

Spontaneous Heroism and the Intersubjective Nature of Sacrificial Selflessness in Merleau-Ponty

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In memory of a tumultuous world that existed between 1939 – 1961.

Dedicated to Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that there are cases of selfless sacrifice, which I call *spontaneous heroism*, during which the hero is primarily motivated by moral significations that are perceptually provided to them on a pre-judicative level through the event they are experiencing. Spontaneous heroism is not a result of psychological conditioning or rational deliberation but the hero's pre-judicative and bodily relation to perceptual motives and significations that engender the course of action that leads them to save others in danger. My argument both draws and contributes to scholarship and interpretation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's texts on heroism and freedom in relation to perception. Most scholars have interpreted his references to heroism in relation to his political thought, but in ways that neglect his interest in the primacy of perception, which informs and leads him to discuss heroic experiences. I push back against this neglect in the literature in order to investigate sacrifice and heroism on the level of perception. I explain that moral significations can arise pre-judicatively if we understand the perception as being affective, linked to Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *body-schema* as intersubjective, and involved with his own understanding of pre-judicative experience which he calls the *pre-personal*. The way in which I expose these phenomenological concepts to describe modern cases of spontaneous heroism leads back to freedom as a central issue for heroism in Merleau-Ponty's work. Overall, my work further supports other current research on the phenomenon of *moral orientation*.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Ph.P: *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1978)

SNS: *Sens et non-sens* (1966)

HT : *Humanisme et terreur* (1961)

SC : *La structure du comportement* (1967)

PdM : *La prose du monde* (2017)

VI: *Le visible et l'invisible* (2019)

ILVS : “Le langage indirect et les voix du silence” in *Œuvres* (2010)

PG : *Pilote de guerre* (1959)

“Today’s night, and I wake before I’ve matured
in the mirrors of your tears.”
– Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński

“Personne n’est sauvé et personne n’est perdu tout à fait.” (Ph.P 199)

This paper builds upon Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Le héros, l’Homme” (1946) by providing a specifically phenomenological study of heroic behavior. His essay calls for an investigation into what it means to be heroic and continues the trajectory broached in a few passages in *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Worms 2019, 24-25).¹ These passages are ambiguous with regard to heroism. I unpack these ambiguities by further informing them with my own interpretation of heroism from his work. In turn, my interpretation allows a phenomenological investigation of a specific kind of heroic behavior, which I call *spontaneous heroism*. Spontaneous heroism, I contend, is a kind of sacrificial selflessness that does not involve any type of automatic response nor any sort of conscious rational deliberation from the hero. Instead, spontaneous heroism demonstrates that heroes rely on perceptions of moral meanings, provided by the phenomenal field of their experience, such that, on a pre-judicative level, perceived moral significations provide the necessary embedded motives for these people to undertake, or rather, undergo courses of action that lead them to make an attempt at saving others.²

I ground my analysis of this phenomenon in Merleau-Ponty’s work on perception not only to inform study of modern testimonies of spontaneous heroism but also to further elaborate on allusions to heroism throughout his work that remain significantly underexplored. At the same time, my phenomenological interpretation of heroism in Merleau-Ponty responds to Bryan Smyth’s interpretation by demonstrating that this topic is not merely connected to Merleau-Ponty’s political views but especially relates to his interest in using phenomenology to address morality. In this way, my paper also refers to and supports further current work that is being done by phenomenologists on moral orientation.³

The first part of this paper exposes what I call the *phenomenological problem of heroism* in two ways. First, I discuss Merleau-Ponty's references to heroism in relation to his view on freedom, and I explain that it speaks to his interest in the phenomenological underpinnings of this experience and not just to his political thought. While scholars such as Bryan Smyth, Kerry Whiteside, Frédéric Worms, Jean-Pierre Cléro and Robert Sasso have focused on the topic of heroism within his work insofar as it relates to his political thought, I argue that they have neglected the primacy of perception that motivates Merleau-Ponty's interest in writing about heroism, which I argue, is meant to illustrate the contingencies of freedom. My paper thus responds to current scholarship on the question of heroic action in Merleau-Ponty's work by focusing on the underplayed phenomenological side of heroic experience within the context of his work (Worms 2019, 25; Smyth 2016, 1). The second way in which I expose the problem of heroism is by responding to what I contend are inaccurate explanations that subsist within psychology (Rand & Epstein 2014), and the serious lack of consideration for this experience both in psychology and phenomenology. I argue that heroism needs to be rehabilitated by phenomenologists both to challenge errors committed by psychologists and to uncover some significant facts about morality and moral orientation.

Part II concerns the phenomenological understanding of what (spontaneous) heroism is about in Merleau-Ponty's work. Taking up the core principle of the *Phénoménologie* that affective perception is integral to the phenomenal field (Ph.P 32; Heinämaa 2022, 133), I address the following question: What is the hero's relationship to their phenomenal field when they experience heroic behaviors? This question is explored by unfolding the experiential steps of acting heroically through highlighting the roles of the pre-personal level of experience and the body-schema which are core features of experience in Merleau-Ponty's account. Using Peter Antich, Scott Marratto, and Susan Bredlau's work, I demonstrate how spontaneous heroism begins to operate at the level of the pre-personal field of experience and how it relies on the body-schema's affective, intersubjective nature. Their work will allow me to argue that it is because the body-schema can be summarized as a "nœud de relations" that spontaneous heroism is

possible at all (Ph.P 520). All of this then turns us toward a more explicit understanding of how meanings, significations, and their moral components can be addressed at the level of perception. My explanations will also be further informed by references to what I call the *heroism texts* in Merleau-Ponty's corpus (see below). I show that Merleau-Ponty seems to be referring to these phenomenological features in these essays as well.

The third and final part of this paper considers the role of what (critical) phenomenologists have called "moral orientation," with respect to spontaneous heroism and Merleau-Ponty's conception of meaning. Here, I will consider Merleau-Ponty's notions of signification and style in order to explain in depth how moral significations can be obtained perceptually. This part further supports the idea that there is such a thing as moral orientation, even at the pre-personal dimension of experience. In turn, this will pave the way to a brief discussion about the repercussions this has for modern conceptions of morality in philosophy.

1. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF HEROISM

HEROISM & FREEDOM IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHILOSOPHY

Let us begin by highlighting the necessity of "reviving" an emphatically *phenomenological* approach to Merleau-Ponty's thought on heroism, which scholars have approached almost exclusively in relation to his political thought, to the point of forgetting the experience and phenomenon of heroism itself.⁴ This phenomenological exposition of his view will allow us to then further articulate a modern understanding of heroism, which, in turn, will help fill out the gaps left out by the ambiguities of his view.

