coheres with but diverges from its own species. The species, on this view, originates in the accidents and experiments around which it forms a meaningful activity.
[222] In the last few, provocative pages of "Cézanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty surprisingly turns away from Cézanne to Leonardo, and a serious meditation on the issue of freedom as rooted in childhood bonds. Thanks are due to Edward Casey, who pointed this out to me.

manifest through the myriad potencies for relationships and bonds between places, things, and life forms.

Living bodies are formed out of this field or "symbolic matrix" of institution, such that their relationships cannot be given in advance. Within this field there is an open potentiality for new meaning to emerge, not a power of time-constituting awareness, but a potentiality between all events in nature, a "lateral kinship of all the 'nows' which makes for their confusion, their 'generality.'" (IP 7/[4](3)) This means that there is no rigid, original distinction between human and animal or other organic forms of sense-making. Merleau-Ponty explains in a section entitled "Animal Institution" there is already openness to future forms of meaning or "prospection" in animals whereas in humans this "prospection" is never pure and completely undetermined, for it is "not that the human *does not have* animal institution, but because of *the use that he makes of it* and that usage transforms institution genuinely." (IP 17/[17](13)) In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes that "there is no *hierarchy* of orders or layers or planes (always founded on the individual essence distinction), there is dimensionality of every fact and facticity and of every dimension." (VI 270/318) Rather than cohering with original "essences," all sense is divergence. Thus animality and humanity alike derive from instituting-instituted temporality, and any differences between these two "species" of life must in fact be local and specific.

Further, this means that in human life there is an interpenetration of natural, bodily, psychological and social dimensions of meaning such that no

precise delimitation of these domains can be made in advance, and that persons are formed out of diverse constellations of all of these factors. For the human being, there is an original past, which cannot take the form of an adult present, in which these dimensions of being were indistinguishable. This past is the basis of developing selfhood and adulthood, and it remains, as I will demonstrate, as a structure of generative passivity distinctively but tacitly at play in these maturing and mature structures of human behaviour.

3.3.2 The Person as Instituted: Childhood

In a philosophy of institution, meaning is not constituted by a human subject, or even an individual living body, but this does not entail that the difference in sense-making in different bodies is a difference of degree. In this section, I will explain how generative passivity is distinctively at work in the structure, what Merleau-Ponty calls "syncretic sociability," the structure that serves as the basis of human existence; this structure both chronologically and ontologically precedes our experiences of personal existence. Merleau-Ponty often returns to the differences between animal and human, and child and adult consciousness in his last writings. As we have seen, institution names the developmental movement in which differences sediment into qualitative levels or dimensions of existence in organic bodies. These instituted differences give rise to novel and irreducible modes of life. Thus, even though the philosophy of institution roots human sense-making in the generative passivity of nature, it also requires a study of the definitive temporality that is instituted in and by each life.

As Edward Casey put it, habit was ontologically secondary in humans, because it remains a species of the temporal sedimentation that conditions living bodies, but it comes to be existentially primary because habit enacts a new institution within the institution of the living body: "habit takes the lead over the very body which it requires for its own realization."[223] Just as we saw in examinations in *Nature,* such as the electro-chemical gradients and differential movements that gave rise to the axolotl nervous system, transforming it from within without transcending it, what Merleau-Ponty calls "personal institution," which is a deeper account of habit that includes its pre-personal foundations, transforms the sense and activity of the living body from within. (N 145/194) In the salamander, differential movements set the stage for, without causing, the efferent-afferent vectors of the nervous system. While these factors were necessary for the nervous system to develop, they were not sufficient, and only appeared as such post-factually, once the new institution of nervous functioning had transformed them. Similarly, as I will argue, the human being is not caused by the vital body, but instituted from within a transformation of it. Rather, the vital body serves as the pre-personal ground out of which the personal is instituted, even though this pre-personal existence cannot appear as such in the personal realm. Indeed, as we will see, the human continues to bear the traces of this pre-personal sphere in complex ways, which demonstrate how the pre-personal is not transcended as much as transformed. This pre-personal institution remains as the background and canvass of personal and interpersonal sense.

[223] Casey, "Habit," 290.

Human institution depends upon the rhythms and temporality of the living body,[224] but it takes up this dependence on the past, in a more complicated temporality than in animal life, and institutes a difference that is the human person, a being who can develop a sense of responsibility for her own future.

Merleau-Ponty argues, in *Institution* that personal institution does not transcend its natural past, but rather that humanity diverges from "animality" from within.[225] He asserts that human and animal alike are structured by a logic of sedimentation or cathected "investments" in which formative developments serve as dimensions in experiences and behaviours that follow. In this sense, animals and organic bodies are habitual too, because they are a becoming true of moments which come to be the "true past" of a present existence. Merleau-Ponty writes, though, that in animals these cathexes occur relatively early in life and are often irreversible, whereas in humans there are longer and perhaps even indefinite periods of lability in which life can be restructured, such that ongoing self-transformation defines of humanity:

> Man knows also, especially in his youth, localized conditionings, fleeting moments of 'geniality', of biological 'determination', during which these acts or these impressions are as if carried over, or made deeper, by means of a subterranean organic potency.... A lot of artists, probably most of

[224] This is first of all a dependence on the generative rhythms of another body: the mother. The child is initially nurtured, and borne into the world by maternal care and labour long before it is ever born qua psyche or even individual body: "The soul of the child is not issued from the soul of the mother; there is no pregnancy of souls. It is a body that produces pregnancy and that moves to perceive when the actions of the world attain it." N, 218/280.

[225] "However immense difference: not that the human *does not have* animal institution, but because of *the use that he makes of it* and that usage transforms institution genuinely." IP, 18-9/[15](14).

> them, live from such moments, not moments of enthusiastic inspiration but of 'accelerated conditioning' or of 'impregnation.' (IP 86-7/129-30; citing Ruyer, 835)

The early institutions of human life, like locomoting, communicating, touching, and perceiving provide basic existential templates to be taken up into and transformed by new orders of expression, such as sexuality, politics, art, and philosophy.[226] These past structures are not fixed, but they remain integral parts of the institutions that can emerge out of them.

Thus, in humans, as I will demonstrate more specifically, there is a deeper connection to the significant structures of the past, but this depth equally means that we are more dependent upon the past but also more free to transform it than other modes of life:

> What defines human institution: a past which creates a question, puts it in reserve, makes a situation that is indefinitely open. Therefore at once human more connected to his past than the animal and is more open to the future. The future by means of a depending of the past: fruitful moments: acquisition of certain schemas that the artist develops indefinitely. (IP 22/ [21](17))

In this way, our behaviours are not fixed or captivated by the past, but this entails that the past is all the more at stake in our lives as that background of sense out of

[226] In his Sorbonne course on "The Adult's View of the Child," Merleau-Ponty articulates the early temporal development of humans as impoverished and weaker than that of animals: "In reality, the temporary poverty of the human infant is tied to his later power: it is because the infant will become a man that he has so few instincts; he is much longer deprived than an animal infant." CP, 70/92.

which our personal lives have meaning. According to Merleau-Ponty, for animals the past continues to be significant, but in definite, less labile and open ways, where: "the imprint is also reserved... But this mark possesses no indefinite productivity. Has no value of a symbolic matrix." (IP 80/[7](6)) We are thus more rooted in our past than other species, but less committed to it, because while it gives us meaning, it also opens up space for research, elaboration and creativity. Indeed it is this dually immersed and detached character of our past that makes it an issue for us, insofar as we inhabit a situation that is given but open, calling for our explicit engagement.[227] Our past becomes a symbol, or symbolic matrix, because we are of it and depend on it for our sense, but also because it is at a distance from us and must be interpreted, and in some measure, shaped by our relation to it.[228] We do not constitute this situation originally, however, since all our powers of expression and freedom depend upon it and must take it up in their very activity.

"Personal institution" offers a richer account of the human relation to the past than habit, in the sense that where habit tied the activity of the past to the existent dimensions of activity in the present, here the so-called activity of the past is caught up in passivity, in a network of diacritical significances which exceed concurrence with the body's activity in the present. In the account of habit

[227] For a detailed discussion of this equally immersed and detached character of our existence, from which I draw these terms, see Chapter Two, "Ambiguity: On Metaphysics," of Russon, "Bearing Witness," 29-44.

[228] See the definition and discussion of "symbolic matrix" in section 2.5. For Merleau-Ponty the institution of subjectivity involves a primordially shared field of sense, one in which newly actualized meanings will communicate with each other and can potentially be productive of shared senses: "Institution in the strong sense [is] this symbolic matrix that has the result of there being the openness of a field, of a future according to dimensions, and from this result we have the possibility of a common adventure and of a history as consciousness." IP, 13/[10](9).

in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the past is withdrawn from presence because it is the synthetic underside of perception and action in the present, and indeed remains there as a kind of trace in the exhibited behaviour of the living body. The account of personal institution in the *Institution* lectures is not incompatible with this view, but goes beyond it, because it grounds this activity of the past not in a "true present" or synthetic power, but in a network of different senses that exceed the activities of the habit body at any given time. These senses are therefore more than what is merely lived by the "body at each moment," and provide the underlying template of significance and possibility for a personal life, and more generally for shared interpersonal life. The past qua "symbolic matrix" is thus what provides a field of elaboration, expression and inquiry full of possible and new senses. The sedimentation of sense in bodies, persons, and relationships not only continues a past, but opens new possibilities.[229] This means that a human life is one intrinsically characterized not by a given past, or settled behaviours, but by the unending task of self-interpretation and self-transformation because the past too is characterized, in part, by openness. This past is not constituted by us, because our activities are instituted through it, and this past is not present *as such* but is the "symbolic matrix" of our development, the interplay of formative

[229] Rosalyn Diprose notes that a philosophy of institution extends an account of sedimentation to include exposure to a future that is more than the past alone enables: "On the other hand, sedimentation is not just meaning surviving as a residue in an activity that repeats the past or that duplicates a social convention. 'Institution' also involves beginning something new, initiating, innovation. Every experience involves 'a simultaneous de-centering and recentering of the elements in our personal life, a movement by us toward the past and of the reanimated past toward us." In other words, institution itself, 'being exposed to …,' or receptivity to elements and significances, initiates the present and simultaneously 'opens a future.'" Diprose, "Ethico-Politics," 11.

events, learning experiences, bonds and encounters that continually institute themselves in our lives.

