The Enigma of Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty[1]

David Morris, Department of Philosophy, Concordia University, UUdavimorr@alcor.concordia.ca
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Abstract
This article clarifies Merleau-Ponty's enigmatic, later concept of reversibility by showing how it is connected to the theme of the genesis of sense. The article first traces reversibility through "Eye and Mind" and *The Visible and the Invisible*, in ways that link reversibility to a theme of the earlier philosophy, namely an interrelation in which activity and passivity reverse to one another. This linkage is deepened through a detailed study of a passage on touch in the *Phenomenology*'s chapter on "Sensing," which shows how reversibility is important to the genesis of sense, not from some already given origin, but through a creative operation within being, beyond the perceiver, wherein the field of perception internally diverges into active and passive moments. The article connects this point about the genesis of sense to themes in Merleau-Ponty's lectures on institution and passivity. Altogether the article shows how reversibility is a sign of a divergence and thence of a sort of gap or excess in being that allows for a genesis of sense within being itself.

Key words: Merleau-Ponty; phenomenology; reversibility; genesis of sense; meaning; touch; activity; passivity; institution

Reversibility is a central concept of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, especially "Eye and Mind" and *The Visible and the Invisible*.[2] Yet, as Merleau-Ponty himself admits, this concept is enigmatic.[3] The enigma is only amplified by Merleau-Ponty's near poetic writing; by the fact that reversibility takes Merleau-Ponty into a radically new philosophy, yet his thoughts about it are never fully clarified, because cut short by his early death; and by an unfortunate, consequent temptation to discuss reversibility by way of repeating the examples and language that Merleau-Ponty has left us. This paper contributes to the project of clarifying reversibility[4] by showing how elements of his earlier philosophy speak to reversibility and the problem underlying it. This is the problem—continuous across Merleau-Ponty's philosophy—of the genesis of sense, of how meaning comes into the world, not by being drawn from some already given origin (a ready-made world, whether empirical or transcendental), but through a sort of creative operation within being, an operation of being that generates new sense.[5]

The first section traces and conceptualizes reversibility in terms of the later philosophy, in order to introduce the enigma of reversibility and some key points behind it. The second section seeks to clarify reversibility by showing how it is linked with and can be understood in terms of a theme that runs from the earlier to the later philosophy and back, namely an interrelation in which activity and passivity reverse to one another.[6] The third section deepens this by studying a passage on touch in the *Phenomenology*'s[7] chapter on "Sensing."[8] The passage indicates that what is passively given *a posteriori* is in fact actively operative in creating the *a priori* of perception; in turn, this *a priori* actively shapes the activity through which we are passive to and thence perceive things.

Altogether this gives insights for conceptualizing perception and sense not as products of the perceiver merely but of an operation beyond the perceiver wherein the field of perception internally diverges into active and passive moments. Reversibility is a sign of this divergence and is thus a sign of a sort of gap or excess in being that allows for a genesis of sense, a creative operation, within being itself. This last issue becomes apparent through overlaps between the *Phenomenology*'s passage on touch, discussions of radical reflection in the *Phenomenology*, and the method of interrogation in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

1) The Enigma of Reversibility and the Internal Incongruence of Being

"Eye and Mind" and *The Visible and the Invisible* repeatedly emphasize a fact demonstrated by perception, namely that to see something is to inherently also be a being who can be seen. The seer is inherently seen, in something like the way that a front inherently has a back. The seen is in this sense the reverse, an inherent flip side of the seer. Similarly with the toucher and the touched, and the perceiver and the perceived generally. This relation is what Merleau-Ponty first of all indicates with his concept of reversibility.

In terms of traditional analyses of perception, this initial point might be converted into one about the condition of perception: perception is conditioned by the perceiver's being part of and open to the perceived world. This is already a central theme of the *Phenomenology*, which repeatedly argues that we do not gaze on the world from on high as a transcendental subject or *cogito*, rather we are being in the world (*être au monde*), such that the sense we find in the world is not a product wholly constituted by us but is already oriented to and by the world.

The concept of reversibility, though, goes far beyond mere claims about the perceiving subject and conditions local to it or to its ontology, or even local to the subject's embeddedness in the world. Reversibility takes the perceptual fact just discussed as echoing and licensing a deeper claim about the ontology of being in general, in which (for example) "the world is made of the same stuff as the body" (*OE* 19/163), things and I are made of the same ""element"" (*VI* 184/139) and "[t]hings have an internal equivalent in me" (*OE* 22/164). That is, we might think that the sole emphasis of reversibility is on our being seen as a condition of seeing. And we might think that this condition is wholly fulfilled (as it might seem to be in the *Phenomenology*[9]) by our being in the world as a body that can be seen, specifically a unique kind of lived body that is unlike other things around us. Reversibility, though, goes further than this by insisting that we see things only because they are in fact made of the same stuff as the body and we are made of the same stuff as them. Ontologically, we are not made of a unique subjective or even bodily stuff absolutely different from things around us. More than that, things around us are not made of a special stuff absolutely different from us and devoid of meaning. For things ring perception in us only by already being non-neutral, by having a tendency, orientation, or sense that already has its "internal equivalent" in us. This sense informs our relation to things and it is what becomes express in perception.[10]

While it may be easy to grasp the first point that the flip side of the seer is a thing seen (since the seer obviously is a visible body of some sort), the enigmatic point just broached is that the thing seen has, as its reverse flip side, as its lining ("*doublure*"[11]),

something like a *seer*, something that (latently at least) makes sense of the world. This is explicit in Merleau-Ponty's strange claims, in "Eye and Mind," that things look at us, to which claims we return below. The seer and the seen are thus the ontological reverse of *one another*, they are different shapes or inflections of one and the same being. "Reversibility" designates this phenomenal and ontological complicity of the seer and the seen and the perceiver and perceived in general, and designates this complicity as a function of being (not merely the perceiver): it is being that is reversibly perceiver and perceived. In other words, reversibility famously shifts the emphasis of Merleau-Ponty's life-long study of perception from the sphere of the perceiver, to being as a whole, for it is the perceiver *and* perceived, as the reverse of one another within being, that accomplishes perception.

Hence a double enigma of reversibility: First, how, contra our experience that it is the subject who accomplishes perception (an experience crystallized in Descartes's *cogito*), can we conceptualize perception as an operation of being as a whole, including things outside us? Second, how exactly does this operation work, what is its ontological underpinning?

To begin, we must note something important about the ontological structure of reversibility. The seer and the seen are not the reverse of one another like two opposite sides of a coin. In the coin, each side, heads or tails, is identified by information it carries on its own, on its own side of the coin (even if each side always comes fused with an opposite flip side, even if the information on each side shares a common material substratum). In the coin, then, the operation that would reveal heads and tails as one another's flip side would be a rotation (a coin-flip) in a higher order space external to their identities; or reversing heads into tails would be a matter of striking new information on each side of the coin independently. This would not involve internal operations of the sides, or of their interrelation, it would work on the coin from the outside.

This is not the case, though, with the reversibility of the seer-seen or the toucher-touched. "Eye and Mind" and *The Visible and the Invisible* emphasize how the hand, in the very activity of touching, inherently opens itself to being passively touched by things, such that the touching hand can reverse to a passive thing touched and the thing can reverse to something active. In the famous case where the thing touched by my hand is my other hand, the reversal in question is one in which my touching hand itself reverses to a thing touched. (See, e.g., *OE* 16-21/162-3, *VI* 183-196/139-149) Contra the coin, where the reversal from heads to tails is by way of an external operation, the very being of touch internally opens a sort of internal convulsion that reverses from toucher to touched.