The *heroism texts* in Merleau-Ponty's corpus consist of two references to Saint-Exupéry in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Ph.P 99 and Ph.P 520), as well as the essays "La guerre a eu lieu" (1945) and "Le héros, l'Homme" (1946). Looking at these chronologically, we can see that Merleau-Ponty did not merely have a political motivation for writing these texts, but seemed to especially demonstrate a phenomenological motivation that coincides with his later attempts at "realizing philosophy," that is,

using heroism as an example of an active philosophy that is achievable by “participating actively in the ongoing historical realization of the world” (Smyth 2016, xxiv-xxvii, xxxi).

Heroism has a culminating place within the final chapter of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* as it exemplifies the very last issue about freedom that he is concerned with, namely the problem of freedom as a constraint to itself. Our experience of freedom, for Merleau-Ponty, is an endless form of being anchored in the present, resulting in us “transforming” the meaning of the past and freeing ourselves from past constraints that we have experienced (Ph.P 519). But this transformation of past meanings also requires us to be *engaged* (involved) with something else, such as in making new choices. Within the last two pages of this book, we get to see how progressing from one commitment – engagement – into another opens toward both the experience of time and the transformation of meaning: “En assumant un présent, je ressaisis et je transforme mon passé, j'en change le sens, je m'en libère [...]. Mais je ne le fais qu'en m'engageant ailleurs” (Ph.P 519). It remains unclear what it means to be “m'engageant ailleurs.” Moreover, this point leads Merleau-Ponty to question the extent to which we can be *engaged in something else*. At its limit, this is akin to asking *How much can I free myself so as to engage in something else? Can I even free myself from freedom itself?* In response, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes and argues that situational constraints are precisely what moves us to be free, as there would not be a transformation of past meanings if there was no constraining obstacle in the first place. My freedom to engage in something cannot escape its anchorage in a situation from which I subsequently “m'engage ailleurs.” According to him, freedom “embarrasses itself,” that is to say we complicate it with those sorts of theoretical, perplexing, questions because it is precisely the situational constraints to freedom that allow us to experience it (Ph.P 520). Without those constraints, we would not seek further anchorage in the world.

This creates some sort of impasse, however, because we have no successful way of fully defining freedom when it comes to using freedom as a constraint to itself: “Donnerai-je ma liberté pour sauver la liberté ?” (Ph.P 520) Merleau-Ponty stops here by claiming that there is no theoretical answer to this

problem. Freedom is paradoxical because it is situational and this situation must in fact be based in personal experience. Yet heroism is an experience that demonstrates for him that freedom cannot be experienced individually if it cannot be experienced *by everyone else*, thus suggesting that it has a universal meaning anyway. The ultimate constraint to freedom is that *it exists only insofar as everyone else can be free* because we are “un champ intersubjectif,” so our freedom is mutually defined by the being of others and vice-versa (Ph.P 515).⁵

Heroism is the pinnacle of this idea as it depicts an irreplaceable link between the hero and the victim. The victim, dispossessed of freedom, forces the hero to put all their freedom into a sacrifice so that there can be freedom for everyone within reach of the hero’s perception. To illustrate this point, Merleau-Ponty leaves the final word to someone else, who has been a hero, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.⁶ His word suggests that intersubjective relationships are at the heart of defining freedom in the circumstances of sacrificing oneself for others:

Mais c'est ici qu'il faut se taire, car seul le héros vit jusqu'au bout sa relation aux hommes et au monde, et il ne convient pas qu'un autre parle en son nom. « Ton fils est pris dans l'incendie, tu le sauveras... Tu vendrais, s'il est un obstacle, ton épaule contre un coup d'épaule. Tu loges dans ton acte même. Ton acte, c'est toi... Tu t'échanges... Ta signification se montre, éblouissante. C'est ton devoir, c'est ta haine, c'est ton amour, c'est ta fidélité, c'est ton invention... L'homme n'est qu'un nœud de relations, les relations comptent seules pour l'homme. (Ph.P 520)

Freedom is situational as well as relational, and there is no better case for illustrating its transcendental limitations than the kind of person who “lives to the end” their relations with the world (Ph.P 520, 191; Worms 2019, 23, 25-26). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s endorsement of this passage takes up the discussion of freedom on the level of perception and embodiment. Heroism or sacrifice, if it is achieved to let others be free, has to be a matter of potentially giving up one’s body and embodying the meaning of this sacrifice because freedom is intervening first and foremost at the level of embodiment and physicality (Worms 2019, 18). In this case, for Saint-Exupéry, it requires undergoing pain in order to get through a

fire, and actually experiencing the ordinarily figurative act of “giving up his shoulder” to save somebody else. It is to be embodied within his body’s actions. Saint-Exupéry’s “Tu loges dans ton acte” (Ph.P 520) shows that what the hero believes and represents comes down to a body moving in certain ways, and the overall result of these bodily motions demonstrate meaning. However, this embodiment also relies on the intersubjective dimension of one’s body. Saint-Exupéry finishes this passage by insisting that one’s embodiment of being heroic is caused by the solid anchorage we have within our interpersonal relations. For him, it is because we have a knot of social ties that we can be embodied in such a way that commits us to being heroic. But it remains unclear to what extent one’s intersubjectivity allows them to be heroically embodied for Merleau-Ponty.⁷

This issue is further exacerbated in the passage where Merleau-Ponty first mentions heroism in the *Phénoménologie*: “Il peut même arriver dans le danger que ma situation humaine efface ma situation biologique, que mon corps se joigne sans réserve à l'action” (Ph.P 99). This claim is followed by a footnote in which Merleau-Ponty cites Saint-Exupéry’s account that, while flying over Arras in France, his existence and his body merged into an experience akin to being nothing but “une source de vie”, which was meant to illustrate his point. This is part of an argument Merleau-Ponty is making in “The Body As Object” chapter to explain that we are not limited to strict biological and existential dimensions of life, that these dimensions can sometimes intertwine with one another such that our body can act in the name of an existential meaning rather than a biological purpose. This is a hint that a bodily mechanism can be much more than what it looks like. In 2020, Rodrick Rodney’s hand stretched out to grab a man’s belt in order to stop him from throwing himself over a viaduct in Montreal is an emphatic act: it is existentially meaningful even though it also is and requires the mechanical extension of Rodney’s arm (Schwartz 2020).⁸ But Merleau-Ponty recognizes that these moments of extreme existential overtaking of one’s body happen momentarily.⁹ This confirms further that freedom and embodiment can be understood in terms of differences of degrees rather than differences in kinds, and it precisely hints to us that, in certain cases when a matter of life and death is at hand, the body can plunge into and embody a heroic

experience. More precisely, Merleau-Ponty's view of heroism in the *Phénoménologie* explains what heroes do and why this heroism is significant for him once we understand the phenomenological point at issue, namely that heroism is a bodily exemplification of what someone might do when there is a threat to the (bodily) freedom that shapes their social relations – and their being in the world even. Heroism, in other words, enacts in the flesh the tension between bodily anchorage and the “m'engageant ailleurs” at stake in freedom—in ways that show that bodily anchorage can never be escaped and is always in principle threatened by the “glissement”, slipping away, of the very freedom that it anchors.¹⁰