Merleau-Ponty's studies of child psychology, between 1949 and 1952, study the way in which there is a past to adult individuality, agency, and sociality when none of these terms were discretely formed. Merleau-Ponty's key insight, which is perhaps articulated most strongly in his "The Child's Relations with Others," is that the child's experience, while providing the foundation for adult experience, is structured differently than adult experience of herself and her world. That is, the child experiences space, self, and others, in ways that are incomparable with the adult's experience.[230] Of course, there is the phenomenological danger of imputing adult categories to the child's world, which we can never access or remember impartially.[231] However, Merleau-Ponty's definition of behaviour means that experience is not solely an interior phenomenon manifest outwardly in behaviours. Rather, Merleau-Ponty develops, in his early work, a more expansive definition of behaviour as a reciprocal relationship between self and environment, in which the significance of an organism's so-called "inner" experience of the world is actually manifest in its

[230] In his Sorbonne course, "Structure and Conflicts in Child Consciousness," Merleau-Ponty explains the way that children encounter space according to a completely different structure than either the lived space of the adult body, or of abstract, Cartesian space, such that: "By maintaining that infantile perception is structured, we are not therefore obliged to hold that the structure of a child's perception is akin to that of an adult. [...] To use Claparède's term, the perception of the child is syncretic; its structures are complicated, global, and inexact." CP, 149/193.

[231] M.C. Dillon cautions that a careful method must be employed to treat childhood experience, which avoids imputing concepts from adult spatiality to the child's syncretic experience of space: "this world of syncretic sociability is an infantile world which corresponds to a quality of experience that is lost with the development of the reflective awareness of perspectival differences between my experience and that of others: if the world of syncretic sociability is to be retrieved, it cannot be done by meditative reduction and static analysis; rather, it requires a genetic phenomenology, an ontogenetic investigation that is the phenomenological counterpart of developmental psychology." Dillon, "Ontology," 119.

responses to the environment, while conversely, the meaning of the "outer" world is manifest in, and delimited by, the bodily comportment of the organism. In this way, there is not an ultimate distinction between experience and environment in the organism, because each of these terms represents an objectified aspect of a total, reciprocal relation, that I have called static or structural passivity. Thus, an analysis of the child's total behaviour can yield insight into the way in which its world and experiences are structured. Indeed, it is precisely within childhood experience that Merleau-Ponty discovers what he calls "syncretic sociability," a structure in which these later conceptual distinctions of adult life, between self and world, self and other, inner and outer, touch and vision, as well as sensing and sensed, are not neatly demarcated. (CP 247-255/309-21)

It is evident, from empirical studies, that children do not possess a sense of objects, themselves, or other people as demarcated, separately existing entities. An infant within the first three months of birth, for example, cannot recognize their familiar bottle if it is presented to them by the bottom-end. That is, the child is not familiar with the bottle qua thing, where differences in visible and tactile aspects are crossed-out or transcended toward a synthetic awareness of the thing. Rather, the child is familiar with the bottle qua particular, isolated aspect. (CP 149/193) Further, there is evidence that prior to six months of age, infants do not distinguish their own bodies or gestures, as well as their own felt emotional states from those of other persons. Indeed these very notions of own and other, inside and outside, are abstractions and the very terms which a behavioural inquiry into childhood must operate without.

Before it can ever focus on the other's visual features or face, the child is immediately in contact with others via sonority and the voice. Merleau-Ponty documents a "contagion of cries" that happens often between babies, where the crying of one child spreads to other children. (CP 249/313) Merleau-Ponty rejects an explanation by which the child cognitively recognizes its sensations of crying as belonging to others, then consciously mimics them,[232] because there can be no explicit analogue for the child at this stage: the child cannot precisely identify things or other people as distinct entities.[233] Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues that the:

> other... can be immediately 'interpreted' by my body schema. By reforming the concept of the psyche and replacing it with the concept of behaviour, and the conception of synaesthesia being replaced by that of postural schema, in two terms: my behaviour and the other's behaviour constitute a totality. (CP 247/311)

The notion of the child as an independent psyche with a relation to the external world is a presupposition which is refuted by the evidence. There is imitation

[232] This critical view has been asserted by Shaun Gallagher and Andrew Meltzoff, who argue that the child's ability to recognize gestures and move its body implies basic capacity of kinesthetic self-awareness. I think that the salient features of the account in this section refute this account, so I will not represent them here. Succinctly, Gallagher's and Meltzoff's argument either is premised upon imputing the adult capacities of other-recognition, self-awareness, and explicit motor-control to the child, or else this account dilutes the account of bodily agency and other-recognition to tacit and indistinguishable, thus conflated, concepts. Gallagher and Meltzoff, "Earliest Sense," 211-33.

[233] "Through pre-reflective perception that, as a body, I am perceived by another, a system of indistinction is established between my body as I live it, my body as the other sees it, and the other's body as I perceive it. This tripartite system is one of 'syncretic sociability': that is, the self is produced, maintained, and transformed through the socially mediated intercorporeal 'transfer' of movements and gestures and body bits and pieces. Just as through the look and the touch of the other's body I feel my difference, it is from the same body that I borrow my habits and hence my identity without either body being reducible to the other or to itself." Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity*, 54.

prior to self-other recognition. Even the language of imitation invokes a sense of already separate entities copying each other, whereas the contagion of early infant behaviour suggests a more global structure of behaviour prior to self-others, self-body, distinctions.[234] The immediate sense of the body, in childhood, thus involves a structure in which postural awareness of self and other is not yet active. Merleau-Ponty's point about syncretic sociability, then, is not that there is a projection of one emotional state from one child to another, but that the child cannot distinguish between its own gestural and emotional behaviours and those of others. Merleau-Ponty calls this a stage of "pre-communication," in which "The child's personality does not distinguish itself from the situation in which it is engaged and from which it emerged." (CP 257/322-3) This pre-communication will come to have been the ground of communication, but its very structure cannot delimit a distance between self and other across which communication would need to be effected.

There is evidence, for example, that much later in infancy a child cannot recognize or feel herself distinctly from others. A child able to speak, but not yet able to say "I" or to linguistically distinguish others, in an example cited by Merleau-Ponty, began to call himself by his newborn sister's name once he heard his parents calling her by it. (CP 257/323). Indeed, before it has a personal sense of itself, the child must first learn to mark a difference between the subjectivity and objectivity of others, as well as itself and its surroundings: "Children's

[234] Dillon thus explains how imitation is a phenomenon of the body, not of the psyche, such that: "A better word would be 'intercorporeality' because the problem of other minds is really a problem of other animate organisms: at the most basic levels, human communion is a communion of flesh and not a relation between isolated subjects." Dillon, "Ontology," 122.

thought is generally pre-personal, pre-individual. The word 'I' appears late, since the child takes a long time to distinguish himself from his surroundings." (CP 258-9/325). Thus, far from the ego being the beginning of childhood experience, the child only has a sense of its own ego after its perceptual and interpersonal field is adequately differentiated. Merleau-Ponty explains how, prior to saying "I" the child will express its desires, such as "I want to write" (*je veux écrire*) simply as something like "rite" (*kire*), and must first learn to distinguish others as performing or wanting to perform these actions (i.e. "*Papa kire*") before being able to articulate its own activity: "The acquisition of the proper name is made after other characters. The use of the pronoun 'I' comes still later, at least in its full sense, when the child understands that everyone in his turn can say 'I' and can be considered as 'you' [*toi*]." (CP 259/325) Citing a study by psychologist Henri Wallon, Merleau-Ponty offers the example of a young child who hits her friend and then begins to cry, reacting exactly as if she herself had been the one hit. (CP 257/323) In these examples, it is clear that the child's affect is at first united with that of others, in an immediate intimacy within which "the child cannot limit himself to his own life, hence the phenomenon of transitivism: indistinction between self and other (syncretic sociability)." (CP 253/318) The child does not constitute the space around her, but is immersed in the institution of an undifferentiated space, and it is only on the basis of differentiations made *within this space* that the child's own sense of herself will come to be instituted.

During his Sorbonne lecture on "Child Psycho-Sociology," Merleau-Ponty states that the emergence of consciousness in the body provides a problem for

traditional ontology. If development is merely biological and bodily, the problem of how consciousness can emerge remains insoluble. On the other hand, if development is driven by consciousness, there can be no explanation of how consciousness in fact "integrates itself little by little" in structures of bodily organization that precede its sense. (CP 228/287) The body and the psyche are not separate factors that exist in an external dialectic between already established domains. When the child eventually distinguishes herself from others, the child's past is laden with gestural, perceptual and interpersonal significances that she herself did not institute. She only comes to institute herself as person, in this sense, once the template of her personality has already been instituted by others. Even though she is not yet acting in an autonomous manner, her behaviours are nevertheless meaningful in a personal sphere. Merleau-Ponty writes that "the development is already a behaviour" echoing his studies of embryology, where the premature structures were working to enact vital structures without yet being them. (IP 16/[16](12)) The difference here is that these embody a significance that the child is not aware of, and so as her personality becomes an express issue for her, so too will this past, which has already furnished the parameters of her personal life. Indeed, it is only from decisive changes within this inter-corporeal total structure of behaviour that her personality can first emerge as an issue for her.[235]

[235] A central thesis presented in *Institution* is that prior to the life of subjective projects and intentions is a generalized, behavioural human "living" which furnishes subjectivity with its template of significance. In an obvious criticism of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion that personal meaning is projected by a constituting subject: “Someone will say: it is through relation

Merleau-Ponty focuses on how a child develops a sense of her own agency and individuality when she is able to move her body to distinguish others, to speak in a way that explicitly names herself, in short, when her entire relationship to space and to others undergoes transformations. Though I will not focus on Merleau-Ponty's studies of the mirror phenomenon in which a child gradually learns to distinguish images from models and then living bodies, and then others from itself, it is worth noting that what is effected in these changes is a whole new relation to space, such that the child no longer associates things with their specific localization in images. When a child can turn to see a model reflected in the mirror, she goes beyond space perceived as "a quality adhering to the image" and instead of a "double localization," learns to see how one selfsame thing can occupy two different places in the perceptual field. (CP 423/525-6) Merleau-Ponty argues that this new relation to space and others cannot be a synthesis of the understanding, because cognitive distinctions like image and object, or singularly or doubly localized, are "all or nothing" principles which are either understood or not understood. (CP 253/318) Rather, in the child's experience, there are tentative, gradual, and initially reversible developments that arise in her ability to move, to sense her own body, to perceive space, and to relate to others. Rather than a constituting mind which enacts a change between two different externally perceived spaces, there is a development *within* the space of the child's global structure of behaviour, that is effected by her body and by her changing relations to others.

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to a project. If you like, but there is a non-decisionary project, not chosen, intention without subject: living." IP, 6/[3](2).

It is telling that the child cannot cognitively *learn* to regard its body from the outside, but must be educated into this distinction by first differentiating the subjectivity and objectivity of other bodies (such as the difference between her father speaking and then speaking of himself, or being spoken of by others):

> The child must come to understand that there are two points of view about himself and that his body which feels is also visible, not just for the child, but also for others. Thus, we discover the interdependence between the development of the specular image and the development of relations with others. The child has to learn to see himself as a role. This acquisition is neither instantaneous or complete. It is not, thus, a question of an intellectual process... Thus, it not only involves the intellectual comprehension of the phenomenon, but the reorganization of the personal life and relations with others as well. (CP 424/526)

The difference between being the subject of her own perception and the subject of another's perception are instituted together, such that the child recognizes and takes up the self-other differentiation at play between more mature others. This transformation of her own experience through others makes this experience *explicitly* hers.