The perceiver and perceived are not like reverse sides of a coin, they are closer in kin to right- and left- hand figures or gloves (but not the sort of glove that can be fit on either hand). Kant calls such figures "incongruent counterparts"[12]; in geometry each such figure is called an enantiomorph. Like enantiomorphs, the perceiver and the perceived are incongruent because the one cannot be collapsed to or take the place of the other. (Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the toucher and touched never fully coincide (*VI* 194-5/147-8), and we will see below that perception and the very concept of passivity entail that activity and passivity never become congruent.) They are counterpart so far as they are always found together and are made of the same stuff. Yet, in the case of gloves, a right-hand glove reverses to its left-hand "incongruent counterpart" when turned inside out. For example, when

everted, the blue, right-hand dish glove, lined inside with white flocking, turns to a left-hand, white-flocked glove, lined with blue rubber.

Reversibility implies a similar latitude or openness of being, wherein being, by an internal convulsive operation (like eversion) reverses from perceiver to perceived. The perceiver and perceived are made of the same stuff, so their divergence (*écart*) into incongruent counterparts is by way of this internal operation of being. That is, the perceiver and perceived are not merely ontologically complicit in one another, they are not two separate folds of being that merely happen to fold into one another (*com-plicare*). The perceiver and the perceived are inflections of one being whose internal fold or hollow[13] gives it the latitude to be in divergent ways. It is absolutely crucial to Merleau-Ponty's ontology that the perceiver and perceived are not two different *appearances* of one being, but two divergent ways in which being *is*.[14] Being itself is reversibly perceiver and perceived—like a glove itself being reversibly right- or left-handed by way of being turned inside-out. The perceiver and the perceived are thus two inflections of being that at once line and follow one another: they are ever so close, yet in that very closeness they are irreducibly divergent in sense—but nonetheless reversible to another. (As in the glove, where the flocking that lines the right-hand glove, when reversed inside-out, has a left-hand sense incongruent with that of the right-hand glove.)

It might seem that a geometrical model of enantiomorphs is too formal to illuminate anything like ontological divergences between things as different as the perceiver and the perceived. But we should note that in chemistry the chirality (handedness) of otherwise identical molecules can make the difference between drug and poison. While the right-hand version of Thalidomide tempers morning sickness, its left-hand version causes mutations; disastrously, the human body can reverse the right-hand cure delivered in the pharmacist's pill into the left-hand poison. (Derrida shows that meaningful difference in fact depends on a supplement that opens a shifting latitude of sense; *pharmakon*, as reversing between cure and poison, exemplifies this latitude.[15]) And in general "biochirality" is key to living phenomena.[16] Chirality matters.

Further, Merleau-Ponty himself links chiral enantiomorphs, reversibility and the internal divergence of being, most prominently in a passage from a working note that begins "Reversibility: the finger of the glove that is turned inside out" (*VI* 317/263).[17] While it focuses on inside-out, not left-right, reversibility, the passage's point seems to be that an external standpoint is not needed to grasp that the glove can reverse from left- to right- handed or inside to out; the glove internally indicates its possible reversal into divergent, incongruent, counterparts. (It does so in the way that a curved Riemannian space internally indicates its curvature. The space's curvature need not be measured in a higher order space, it can be sensed by traversing a triangle within the space and adding up its internal angles.) The inflection point that indicates the divergence between the senses of inside and outside, or left- and right- handedness, is *right there* in the convolutions of the glove (even if the glove cannot be both left- and right- handed at once). There is a doubling of being, which Merleau-Ponty suggests when he writes of the curvature of the glove as a "double "representation"."[18] The implication seems to be that being's divergence is similarly internal to being, in virtue of an internal reversibility that enables being to be in two internally counterpart yet incongruent ways. Being is not a fusion in one point of two

separable, mutually external, opposites: being itself is reversibly one way or another.

To capture the point another way, in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty writes that he is seeking a new and heretofore unnamed element of being, which he calls flesh (*VI* 193/147). In biology and chemistry, chirality is generative of crucial, living differences. With reversibility we can think of Merleau-Ponty as conceiving chiral-like inflections—a kind of internal incongruence of being—as elemental to being. What is elemental to ontological differences is thus not some primal substance or process, nor even a unity or dialectic of opposites, but a kind of chirality or handedness, in virtue of which being internally diverges into different senses—not by way of opposites that can be set over against one another as repelling or collapsing into one another, but by way of an operation that opens or plays in a peculiar gap between reversible terms. This reversible gap and incongruence between terms is central to all that follows.[19]

2) Perception and the Reversibility of Activity and Passivity

We now have a sense of what is at stake in the concept of reversibility, but the enigma remains: How does reversibility work, and how is a reversible being beyond the perceiver operative in perception? This section reveals a nexus between perception, activity and passivity that runs like an underlying seam through Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy and back to the *Phenomenology*, thus showing how the reversible relation between the perceiver and perceived has its ontological underpinning in activity and passivity as ontologically incongruent counterparts that reverse to one another. This prepares for the next section, which returns to the *Phenomenology*'s analysis of touch for further insight into the enigma of reversibility.

To work back to the nexus of activity, passivity and perception from a late formulation, Merleau-Ponty's summary of his 1954-55 lecture course on passivity begins with the following question:

> How are we to conceive that the subject never encounters obstacles? If the subject has posited them itself, then they are not obstacles. And if they truly resist the subject, then we are brought back to the difficulties of a philosophy which incorporates the subject in a cosmic order and treats the functioning of the mind as a particular case of natural finality.
>
> It is this problem that every theory of perception runs up against, consequently the explication of perceptual experience must make us acquainted with a genus of being with regard to which the subject is not sovereign, without yet the subject being inserted in it.[20]

This question and its structure, especially given the reference to the theory of perception, should immediately remind us of central issues that emerge in the *Phenomenology*'s dialectical engagement with intellectualism and empiricism (to which we will return). The question in the passivity lectures is how the subject can always make sense of things, find a *sens*, a meaningful way through the world, such that it need never encounter things as explicit obstacles to sense. Philosophical and scientific analysis may show us how perception grapples with outside things which thus (from the point of view of the analyst) operate as obstacles, but the perceiver never encounters them as such within perception. At most the perceiver encounters difficult or ambiguous perceptual objects that are hard to sort out, but never notices or encounters utter obstacles, or completely senseless things, as such. If we

go the intellectualist route and explain this by saying that the subject is wholly active and constitutes everything, the entire issue of obstacles, encountered or not, is moot, and we cannot even pose the question. On the other hand, an empiricism that renders the subject passive to inputs given wholly in advance of and apart from the subject undoes the sense making activity in virtue of which the subject appears as crucially different from the cosmic order. If we tried to repair this problem by anchoring the activity and difference of the subject in the subject, then we would relapse into intellectualism—or (to strike to a core issue) into an *activism* that posits the subject as wholly active and thus betrays our rootedness in the world. Yet this does not mean that we can lapse into a *passivism* in which the subject is wholly passive and thence inserted into the cosmic order. With this beginning, the passivity lectures emphasize how the *Phenomenology*'s route between intellectualism and empiricism demands an account of a 'passivity without passivism'.

As we shall soon see, the need for a 'passivity without passivism' is already apparent in the *Phenomenology*. Nonetheless, the passivity lectures give new focus, depth and centrality to an account of passivity and activity that would go between passivism and activism without lapsing into either. This is apparent throughout the passivity lectures but especially, for example, in passages where Merleau-Ponty criticizes Sartrean "activism" (*IP* 199) or "actualism" and writes of the "binary dialectic" (which splits terms into wholly polarized opposites) as "madness: madness of activism, madness of passivism" (*IP* 160), or writes that we need "a) a passivity, b) without passivism" (*IP* 157), that is, a passivity that would neither be utterly devoid of nor disconnected from activity.