In the same year that *Phenomenology of Perception* was published, Merleau-Ponty published another essay on World War II in the first issue of *Les Temps Modernes*. “La guerre a eu lieu” (1945) presents his impressions of the social changes in living throughout German occupation as the war evolves.¹¹ Merleau-Ponty is especially concerned in this essay with how we should judge those who collaborated with the German occupiers, and at the same time were hypocritical by voicing their disagreements with the war in ways that would not change the status quo (SNS 246). All in all, for Merleau-Ponty, these social changes were reflective of collective struggles with freedom such that people merely dealt with a “nécessité extérieure,” constraints imposed by other people, while just a few others sacrificed themselves because they could not deal with the drastic constraints their freedom was hinging on (SNS 258). The options were to either give up your life (“cesser de vivre”) or to live in such a way that you could make do with oppressive powers through measured sacrifices (“sacrifices mesurés”) (SNS 258). Because of that, for Merleau-Monty, traitors and collaborators alike had to be judged according to the popular kind of ethics of that time, which cut corners on moral duties (Cléro & Sasso 2002, 318). They had to be judged on the same basis as everyone else. The only exception to that are heroes, for whom sacrifices are not “mesurés” but in full, and this is where he makes an important distinction about them: “Seuls les héros ont vraiment été au dehors ce qu'ils voulaient être au dedans [...]” (SNS 258; Worms 2019, 23).¹² They were the true embodiment of a moral endorsement mainly meant to stop a wrongful situation. Heroes exemplify a way of thinking that fuses them with the narrative frame of

history. As such, they can be scrutinized with the most rigid deontological judgements because they were the ones who lived in the moment. Their actions literally spoke for themselves such that everything else about them is mere speculation: “L'héroïsme ne se prêche pas, il s'accomplit, et toute prédication serait ici présomption, puisque celui qui peut encore parler ne sait pas de quoi il parle” (SNS 258). In 1945, then, Merleau-Ponty seems to be continuously thinking about a relationship between freedom's contingency and personal identity – the hero *is* the embodiment of a moral impetus expressed through bodily activity (Worms 2019, 23) – and it will come back to him again three years later when he republishes his essay “Le héros, l'Homme” in 1948, originally published as “Le culte du héros” in *Action. Hebdomadaire de la Libération française* (1946).

Even though there is a certain kind of silence imposed by heroes because we may not speak for them in fear of speculating¹³, there is still some room to interpret the meaning of heroism by returning to its root cause, which is a struggle for freedom pursued at the level of perception. By demonstrating so far the intricate connection between freedom and embodiment for Merleau-Ponty, we showed that Merleau-Ponty is interested in freedom and heroism beyond political discourse – especially because of his very subtle assumption, through Saint-Exupéry, that heroism is an experience *involving a body living through things*.¹⁴ As we shall see further, “Le héros, l'Homme” is in fact Merleau-Ponty's attempt to reinforce this connection by asking what it means to be heroic in light of a struggle for freedom. Let me unpack his essay further in order to show how intersubjectivity also appears as a key component of Merleau-Ponty's conception of heroism.

For the most part in “Le héros, l'Homme”, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with contrasting a prominent misinterpretation of heroism with his own view: The religious, mythical, transcendental, Hegelian interpretation and what he considers to be the *contemporary hero* (SNS 326).¹⁵ He begins by offering his own summary of Hegel's word on heroism. For Hegel, most of all, the hero is fundamentally isolated by the “solitude” of the hero's subjectivity. A hero is somebody who is separate from the world and whose motivations to act as such were founded within a “source dont le contenu est caché et n'est pas

encore parvenu à l'existence actuelle [...]” (SNS 324).¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty finds huge mistakes in Hegel's interpretation and claims that intersubjectivity plays a bigger role than what Hegel suggests.¹⁷ Rather than being motivated by changing the overarching narrative of history, the Merleau-Pontian hero is motivated by the action itself because it is “la suite de ce qu'il a pensé, voulu, et décidé, parce qu'il ne serait plus rien s'il se dérobait” (SNS 328). It is worth pointing out that this “thinking” and “deciding” refers to what happened *before* the heroic action. The heroic action complements the rupture created by the hero's past and the danger they currently face. Again, we see here a clear connection between the hero's existential, moral motive to act and their embodiment.¹⁸ But the extent to which these two things are necessarily intertwined and how so remains to be discussed. Notice again that the matter of sacrificing one's own freedom for the sake of freedom is still present in his view. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty is also pointing out the significance of the temporal unfolding of a heroic act – heroism is the “follow up” to what heroes thought and decided.¹⁹ Not only is this claiming that there is a “series of steps” to acting heroically, so to speak, but it also indicates that the “chokehold” on freedom experienced by the hero also has a temporal dimension that needs to be accounted for. This is further demonstrated by his point that too much attention has been given to the seriousness of the sacrifice if it had gone wrong – that the hero could die. Most interpretations, including Hegel's, focus on the hero giving up their life and interpreters seem to be jumping the gun by highlighting death as a necessary component of the experience. Likewise for Hegel, it is as though the danger of death has to be the primary obstacle *par excellence* in order for there to be heroism.²⁰ On the contrary, according to the descriptions above, the hero is not facing death as obstacle. They are merely dealing with living imperatives. We begin to see a hint that pre-judication, the judgement obtained *prior* to an explicit judicative act, has a bigger relevance to heroic action than the hero facing death.

In my interpretation, this temporal condition, wherein the motivation to act heroically arises prior to any explicit judgement, is embedded within the hero's intersubjectivity. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the intersubjective character of the hero is the driving force for their action : “On meurt seul, mais on vit

avec les autres, nous sommes l'image qu'ils se font de nous, là où ils sont nous sommes aussi" (SNS 329).²¹ As such, for Merleau-Ponty, his own interpretation of heroism is that heroes can exist because they remain true to this "mouvement naturel qui nous jette vers les choses et les autres" (SNS 330). Hegel's mistake is thus fixed by demonstrating that the hero is fundamentally motivated by others, that the hero's being in the world is opposite to being a solitary subjective individual. Indeed, this motivation provided by others could be part of the steps required for a heroic action to unfold. As we will see later on, this external motivation is in fact a necessary condition to achieve heroism.