As the evidence of these studies compellingly suggests, it is by learning to differentiate between the other and the image of the other, or the other as speaking subject and the other as object of speech, that the child learns how to identify different images as self-same things (because the other is different than her image, she is nevertheless reflected in her image). I think that it is this transformed sense

of the other, who is no longer an immediate, syncretic part of the child's postural and perceptual field, but is now a subject who sees and can be seen from the outside, that most powerfully motivates a shift in the child's spatiality, according to which she begins to see things perspectivally, indeed, to see them as things rather than mere images. The other, in this development, is not just a thing laid out in our space that is distinct from the image we have of them, but a genuinely other being with a unique purchase on space:

> The analysis is to recapture this in another language. It is not by reduction to an intellectual synthesis that the problem will be resolved. The child must be put in relation to the other as the other. I have an exterior aspect; I am visible for the other. The other has a view of me. *The relation with the other has the value of a real structure*... (CP 255/320)

These personal relations do not supervene from outside of space, because they were always already there. It is rather that they become explicit within space, that the self-other distinction motivates its own appearance between the child and others, which commences the enactment of divisions between seeing and seen, image and object, and body schema and body image. The other's presence is announced as an internal divergence within space, an alienation of syncretic structures which does not "transcend" them but "pushes them back" as space comes to be characterized by "joint ownership." (CP 259-261/324-7) Thus it is the emergence of the other, not as a known structure, but as an apperceived person who is really out there with and against her in space that motivates a sense of

individuality in the child, at once *alienating* her from syncretic sociability, but equally *giving* her an inaugural sense of her own agency.

As this sense of agency emerges, the youth is estranged from the past of her childhood, for new distinctions become operative in her experience. Indeed the very presence of *her* self-conscious experience elides and transforms the syncretic sociability of childhood. As the structure of generative passivity of adult agency, this past matrix of sense is withdrawn from direct awareness and volitional influence, even though it is continually at play underneath these activities, as their instituting ontological ground.

3.3.3 The Emergence of Instituting Personality: Puberty

The philosophy of institution is uniquely capable of explaining the emergence of conscious life and personality in a living body. In this section I will demonstrate that a sense of personal agency emerges out of the syncretic sociability of childhood, but not as a fully formed and complete agency, but precisely as an agency which is shaped by and accomplished with other people. In this way agency is generatively passive, because even though it presents each of us with an indeclinable sense of agency, this sense is continually generated and supported within a sphere of intercorporeality, a transformed syncretic sociability, that anonymously and passively undergirds, and often interferes with, our sense of being individual agents.

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the emergence of the person raises the difficult question of what the decisive factors are in the child moving out of

syncretic sociability and encountering her behaviours as actions belonging to her *self*. The transition to individuality and a lived sense of agency entails that she encounters her own body schema and those of others as independent domains of self-expression: "The absolute love of infancy as the anticipation. The institution is made in this same medium. As the 'passage' of the Oedipus complex results from its immanent impossibility, the beginning of puberty is going to be the *immanent possibility of the relation to others*..." (IP 25/[23-4](17-8), my emphasis) Puberty marks the stage[236] at which the child moves to a new identification between her body and others: now each body is characterized by a sense of agency, such that the immediate identification with others that characterized early childhood experience is displaced by an arena in which individuals act in ways that define both themselves and the others around them. In puberty, I encounter my own body as diverging from itself and from the familiar ease I have with others, because my body now appears as a site in which I express myself. This experience of my own detachment from others can be liberating, but there is a fundamental alienation involved insofar as I begin to experience others as diverging from me, as centers of judgment and agency. The significance of my own identity and action must pass through the judgment and influence of others. Though this is often originally encountered as an experience of difference and non-identity, it also opens up the possibility for a new

[236] Puberty is not a fixed stage or schedule reducible to events in the body or determined in advance by cultural norms. It need not happen all at once, or even in neatly punctuated events or phases. It could take the form of gradual unnoticed developments, sudden crises, perhaps later in life, or it might not happen in noticeable ways at all. Puberty is institution and I use the term, following Merleau-Ponty, in a much wider sense than our ordinary connotations of it: "Therefore institution does not get carried along as if it had a date and followed a certain past: 'normal' puberty is incomplete." IP, 26/[24](18).

identification of co-creativity, and shared relations with others. It is in this way that our self-conscious agency as persons does not take the form of a complete structure, but must develop, and constantly be redeveloped, with others.

The Freudian view that the child already has fully operational, albeit tacit and unconscious, structures of personal consciousness is problematic. Freud explains the explicit emergence of such awareness as the motor of a breakdown in family relations that either propels the child into puberty or into regressive, neurotic behaviours. This view is premised upon an already operational but repressed sexual consciousness in the child,[237] and it rests on the assumption that the emergence of self-consciousness out of bodily-habitual identification with primary care-givers can only take the form of painful failures of this already established unconscious desire for identification; as Freud explains in "The Dissolution of the Oedipal Conflict:" "It has not yet become clear, however, what it is that brings about its destruction. Analyses seem to show that it is the experience of painful disappointments."[238] Freud reads the emergence of sexual behaviours back into childhood, imputing an already formed sexual consciousness to the child, and finding a retrospective illusion of a sexually self-determining person there. When this supposed sexual desire becomes manifest, it makes the continual identification with the parental others impossible, and thus exposes the

[237] Freud writes in his second essay on "Infantile Sexuality" that: "I believe, then, that infantile amnesia, which turns everyone's childhood into something like a *prehistoric* epoch and conceals from him the beginnings of his own sexual life..." Freud, "Three Essays," 91.
[238] Sigmund Freud, "Dissolution of the Oedipal,"315. Without discussing the intricacies of Freud's theories, it is enough to present theses of his psychoanalysis to explain, by contrast, Merleau-Ponty's account of personal institution as genuinely open to liberation and alienation, and also characterized by a gradual, learned, expressive emergence of the person qua self-consciousness. There is not for Merleau-Ponty a repressed, tacit consciousness which effects itself through already formed desires.

child's own sexuality through alienation between habits of familial identification and the impetus toward self-determining sexual behaviour. Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion that puberty is a merely psychological crisis between the child and her family, as well as the notion that individuality is initially or ever fully self-determining, because the family structure cannot be determined in advance, and because the child's bodily and psychological development occurs gradually and distinctively in each case.

Merleau-Ponty writes that the emergence of sexual self-consciousness in puberty does not take the form of a merely subjective "anxiety" whereby a tacit sexual self-consciousness becomes repressed or liberated, but rather that that there is a total reconfiguration of body, self, and relations to others. The child's immediate identification with the family is called to transform itself, because it is only a premature structure of behaviour that establishes the possibility of a future, but is not yet adequate to that future sense:

> The mode of existence of the question like that of the answer is not psychological: it is not a state of consciousness (anxiety) and it is not an object of consciousness. The modes of existence of the question and answer are *dimensions* of a field, dimensions in which all of what is lived is distributed, but which are not lived for themselves. (IP 23/[21](17))

I take the notion of "question and answer" to be crucial to understanding how the institution of one habit calls for another, and in a way that is not necessarily

psychological.[239] Self-consciousness emerges gradually out of developments that have already begun to situate the child as person. These developments are necessary but not sufficient for the formation of the person. These structures work according to a generative passivity, like the seed, that holds open a potentiality (*puissance*) for personal life to emerge without already possessing a preformed possibility, capacity or power (*pouvoir*) which could cause that life to emerge. As Merleau-Ponty describes in his Sorbonne course "Child Psycho-Sociology," premature developments prepare the parameters for the person to be a person and, at a certain stage, call for her to take them up as her own personality:

> Development... progresses from *Gestaltung* to *Gestaltung* as a writer slowly creates his language. For instance, take Malraux, who says that 'the writer must learn to speak with his own voice.' Life's exercise--the creation of self by the self--is how the child becomes adult. (CP 224-5/281-2)

The key here is that the child's consciousness is not given in advance, but rather fashioned out of habits that continually call for elaboration and prompt new developmental tasks. When learning to write, for example, a child is presented with the motor problem of coordinating certain shapes, like cursive loops. Once the problem of making shapes is resolved and integrated into the habit body, the threshold of habitual learning shifts elsewhere: now the child, with writing ready to hand, is freed up for other problems, such as written self-expression or

[239] Bergson writes that it is as if, before intelligence ever comes on the scene, life adapts quasi-teleologically by posing problems for itself, such as the need for vision, which will have appeared as having called forth creative elaborations and solutions in the adaptive growth of organisms. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 79/50.

grammar. Here a sensory-motor demand becomes an intellectual or interpersonal one, and learning to move the body becomes learning to communicatively move others.

The "answer" of an acquired habit thus generates "questions" of its own, new significances in the world that present themselves to be reckoned with, such that "[h]uman institution always resumes a prior institution, which has posed a *question.*" (IP 22/[21](17)) Thus, the motor of development in the child is the diacritical character of habits, which means that personal developments are prompted by *discovery* of new behavioural aptitudes, particularly a new awareness of others and the issues it raises, not by the failure of already mature structures. In the case of puberty it is not the failure of tacit sexuality in the child that drives development, but the discovery of a sense of agency in both oneself and in non-familiar others. This is not the discovery of already formed powers, but of a potency of the body to be expressive of itself with the similarly self-expressive bodies of others around it. Puberty is more accurately described as the discovery of one's own body as a site of potential expressions, as a symbolic matrix of sexual expression between self and others.

Puberty is not an event of the body alone, nor is it a psychological change that happens apart from bodily development and relations with others. There must be a family and social structure that allow it, but it is furthermore enacted as a *practice* developed with non-familial others. It is through encountering other bodies as sharing behaviours and practices with my own body that I begin to learn to inhabit my body as an explicit site of agency and other mediation. The

complication here is that the child's terms of relating to others are neither constituted by nor transparently given to her self, but inherited from the syncretic sociability with parental others.[240] As such, by the time she is ever in a place to encounter the question of agency and concrete relations with others in puberty, her very understanding of herself and others has largely been shaped by her childhood development. Puberty names the interstitial phase in which these childhood modes of relating to others become explicitly charged by personal and interpersonal interpretation, but this does not mean that puberty occurs at a preset time, that it results in a pregiven outcome or that it is decided by the emergence of pure freedom in the child. Indeed puberty is prematurely at play in the life of the child's relations with other people, although the child does not explicitly live out of this sense. Puberty is an institution where a sense of self is accomplished by renegotiating the behaviours of the premature structures of syncretic sociability within new relations with non-familial, distinct others:

> Therefore human institution [is] the transformation which preserves and surpasses (the Oedipus complex failed only because it was 'prematuration.' It set up a movement towards the future). Oscillation of pre-puberty between infantilism and aggressive futurism. The true institution of puberty [is the] the past referred to its place and [the] future truly open to the individual. Synonymy of institution and truth: truth which becomes.