The account of passivity and a way between activism and passivism is a strong underlying theme of the institution lectures as well. (Merleau-Ponty taught these two courses in parallel, with the institution lectures given on Thursday and the passivity lectures given on Monday.) In the very first page of the passivity lectures, Merleau-Ponty writes "No introduction: cf. other course" (*IP* 157). It is as if the problem of passivity is already implicit in the very concept of institution. And it is. 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* 124). Examples include the maturation of the body, which, in resuming 'pre-maturational' instincts or habits, generates new senses of the body as, for example, sexually active in a new way after puberty.

An example that powerfully exposes the theme of passivity in the institution lectures is birth. Merleau-Ponty writes that birth "is an act, and, like all acts arises from nothing"; that is, like all acts, birth does not constitute its own conditions of activity—activity is not devoid of passivity. He then writes that "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." (*IP* 37)[21] As in the initial passage from the passivity lectures, birth leads Merleau-Ponty to seek a new "genus of being," beyond activism and passivism. But in the institution lectures we can understand his point about birth not merely in terms of being, but in light of an earlier remark about time, namely that "Time is the very model of institution: passivity-activity….[time] is total because it is partial,

it is a field." (*IP* 36) That is, birth is a process in which the act of birth and the one 'doing' this act always 'arrive' later in that very process. Birth as process is passive to a temporality not constituted in that act: birth is passive to a not-yet-already accomplished 'pre-birth' that must precede birth's accomplishment; and it is also passive to the yet-to-be accomplished birth. And yet, birth, even in this passivity, is an act. Indeed its very character as act depends on its interrelation with a prior and posterior passivity—birth builds on a pre-birth and towards birth as accomplishment, even though those terms are not yet fully given. The act of birth is thus *not* devoid of passivity.

Time is the very model of this interrelation of activity and passivity: of activity as not being devoid of passivity; of passivity not being devoid of activity; of passivity and activity as incongruent counterparts. This is because time happens, it acts, yet not as something already given. (Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, is always criticizing the concept of time as an already given dimension.) We must wait for time to 'happen'. Time is what it is only by being partially what it is. The very act of time is to not yet be given, to not be a fixed dimension, to not yet be ready to act: time is always waiting to be born, we could say. And this 'birth-character' of time precisely depends on an incongruence between past and present, present and future, in which these incongruent moments are counterpart and reverse to one another in highly complex ways.

With the above sketch of the 'operation' of passivity and its centrality to phenomena such as institution, perception, or birth, we can now tease out certain ontological characteristics of passivity, to expose its interrelation with activity as exemplary of—and in fact underpinning—reversibility. First let us note that if passivity is in fact crucial to the 'operation' of institution, perception, or birth, then passivity must be taken seriously in its own terms. If we are to escape activism (and passivism), we cannot conceptualize passivity as a mere absence or deficit of activity. Passivity entails its own genus of being, in which we are non-sovereign, non-activist, yet not reduced to inertness. For Merleau-Ponty sleep is a key example of the irreducibility of passivity to an absence of activity, a point that goes back to a passage in the *Phenomenology*:

> [S]leep comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. *I* am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath. (*PhP* 245/211, also see 191/163)

We are active and voluntary in trying to go to sleep, but only to the extent of adopting a certain pose and acting to cease certain activities. This active cessation and adopting of a pose do not yet actively accomplish sleep. Rather they invite our being taken over by something, by a movement that is not yet our activity and that we cannot bring off ourselves. If we could actively and fully make ourselves go to sleep, then it would not be sleep. So the passivity of sleep is not merely what is left when we remove a certain activity, it is something else. And there is a peculiar gap, then, between waking and sleeping: they are part of one life or way of being, such that the one reverses to the other as its inherent counterpart—yet these counterparts remain incongruent. The transition between sleep and waking, waking and sleep, is abrupt and discontinuous, as between the left-hand glove and its eversion into a right-hand glove, or between past and present.

Notice the ontological structure of the relationship between activity and passivity. Activity is not devoid of passivity, in the sense that an act such as birth or waking draws on and resumes a passivity that that act could not itself generate. Similarly, passivity is not devoid of activity, since falling asleep or dying draw on activities (waking and birthing) that are not generated in these forms of passivity themselves. Passivity and activity are internally related, they are counterparts. This crucially challenges the traditional dualism of activity and passivity, the view that activity and passivity are disjoint, yet in such a way that we could make one or the other term primary, as in intellectualism's reduction of all perception to a constituting activity, or empiricism's reduction of everything to a receptive passivity. Yet, in showing us that activity and passivity are inseparable, that you cannot give either an activist or passivist account of perception, Merleau-Ponty is also precisely showing us that activity and passivity are not inseparable in the way of different points along one continuous scale. Passivity is not merely a void or absence of activity; activity is not merely a void or absence of passivity. You do not fall asleep by easing your wakefulness down to the zero point of a scale—a leap to something different is involved. You do not wake up by ratcheting your sleepiness down to zero—here too there is a leap to the different. But this differential leap is not between domains that have nothing to do with one another, it is between counterparts that remain incongruent.

Let us now see how this ontological incongruence, this gap, is at play in perception. Crucially, in the above passage in the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty deploys the gap between waking and sleeping precisely to illustrate the relation between the senser and the sensed. He thus anticipates the point in the passivity lectures that perception entails passivity, that is, an exposure to an operation beyond us that visits something in us in the way that sleep visits us in the night. (The language of respiration in this passage also echoes a passage in *OE*, cited below, that conceptualizes the reversibility of seer and seen, activity and passivity, in terms of a "respiration in Being" that inspires something in us.[22])

This link between passivity-activity and perception—and thence reversibility—becomes apparent in "Eye and Mind," once we notice that passivity is a central theme in it too. "Eye and Mind" begins with the remark that "Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. It makes its own limited models of things…it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. Science is and always has been […] admirably active…." (*OE* 9/159) That is, scientific activism eschews any kind of passivity (methodological or experiential) to the world and to this extent it ends up betraying the phenomena, talking about the scientist's activist construction of things, rather than things themselves. The scientist claims to already know how to know or think; the scientist, we could say, does not have to endure being born into the world, but already constitutes herself as the agent of the scientific task. (In "Eye and Mind" the scientist is never far from the Cartesian *cogito*.[23]) In contrast, the painter must wait to be born as the one who can see the specific things (this mountain, this snow) she wants to paint. To do this, the painter must ""take his body with him"" (*OE* 16/162, citing Valery), be passive as a body in its engagement with things, yet be active with his body. Simply put, the painter *learns* how to be a seer, by installing herself as the reverse of, and as guided by, the seen and its *sens*: the painter "draws upon" a "fabric of wild meaning [*sens brut*]"—a sense outside

us—of which scientific activism would "want to know nothing." (*OE* 13/161)