"Le héros, l'Homme" was the last text in Merleau-Ponty's early works where heroism is explicitly used to draw his commentary on freedom in contemporary society based on the results of the *Phénoménologie*. Though his 1948 text gives us a better idea of what heroism means to him and why it is so useful for illustrating the problem of freedom that goes back to the *Phenomenology*, there is still some ambiguity regarding the phenomenological experience of heroism itself. In saying that the hero's act is a follow up to what they thought, and that they could not exist without behaving this way, Merleau-Ponty is clearly sensing that a heroic action necessarily follows a temporal succession of significations that the hero is experiencing in the face of danger. There is a relationship between what they see and what they do next. The motives for acting heroically are primarily found in the hero's encounter with some victim, or victims, even if this is not a definite, specific person – but these motives are further sustained by the brave things they do next. This ambiguity about where heroism starts and stops can be further seen through his mentioning of the "unknown source" of motivation for acting heroically: What exactly pushes heroes to act spontaneously in the name of freedom and why can't we all be heroes by perceiving the same motives?

We will answer this subsequently. I believe we have to go back to the level of perception and embodiment in freedom to answer this question.²² This is what I believe would lead us to this "mouvement naturel" that motivates heroes to act heroically according to Merleau-Ponty. Furthermore, I suggest that this "unknown source" can be better explained via Merleau-Ponty's concepts of anonymity

and pre-personal level of experience, while the other one will become clearer as we get through his viewpoint on meaning and intercorporeal embodiment. But we first need to see how spontaneity as a condition of heroism, as well as an illustration of freedom's pressure onto the hero, shapes further the context within which there can be a pre-personal level of perception in the first place.

2. UNDERSTANDING HEROISM THROUGH PERCEPTION

SPONTANEOUS HEROISM

With this exposition of Merleau-Ponty's view and texts on heroism in hand, we can start to resolve some of the remaining ambiguities. I do this phenomenologically, by first addressing the character of spontaneity that emerges in heroic behaviors, for which his concept of *spontaneous motivation* seems to be extremely relevant.

Not all kinds of heroisms are sacrificial and not all sacrifices are heroic (Worms 2019, 23). I suggest that there is a kind of heroism that is by nature mainly spontaneous and this spontaneity is due to the relationship established between the subject and the situation into which they fall. What's more, this spontaneous heroism is characterized by a clear absence of self-awareness as well as a motivation based on a perceived moral value.²³ The spontaneity of the heroic action goes hand in hand with the moral motivation, and this can be understood through Merleau-Ponty's concepts of *spontaneous valuation* also known as *epistemic motivation*, which Peter Antich also uses to explain a different form of epistemic judgement based on perception (Antich 2021a, 2-5; 2021b). Let us first address this concept, and then see how it might be exemplified through specific case studies and events depicting spontaneous heroism.

For Merleau-Ponty, there is a grounding relationship between perception and any (judicative) act that puts me in relationship with the object such that this act becomes part of my perception as it unfolds (Ph.P 304, 503; Antich 2021a, 3). In seeing a grouping of points (Ph.P 503; Antich 2021a, 2), or a perspectival drawing (Ph.P 304)²⁴, my perception does not take these appearances at face value but rather *instills* them with meaning such that I would fall for the illusion of seeing these things for what they mean

instead of what they really are: A pairing instead of a mere series of dots and a painted street instead of a bunch of lines drawn in a way that creates an illusion of depth (Ph.P 304-306). There is, as a matter of fact, the realization of this perception in a simultaneous way and this is what gives rise to a feeling that the perceived meaning of something appears to me as “*institué en lui*” rather than being “constituted” by me (Ph.P 305). This is not to say, however, that the entire result of perception is rooted within the perceiving subject. The object *motivates* the subject’s perception to instill it with meaning in virtue of the object’s situation. Because the object of perception is always entrenched in a situation, it appears in different ways such that it can *suggest* to perception other ways of interpreting it.²⁵ The alliance formed between the object appearing as relating to a certain situation and the choice of meanings it motivates me to pick and instill in it is *spontaneous* for Merleau-Ponty (Ph.P 503; Antich 2021a, 3). The element of spontaneity is his way of opting for a third option between some sort of active reasoning that I would be actively making about my perception of an object and my passive undergoing of the “effect” created by my perception of that object (Ibid, 3). Rather, this move from perception is spontaneous insofar as it just seemed to be the obvious move to make. I am both causing the object to appear as it is suggested to me and I am prey to the obvious solution that “it has to appear this way,” so to speak.

I concur with Antich’s definition of spontaneity but I also emphasize its temporal character.²⁶ Not only does a judgement of perception arise naturally or spontaneously not simply by virtue of this process, it is also characterized by its *rapid* enactment. The objects we perceive impose on us a temporal experience, and the faster they rise to perception the more spontaneous are our perceptions of them. Consider the experience of noting only afterwards that you noticed something and responded to as such and such, e.g., grabbing the ball that would hit your friend “before even knowing it.” This is exemplary of the sort of spontaneity in question. Spontaneous heroism, I suggest then, also describes cases where people act fast and in a seemingly automatic or intuitive way. In this case, the element of speed and lack of self-awareness is then obviously explained by the hero’s being in-between the activeness and passivity of their pre-perceptual judgement.

To illustrate how spontaneous valuation (motivation) gets embodied and enacted in a way that defines more clearly what I mean by spontaneous heroism, I rely on the cases of Mamadou Gassama in 2018 (Agnew 2019) and Shontakbaev Sabit in 2022 (Robertson 2022), as well as Rodrick Rodney in 2020 (Schwartz 2020), and testimonies from Carnegie Hero Medal Recipients (CHMR) that were reused in Rand & Epstein's study in 2014. All of them expressed some sense of spontaneity and moral value when they acted heroically. Each individual acted within a relatively fast timespan depending on the speed at which somebody else was about to die. Besides being unable to recall most of what they did because of how unaware they had been, they all expressed a strong sense of being spontaneously compelled to act because what they did seemed to have been the only solution available to them to reestablish an equilibrium in the freedom that is available to the people involved in these scenarios. I will also address a few words to Rand and Epstein's psychological interpretation of the CHMR's testimonies in order to raise at least one example of how modern psychology may misattribute rational deliberation and classical conditioning to heroic behaviors that can be explained through Merleau-Ponty's concept of spontaneity, which in turn provides a different way of understanding epistemic motivation as Antich argues.