[240] Family here is not specified in advance, but refers to anyone else that has played a formative role in the development of the child's behaviour during syncretic sociability and premature forms of awareness.

> I.e., institution condenses and opens up a future. Not simply an imprint, but fruitful imprint. (IP 24/[22](16))

There is a tendency as transitions occur in the individual to reject these changes and fall back into childhood behaviours (perhaps because of pressure or negative reinforcement from family and social structures), but there is equally a tendency to abandon the past and hastily move into relations with others for which the child is not yet prepared.

Institution operates by a logic of prematuration whereby developments prepare, without determining, the space for a new possibility to arise, which once accomplished, comes on the scene as exceeding the sense that will appear to have motivated its development. The notion of prematuration and the becoming-true, post-factually, of actualized possibilities avoids the antinomy of mechanism and finalism: by which sense must either be preexistent or constituted *ex nihilo*.[241] The premature structure thus prepares to enact a sense to which it is not yet itself adequate: this sense is not contained implicitly in the developmental behaviour as its mechanism or telos, yet neither does it spontaneously emerge and constitute the development according to its own logic. There is a transitional movement, a germinal orientation or seed in institution that will orient what follows without determining or guaranteeing it: “Institution [is the] advent of a sense which is oblique and which is not a pure advance, not a pure forgetfulness.” (IP 22/[20](16)) Thus institution does not transcend the past, but reorganizes it according to a new sense, which means that "prematuration is never entirely

[241] Cf.: “Institution neither chance nor entelechy: one does not change and never remains the same.” IP, 22/[21](17).

eliminated and neither is the possibility of regression. It is not the end of history, nor even of pre-history, it opens another history which is still going to be a research." (IP 26/[24](18)) This is significant insofar as childhood habits remain, in some sense, active in adult habits, and insofar as adult habits cannot efface childhood habits.

A reversion to childhood structures of dependence and identification is possible, and conversely, the habits of adulthood are never complete and thus always call for renewed development.[242] Despite prevalent attitudes that sexual maturity entails accomplished behaviours and sexual roles, adulthood is never a finished stage of development, and it generates difficulties when it is taken to be such a realizable goal. The poles of regressive "infantilism" and "aggressive futurism" echo Sartre's notion of bad-faith, whereby one evades freedom by either affirming what one has been and denying one's transcendence, or in denying one's past absolutely and affirming one's transcendence. For Sartre, this is often an everyday structure of self-consciousness, because the individual as equally "transcendence" and "facticity" is always caught between the absolute alternatives of being and nothingness.[243] But Merleau-Ponty has a different ontology, such

[242] In his course on "Child Psycho-Sociology," Merleau-Ponty explains that an institution hinders the actualization of new sense when it becomes too fixedly rooted in the past, or when it prematurely overcomes the past. In terms of emotional attitudes in puberty, this hindrance of institution amounts to either fear of change and protectionism, or else a rebellious sense of irresponsibility and prideful denial of dependence upon others: "This anachronism expresses itself in two ways: from anticipated behaviour, condemning one's own childhood, the liberation from all guardianship and regressive behaviour when one needs protection. The child hates his childhood and wants to completely exorcize it. This development has close correlations with the parents' attitude toward the child. The child's subtlety can cause worries for the mother in particular and increase her own fears. We thus see that puberty can fail in two manners: when the liberation is too violent and when it is too weak." CP, 226-7/284.

[243] See Chapter Two of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

that one can fall into behaviours that are overly regressive or rebellious and hypertrophic, where these terms are not the necessary alternatives of all behaviour. Merleau-Ponty deems these reactionary and conservative behaviours to be modes of "pathological institution." (IP 9/[6](5)) However, Merleau-Ponty also allows for a kind of balance between the two, whereby the individual's past is not rigidly adhered to, but instituted as a scaffold for a future of open significances. A person can be genuinely, but not absolutely, free when they can explore and elaborate new possibilities here.

These modes of development that repeat or reject the past are what Merleau-Ponty indicates, and what Alia Al-Saji's study of bodily perception in Merleau-Ponty has made explicit, as pathological institutions because they either merely repeat the past while avoiding the future, or psychologically reject the past which remains the foundation of the future.[244] "True" institution is an institution whereby the child grows into an adult by letting her past remain as past while also opening up a meaningful future of agency, sense of self, and relations with others. These structures of adult individuality are mediated with her childhood and thus must involve an engagement with and transformation of childhood structures of

[244] Here I draw upon Al-Saji's study of the pathological level in racialized pereption. See: Al-Saji, "Critical Ethical Vision." Also, Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Passivity* lecture course, given concomitantly with the lectures on *Institution*, that we come to play a role, but not an absolutely determinative one, in reorienting the "levels" of our lived experience, such that we must be both open to receiving but also to acting to determine events in our lives. Attempts to refuse or to "construct" the meaning of events misses one of these dimensions, and divides us perniciously between a false identification with past and future: "Not according to the sense given with the event: we can be crafty, maintain the operation of the old practical schema, repress [it]. But although there is no sense given, there are events whose historical inscription we can prevent only by refusing to see them, events that are inassimilable for our system, that refuse our *Sinngebung*. The choice to maintain the old system would then be pathological. Thus, the sense is never simply given to us, but it does not always allow itself to be constructed. When it does not allow itself to be constructed without division of the self from the self, our truth falls outside of us." IP, 191-2/[194](55).

behaviour. The child must grow by working through her past structures of behaviour, but this does not entail that her adult self is contained in her past. Because a person "becomes" truly who they are according to a logic of generative passivity, there is a divergence from the past when explicit relations with others develop.

The notion of "research" (*recherche*) that Merleau-Ponty borrows from Kafka's "Researches of a Dog" is crucial here.[245] As we saw in the analysis of habits, habits are not self-transparent and they can only be changed by the gradual and uncertain process of working at new habitual development. Research here means experimentation more than it connotes an intellectual survey or volitional control. "Research" emphasizes the provisional character of habits and the learning, sharing, and communication that characterizes subjectivity, but it also suggests that the past of habits is broader and more profound than the specific past that is contracted into the present as the condition of perceptual and personal activities. This is because the past is not fixed, but the very matrix within which a future can come to be elaborated:

> However, in the human the past is able not only to orient the future or to furnish the terms of the problems of the adult person, but still give way to *research*, in Kafka's sense, or to an indefinite elaboration: conservation and surpassing are more profound, so that it becomes impossible to

[245] IP, 88/[15](14). The editors note that the term " *recherche*" makes implicit reference also to Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and so the term connotes searching, adventuring, and self-discovery.

> explain behavior by means of its past, anymore than by means of its future. (IP 77/124)

In the account of habit the past was characterized as the structural activity that was contracted into the present as the "true present," or what gave the present its meaning. In the more nuanced account of institution, the past is a diacritical structure which is polarized by the future, such that new events can call up new activities from the past, and the past is more than just a template activity in the present, but an open matrix of significances that exceeds activity or being in the present.[246] Similarly, on this view, the future is not given as pure prospection, but rather is given against dimensions of past significance, at once calling up inactive dimensions of past significance but also calling for these dimensions to be creatively developed. Succinctly, the present is given as a tension between past and future significances, such that the past of the present is not fixed, but remains characterized by a generative indeterminacy. The past is caught up in latent, potential significances, such that its generativity is not a mode of constituting activity, but a passivity charged by dynamism and futurity. Puberty is an intensified period of this "research" where a past can prepare a future with manifold, proliferating possibilities. These changes in structure during puberty

[246] In "Child Psycho-Sociology," Merleau-Ponty describes how puberty is charged by divergent dimensions of self, others, and body, and moreover complicated because these structures are polarized by a new relation to time, and new possibilities of self-expression:"Development is not a solely bodily fact, nor is it totally cultural. (Isolated sexuality is pathological.) In this twofold situation, a type of behaviour develops which looks for an equilibrium, one that cannot be found by a simple addition. It is necessary to find a *true present* between anticipation and regression, a present that initiates the future: a future that is full and unanticipated. CP, 228/287.

are distinctively ambiguous in character, because they are at once bodily, social and psychological changes and thus provide multiple avenues of "research."

In the analysis of natural institution, Merleau-Ponty demonstrated that the development of the organic body is not mechanistic, and that there is no pre-established blueprint or ideal form of development that preexists the actual, local developments of the growing organic body. Similarly, in his comments on puberty, Merleau-Ponty argues that even though there is an outline of biological developments that build upon each other, this proliferation of bodily developments is by no means mechanistic: "The schedule of the body? ... Yes. But how is this *schedule worked out*?" (IP 21/[20](16)). Merleau-Ponty notices such phenomena of adaptation and learning endogenous to the growth of organic structures like plants. The dehiscence of fern spores, for example, cannot be specified in advance but depends upon a cross between physiological tendencies and environmental influences, resulting in novel, unpredictable patterns and configurations. This is not a mere interplay between separate physiological and environmental factors, but what Merleau-Ponty calls an "actual" dialectic that orients the global structure of behaviour as an irreducible function of the organism and its environment-relatedness.[247] In the case of human development, there is not a hormonal development that happens according to its own schedule, which then somehow prompts sexual instincts to motivate conscious intentions. Instead, the developments of the body are proper to a total development that is social and

[247] Merleau-Ponty alludes to the "dehiscence of fern spores: 'achievement' substituted for the dynamic of formation. Therefore the ontogenetic factor of phylogenesis is needed and every development is actual dialectic. No Engrams." IP, 21/[19](15).

psychological: a sexual organ, for example, only becomes "active" within the parameters of an individual life--indeed what even counts as sexual "organs" or developments are shaped distinctly within cultures and enacted uniquely within individuals.[248] The development of the body, therefore, is mediated by personal and social developments, such that:

> The formative event or institution [is not] merely corporal, not merely psychical, but a nexus of the one with the other: the 'premature' is now mature, not according to a *schedule*, but when the materials of behaviour are truly capable of receiving the anticipated form: institution at the crossing over of an anticipation and of a regression. (IP 22/[20]16))

The "events" of the body are thus motivated by and instituted within psychological and social institutions. The events of puberty are not a set of physiological changes that can be listed in advance, yet neither are they merely psychological and separate from developments in the body. The bodily changes are inflected psychologically and interpersonally, and are inconceivable apart from changes in those spheres as well.

[248] Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor note that it is neither a subjective act nor a social norm that constitutes the objects and values in a given field, because there is no separation between personal and public institution. Instead, there is an "internal" interplay of subjects, events, and values which as a total structure of behaviour orders the meaning of subjects, things, social norms and values alike: "One could also add that an institution establishes the subject status of those who carry out its practices (speaker/audience, manager/worker, male/female, etc.); determines what will count as the relevant objects and events; specifies the range of possible goals and the most reasonable means of obtaining them; and predisposes us to one or another set of values. Because perception and language do not exist apart from the internal logic of institutions (anymore than institutions can exist in separation from the subjects that carry out the institutional agendas), the internal logic of institutions, and neither language nor perception, is the primary mode with which we engage one another and the objects that surround us. The internal logic of institutions would be the plane of immanence." Evans and Lawlor, *Chiasms*, 15.