Hence Merleau-Ponty's enigmatic point that for the painter, it "is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen." The painter learns from the mountain how to paint it, by "interrogat[ing]" the mountain "with his gaze" so as to "unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which it makes itself [*se fait*] a mountain before our eyes." (*OE* 28-9/166) This enigma is emphasized in Merleau-Ponty's claim that "Inevitably the roles between [the painter] and the visible are reversed. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them." (*OE* 31/167) It echoes in his observation that painters are fascinated with painting mirrors—things that seemingly see and make proto-paintings of other things—and with representing "themselves in the act of painting," thus "adding to what *they* saw … what *things* saw of them." (*OE* 168-9) And it is distilled in his claim that painting shows "[t]here really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that one no longer knows who sees and who is seen, who paints and who is painted." (*OE* 31-32/167)[24] This linkage between the enigma of things looking at us, and the connection between activity and passivity, is amplified by a working note where Merleau-Ponty writes: "Circularity [of] speaking-listening, seeing-being seen, perceiving-being perceived (it is because of it that it seems to us that perception forms itself *in the things themselves*)—— *Activity=passivity*." (*VI* 318/265, Merleau-Ponty's emphases)[25] And the linkage to activity-passivity is also at play in Merleau-Ponty's invocation of the seeker's paradox from Plato's *Meno* (80d), when he writes that in interrogating the mountain the painter is not posing a "question asked of someone who doesn't know by someone who does—the schoolmaster's question" (*OE* 30/167). Yet we can note here that Merleau-Ponty's enigmatic point in *Eye and Mind*, that the painter's vision is enthralled by things looking at her[26], is no less enigmatic than his point in the *Phenomenology* that the sleeper is inspired by the "great lung" of the world taking over breath—or the field of touch being structured, as we will see below, by things acting upon us.

The underlying issue here, of undoing the seeker's paradox, and of perceptual activity as reversible with active things to which we are passive, is *learning*. To better grasp this point, let us note how it resumes a central theme of the *Phenomenology*. The *Phenomenology* shows us that if a perceiver learns to see something in a new way (as is the case with children learning to make new color discriminations, see *PhP* 39/30) then the perceiver must both actively add something new over and above given contents (so as to change the sense of perception over time) yet must be passive to things and the time it takes to learn to see them (otherwise we would not have to learn how to see, or learning to see would not be contingent on external factors). As Merleau-Ponty puts it, echoing the seeker's paradox, "Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching." (36/28)[27] Perception cannot wholly constitute itself as an act, it must be open and passive to what is being seen, for example, to colors that we have not yet learned to discriminate, which are active in prompting our act of overturning givens, a "*bouleversant les donées*" (*PhP* 39/30). This complicity between the one who perceives and what is perceived, and between activity and passivity, deepens in Merleau-Ponty's remark in the *Phenomenology* that "in the exchange between the subject of sensation

and the sensible one cannot say that the one acts [*agisse*] while the other suffers the action [*pâtisse*], or that one gives sense [*donne sens*] to the other" (*PhP* 248/21). This is strikingly echoed in the passage from "Eye and Mind" above that in painting "one no longer knows who sees and who is seen, who paints and who is painted." (*OE* 31-32/167) We could also think here of Merleau-Ponty's point in the *Phenomenology* that one must "'look' in order to 'see'" (232/268): active looking is inseparably counterpart yet incongruent with passive seeing—and vice versa. And this point clearly echoes in Merleau-Ponty's account of touch and of one hand touching the other: on the one hand, touching involves an active probing of things; on the other, it involves things pushing back against this active probing, being passive to things (as we will see in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of touch, discussed below).

Seeing and looking, touching and being touched are always counterpart yet always incongruent. If we reduced passivity to activity, we would lose the openness to things that guides perception and enables things to prompt us to learn how to see them—the error of activism and intellectualism. If we reduced activity to passivity, we would lose the changing dynamic of perception which enables us to overturn the givens and grasp them a new way—the error of passivism and empiricism.

What is conceptually required, then, is a peculiar relation between activity and passivity. This kind of relation is precisely what is at stake in the concept of reversibility, and we can now grasp how the reversibility of the perceiver and the perceived has its ontological underpinning in the reversibility of activity and passivity. As already emphasized, the reversibility of activity and passivity has a precise and peculiar structure: activity and passivity are inseparably counterpart (since neither is devoid of the other), yet incongruent (since they are nonetheless irreducible to one another). That is, to say that activity turns to or reverses to passivity (as I do above and below) is not to say that activity *turns into* passivity, as if all activity could go away and, when it does, activity turns into something else. In the passivity lectures, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes an important aspect of this in discussing sleep: if all wakefulness went away in sleep, then we could never be called upon by sounds around us to wake up; conversely, if sleep did not remain as its own issue alongside wakefulness, then sleep would just be the absence of wakefulness, and we would be able to actively put ourselves to sleep by eliminating wakefulness. A glove is a membrane that is at once a convergence and divergence of the glove's inside and outside, and enables their lining one another as reversible. Similarly, sleep and wakefulness forever line and diverge from one another, they are 'separated' by a reversible 'membrane'. We can now grasp this 'reversible membrane' between activity and passivity as at work in perception, specifically touch. Active touching, *by its very own activity*, is rerouted to, reverses to, passive tactile feeling—but the activity that accomplishes this rerouting must precisely remain as 'lining' the passivity. At each moment of touching one can feel, for example, oneself gently pressing down on one's desk and reversely one's desk gently pressing back, or vice versa. But active pressing cannot reduce to passive touch, it must remain a distinct moment, for activity functions as the determinate ground against which a figure can show up as a determinate passivity; conversely, passivity to the touched is a distinctive moment that remains in and determines one's active way of pressing. Perception depends on activity and passivity remaining incongruent yet

counterpart and reversible, as the right-hand glove remains a reversible lining invisible yet operative in the visible left-hand glove.

The point that active sense making is reversibly lined with a passivity that opens active perception to the world, the body, emotion, movement, and so on, percolates in various ways throughout the *Phenomenology* and perhaps culminates in a passage in the "Temporality" chapter, in a section subtitled "Passivity and Activity" in the table of contents. Here the point is translated into one about perception's openness to time:

> A passive synthesis is a contradiction in terms if the synthesis is a process of composition, and if the passivity consists in being the recipient of multiplicity instead of its composer. What we meant by passive synthesis was that we make our way into multiplicity, but that we do not synthesize it….What is called passivity is not the acceptance by us of an alien reality, or a causal action exerted upon us from outside: it is being encompassed, being in a situation—prior to which we do not exist—which we are perpetually resuming and which is constitutive of us. (488/427)

Once again the point is that passivity is something different than an absence of activity, and the underlying issue and language are strikingly reminiscent of the passage from the summary of the passivity lecture. What is required for perception is a passive synthesis. For it to genuinely be passive and yet be a synthesis, we cannot posit obstacles that are subsequently run together in the synthesis (for if we *posited* the obstacles, there would be no need for a subsequent synthesis, or learning how to synthesize; and if obstacles were completely *alien*, then there would be no possibility of synthesis). Nor can we actively/constitutively compose the way ingredients of a synthesis are run together (for then there would be no passivity). We must "make our way into multiplicity" and find a way through it, yet not by anything wholly active on our part. Passive synthesis is not a matter of submitting to an alien reality in which we would be "inserted" (devoid of activity) but neither is it a matter of being a wholly active sovereign. It is more like falling asleep, like falling into a way through multiplicity.