In 2018, a four-year-old child slips over the fence of a Parisian balcony and ends up hanging over a four-story void until Mamadou Gassama, a Malian refugee at the time, sees him and begins to climb over each of the building's balconies. He reached the child and took him back to safety. "I just go", Gassama later said to a *Financial Times* reporter. His feat seems all the more unexplained as he did not have any knowledge or expectations about what he did: "I never tried it before," he says. "There is not a big tree in my country. I don't know, I just go." What else appears from his recalling of the event to the reporter is an element of *spontaneity* and *non-explicit awareness* of what he was doing: "In that situation you don't think about anything. [...]" Explicit bodily awareness or any other sort of deliberative recourse do not seem to be part of the picture, except for some compelling form of motivation to act this way, as he says: "I did what I had to do and that's life. I'm still the same person that I was before" (Agnew 2019). This element of doing "what I had to do" comes back in plenty of other cases of individuals risking their

lives to save other people.²⁷ A similar event happened more recently, in May 2022, when a Kazakhstan man named Shontakbaev Sabit also saved a toddler dangling from the edge of a building. There again, Sabit “didn’t think about anything” and “just wanted to help the child” (DailyMail 2022).

Obviously, these two examples clearly show that a response is demanded from the hero, where this demand arises out of a preceding event. Not only do they demonstrate a selfless, unconscious act, but it is important to note that these cases also illustrate that the response demanded from the hero is reported by them as *already pre-judicatively contained* within the call for action that is exemplified through the situation, as Rodrick Rodney seems to have experienced. Rodney saw someone on a viaduct about to commit suicide and rushed to stop them. As he first looked at the man walking up to the guardrail, he seemed to have anticipated the situation as it was unfolding: “The minute he looked down over the highway, it was like I could foresee his intention.” Rodney then attempts to grab the man to save him:

As he turned around and let go, I leaped over and grabbed the neck of his T-shirt and started to pull him: His shirt was tearing apart, like a bungee cord: The more I pulled, the more the shirt stretched. He was silent as a lamb. [...] To hold something steady, I grabbed his pants and belt and — this part is a bit emotional — I had to jam my feet against the railing because now I was dangling over it so if he falls, I am gone with him (Gazette 2020).

Again, in recalling the event to the news reporter, Rodney also seems to demonstrate an element of *compulsion*: “I think that, had he died, I would have crawled into a corner and felt like never coming out.” For him as well, the element of selflessness is also present. It was only after the event that he began to realize the gravity of the situation, especially that he could have died as well: “After realizing what I had done, I started to cry, knowing that my kids and grandkids could have gotten a call that day that said, ‘Your dad tried to save someone and he wasn’t successful.’”²⁸

The role of rational deliberation and classical conditioning in these spontaneous acts of saving others is still, unfortunately, the central or exclusive focus of scientific studies, even though testimonies

from heroes themselves explicitly state that they did not act deliberately.²⁹ For instance, in their 2014 study, Rand and Epstein analyzed testimonies from Carnegie Hero Medal Recipients (CHMR), people who performed extreme altruistic acts at the risk of dying in order to save others, in order to understand how intuition and deliberation work in situations where people risk their lives to save strangers. They offer evidence “that when extreme altruists explain why they decided to help, the cognitive processes they describe are overwhelming intuitive, automatic and fast.” This is indeed clearly demonstrated by the testimonies of a few of these people.³⁰

While Epstein and Rand may have demonstrated something obvious, which is that the subjects did not take the time to think about their options and be self-aware of their actions in a life and death scenario, they are still compelled to find an explanation for these behaviors that relates to the *Social Heuristic Hypothesis*.³¹ It postulates that behavioral strategies “typically advantageous in our daily social interactions” become internalized and used as automatic responses for behaving in certain situations (Rand & Epstein 2014). In the case of extreme altruistic situations, these strategies become overgeneralized on some basic level and, as they become more and more inadequate for peculiar situations, deliberation and self-aware decision-making take on a greater role to facilitate a behavior that is adequate to the situation. In other words, if this hypothesis were true then “successful behavioral strategies from lower-stakes settings where cooperation is typically advantageous” become internalized as advantageous on the long-term. These strategic behaviors are then “sometimes [...] applied in atypical settings where helping is extremely costly, such as the CHMR scenarios” (Rand & Epstein 2014). But this argument would entail that there is a determinate threshold from which a certain level of altruistic conditioning allows people to perform heroic behaviors. It also entails that not everyone can be heroic, which totally disregards the significance of how people interpret their situations. As a matter of fact, a scientific explanation like Rand and Epstein’s would suggest that there is a standard of morally interpreting certain situations for everyone, granted that they have the required level of altruistic conditioning to recognize a situational pattern where their habit can take place.³²

This is not to say that moral norms and dispositions, or other dispositions and capacities have no role in heroic action. There can be cases of heroism where the individual's past training or habituation plays a bigger role, such as in cases where the hero is a firefighter or lifeguard. It is also evident that an elderly person is less likely to perform the same kind of heroic feat as Gassama and Sabit did. The focus here, however, is on cases of heroism where there is strong evidence that the subject's perception of the situation *in the moment* provided them with the perceptual motives to act spontaneously. The reports from these heroes largely claim that they did not have any idea that they would be able to perform a heroic action – their experience leads them to believe that there is nothing about them that made them more suited to help than anybody else – and I believe this is something that needs to be accounted for. This is why I am restricting my study to spontaneous heroism (as I define it), where self-reports indicate that prior conditioning or training did not have a role in the heroic action; this gives us a body of evidence that supports the point that moral orientations can spontaneously arise on the very short timescale of heroic action. Of course, one might ask whether factors in the history of these spontaneous heroes have something to do with their transformation toward heroic action in these situations, but unfortunately reports and data give us little insight into this. It should also be noted that a very well-trained firefighter or lifeguard might also in fact undergo what I am calling spontaneous heroism, for example, one could imagine such a person finding themselves frozen in face of an overwhelming situation, but then spontaneously being moved to act in ways they had not anticipated. However, the reports and data once again give little insight into this. This is why I purposefully define “spontaneous heroism” in such a way as to exclude subjects whose training might prepare them for heroic action. This restriction reveals that there are experiences of being motivated to act in ways unanticipated—and called forth by the situation. And this allows me to reject explanations that rely on a “hard” form of conditioning or embedded moral value, which also allows me to avoid a deterministic claim about who could or could not be heroic. This appeal to conditioning does not work in all cases.