Changes in the inflection of a voice, for example, can come to be regarded by others as having a distinctive significance, and a child might experience the changing voice as a new domain of creative expression, or an inhibiting demand to be heard by others in a certain way. Thus, the individual encounters the changes of puberty at the intersection of her body and her culture as the demand for a new mode of existing as a person. The body is a necessary but not sufficient condition of puberty, such that an isolated bodily maturation that is not taken up psychologically and socially is not yet an institution of personality: "In the human organism, functions have to find themselves; humanity is in its own indefinite state. Organic change is necessary, but not sufficient, for development to reach full development (as in Deutsch, without hormones: no puberty arises)." (CP 230/289) Indeed, when the body plays an isolated and determinative role in establishing behaviour, this marks a pathological kind of psychological development and indicates a limiting social structure. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, notes that Western cultures generally link personal development to bodily development in a reductive manner for women, with psychological consequences. Thus, there is the young woman who encounters her body not as a vehicle of her freedom and site of transcendence toward others, but as "a screen interposed between the woman and the world, a fiery mist that settles over her, stifling her and cutting her off."[249]

The precise challenge for the individual, indeed the whole crisis and wonder of puberty, is that one must learn how to continue being oneself while

[249] de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 329/II, 77.

undergoing so many transformations, particularly relations with others that enable or disable these changes. Indeed, even after the child has left the familial home, the psychological issues faced with others in the family remain at the core of the personal process of development.[250] By the time we ever get to puberty, our possibilities of meaningful habitual development have already been indelibly shaped by the institution of our childhood. A child who has been dominated by her parents might lack the confidence or even social opportunities to experience new relations with others, and conversely a young person who has been thrust into adult responsibilities without a chance to elaborate new behaviours might lack the security and resources to discover stable new habits. In *The Second Sex*, for example, Simone de Beauvoir characterizes the adolescent girl as subject to a stifled development in patriarchal society, because she is cut off from the chance to freely elaborate her personality, and is prescribed the "destinies" of matrimony and maternity: “The fundamental reason for such defeatism is that the adolescent girl does not think herself responsible for her future.”[251] When a family or a society closes off the individual's ability to discover her own *possibilities*, a pathological form institution results. de Beauvoir describes a psychological introversion that characterizes the young woman whose own field of possibility is determined by others.

[250] Even as the child grows into an adult, writes Merleau-Ponty, "there is in it likewise a trace of the primitive identification: the struggle with the parents is transformed into a struggle with oneself. Therefore, since there are no tracks, but the reaction of a history upon itself, and the originary impulsion of prematuration, institution does not absolutely liquefy what preceded it.” IP, 25/[24](18).
[251] de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 335/II, 82.

de Beauvoir describes what Merleau-Ponty articulates as a division in the institution of the person, between real and imaginary selves, such that the young woman intensely experiences her own freedom in psychological isolation and indefinitely postpones her real freedom:

> The sense of secrecy developed in the girl at prepuberty is bound to become more intense. She wraps herself in a grim solitude; she will not expose to those about her the hidden ego that she regards as her true self and that is in fact an imaginary personage… There is always an enormous difference between this heroine and the objective person with whom her relatives and friends are familiar. She is also convinced that she is not understood; her relations with herself are then only the more impassioned: she is intoxicated with her isolation, she feels herself different, superior, exceptional; she promises herself that the future will be a revenge upon the mediocrity of her present life.[252]

The young woman's shame in the face of others devolves into a kind of intense personal pride, because the social and personal institutions cannot cohere, and because she is not permitted to find a balance between her oppressive past and the deferred openness of her future. Agency develops when a person feels free with respect to their own future, but this requires the existence of interpersonal and social relations which enable this sense of freedom. Like the body, the development of the psyche is a necessary condition of the institution of the person

[252] de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 340-1/II, 87.

in puberty, but it is not sufficient, and if puberty becomes a merely psychological institution, or a solely bodily one, it is a form of pathological institution.[253]

The person is socially instituted in puberty, and it is in puberty that the person comes to have an awareness of the social relations that enable persons in her society to develop their sense of selfhood and their relations with others. In this way, the indeclinable questions of personal life and agency that are disclosed in puberty never go away, and cannot be settled once and for all. Merleau-Ponty's account of the formation of the person requires a broader account of the social, and in the next, final section of this chapter, I will demonstrate how his conception of the social as an institution of generative passivity is opposed to the idea that society is either a super-individual entity or a mere contract among individuals. Society neither constitutes the individual, nor do individuals collectively constitute society. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's radical notion of the social is, as was hinted at by the study of syncretic sociability, an intercorporeal matrix of shared significance out of which individuals, the relations between them, as well as the groups and communities that they form, draw their sense. By understanding the intercorporeal character of the social, we not only gain a better understanding of how individuals come to be formed; by examining the way this structure of generative passivity remains at play in adult life, we also open the possibility of concrete ethical and political ways of confronting the pathological institutions that impede personal and social development.

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[253] "The *psychological side* is necessary but does not constitute a sufficient condition." CP, 227/285.

3.4 Toward a New Concept of the Social: Intercorporeal Agency

In this section I will briefly consider Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeal conception of sociality which goes beyond a merely inter-personal analysis of social relations, seeking the roots of these relations in structures of passive generativity out of which persons arise. Instead of a social theory that presupposes already-formed, rational individuals, or super-individual, structuralist norms, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the intercorporeal institution of the person is uniquely capable of understanding the pre-personal, inter-bodily, communicative context in which personhood is initially accomplished and continually enacted. Even though the establishment of a sense of agency and personhood leaves behind the childhood structure of syncretic sociability, this past of interpersonal intercorporeality lives on, albeit tacitly, as the generative matrix of personhood. It is this inter-bodily sociality within which individuals and groups originally develop that can persistently nourish, or undermine, their agency. I contend that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy offers unique insights into how shared, bodily practices and gestures are original means of exposing and reshaping social structures.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of institution is a rejection of the liberal notion that society is comprised of distinct, rational individuals who enter into social relations solely on the basis of consent. The basic premise of institution is that there are already social relationships in play, out of which individuals develop the capacity for such volition, such that "there will later be decisionary institutions or contracts, but they are to be understood on the basis of birth and not

the reverse." (IP 8/[5](4)) The liberal notion of the individual is premised on that of a constituting consciousness that *posits* other people and relations with them, such that a real relationship:

> makes no sense for consciousness or, what amounts to the same thing, everything for consciousness is instituted in the sensing of being posited. [The] relation with others [is conceived] as pact or contract. And even if we take account of the spirit of the contract, what is still contractual is that the prisoner is his jailer, that he is not subjected to the force of the other himself, but by his decision to constitute the other. (IP 8/[5](4))

The idea of a genuine relationship collapses because it is the self that posits the relation, and thus only enters into a circular relation with itself. The individual, qua constituting consciousness, in relations with others is as absurd as someone calling himself a prisoner while holding the key to his own cell. There is no meaningful way that such an individual could relate to others. This view overlooks the way in which individuals emerge from and are sustained within social relations.

The liberal notion of the constituting self is more than an epistemological error: it is a dangerous ethical stance. The idea that consenting individuals are the basis of political power overlooks the way in which agency is a result, and not a condition of shared social practices. These practices, Merleau-Ponty explains in his essay "Concerning Marxism," are essentially violent, and are elided when we adhere to a liberal notion of politics and

> suppose that violence appears only episodically in human history, that economic relationships in particular tend of themselves to effect harmony and justice, and finally, that the structure of the human and natural world is rational. We know today that formal equality of rights and political liberty mask rather than eliminate relationships based on force. [...] The weakness of democratic thinking is that it is less political than moral, since it poses no problem of social structure and considers the conditions for the exercise of justice to be given with humanity. (SNS 103/180)

The assumption that individuals are consenting rational agents denies, and thereby extends the genuine dangers of shared, bodily social power.

The facts that sociality is not effected by individual consent, and that it can exert force upon individuals, do not entail that the social is a super-individual realm of power or normativity. For Merleau-Ponty, laws do not transcend the situations in which they are embodied.[254] Social norms are neither constituted, artificial realities external to individuals, nor are they transcendent ideals which constitute human existence: "There is no intelligible world; there is culture: [...] In the first relation, there are only discontinuous terms, the one after the other, 'cultural objects' and 'consciousnesses'" (IP 58/[66](49)) There are not *a priori* norms which govern human existence, because humans play a role in establishing, maintaining, and changing social relations. Even in childhood, argues Merleau-Ponty, there is not a "mechanical insertion" of the child into an order of

[254] As early as *The Structure of Behaviour* , Merleau-Ponty was making this argument: "Since the law cannot be detached from concrete events where it intersects with other laws and receives a truth value along with them, one cannot speak of a linear causal action which would distinguish an effect from its cause; for in nature it is impossible to circumscribe the author..." SB, 139/150.

socialization, because "the social environment intervenes" not from the exterior but as "a call to the child" endogenous to her own self. (CP 197/245-6) Sociality is not an object distinct from the individual, but lies at the heart of each individual as the shared milieu out of which she is called to exist for herself and with others.[255] Thus the terrain of sociality is embodied intersubjectivity: "The dialectical [...] milieu in which crises, problems, solutions, reversals, transformations are produced is not an in-itself." (IP 71/[85](62)) There is a dialectical relation, or a double horizon between individuals and society,[256] an instituting-instituted relationship rather than one of one-sided constitution: "But where is this truth of societies? The truth is not in the individuals, it is not in the sum of the individuals--it is in the field of social gravitation. This field is capable of posing and resolving 'problems.' It is the real seat of the dialectic." (IP 73/[87]) This intercorporeal institution of human life is organically and developmentally open-ended.[257]

To understand the social according Merleau-Ponty we need to go beyond immediate inter-subjective relations to discern their basis in structures of generative passivity: "And in order to think the social fully, wouldn't we have to have a notion that is more general than *exchange*, [and] coexistence, more general

[255] In his lectures on *Child Pedagogy*, Merleau-Ponty notes that the traditional separation of psychological and sociological methods dichotomizes this notion of sociality, and that we should not understand these methods as opposed: "There is no competition between psychology and inter-psychology in the same way that there is no rivalry between plane geometry and three-dimensional geometry. They are not boundaries: all is social and all is individual. We see that the culturalist conception of the norm is insufficient." CP, 225/281.
[256] Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a reciprocal relationship, or "double facet" between public and personal institution. IP, 14/[11](10).
[257] Though I will not treat it at length here, this account of sociality not only requires an account of the embodiment and violence of inter-human social practices, but also of human ecological practices and violence human social life effects upon animals and other organisms.