Here, as in the institution lectures, the fact that passivity accomplishes something or that accomplishment can be grasped in terms of passivity is understood in terms of time. Passive synthesis does not actively constitute sense, rather it resumes a sense that was already constitutive, yet was not yet explicitly so until it is resumed and repeated (as in the discussion of maturation, puberty and birth in the institution lectures). Resumption, as it were, is a name for the operation that leaps across the incongruence of waking and sleep, activity and passivity, and vice versa—and this word bubbles up everywhere in the institution lectures and is already an important word in the *Phenomenology*. Indeed, sometimes reading the institution and passivity lectures seems like nothing more than reading an extended commentary on the problems raised in the temporality chapter of the *Phenomenology*. For example, the linkage between temporality and passivity percolates forward to the summary of the passivity course, where Merleau-Ponty writes that "to be conscious is to realize a certain divergence [*écart*], 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."[28] Present perceptual activity only operates by being incongruently lined with a weight of the past to which we are passive, yet which is transformed in learning and habit acquisition. Here we broach a relation

between the *a posteriori* and an *a priori* that is not eternally given, but is a weight, a momentum, secreted as the past of a present. With this point we can return to the *Phenomenology*'s "Sensing" chapter to delve deeper into this reversible relation of activity and passivity at the heart of perception.

3) Reversibility, and the A Priori as Anexinterior to Touch

The *Phenomenology*'s chapter on "Sensing" poses a problem to the reader. It looks like it begins by repeating the *Phenomenology*'s earlier critique (in the introduction's first three chapters) of the doctrines of sensation and constituting consciousness, and continues by repeating earlier discussions of the bodily character of perception (especially those in the motility chapter) and of radical reflection (in the fourth introductory chapter, on the phenomenal field). It is not clear what these repetitions do or add to the book.

A close reading of the chapter in its context both dismantles this problem and prepares us to grasp the chapter's affiliation with and significance for the later concept of reversibility. The "Sensing" chapter is in the *Phenomenology*'s second part, which turns from "The Body" (the first part's topic) to "The World as Perceived." This turn is motivated by a study, in the second part's brief introductory section, of the inherency of the body in the world. This introductory section culminates in an analysis of touch, specifically the illusion of feeling a single marble as doubled when touching it with crossed fingers. Some claim this is because crossing displaces the outer sides of the index and middle fingers, twisting these sides so as to face one another and thereby pince the marble in between. The crossed fingers sense ∩•∩, but if the fingers were in their usual, uncrossed, positions, these sensations would be caused by •∩∩•, by two different marbles pressing on the outsides of fingers—which is why we feel a doubled marble. Briefly, this conceives touch as an inference from and concerning a domain of sensation that is external to our inferential activity and to which we are essentially passive. Against this passivism, Merleau-Ponty musters experimental evidence to support the claim that we feel a double marble because touch inherently requires *active* exploration (for example, rolling the marble between fingers) and that our habitual exploratory activity is disrupted by crossing the fingers. (Indeed, when you habituate to actively probing a marble with crossed fingers, you feel it as single.)

Merleau-Ponty's point is that perception is not a passivist intake of outside sensation, but an active inherence of the body in the world. The latter point resounds in the introductory section's title, "The Theory of the Body is Already A Theory of Perception," a formula rehearsed near verbatim in a sentence about the "theory of the body schema" being "implicitly" a "theory of perception" (*PhP* 239/206). But this formula, and others in the section, can misleadingly invite an all too activist reading, as if the theory of the body is already a theory of perception and the world because the body actively communicates its schema to the perceived world in a one way fashion (in the way that Kantian transcendental subjectivity would communicate its cognitive structure to the cognized world).

This activist reading forgets that the body's inherency in the world is a two-sided, two-way opening. Our active exploration of the marble is inherently also passive to the marble as guiding our activity. Thus when Merleau-Ponty writes that "it is literally the same thing to perceive one single marble and to use two fingers as one single organ" (*PhP* 237/205-6) this does not

just mean that unifying two fingers as a single, active organ communicates—one-way—a unity to the marble, it also means that our passive openness to unified things is crucial to the coherence of our activity and body; dislocations and ruptures in the world dislocate and rupture us. And if, as Merleau-Ponty writes at the very beginning of the section, the "body is in the world as the heart is in the organism" (*PhP* 235/203) this does not simply mean that the body inheres in the world as its active animating heartbeat, but that bodily beats are passively rhythmed and sustained by the world in which it inheres. Finally, if bodily activity one-sidedly informed the world without the world informing the body, then there would really be no need or even room for part two's phenomenology of the world, for this would already be implicit in part one on the body. (Also, much of what Merleau-Ponty says about bodily movement, habits, and learning in part one would not make sense, since these depend on the lived body being disrupted yet guided by a world that surpasses the senses the body is prepared to communicate to it.)

In other words, part two turns from the body to the world because the body inheres in the world. But this does not simply mean that the body is stuck, inherent, in some outside, alien domain, it means that the worldly domain inheres, participates, in the body and perception. Here we are in the domain of reversibility.

The "Sensing" chapter's study of perception, then, is precisely not a repetition because its focus is the *reverse side* of the perceptual phenomena studied in the earlier chapters. It does not repeat the point that perception is bodily, but twists it around, showing that precisely as a bodily activity, perception is shaped by its inherency in and *passivity* to the world that sustains it. This twist from the active to the passive side of the body is apparent right from the chapter's start, which resumes the *Phenomenology*'s ongoing dialectical critique of empiricism and intellectualism. But the critical emphasis is not these doctrine's mistaken descriptions of the 'inside' of perception (what perceptual experience is like), it is rather their mistaken *ontological positioning* of the perceiver. Empiricism wrongly puts a distance between the subject and sensations and the sensed world, as if sensation is an alien something external to us; and rather than challenging this externalism, intellectualism resolves it by doubling it, by grasping this distance from the position of a transcendental *cogito* outside the world. Against this, Merleau-Ponty's methodological proposal is to "return to sensation" itself so as "to learn from it" "*le rapport vivant de celui qui perçoit avec son corps et avec son monde*." (*PhP* 241/208) The ontological position at issue here echoes in the subtitle of the chapter's initial section, which asks a question about the ontology of the subject, namely, "Who is the Subject of Perception?" [29] Merleau-Ponty's response is that the living who who perceives does not operate at a distance from the world, and is not merely bodily, but is a who who perceives *with* its world, *avec son monde*.

This response begins in the chapter's next section. The section emphasizes how colored light modulates bodily motility, how the world sustains and conditions the comportmental schema through which we perceive colors, how a sensed quality is not purely internal to us, but is everted beyond us by inherently being "inserted into a certain form of behaviour" (*PhP* 242/208-9) that takes place in the world. This point is amplified in the chapter's later argument (*PhP* 260-3/225-8) that perceiving shadowed paper as white depends on perceptual levels shaped in us by the lit environments in which we move (see Kelly 2005), and it echoes in Merleau-Ponty's later appropriation, in "Eye and Mind," of

Cézanne's remark that "color is the "place where our brain and the universe meet"" (*OE* /180).

This perceptual point leads to a series of claims about the ontological position of the subject and sensation. Merleau-Ponty writes that "[t]he subject of sensation is neither a thinker who takes note of a quality, nor an inert setting that is affected or changed by it, it is a power *qui co-naît à* a certain existential environment." (*PhP* 245/211) The point of his word play (which draws on Claudel[30]), is that to ken (know, *connaître*) the world is to be kin, co-born (*co-naître*), with the world. (He explains this relation via the passage about sleep discussed above.) This co-birth echoes in his definition of "sensation as co-existence or communion" (*PhP* 247/213) and his later insistence that consciousness cannot constitute the world from a distance, that the veridicality of things depends on our being snared, "*engluerait*," in the world (*PhP* 275/238). This "*engluerait*" is likely an echo of Hyppolite's translation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*'s famous introductory remark that, like a free flying bird, an absolute above the world would mock any effort to ensnare it with a twig coated with bird lime (*glu*); in contrast, the absolute is already within the world, yet not in such a way that it can be "caught in immanence" (see Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Klee's epitaph at *OE* 87/188).