Accordingly, my focus is on examples of emphatically spontaneous heroism. Through testimonies provided by the heroes themselves, I believe they reflect precisely the same kind of heroism that Merleau-Ponty talks about in the heroism texts. They display the same necessary conditions that Merleau-Ponty accepts for defining heroism, namely the elements of sacrifice and display of a moral impetus.³³ But they also exude the condition of spontaneity through their univocal account that what they did to save others was self-evident and the only obvious thing to do. Here, again, I am not taking up cases of heroism that can readily be explained and motivated by training and internalized moral duties. Cases involving firefighters and law enforcement, as well as military officers rely too heavily on the assumption of some deontological duty to help others that, even though their actions may seem spontaneous, their experience and training affects the readiness of their perception to apprehend danger. I am specifically interested in civilian cases to investigate *unprecedented* heroism that cannot be explained by training and physical or cognitive attributes.³⁴

In sum, in cases of spontaneous heroism we find that: i) the hero must put their life in danger whether or not they are aware of doing so; ii) the victim must be in a situation that endangers their life as well; iii) the hero's actions have to happen very quickly; iv) the hero has no training for the situation; v) what the hero achieved must be unprecedented for them; vi) the hero does not report that their action proceeds from a cognitive, deontic demand. Exploring the concept of spontaneity in these cases of heroism lets us arrive at the idea that these heroic acts were motivated by perceptual judgements of situations that were already informed by the situations themselves in which the heroes were involved. Moreover, the difference between these examples of spontaneous heroism and everyday life examples of spontaneous judgement, like those that Antich discusses, is that they highlight the *moral or normative* component of perceptual signification, which we will explore later, rather than just the spontaneous descriptive judgement itself. Spontaneous heroism suggests that spontaneity can proceed in ways that can be understood alongside existing moral and perceptual norms of perception, without yet implying that these norms will influence spontaneous perceptual judgements. But it can also proceed through motives

arising in the course of perception, which can be described in ways that do not depend on already established norms of perception. I will come back to these two points later on. The heroes' perceptions of these situations were already *suggestively informed* about the meaning of their experience. We shall see now how these suggestive significations obtained through perception can actually turn into pre-judicative perceptions through what Merleau-Ponty calls the *pre-personal* level of perception. This will show how there can be spontaneity at all, which is by virtue of our being in the world.

PRE-PERSONAL PERCEPTION WITHIN HEROIC EXPERIENCE

Our explanation of Merleau-Ponty's concept of spontaneity remains slightly incomplete. To proceed requires attention to what he terms the *pre-personal* level of perception, through which motives can be given to us from the objects of our perception themselves.

We find in perception a character of spontaneity justified by Merleau-Ponty's claim that perception is "neither wholly passive nor wholly active" (Landes 2013, 86). To be more specific, perception takes place *anonymously* within "une atmosphère de généralité" (Ph.P 249). This *general field of existence* serves as a common ground between all subjective experiences sharing the same objects of perception and where these objects can exist *for anyone*. This is because our sensation is not the complete result of our own volition and it has to involve "un autre moi qui a déjà pris parti pour le monde" (Ph.P 250).³⁵ I can perceive certain things because I inherently possess the fundamental conditions to be receptive to them. I can tell you what color the sky is *because I can see colors* and I can deal with all experiential significations because my own phenomenological constitution is geared up and ready to deal with them (Ph.P 249). Not only that, but my own receptivity to these objects does not provide me the full extent of their being. There is always another side to them, a Husserlian *horizon*, such that "j'éprouve toujours qu'il y a encore de l'être au-delà de ce que je vois actuellement" (Ph.P 250). All things perceived always have a phenomenological depth that is inexhaustible by experience (Ph.P 250). This field through which things have a general way of existing, still blurry and not fully defined through our own epistemological appropriation of them, does not show up through some process of perception before we

actually cognize these objects and become aware of ourselves in a world fully determined. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's description shows that this blurriness arises in and through another *layer* of perception. The subtlety is that we are not wholly invested in each of these operational layers, which keeps these perceptions not fully ours, like they are when we decide what things to grab and to look at (Ph.P 250). These different pre-judicative acts of perception, those cases of perceptual judgement arising prior to actual cognitive judgements, happen "in front of me" and concern the different selves in me that are in some way specialized, "familiar" with "un seul secteur de l'être" (Ph.P 250). This is what lets my body able to "deviner le mouvement qui va préciser la perception et [...] faire preuve de cette prescience qui leur donne l'apparence de l'automatisme" (Ph.P 250). The rootedness of perception in this general field of existence provides me with a *pre-personal level* of experiencing things insofar as I am not fully aware that it is me who is experiencing *this* object before I would intentionally apprehend it fully for myself as something I can dispose of by choice. The pre-personal, then, is the level of perception through which I am able to find "un sens à certains aspects de l'être sans le leur avoir moi-même donné par une opération constituante" in virtue of this "connaturalité" enacted by my entrenchment in the world before I can fully make sense of it (Ph.P 251).

As such, then, there could not be an element of spontaneity in perception, and in spontaneous heroism, without a pre-personal dimension of experience where things can be generally given to me with a pre-objective meaning that gives me enough ground to make sense of them. Our definition of spontaneity becomes more specific now: objects do not merely "suggest" to us meanings and ways of dealing with them. Because there is a part of perception already invested in the world prior to making deliberate perceptual judgements, this part is *opened* to significations and meanings already contained in the world.³⁶ The world, then, does more than merely suggesting to us how it should be interpreted – it grabs us by the throat. It provides us *motivations* to apprehend it a certain way because of how it appears pre-judicatively and we shall see later on that those motivations can even be understood as *orienting* us in

the world. As such, then, the world really “pre-exists my reflective activity” (Ph.P v; Toadvine 2002, 238).

However, the pre-personal field of perception could not happen without my own general existence and other people’s. My existence also requires some generality so it can have a foot in the door towards the anonymity of things as well. It requires the transcendental condition for recognizing objects as generally given. In other words, I must have what it takes to understand the pre-defined meaning, to some extent, that objects give to me in perception, and that is the fact that I also exude a pre-defined meaning about myself when I navigate the world. Furthermore, since the generality of the world makes it inherently sharable with anyone, intersubjectivity becomes another requirement to experience things as pre-objectively given (Ph.P 512).³⁷ The emergence of a pre-personal givenness in perception implies “les droits d’une autre perception du même être” (PdM 190). There can be a pre-personal level of perception in virtue of perception’s “implication” that it shares “a world with others” (PdM 35; Bredlau 2018, 35). In the same way, I also need to possess the ability to recognize other people as non-objects and as separate consciousnesses. This condition is the fact that *I exist for others* as well and that my existence *also has generality*, which Merleau-Ponty labels as a form of *anonymity* (Ph.P 511-512). This other part of me who belongs to the world shows up as a possibility for others to see me as an object for them. At this point, then, the world can be constituted by anyone and it is an experiential reminder that we are sharing it with others (Ibid).