than the existence of the others, intersubjectivity?" (IP 74/[89]) Individuals, we saw in our study of childhood and puberty, arise in an intercorporeal, anonymous syncretic sociability that precedes and grounds the development of individuals and the relations between them. I have argued that the experienced form of mature individuality transcends these syncretic childhood structures, but that this anonymous intercorporeality remains tacitly operative--as a generative, rather than given past--in adult life. Thus, in *Institution* Merleau-Ponty argues that the social must be understood within the tacit, inter-bodily dimensions that continually undergird personal existence: "[The] Solution: the system would be based on [...] [the] social configuration which would be the symbolic apparatus of this intersubjectivity[: ...] perceptual orientation of the social space." (IP 74/[89]) The social is not an object to be examined directly since it operates as the tacit dimensions, or "symbolic matrices," of bodily and communicative practices which enable individuals to meaningfully exist.[258]

The objects of social reflection are, for Merleau-Ponty, the embodied milieus within which persons are enabled or restricted in discovering a sense of agency and selfhood. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty argues in his essay "Concerning Marxism" that the shared human behaviour which transforms reality into a space of personal and interpersonal realization, what he calls "labour," is the true motor of social relations. Of course, this term "labour" connotes more

[258] "Institution in the strong sense [is] this symbolic matrix that results in the openness of a field, of a future according to certain dimensions, and from this result we have the possibility of a common adventure and of a history as consciousness." IP, 13/[10](9).

than wage-labour, and includes all of the bodily practices, domestic relations, shared expressions and gestures which shape the social:

> More surely than books or teachings, modes of work hand the previous generations' ways of being on to the new generations. It is true that, in a given society, at a given moment, the way of working expresses the mental and moral structure just as a living body's slightest reflex expresses the total subject's fundamental way of being in the world. But economic life is at the same time the historical carrier of mental structures, just as our body maintains the basic features of our behaviour beneath our varying moods; and this is the reason one will more surely get to know the essence of a society by analyzing interpersonal relations as they have been fixed and generalized in organic life than through an analysis of the movements of fragile, fleeting ideas--just as one gets a better idea of a man from his conduct than from his thoughts. (SNS 108/189)

The social is to be understood as a bodily realm, within which living relationships are instituted. These dimensions of the social are not always explicit, and often require interrogation. Because individuals begin as children, and not self-conscious agents, the generative matrix of selfhood is not, as Rosalyn Diprose puts it, something of which we can be explicitly conscious. Rather, "this constitution of the body subject through the other occurs not by conscious intervention but by mimesis and 'transitivism:' by identification with other bodies and by the imitation and projection of gestures."[259] It is obliquely, then, by

[259] Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity*, 69.

exploring the shared spaces of bodily gesture that we can shed light into the workings of the social. Rather than studying "the installation of social complexes" in the individual, explains Merleau-Ponty, the study of the social involves understanding an individual in its "initiation into a certain cultural environment." (CP 100/130)

The difficulty with our initiation into personal habits, and their broader social significance, is that they are not initially manifest. In some sense, then, our developing habits present themselves as "natural" and simply the way the world is.[260] In the essay "Straightening Our Hair," bell hooks describes the way that as a young girl she was invited by the women in her community to flatten out her naturally thick hair, and how this marked a rite of passage to adulthood in her community. She notes, however, that she only had a local sense of the communal significance of straightening her hair at the time, and did not, and indeed could not, see the broader social significance of this practice, such that straightening hair:

> was not connected in my mind with the effort to look white, to live out standards of beauty set by white supremacy. It was connected solely with rites of initiation into womanhood. To arrive at that point where one's hair could be straightened was to move from being perceived as child (whose hair could be neatly combed and braided) to being almost a woman.[261]

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[260] Gail Weiss explains the linkage between habits and naturalizing attitudes as follows: "Through the process of habituation, horizons are naturalized, taken for granted as 'the way things are,' and this, in turn, makes these horizons even more resistant to analysis, much less transformation." Weiss, *Refiguring the Ordinary*, 75.
[261] hooks, "Straightening Our Hair."

After the fact, she came to recognize that African-American women straightened their hair not only to 'fit in' as adults, but to conform to a socially and professionally accepted body image. Thus the practice by which she entered black adult sociability became the alienating site at which she discovered the pressures to assimilate her distinctive bodily comportment to a white body-image.

Shannon Sullivan describes the way in which dominant cultures habituate social behaviours according to a kind of "ethical solipsism" which seeks to regularize bodies around a set of images and practices that are presumed to be normal. When those in a dominant culture take the social realm to be an *object constituted* by certain behaviours of race, class and sex, they overlook the way in which they are *a*cting to *constitute* these structures. This is a case of the "crypto-mechanism" of perception (PP 59/85), by which the dominant culture takes itself to merely encounter the social realm passively, overlooking the violent act of perception that constitutes it:

> [This dominant] projective intentionality tends to suggest that it is desirable that all people live in as ontologically expansive a manner as possible. ... It implicitly encourages [white people] not to concern themselves with other people's lived existence, including the ways in which other people's existence is inhibited by white people and institutions. In this way, the non-transactional, unidirectionality of projective intentionality lends itself toward ethical solipsism. Unlike metaphysical solipsism, which holds literally that only one subject exists,

> ethical solipsism holds that the interests, projects, desires, and values of the one subject are the main ones or the only ones of any significance.[262]

bell hooks did not notice that straightening her hair involved an internalization of white significance because, she notes, her community was segregated from whites.[263] That is, while black people were tacitly or explicitly pressured to conform to a white body image and postural schema, those existing in a world of white privilege were not similarly made to relate to black experiences or values.

This segregated world in which one class of privileged people exist as if they constitute space and another lives within a space that is constituted by others illustrates Merleau-Ponty's description of a pathological institution. (IP 9/[6](5)) An oppressive social institution is one that cuts off genuine communication and shared practice, hypostasizing the meanings of bodies and behaviours by operating according to a logic that prohibits expression and enforces fixed norms. Such "false" institutions, says Merleau-Ponty:[264]

> do not play the mysterious game which consists in putting all humans into the game, in attempting to make the intermingling truly universal. They follow the letter of institution but not its spirit, which consists in not being limited, prohibited, enclosed on an island of customs. The spirit of institution consists in setting an unlimited historical labor underway.[265]

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[262] Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 163.
[263] "Since the world we lived in was racially segregated, it was easy to overlook the relationship between white supremacy and our obsession with hair." hooks, "Straightening Our Hair."
[264] Merleau-Ponty claims that there is no such thing as a "true society," but it is possible to call societies "false" to the extent that they violently constituted the past or foreclose the future, or one-sidedly privilege one class of people rather than putting humans "in the balance [... of] the *Miteinander*." IP, 75/[90](122).
[265] IP, 72/[86](63).

In this pathological institution, space is one-sidedly a domain of expression for the privileged, and equally one-sidedly a domain of conformity, fear and violence for the oppressed. The oppressing side, rather than opening the social as an institution of expression, controls future forms of expression by hypostasizing the past as containing the only valid possibilities of social meaning. Further, where one side enjoys the power of determining space, it equally lacks awareness of its "projective" power, in what Sullivan called its ethical solipsism. Conversely, though, the oppressed community, while lacking power, is all too aware of the coercive and limiting effects of this power that constitutes social space. Where the privileged person immediately experiences the world pridefully, as reflecting their own values, the oppressed find that their self-realization is subverted by the domination of others. This experience, however, reveals the very conditions of possibility for agency and genuine communication in the very moment of impoverishing them.[266]

Human beings come to be by partaking in a shared structure of intercorporeal sociability which actualizes personal meaning. Human sociality, like institution generally, is not constituted by isolated loci of power. Institutions are not static realities, but are fundamentally diacritical, such that each institution prepares the site for future institutions, without determining them in advance. In the oppression she was exposed to in something so innocent as straightening her

[266] Diprose explains that it is initially alienation, an exposure to the fact that the person is co-founded with other persons, that motivates the discovery of selfhood and agency. Experiences of oppression show up how this intercorporeal structure continues to enable adult life: "the emergence of a body I can call [mine] occurs not prior to but through the 'alienation' of corporeality. In this scheme of things, the distinction between self and other is neither original nor final." Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity*, 54

hair, bell hooks discovered, like other women around her, a new potential for self-expression and shared creativity:

> During the 1960s black people who actively worked to critique, challenge, and change white racism pointed to the way in which black people's obsession with straight hair reflected a colonized mentality. It was at this time that the natural hairdo, the "afro," became fashionable as a sign of cultural resistance to racist oppression and as a celebration of blackness.

In the spirit of institution, hooks and the other women around her turned an oppressive practice--straightening hair--into a joyful practice of solidarity and resistance, cultivating a shared space of agency. Yet while this action transformed one space into another, and oppression into agency, it still bore the traces of the preceding institution, insofar as this behaviour also marked her out as a non-conformist black woman, and even a lesbian because of the hetero-normative connotations of naturally crimped hair.[267] While this dual meaning of letting her hair naturally grow marked out the existence of a pathological institution, hooks also considered it a means of exposing the oppressive comportment and affect of the dominant community.

Indeed, in *Black Looks*, hooks articulates the way in which such a shared experience of resistance to oppressive structures can serve to create a sense of community solidarity and the opportunity to interrupt structures of oppression. hooks characterizes an oppositional gaze, by which a community collectively returns the objectifying, racist gaze, not in order to objectify privileged white

[267] hooks, "Straightening Our Hair."

people, but to interrupt the oppression that functions at the unnoticed levels of perception and bodily behaviour, insofar as

> white people can 'safely' imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze. As fantastic as it may seem, racist white people find it easy to imagine that black people cannot see them [...] Their amazement that black people watch white people with a critical 'ethnographic' gaze, is itself an expression of racism.[268]

Thus, making the privilege of whiteness seen, by making their own subjectivity as seers manifest, has served to interrupt oppression and generate a new sense of community in a segregated society. In his criticism of democratic idealism in "Concerning Marxism," Merleau-Ponty argued that a genuine social practice functions by

> institut[ing] social structures and real relationships among men [sic] such that liberty, equality, and right become effective. [...] In opposition to that particular moralism we all rallied to realism, if by that one means a politics concerned with realizing the conditions of existence for its chosen values. (SNS 103/180)

The task of a social practice seeking a healthier social institution, then, is to expose dysfunctional shared bodily practices and perceptual orientations while

[268] hooks, *Black Looks*, 165-8.

creating new ones, which can potentially create conditions of possibility for new social realities.