These claims are behind Merleau-Ponty's remark (discussed in sections above) about the impossibility of saying "of the subject of sensation and the sensible" that "the one acts while the other suffers," which leads to the claim that the "sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place" and that to see blue is not to possess it in thought but to plunge into its mystery such that "it 'thinks itself within me'" (*PhP* 248/214)—all of which thematize the reversibility of activity-passivity and anticipate the enigma of things looking at me. These claims condense in the crucial conceptual point that "any sensation belongs to a certain *field*," such that "[v]ision is a *thought subordinated to a certain field*" and that in belonging to a field, sensation has a sense that is not given by me alone: "I am able, by *connaturalité* [i.e., as *co-naître* with the world] to find a sense in certain aspects of being without myself having given it through any constituting operation." (*PhP* 250-1/216-7)

All of this leads Merleau-Ponty to a crucial methodological problem: If sensation is not distant from us, but internal to us, and if sensation belongs to a certain field outside us, if the sense of sensation comes to us partly from the 'outside'—then how can *we* reflect on sensation? How are *we* the active agents of phenomenology? Do not perception and thence reflection depend on something older than and outside, yet interior to, our being? Indeed they do. I coin the term "anexinterior" to designate this something, which is anterior and exterior to us, yet not really exterior to us (so it is 'an-exterior,' not exterior), because it is inherent and interior to our being, such that things are an "annex" of the body (compare *OE* 19/163). In the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty seems to makes sense of this anexinterior temporally: he urges that perception is not in the first instance an accomplishment of my person, of a personal "I" that Descartes could call a thinking thing, but of a person in general, of a pre-personal stratum of my being, such that "to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive." (*PhP* 249/215; note the echo of *OE*) Rather than being an operation of a being beyond me, perception would thus be an operation of an anexinterior that is somehow within me (in virtue of an

'older' me within me) in which case we would still be operating within something like a philosophy of subjectivity.[31] But on the other hand, with respect to this temporality, the chapter concludes that "reflection does not grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experience which it presupposes," that "constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present" (*PhP* 280/242), which would seem to put this temporal anexinterior into a domain of being that cannot be recuperated within reflection. There are various levels of 'flywheel' pasts whose weight is resumed within the present—and ultimately the present can never make those pasts be fully present.

In any case, the issues here overlap with the thrust of the *Phenomenology*'s earlier chapter on "The Phenomenal Field" and its key philosophical and methodological insight that if perception involves a phenomenal field beyond the perceiver, then reflection on the phenomena can neither be an activist "return to a universal reason" that transcends the world nor a passivist something "anticipated in unreflective experience" but "a creative operation that itself participates in the facticity of that experience." (*PhP* 74/61)[32] That is, finding sense in the world and reflecting on that sense are not operations of consciousness purely, merely or only, but creative operations involving an anexinterior field. This field includes our being as "a hollow, a fold" in being. (*PhP* 249/215; crucially, the perceiver is not a 'hole in being' who punctures being from a transcending outside, a view Merleau-Ponty here elides with Hegelian negation, but would be better attributed to Sartrean activism.) And the methodological issue here also overlaps with the one driving *The Visible and the Invisible*'s crucial chapter on "Intertwining—The Chiasm," which begins by observing that "as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection…it prejudges what it will find," so "it must once again recommence everything" by "installing itself in a locus" where reflection and intuition "have not yet been distinguished." (*VI* 172/130)[33] That is, methodologically philosophy must return to a field of being wherein active reflection is not distinct from passive intuition, but is rather its reverse; and philosophy must not presuppose the divergence of reflection and intuition but trace it back to a creative operation *within* that field.[34]

All of this is to say that the "Sensing" chapter here converges with and anticipates the enigma of reversibility. (Recall here the point from the institution lectures that "Time is the very model of institution: passivity-activity….[time] is total because it is partial, it is a field" (*IP* 36): fields are defined by a partial totality that hinges on passivity-activity, that has to do with temporal generativity.) Admittedly, in the *Phenomenology* the ontological dimensions and issues at stake are not as sharply, rigorously, and consistently thematized as they are in the later philosophy (e.g., Merleau-Ponty keeps speaking of consciousness despite what he is getting at). But the underlying problem is the same: How does sense come into being, not from a consciousness outside being, not from a domain of sensation already given outside us, but by an internal operation of being itself, an operation that not only presently involves the ontological complicity of the perceiver and the perceived, but generates their divergence in the first place? Given the shared problem, Merleau-Ponty's way of responding to it in the *Phenomenology* can shed light on the conceptual issues in the later work.

So, turning back to the *Phenomenology*, let us note that methodologically (in an echo of the

"Intertwining—The Chiasm" chapter) we are at a point where we "must rediscover, as anterior to the ideas of subject and object…that primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being." (*PhP* 254/219) Here Merleau-Ponty turns to space as a test case: if we are not Gods with intellectual intuitions, if our sense of space arises in a complicity of things and ideas anterior to the subject vs. object, or active concept vs. passive intuition, distinction, then we will not "need to follow Kant in his deduction of one single space." The "idea of a single space" must be "bracketed" to instead "produce its genealogy from the starting point of our actual experience," a genealogy that describes a genesis of sense within the anexinterior, such that each sense, as generating its own spatial organization, at first has its own space (rather than a space derivative of a single space given *a priori*).[35] It is not surprising that Merleau-Ponty says here that the "new [phenomenological] conception of reflection" behind this genealogical strategy amounts to "giving a new definition of the *a priori*." (*PhP* 254-5/220)

At this point Merleau-Ponty turns to touch, to show that its spatial *a priori* is not given in advance of touch, but arises precisely through the reversibility of movement in the anexinterior. He writes that once we recognize that "experience" is inherently open to our defacto world, then, remarkably, there is no longer a way of distinguishing the *a priori* from the *a posteriori*,[36] since the *a priori* of experience is precisely shaped by openness to facts. So the "unity of the senses" is no longer an "*a priori* truth" but the "formal expression of the fundamental contingency" that we are open to the world. If, then, we say that "[e]very sensation is spatial," this is not because "an object cannot be thought otherwise than in space" (the Kantian point), but because sensation, "as the primordial contact with being, as the resumption [*reprise*[37]]… of a form of existence" is "itself constitutive of a setting for co-existence, of a space." (*PhP* 255-6/221) This claim is fleshed out as follows:

> It would be contradictory to assert that the sense of touch is devoid of spatiality, and it is *a priori* impossible to touch without touching in space, since our experience is the experience of a world. But this insertion of the tactile perspective into a universal being [i.e., a space] does not represent any necessity external to touch [i.e., a necessity imposed by constituting consciousness or transcendental argument], it comes about spontaneously in the experience of touching itself, in accordance with its own distinctive mode. (*PhP* 256/221)

It is a spontaneous activity internal to touch that inserts each tactile perspective into its own space. But this spontaneous activity accords with the distinctive mode of touch, which means that it is passive to the structure of tactility, including passivity to what is touched. The *a priori* of touch is informed by the very *a posteriori* that is anexinterior to it. Spatial sense is generated in the circuit between hand and thing, in an active-passive reversal between the two.

How does this come about? Here we must venture on our own, because Merleau-Ponty does not go all the way. Let us return to the reversibility of activity-passivity: the activity of the hand plays out in a field in which this activity is also reversibly passive; it is in virtue of this reversibility that the hand's active exploration reverses back to pacify the hand through active things, so as to form an *a priori*. This *a priori* just "make[s] explicit" a fact "that is isolated and implicit" in the *a posteriori*, namely, the fact that things are brutely spread out. (*PhP* 256/221) How does this work? How does the reversal between the passive brute fact

and the active hand generate a sense of space?