Furthermore, this sharing of the world can be experienced by seeing how others perceive us differently than what we know ourselves to be like, because they only had a glimpse of our identity through the generality that we offer them at first glance. This can be shown in cases when someone calls us for help but we do not feel capable to do so. We do not reveal our identity with the entirety of our bodily knowledge to others, but they perceive that we are “generally there” so to speak and that is enough to motivate them to cry for help.³⁸ Because freedom has to be *for anyone*, it is also pre-personally obtained by knowing that we can act in certain indefinite ways. Because of that, however, freedom is also

up for grabs because it is offered to anyone through the general, anonymous, layer of existence. Other people can “rob me” of my freedom as well, so to speak.³⁹ As I stand near a house on fire, for instance, my freedom of conceiving this scene as a place to avoid gets radically changed when I realize there is someone else inside and they leave me no other choice but to see this house as a place of danger where death, the end of freedom, is imminent, and where someone else needs to be saved (Bredlau 2018, 34-35). More and more as my experience of this house unfolds, this person indirectly takes away the level of freedom I can use to experience this place because my freedom, my being-here in this situation, hinges on this other person sharing it as well, and their freedom becoming sedimented through the definiteness and limitations of their situation narrows down the level of general freedom I can enjoy. The possibilities of others for being must account for my own possibilities to be, and vice-versa. Everything about me, my perception, and my behavior, ultimately depends on my life having meaning that I did not create on my own (Ph.P 512). It is precisely because others and the world endow me with meaning that situations can arise and that we can have different interpretations of the same event (Ph.P 512). This anonymity that exists between myself and others is what stops me from accessing what they can be on the inside. It suggests that there is no absolute kind of freedom experienced, but only a situational kind that is shared and shaped by what and who we perceive (Ph.P 515).

Obviously, I could walk away from this house on fire. But that won't be without an unsettling feeling of discomfort – remorse, sadness, uneasiness, etc.⁴⁰ – caused by my pre-perceptual perception that I am less free from now on because someone who was co-constitutive of the reality I experience is missing.⁴¹ The same goes for the crowd full of fear when they watched Gassama and the child, not knowing what happens next. The meaning of an event is an unfolding futurity that actually depends on “coexistence sociale et dans l’On avant toute décision personnelle” (Ph.P 513). If there was no anonymity and if my body did not already have a prejudice in favor of the world (“parti pris”), I would not be free and I would not experience the consequences of my actions because I depend on an indeterminacy shared with others to suffer these consequences (Ph.P 513). Bystanders who freeze from fright are just as much

experiencing this strain on freedom on the pre-personal level. Not everyone acts heroically precisely because not everyone perceptually relates to the world in the same way.⁴² In this case, when general freedom becomes a hostage, the lack of it is expressed by their bodies being unable to focus on something other than what is going on and to freeze. Their ability to translate their pre-personal anchoring into freedom depends on how their body relates to those pre-personal significations, which we will address later on when discussing affectivity in the body-schema. The fact that people have different bodily reactions to perceiving someone else in danger is indicative of the intercorporeality that is fundamental to the pre-personal dimension of bodily experience (Marratto 2012, 9). The sharing of this world “always involves a certain threat of dispossession” insofar as our freedom and bodily agency can be threatened by the ways in which others share this world with us (Ibid). It justifies that the world in general “does not wait for us to see the terms of its appearance” and it is precisely because our deliberate perceptual judgements can be one step too late on how the world appears, so to speak, that we can be vulnerable and exposed to our own lack of control over it (Ibid). This lack of control, in a manner of speak, is dependent on the bodies with which we perceive a situation. Furthermore, it can become unclear at times “where the ‘other’ ends and the ‘I’ begins” because of this anonymity that envelops all sensible beings (Ibid).

The fact that our body is already always pre-personally involved in the world explains why heroes are involved in the dangers experienced by others because they experience these dangers as if they were happening to them as well. At this point we start to delineate the contours of an inherent morality that exists in virtue of this “primitive kinship between my body and the bodies of other selves” that is set up by our collective sharing of the same conditions for perception (Ibid). But to understand better how this embodied morality might emerge from this intercorporeal kinship we first need to figure out how exactly the body can be affected by these pre-personal significations, how these significations solicit the body in such a way that it is led into acting heroically, how one’s implicit body knowledge is always “paired” with others’, and how it is that an other’s danger also feels like my own (Bredlau 2018, 34-49).

AFFECTIVE BODY-SCHEMA & HEROISM

I argue in this section that the body-schema can be shaped not only through repetition and habituation but especially through affectivity, and this affectivity is what causes heroes to act on their pre-personal significations. Because the body-schema can be shaped by the way in which things affect us, we become susceptible to those pre-objective meanings that shape our global awareness of our motility, such as in Sabit and Gassama's cases. I will proceed in three steps: a) I will give an exposition of Merleau-Ponty's body-schema in chapter III of the *Phenomenology's* first part; b) Then I will explain how this concept is based on the affective dimension of the body that he discusses in part I, chapter V; and finally I will show some of the potential repercussions that this phenomenological description entails for understanding the core structures of spontaneous heroism and to offer some understanding as to how both Gassama and Sabit's bodies navigated through a space that was not a priori intended for their actions.

The most basic idea expressed behind Merleau-Ponty's "schéma corporel" is that it is a kind of "non-explicit awareness" about one's body (Landes 2013, 32). An "implicit knowledge" that provides the necessary determinations to extend my hand forward so that I can reach the phone on my desk (Landes, 32; Bredlau 2018, 34; Whitney 2019, 308). I do not reach my phone by establishing, either consciously or subconsciously, some sort of series of steps A, B, C, and so on, so I can grab it. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is instead my body's involvement with the world in which I find myself that allows it to be oriented, to be opened or (pre)disposed, toward possibilities that can be both precedented and unprecedented.⁴³ This is why he draws a contrast between *positional space* and *situated space*: my body's spatiality "n'est pas comme celle des objets extérieurs ou comme celle des « sensations spatiales » une *spatialité de position*, mais une *spatialité de situation*" (Ph.P 116). On the one hand, some possibilities of moving my body in the world have precedents, because they are based on habituation that my body undergoes. Through learning, repetition, and habit I can do certain things without being aware of them because my body *incarnates* the means to execute those movements, so to speak. On the other hand, unprecedented events result from the interactional relationship between my body and the world. Sabit did

not slip over *this* window edge when he stepped on it for the first time because there is an exchange of significations between his body and his environment that allows the former to have a spatio-situational awareness of the latter. This exchange of significations operates through perception on the basis of a dynamism, which consists of calling for perception to interact with its phenomenal field.⁴⁴ The way perception interacts with it is by *gearing up* the body in such a way that it can be ready to act around as well as within the world – this world that precisely motivates perception to continuously interact with it. This proceeds in such a way as to turn the body into an ensemble of capacities, as well as of an accumulation of an “I can” that can do certain things based on how my body apprehends the world through perceiving it (Ph.P 160). For Merleau-Ponty, the starting point for defining the body-schema is a summary of bodily experience that echoes back a relation between the whole and its parts, which emerged from psychology. He finds this interpretation of how one understands the relation between their body parts and their situational awareness to be limited.