Sullivan explains how habits cannot be disrupted directly, but must involve *Gestalt*-shifts in the behavioural environment, because in the case of privileged habits, gestural space becomes normalized and customary habits are perceived as natural: "people become personally invested in racist institutions and structures [but] they might try to combat this 'internal' investment by changing their relation to the 'external' world."[269] I think there are a few gestures to point out that effect this change of the social world by resituating a person's relation to their environment. The Cacerolazo protests in Chile, and later in Argentina, Iceland, Mexico, Spain, and Québec did such a thing, when people started banging pots and pans, taking to the streets, alerting their neighbors and calling the people to commune as a whole to call out the corrupt, oppressive executive authorities. These protests are remarkable because, peacefully, but clamourously, they reshape the social terrain into a space where neighbors are brought into contact, where awareness and a new communal and critical sense of social engagement is fostered. Moreover, these protests, like the "contagion of cries" echo and are taken up around the world, creating the conditions for unified, peaceful social action elsewhere. Sometimes a few simple gestures, like banging pots and pans, is enough to reorganize shared social practices. As in any form of life, the environment is not a static given or something formed by external forces. As much as the environment shapes the organism, the environment is shaped and

[269] Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 4.

transformed according to the bodily movements and comportment of organisms.

A gesture is something definitively shared. It is through taking on the gestures of others that we learn to express ourselves, that we become inaugurated into a world of significance greater than ourselves.[270] We do not gesture alone, and when we gesture we exhibit explicitly something inward and personal, something about ourselves. Yet a gesture points to something beyond what is immediately evident, it sets up the terms of shared reference for a meaning which can be taken up communicatively and transformed by others.[271] Indeed, as we saw in the study of early childhood development, we learn to be ourselves according to a "contagion" of gestures and postures, which before we are ever self-conscious establish the first parameters of our social practice. Shared bodily gesture undergirds our co-existence as individuals, and therefore is an avenue through which we can, albeit obliquely, expose and reshape social structures. In the *Adventures of the Dialectic* Merleau-Ponty articulates how no human action is purely volitional or merely utilitarian. Because all action participates in the world and must be interpreted by others, all action is symbolic:

> no action assumes as its own all that happens, that it does not reach the event itself, that all actions, even war, are always symbolic actions and count as much upon the effect they will have as a meaningful gesture and as the mark of an intention as upon the direct results of the event--if one

[270] "In particular, [the] perceptual foundation of the system [is discovered] in sexuality. The system as the variation of a sexual being in the world who is a polymorph." IP, 74/[89].
[271] I base this point on a public lecture given by John Russon, in October 2011 at St. John's, Newfoundland, for the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy, entitled "Intimacy and Economy."

> thus renounces 'pure action,' which is a myth (and a myth of the spectator consciousness), perhaps it is then that one has the best chance of changing the world.. [...] Politics and culture are reunited, not because they are completely congruent or because they both adhere to the event, but because the symbols of each order have echoes, correspondences, and effects of induction in the other. (AD 200-1/241)

Sometimes an exemplary gesture becomes a symbol of oppression and a call to action. When the police confiscated his only means of survival, his food cart, and after his local magistrate refused to hear his case, Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six year old Tunisian, in a desperate gesture, lit himself on fire. This gesture awoke the outrage of those oppressed in his society, summoning them to convene defiantly in one of the catalyzing moments that set off similar gestures around the Arab world, and beyond. His was an extreme manifestation of the human need to be seen and heard, of the indomitable capacity of the body to express, while subverting, social space.

bell hooks argues that, in contemporary capitalist culture, there is a lived impersonality which undermines the shared value of human gesture. Against this, hooks argues, and demonstrates in her own body, that gesture is a source not only of desperate rebellion, but of joyous affirmation of self and community:

> In a culture of domination, one that is essentially anti-intimacy, we must struggle daily to remain in touch with ourselves and our bodies, with one another. Especially black women and men, as it is our bodies that have been so often devalued, burdened, wounded in alienated labor. Celebrating

> our bodies, we participate in a liberatory struggle that frees mind and heart.[272]

In the months after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot in Memphis in 1968, two black, American, world-class athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, with the solidarity of an Australian peer, Peter Norman, made a joyous, defiant gesture on the world stage--the Olympic podium at the two-hundred meter sprint final--as a symbol of their everyday struggle against oppression, and as an affirmation of black potentiality. With all three heads held solemnly low, the two black men each held a black-gloved fist triumphantly high, all wearing "Olympic Project for Human Rights" badges as the American national anthem played. Dr. Smith, who apart from his sprinting career was then a promising sociology student who later became a college professor, explains in his autobiography *Silent Gesture* that he was exhausted by the unappreciated sacrifices he and those around him had to make in order to excel in a white culture. He expresses exasperation at the fact that because he was an athlete, despite being famous, he was expected to perform in silence because of being a black "dumb jock." Smith describes the exasperating conditions which brought about his gesture: a culture which while priding itself on freedom and self-determination, silenced even its most renowned citizens. Smith explains how such a society, premised upon freedom, is self-contradictory:

> Sociology teaches us that difference of opinion is the glue of society, that freedom of speech is critical, that the thought process is free. Many times

[272] hooks, "Straightening Our Hair."

> in your thought processes you can't, or don't, say how you really feel. That's the worst misuse of education.[273]

Smith's frustration is not only his--it is the universal frustration of squandered human potentiality, of pathological institution. Even though this gesture cost Smith and Carlos their athletic careers--both were banned forever from world athletic competition--Smith remains proud of the fact that this gesture demonstrated to others that the oppressed cannot be silenced indefinitely, that they too can use their bodies to speak and accomplish more than just socially accepted feats of labour.

The advent of gestures which point out new modes of sociality cannot be predicted, and thus they cannot be foreclosed, we can only await them by listening and watching, and by experimenting with our own expressivity. Tommie Smith waited years to find such a way to gesture to his struggling community, and to remind those blinded by habits and privilege that it is in the nature of our bodies to surmount obstacles and actualize new, unrestrained possibilities:

> The athletic achievement paved a road toward my quest for a social victory, where everyone would be listening to and watching my statement about the conditions in which my people and I were living in the greatest country in the world. I never said a word as the national anthem was playing. My silent gesture was designed to speak volumes.[274]

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[273] Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 38.
[274] Smith, *Silent Gesture*," 1-2.

Smith's action is not an attempt at "pure morality" but rather "it is action in the process of self-invention." (AD 4/8) Smith demonstrates that the passivity of the body is not a limitation. That is, Smith uses his visibility to expose unseen oppression, demonstrating that our bodies, as the condition of the social, cannot be silenced, but remain constitutively open as generative sites of human potentiality.

In this chapter, I have traced the origins of human growth and education beyond the nascent activities of development to the generative passivity that, in the previous chapter, I characterized as the origin of new possibility in nature. I have demonstrated how the basis of human personality in the childhood structure of syncretic sociability remains operative in adult life as the shared intercorporeal matrix of personal significance. However, by demonstrating how our personality emerges in puberty by diverging from this syncretic relation to others, I have articulated how this pre-personal past of childhood cannot be present as such for the adult. But this matrix of intercorporeality remains operative as the institution of generative passivity that continually undergirds the possibility of selfhood. Because we are formed in relations to others before these relations, or our own selfhood, are ever explicit questions for us, a nuanced notion of responsibility is required. I have articulated this notion by turning to experiences of oppression that show certain behaviours operate by working to close down and obfuscate this shared, open generativity at the heart of social life, seeking to constitute it according to privilege. Exploring the potential for shared gestures of resistance to expose, interrupt, and reshape these oppressive behaviours, I have explained how

Merleau-Ponty's notion of social practice can serve as an alternative to a liberal conception of sociality. It is thus through shared bodily comportment, out of which our personal agency is instituted, that we can labour to shift, if indirectly, the very terrain of our human possibilities.

Conclusion

The Problem of Passivity

The task of this work is to demonstrate how two of the putatively most immediate domains of activity--the organic body and consciousness--are in fact mediated by and accomplished within structures of passivity. I have pursued this task by conducting a phenomenological study of these domains, which disclosed three progressively deeper and more ontologically foundational structures of passivity. First is what I have called static or structural passivity, which is manifest in the way in which living activity is mediated with a coefficient of passivity, whether in the organism's inextricable relationship to its environment and the behaviour of other organisms, or to the rootedness of consciousness in bodily and interpersonal existence. As I argued in the first chapter of this dissertation by drawing upon *The Structure of* Behaviour, this sense of passivity points beyond itself into the developmental past and to a second sense of dynamic or genetic passivity, however, because these mediated structures of animal and human life are accomplished in processes of organic growth and habituation. This second sense of passivity, however, remains a concept that derives from activity because it remains the coefficient of developmental processes which are still constituting activities, if nascent ones. To demonstrate this point, in the second chapter I explained how an account of the genetic passivity of animal learning and adaptation, found in *The Structure of Behaviour,* required an account that went beyond the terms of developmental activity, which I demonstrated by

turning to Merleau-Ponty's studies of embryology in the lecture courses *Nature and Institution*. Similarly, in the third chapter, I demonstrated the tension in the *Phenomenology of Perception* between genetic passivity in the account of habit and the generative passivity of natural temporality that undergirds subjectivity, resolving this issue by turning to the lecture courses *Institution* and *Child Psychology and Pedagogy* to show that the formation of the person in birth, childhood, and puberty precedes the genetic passivity of habit and operates according to a deeper logic of institution. In both studies, of organic life (chapter two) and personal life (chapter three), a concept of generative passivity is required to establish the grounds of the genesis of sense in life and consciousness. I have demonstrated that radical concept of passivity is not a coefficient or deficient mode of activity, but an ontological precursor to both constituting activity and constituted structures of being. This passivity, I have argued, cannot be given as such or identified according to a concept of synthesis or function.

This pivotal "concept" of passivity is a kind of non-sense out of which sense arises. That is, because it does not act or exist within existent being, this passive origin of sense generates new meaning from outside of existent being. This "outside" of being must be conceived in terms of a temporality of developmental becoming. Generative passivity names a radical ontological futurity which actualizes and creates new possibility in the present. This creativity in being is not purely spontaneous and *ex nihilo*, however, because it functions by transforming developing structures within being, generating new sense within the temporal rhythms of existence. I have turned to analyses of

embryology, early behaviour formation, and childhood to expose this "institution" of possibility in life. Further, I have shown how this becoming of new meaning on the basis of past institutions of sense is the very issue we face as we become persons. Indeed, because our personality and agency emerge in response to a structure of generative passivity, I have shown how our life is characterized by a continual demand for us to be responsibly attuned to the passive workings of the shared habitual and intercorporeally social structuring of our personal existence.