Here we might avail ourselves of a different phenomenon that, as it were, gives us a magnified view of what is going on in such a process of sense making, namely, a hive of honey bees foraging for food or searching for and choosing a new nest. Biologists argue that such a hive must be conceptualized as a coherent unit, as a "superorganism" that decides on new nest sites or successfully harvests food only by operating on a collective level that entails as much unity between bees as that between cells of the body. Indeed, biologists conceptualize the hive as a single reproducing body, with the queen as the body's germ line, and the workers as its somatic line.[38] Now, the hive's collective movement can generate new senses ("this is a good nest site," "this is the best food site now available"), albeit this generation depends on evolved sense making abilities already inborn in individual honey bees. So we can think of the hive as kin to a gigantic hand spreading over and feeling the landscape to make sense of it—as the scientists write, the hive "functions as a large, diffuse, amoeboid entity which can extend itself over great distances and in multiple directions simultaneously to tap a vast array of food."[39] It does so in such a way as to be able to spatially locate what it feels—communication of the spatial locations of food and nest sites is central to the hive working as one unified organism. The hive thus implicitly explicates a spatial *a priori*. (Implicitly, because we do not have evidence that it explicitly thinks about or knows this *a priori*, the hive just operates as generating a framework in which to locate and communicate locations.)

Without going into detail, the results of biologists tell us that the hive's ability to 'feel' its way across the landscape and communicate the spatial locations of what it feels depends on many honey bees moving back and forth from hive to world and engaging in dance displays that are followed by fellow bees. In other words, what generates sense is a complex choreography. And all the way up and down, this sense generating choreography depends on movements reversing from active to passive: the outbound movements of bees actively seeking particular targets reversing to hive-bound movements passive to the location of targets; the active dancing of the incoming scout reversing to the passive following along of others; etc. It also depends on the spread of place, or *chōra*, that enables bee movements to meander and diverge from active to passive in this way. This view of sense being generated by movements spreading through place and reversely feeding back onto one another to form coherences and structures resonates with some of Merleau-Ponty's later thoughts in the institution and nature lectures and elsewhere about the genesis of structure in embryology and the genesis of determinate matter in nature.[40] Movement through place is an event. In the case of the hive finding a nest, a course of events that are mere successors to one another, each immediately leading to the next (the meandering searching movements of individual bees), itself opens the way for a transitional event (bee movements linking up as movement to a new hive) within this very course of events, such that successor events are oriented, sensed, by that event which now mediates the subsequent series. This process gives a pre-personal echo of Merleau-Ponty's formula for institutions as "those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experience will acquire sense" (*IP* 124). And the link between this and an internal generative gap in being strongly resonates with a recently published working note from the time of the *Visible*

and the Invisible, which speaks of our "primordial contact with being" as not being a ""shock" without meaning." Being has meaning latent within itself not by way of a possible that, on the classical model, is beyond being, waiting to be actualized, but a possible that can be modeled on the sort of "implicit totality" (see above on the field) that "prepares the salamander to swim even before the organs of swimming are in place," that is, a possible involving a sort of generative latitude of movement inherent in being. In virtue of this, "[t]he universe of meanings is a repetition [*reprise*] of the universe of structures."[41] The last point must be compared with the above point from the *Phenomenology* that sensation "as the primordial contact with being, as the resumption [*reprise*]… of a form of existence" is "itself constitutive of a setting for co-existence, of a space." (*PhP* 255-6/221) That is, the reprise of structures that give latitude for movement can generate sense, which is what is at stake in institution.

So we could say here that the problems pursued in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* precisely lead us to the sort of elemental principle of ontological divergence that is at stake in his later concept of reversibility. The unity of the hand or the unity of the hive, and the unity of spatial sense generated in the course of such a unification, which institutes a sense, depend on an elemental divergence between activity and passivity, a way that being has of moving such that it inflects itself as internally incongruent. This inflection is the first opening for sense, for differences that make a difference—for *différance*, as Derrida might put it. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, such an opening or hollow is crucial to the being of the sort of field in which a creative operation can occur, if "field," as Merleau-Ponty suggests in the institution lectures, designates a kind of being—like that of time—"that is total because it is partial." This partiality that inheres in the totality opens the way for movements that diverge and thence enchain themselves in evolving ways as movements of living beings, which, as coherent beings, as beings that link spread out movements and divergences, constrain and organize being from within, as the spread out hand constrains and organizes both it

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[2] References to "Eye and Mind" are given in the form *OE* [pg# in Merleau-Ponty (1964)]/[pg# in Merleau-Ponty (1964)]. References to *The Visible and the Invisible* are given in the form *VI* [pg# in Merleau-Ponty (1964)]/[pg# in Merleau-Ponty (1968)].

[3] In a discussion of reversibility in relation to the body (*OE* 18/162), he refers to it as an "enigma of the body".

[4] For other contributions, some overlapping with various issues broached in this paper without yet making its point, see, e.g., Vasseleu (1998, pp. 65-67); Cataldi (1993, pp. 105-6); Grosz (1999, pp. 158-9); Zahavi (2002); Dillon (1988), ch. 9; Kleinberg-Levin (1999, p. 207) and Irigaray (1993, pp. 160-1), who links reversibility to activity-passivity (Irigaray, though, does so in the name of undoing this difference for a "middle-passive"); Hass (1999), which draws an important link with the figure-ground relation; and Hass (2008), which links reversibility to activity-passivity in passing, and gives an extensive discussion of reversibility that links it to expression and *différance* in ways supportive of this paper's

linkage between the themes of reversibility and sense—although Hass ends up rooting reversibility in our cognitive, epistemological operations, rather than heading in the ontological direction taken here.

[5] Merleau-Ponty (2002) gives an extensive study of this problem in Husserl, and Lawlor (2002) gives an excellent introduction to and context for this issue, which is also central to Merleau-Ponty (2003), and at play in Merleau-Ponty (1995), see Vallier (2005).

[6] Links between the earlier and later philosophy are here deployed not so much to argue for a simple continuity between them, but to open details behind Merleau-Ponty's later, enigmatic philosophy.

[7] References to the *Phenomenology* are given in the form *PhP* [pg# in Merleau-Ponty (1945)]/[pg# Merleau-Ponty (1962)].

[8] Merleau-Ponty's chapter title is "*Le sentir*," which I here translate as "Sensing," to capture the chapter's broad concern with sensation and its engagement with the issue of sense as meaning.

[9] In *VI* 237/183 Merleau-Ponty notoriously notes that *PhP* retains a philosophy of consciousness and must be brought to "ontological explicitation." To accept this criticism is to take the earlier work as boiling down to the claim that the condition of perception is bodily, which merely converts the Cartesian subject into a body-subject but does not escape the philosophy of subjectivity. This paper, though, shows that there is a much greater ontological affinity between *PhP* and *VI*. In addition, we should note that *PhP*'s effort to bed the personal in pre-personal habits and movements prolongs *The Structure of Behaviour*'s efforts to conceptualize a discontinuous continuity of the natural, vital and human orders (see Merleau-Ponty (1965, p. 139)), which would mean that *PhP*'s account of the body subject already overlaps with an ontology of nature, albeit this is not yet explicit.

[10] Compare with Merleau-Ponty's point in the institution lectures that "the instituted has sense without me," which arises in his discussion of time as a "passivity-activity" that is the "very model of institution" (*IP* 36; see note 20 for citation convention). This means not only that things have a sense, but that I am not the wholly active constituter of sense, for institution requires an activity that surpasses me.