To understand this instituting-instituted movement of genuine possibility in life, I have attempted, in the second chapter, to deepen Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Bergson's "retrograde movement" of the true. An analysis of this thinking of time as the creation and actualization of possibility in life yields the conclusion that we can say, post-factually, that the past harboured, or more accurately *will have harboured*, the possibilities that were developed in life, albeit not determinately but as "tendencies" or "seeds" of potentiality that await the emergence of a new sense. Because the past is characterized by indeterminacy, or provisional, diacritical determinacy, it cannot be conceived of as substantial, complete being. It is this indeterminate passivity of the past, its incompleteness and lack of full presence, that unpredictable futurity arises. In this vein, I have demonstrated, in my third chapter, that the past of natural life is never present as such, and that for human life, which exhibits a more complexly layered dynamics of passivity, the natural past of life is itself a kind of generative nonsense. In this way, my attempt to "naturalize" consciousness does not have a goal of grounding humanity in an already established, substantial sphere of

nature, but rather aims to root our very sense of agency in the passive generativity which realizes possibility in nature. By understanding the generatively passive character of our agency, we can come to terms with the ethical ramifications of bodily practices which seek to constitute social space on the basis of a hypostasized version of the past, rather than regarding the sphere of human sociality as a genuinely intercorporeal space open to shared improvisation and proliferating, diverse natural, personal and social forms of life.

Interpreting Merleau-Ponty: Thinking on the Move

Also at stake in this dissertation is an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's texts as a continuously deepened, dialectical account of passivity in life and consciousness. Against interpretations that Merleau-Ponty's work is divided into an early reliance on an idealistic philosophy of consciousness and a later abrogation of consciousness in favour of an ontology of nature, I hold the view that Merleau-Ponty's earliest works are driven by the question of the ontological meaning of nature, and that upon careful reading, these texts provide the resources for a critique of the notion of constituting activity. In particular, my claim is that Merleau-Ponty's early work, *The Structure of Behaviour*, can be interpreted according to different, largely opposed, readings. The first reading, held by many scholars, takes Merleau-Ponty's first work to be an affirmation of a transcendental philosophy in which human consciousness is the synthetic ground of all "forms" of life. I have demonstrated, however, that another reading of this text is possible, which takes form to be a dynamic and emergent reality, rather than a constituted

entity. In this way, I have shown that consciousness is not required as the synthetic lynchpin of form, but rather that consciousness itself is a developing, vital form of behaviour. I have broadened the focus of this critique of constituting consciousness to include a rejection of constituting activity as such, particularly attempts to confer the transcendental activity of consciousness to the vital activities of organisms. Against such an "auto-poietic" concept, and such an interpretation of *The Structure of Behaviour*, I have demonstrated that both consciousness and life are characterized by generative passivity insofar as they are developmental, rather than self-effecting, beings. On my view, Merleau-Ponty's early work already works to counter a logic of constitution by opposing the past as lived and constituted by the organism to the past from which the organism was passively generated (SB 206/222). In this way, this early work serves as a propadeutic for a philosophy of institution, even if the logical terms of institution have not yet been fully worked out in this text.

On this basis, I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's early work is characterized by a developmental, genetic account of meaning which points to the issue of the generative passivity of sense in life. I have made the case that his subsequent *Phenomenology of Perception* takes up precisely this issue of the tension between the genetic passivity of developmental activities and a deeper ground of these activities in a notion of nature which precedes activity, not only chronologically, but also ontologically. Rather than presupposing an idealistic conception of the activity of consciousness, I read this text as a site where the difficult issue of generative passivity is being originally worked out.

By drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's later lecture courses on *Child Psychology and Pedagogy, Nature*, and *Institution and Passivity* I have developed a full account of genetic passivity and shown how this concept was being worked out from Merleau-Ponty's earliest writings. Of course, these earlier writings are not univocal, because they are first attempts to broach this original notion of radical passivity within the inherited terms of a logic of constitution. As a thinking in development, working out new terms to express what was previously unthought, Merleau-Ponty's texts exhibit a kind of sense in movement. I have endeavoured to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty's thinking and writing mark out such a progressively richer development, that of a genuinely dialectical philosophy which moves from phenomena to their deeper underlying structures, developing the conceptual apparatuses to express these discoveries along the way and from within contact with the phenomena themselves.

Concluding Thoughts for Further Investigation

It is my hope, that as well as offering a philosophical argument for the creativity at work in life, and in addition to offering a new reading of Merleau-Ponty's texts, that this text will contribute to ongoing philosophical discussions about nature, ethics, and social philosophy. While I offered a brief consideration of social philosophy in the final section of the thesis, I conclude here with a simple gesture in each of these other directions, toward what potential forms these dialogues might take.

In his *The Implications of Immanence*, Leonard Lawlor argues that our contemporary understanding of naturalism amounts to a leveling down of nature, a reduction of the generative passivity out of which new possibilities arise to a naive sense of nature as constituted, substantial being:

> The will to the preservation and enhancement of life dominates the West because the second world of ideas, the Platonic 'sun,' has set. [... This] is the reduction of everything to a kind of 'actualism,' or, to use a term popular in analytic philosophy today, to a kind of 'naturalism.'[275]

Within this worldview, all of the genuine institutions which emerge in nature and which are different in kind, such as organic, personal, and social life, are reduced to differences in degree, to putatively actual, physical processes in a homogenous, sterile "nature." Merleau-Ponty's thought, while hinging on the abrogation of an absolute division of fact and essence, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, consciousness and life, allows for genuine differences to emerge between these terms within a heterogeneous, expressive nature. In this nature forms arise which are original, but they remain diacritically situated in an evolving milieu of dynamic structures. My work serves to "naturalize" consciousness not by reducing it to given biological functions, but by demonstrating that life is a kind of dynamic, educative elaboration of new possibilities, one of which is consciousness. Indeed, in the first chapter, I showed how consciousness exists as, and carries on, the adaptive and educative development that characterizes life.

[275] Lawlor, *Implications of Immanence*, 143.

The distinctive "forms" of life are not rigid essences; they are dynamically open-ended and *melodic* structures. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy serves as a counter-point to the theoretical assumptions of a reductive naturalism, not by affirming biological essences, but by demonstrating the way in which "forms" or "structures" of behaviour are emergent, dynamic beings characterized not as mere physical events or pure essences, but by a kind of "experimental Platonism." (IP 107/[17](13))[276] Against a bankrupt concept of nature which reduces life to the actual, and to a conscious power (*pouvoir*) to constitute life absolutely, Lawlor argues that Merleau-Ponty attributes a radical *powerlessness* to life.[277] This passivity at the heart of life, however, is equally a strength (*puissance*) which holds open the possibility of new meaning, growth, education, birth and radical creativity in life. Against an objectification of nature, I have demonstrated that Merleau-Ponty's thought demonstrates how life itself is occluded when it is reduced to the actual, when its terrain is settled in advance. Practices informed by this thinking oriented by institution would serve to interrupt the objectifying mechanisms of a reductive naturalism and work to establish spaces open for and discourses responsive to the passive dynamism of life.

Secondly, and to continue our reflections on the nature of personal life, I think that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical account of the openness of life entails an ethical comportment premised upon our ignorance of the future. In my study of the becoming true of meaning in life in chapter two, I explained, following Al-Saji's interpretation of Bergson's influence on Merleau-Ponty's thought, how the

[276] Citing Ruyer, "L'instinct," 838-9.
[277] Lawlor, *Implications of Immanence*, 108, 146.

"retrograde movement of truth" works only retrogressively, and that any attribution of predetermined possibilities to the future is a mode of the retrospective illusion, a projection of what has been onto what is not yet.[278] The future, on this account, is genuinely open and generatively productive of the new. This futurity is that before which thought, like life, is truly passive, and yet that which enables the possibility of these very activities. I continued this point in chapter three by taking up this logic of institution the domain of our second nature as social beings, by arguing that the form of our agency cannot be specified in advance, but must emerge out of specific inter-bodily social practices. Against traditional social theories, we cannot secure an ethical ground in advance in either the individual's freedom, or in social norms or first principles.[279] Merleau-Ponty articulates the way in which we are committed to social practices before they can ever take the form of clear and distinct ideas. Indeed, the workings of our own agency, as habitual, and our society, as anonymously intercorporeal, are never transparent objects spread out before us to contemplate or manipulate. The ethical dilemma, then, is that we are indeclinably committed to action in a social context, but we are never in an absolute position to transparently grasp our action or this reality. Even in retrospect, the exact character of our actions and responsibilities is provisionally manifest. In this sense, we are passive insofar as

[278] See Al-Saji, "When Thinking Hesitates."
[279] I have in mind here both liberal theories which define the individual according to a pre-established notion of free activity (as found in such figures as Hobbes and Locke), but also in accounts which render the individual a passive product of social forces (the premise of some sociological structuralist accounts).

we are *bound to act* while always existing in a condition of being *ethically inadequate to action*.

And yet, this passivity is not a failing. Action is not merely a direct, utilitarian means of accomplishing our intentions, but a transformative process through which the world and the actor are changed. Action takes time for its significance and effect to become manifest, and to be taken up by others. This means that action is inherently uncertain and dangerous, but also that it can create the condition for further action, communication, and meaning; discussing the human condition as described by Montaigne, Merleau-Ponty articulates how:

> Life is a material and corporeal movement, an action that by its own essence is imperfect and disordered. [...] Life should have itself as its aim and design; its proper study is to govern, conduct, and undergo itself. [...] Having experienced that what he loves is at stake, out there, he resolutely confirms the natural movement which was bearing him outward. He joins the human game. Upon contact with this freedom and courage, passions and death are transformed. (S 209-10/264)

While our ignorance of the future might appear as a limitation of our finite, limited perspective, it ultimately serves as the generative foundation of our growth, education and transformation, insofar as we must wait to see what possibilities the future actualizes in order to adequately grasp them. The first ethical virtue of an ethics of passivity is courage, but not courage understood as the bravery to execute already formulated tasks, but rather the courage to face our

situatedness as something dynamic, as something inherently calling upon us to learn and adapt, to change ourselves and effect changes in situations.

In this sense, a philosophy of passivity is only a propadeutic for a dynamic, responsive engagement with life. In *Institution* Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "true self-criticism," a "realized negativity" according to which we go beyond our limitations (*Selbstaufhebung*) by recognizing that we are ever in a position of awaiting a future that will educate and transform us on its own terms. (IP 26/[25](19)) This ethical stance echoes Merleau-Ponty's injunction, in the "Preface" to the Phenomenology of Perception, to practice phenomenology by relearning to see the world. (PP lxxxv/21). The passivity at the core of life becomes realized as a responsivity to the developing character of our existence, taking its mature form in an ethical comportment, courage, which is not a positive code or ideal possessed in advance, but a negative commitment to be changed by what transpires rather than holding statically to what we have been. In the *Laches*, Socrates admits that he cannot offer a positive definition of courage while denying that this is a failing. Just as courage cannot be defined in advance, neither is it an arbitrary concept. Courage is a kind of responsive engagement, which like generative passivity, must become instituted through a situation in order to manifest a significance. Our ongoing initiation into situations changes us, and transfigures who we were prior to these situations--it calls for us to elaborate new conditions for action within our unfolding action itself. So

Socrates can, if not define courage, describe how to comport ourselves toward it, such that: "What I don't advise is that we remain as we are."[280]

[280] Plato, *Laches*, 201B.

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