[11] See *VI* 195/149, where Merleau-Ponty speaks of ideas lining the sensible.

[12] See van Cleve and Frederick (1991) for Kant's writings on this topic and extensive context and discussion.

[13] The fold and hollow are two of Merleau-Ponty's favourite concepts, going back to *Structure* (see pp. 161-3) and forward to the last writings (*VI* 286-7/233-4 is apt here). We return to this theme below.

[14] It is wrong to say that reversibility inflects being *as* perceiver or perceived, as if being is a purely invisible substratum that *appears* in one of two visible forms. The right-hand glove turned inside out *is* a left-hand glove, not the appearance of a right-hand glove; and the left- and right- hand gloves are not two visible appearances of some underlying, ambiguous being that would be purely invisible (a non-handed version of a handed glove is impossible). To say that the counterparts *seem* incongruent is not to say that they are really two *appearances* of the same thing, but that, despite their *own* looks, the one counterpart can turn to the other. This point is at work in a passage from *VI* on the reversed glove, discussed here on page 4. The ontology of reversibility and *écart* is not an ontology of appearance. As Merleau-

Ponty insists, the invisible is *of* the visible (see e.g., *VI* 247/300-1), ontologically internal to the visible, not behind it.

[15] See Derrida (1981).

[16] See Levin (2005) for a review.

[17] Research prompted by my own realization that reversibility can be conceptualized in terms of chirality shows that in several places Merleau-Ponty links reversibility and the gap between the perceiver and the perceived to mirror phenomena (which are closely linked to chirality, since mirroring turns a left-hand enantiomorph into a right-hand one). See *VI* 327/274, 192/146, 303/249, 309/255-6 and Merleau-Ponty (2003, p. 224), and the glove passage discussed here.

Chirality itself is thematized by Merleau-Ponty at *VI* 270/216-7, where he says "[c]onsider the right, the left," and, referring to Kant's discussion of incongruent counterparts, writes that the "two" parts of such pairs announce "a fragmentation of being" that is "the possibility for *discrimination*" and "the advent of difference." This reinforces the point that an incongruence and gap between reversible terms is crucial to Merleau-Ponty.

[18] That is, the finger tip, as sensed by its curvature, internally affords divergent representations of both inside-out and non-inside-out gloves.

[19] The present claim that there is a gap and incongruence between reversible terms, intersects with Lawlor (2006), which importantly identifies a "mixturism" in Merleau-Ponty, in which traditional poles of oppositions such as subject/object are inseparably mixed, yet must never coincide. Lawlor argues that for Merleau-Ponty (in contrast with Deleuze and Foucault as more radical philosophers of immanence) this non-coincidence is rooted in an ambiguity of a field of *experience*, thus maintaining a residue of transcendence. This paper urges that the matter is not so clear in Merleau-Ponty. On this issue, the passage on chirality and the fragmentation of being, cited in note 17, is especially apt.

[20] Merleau-Ponty (2003) contains his lectures on passivity and institution. The translation here is by Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey, from their forthcoming edition, with some minor modifications. The lectures are cited using the abbreviation *IP*, followed by the page number in the French edition, which is provided in angled brackets in the Lawlor and Massey edition.

[21] My thanks to Lisa Guenther for her insights on Merleau-Ponty on birth.

[22] Thanks to Petri Berndtson for pointing out to me the importance of this theme of respiration.

[23] We would have to acknowledge, though, genuine moments of wonder in science, when the scientist passively opens to things, and these are strikingly correlative to insight.

[24] Translation modified to include omitted portion.

[25] The equal sign here does not remove the incongruence between activity and passivity, since the topic is reversibility as an "act with two faces." In fact, the ability to indicate, with the equal sign, that activity and passivity are counterparts or equals precisely depends on the two maintaining separate faces. Again, in the *OE* quote about the respiration of being, Merleau-Ponty writes that activity and passivity are "so slightly discernible"—they are ever so close, yet still slight discernible, and this makes all the difference. See note 19.

[26] It would be easy to discharge this enigma by saying that it is true that things actively look at the painter—but this is true only

from the subjective point of view of the painter. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty suggests this when he notes that the painter practices a "magical theory of vision." (*OE* 27/166) But in *OE* (and throughout his philosophy) Merleau-Ponty takes painterly experience seriously as challenging traditional ontologies. In *OE* he speaks of a "philosophy still to be done," a philosophy that "animates the painter" and of painting as having a "*metaphysical* significance." Reducing the enigma to subjectivism would betray Merleau-Ponty's project.

[27] At this point in the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty does not directly refer to *Meno* 80d, but does so in the "Cogito" chapter (425/371), after which he writes that "A thought really transcended by its objects would find them proliferating in its path without ever being able to grasp their relationships to each other," which again echoes the passage from the passivity lecture and anticipates the quotation from the temporality chapter to which we shall shortly turn. For more on this theme of the seeker's paradox, see Dillon (1988).

[28] Compare: "I am installed on a pyramid of time which has been me. I take up a field and invent myself (but not without my temporal equipment), just as I move about in the world (but not without the unknown mass of my body.)" Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 14)

[29] I here refer to the chapter subtitles that Merleau-Ponty gives in the French, which Mallin (1979) translates and correlates with passages in the text.

[30] See Claudel (1929), which is cited in Merleau-Ponty (1965, p. 197) to make a point similar to the one in *PhP*; Claudel, is not, however, cited at this point in *PhP*.

[31] This point must be compared with the new working note of October 1959 on "*Personne*," Merleau-Ponty (2007, pp. 425-6).

[32] See Lawlor (2003, p. 87) for insight into the significance of this passage; also see Lawlor (2002).

[33] On this methodological issue, compare the later point "Vision produces what reflection will never understand—a combat which at times has no victor, and a thought for which there is from now on no titular incumbent" Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 17), i.e., that reversibility, as interrelating activity and passivity, challenges traditional reflection's activist claim that it is a wholly autonomous activity.

[34] The intuition-reflection distinction is linked to passivity-activity and reversibility in a working note (*VI* 318-9/264-5) that parses intuition-reflection in terms of Kant's "real opposition" between perception and counter-perception. The issues invoked with Kant here in *VI* resonate with the turn to Kant in *PhP*, discussed below.

[35] This passage must be compared with Merleau-Ponty's remarks on the genesis of sense in his discussion of Husserl, in Merleau-Ponty (2002).

[36] See Dillon (1987), Dillon (1988). This indistinction is already a theme of Merleau-Ponty (1965). See, e.g., page 171.

[37] As noted above, this is a key term in the institution lectures, where it signals repetition/temporality as generating sense without yet constituting sense.

[38] See Seeley (1995), Hölldobler and Wilson (2009), Seeley and Visscher (2004), Seeley, Visscher and Passino (2006).

[39] Seeley (1995, p. 46).

[40] See Merleau-Ponty (2003), Merleau-Ponty (1995), and material from working notes on dynamic morphology cited in Barbaras (2001); also see Morris (2008).

[41] Merleau-Ponty (2007, pp. 415-8).

self and the world it palpates. This linkage of spread out movements, as at once constraining, yet internally opened, through the gap of reversibility, would seem to be at the core of an operation that is creative of sense, of directed differences that make a difference, without yet duplicating already given senses. Tentative thoughts such as these give us a way of grasping how reversibility, a sort of gap that opens up a latitude of movement, partiality, or incompleteness, is at stake in the genesis of sense.

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