Indeed, the body is not composed of a series of parts linked up with one another and relying on consciousness to operate some kind of associational synthesis. Rather, it must be what he calls “une unité intersensorielle ou sensorimotrice du corps” (Ph.P 115).⁴⁵ This holistic mode of being for the body is further obvious in his analysis of movement as always executed against a background defined by the movement itself. The body must be an entirety of its own, not *partes extra partes*, because of the relational dynamism that operates itself and the world. In this relation, the body is as much a participant in the making of significations about objects as these objects themselves are providing their own significations. There always has to be a background against which the body-schema can be understood: “Chaque mouvement volontaire a lieu dans un milieu, sur un fond qui est déterminé par le mouvement lui-même [...]” (Ph.P 160)⁴⁶; “Dans le geste de la main qui se lève vers un objet est enfermée une référence à l’objet non pas comme objet représenté, mais comme cette chose très déterminée vers laquelle nous nous projetons, auprès de laquelle nous sommes par anticipation, que nous hantons” (Ph.P 161). The body-schema is therefore also the medium through which a comfort zone, so to speak, is created where

the body can serve as an anchor point to dispose of things as they are signifyingly understood by the body: “Un mouvement est appris lorsque le corps l’a compris, c’est-à-dire lorsqu’il l’a incorporé à travers son « monde » [...]” (Ph.P 161). To know how to move towards and with the objects surrounding me is to include these possibilities of moving, with regards to these objects around me, into my body’s own worldliness, which we can also call my body’s situatedness. In doing so there is a genesis of meaning co-constituted between what the objects are meant to be and what my body is able to make of them.

But the body-schema is not merely consuming the significations of the world obtained through perception. It invests the world with its own significations formulated as capacities, potential moves you can execute, and the body’s actual disposition in the world. To understand this point, we need to go back to Merleau-Ponty’s discussion about the reflex response: “Le réflexe ne résulte pas des stimuli objectifs, il se retourne vers eux, il les investit d’un sens qu’ils n’ont pas pris un à un et comme agents physiques, qu’ils ont seulement comme situation” (Ph.P 94). A reflex is a means for the body to put into perspective what it encounters as calling for its attention, so to speak. Rather than undergoing a linear imposition of meaning from the trigger to the body, the reflex is an instance of the body instilling the trigger with a specific meaning that it did not have previously. This providing of meaning to the trigger by the reflex response delineates the context of the trigger as well, which is a form of situational background against which the motion of a reflex response can be understood. But this happens because there is an indeterminateness in the situational space. A trigger is undetermined. It provides some sort of stimuli to the body and it demands a reflex *response*. That response is precisely the part in which, for Merleau-Ponty, the body will “turn around” and put into perspective this specific stimulus within the larger scheme of stimuli that are constantly experienced in the here and now.

The first three chapters arguably account for Merleau-Ponty’s willingness to demonstrate that the body is not a passive receptor of an active world generating meaning. This is shown through perception being responsive to its objects – instilling or investing them with meaning as much as they display their own pre-objective ones. This establishes that the whole body incarnates a relationship of meanings

between itself and its situational status. It does so not only to make explicit how the body behaves in the world but to also account that it exists *in-for* the world: “[...] et le schéma corporel est finalement une manière d’exprimer que mon corps est *au monde*” (Ph.P 117, my emphasis). Merleau-Ponty’s device to explain this phenomenological feature is the body-schema. Rather than seeing how habituation and learning shape the body-schema into a space of tendencies towards certain significations⁴⁷, we focus instead on what it is that allows the body to holistically apprehend unprecedented moves based on its situational awareness. So far, our basis for this second point was to understand deeper the dynamism of the relation between body and situation, between perception and its objects. We can explore this point even deeper now through affective meanings being exchanged between these two poles, and how this allows a generativity of what I have been calling “unprecedented” motions.

Merleau-Ponty makes the crucial point that the goal of phenomenology is to investigate the things themselves insofar as they exist *for us* – in what way the hero apprehends a situation as though it exists for them (Ph.P 180). The problem arises when we address these things on their own terms: It turns out that these objects exist for themselves and it makes it harder to understand the sort of genesis by which something appears for us – with or without a hero, the victim experiences this danger because it was, after all, a danger *for them* specifically and not some sort of set up for the hero like in the movies. Up to the chapter on sexuality, we were looking into something that did not need to be perceived in order to exist – these situations do not virtually need a hero as they would have resolved themselves on their own (Ph.P 180). However, in the cases at hand, where the element of meaning of a situation is to be resolved with the hero’s help, the hero’s body is affected to such a degree and in such a way that their action in effect imposes this impossibility of the victim dying. That is the further contribution the hero makes, the kind of meaning they instill into the situation. Thus, Merleau-Ponty brings about in this chapter the necessity of inquiring into the dimension of existence in which things exist for us. This is the existential zone where meaning, sense, and reality can be threaded with perception as a distinctive pole, which is contrasted with our “milieu affectif” (Ph.P 180). Love, sex, and overall affectivity are for him the obvious fields of

experience where things can have meaning in relation to us. The body-schema is the main medium for this kind of meaning-making.

Goldstein's patient Schneider is absolutely unaffected by sexual stimuli of any kind. Merleau-Ponty uses this case study to debunk an intuitionist interpretation of the body at the time (Ph.P 181). If Schneider is unable to experience sexual desire, this is not because of some flawed mechanism of representing pleasure. Rather, his ability to come up with sexual possibilities is defused such that his body cannot anticipate a sexual act (Ph.P 182). There has to be a "déploiement" of sexual life, such that possibilities that are sexual in nature can be formed based on the body's situatedness (Ph.P 182). Sexual kinks and fetishes come from newly formed possibilities for the body to relate to its environment in a certain way (Ph.P 182). The difference, however, is that the meanings of those possibilities have sexual connotations. To be sexually connotated is for the meaning to express how a certain relationship between the body and the object of perception can be sustained, which is radically different from normative meanings such as, let's say, a building's architecture clearly indicating that we can stand on its balconies to look at the view.⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty proposes that there is a phenomenological feature through which external value and meaning can be sexually intended. As an example, he suggests there is a "sexual schema" which is the structure through which the body incarnates affective possibilities, that is, possibilities linked to the external world insofar as it is apprehended as existing for the body:

Il faut qu'il y ait un Eros ou une Libido qui animent un monde original, donnent valeur ou signification sexuelles aux stimuli extérieurs et dessinent pour chaque sujet l'usage qu'il fera de son corps objectif. [...] Chez le normal, un corps n'est pas seulement perçu comme un objet quelconque, cette perception objective est habitée par une perception plus secrète : le corps visible est sous-tendu par un schéma sexuel, strictement individuel, qui accentue les zones érogènes, dessine une physionomie sexuelle et appelle les gestes du corps masculin lui-même intégré à cette totalité affective. (Ph.P 182)

It is worth pointing out here that “sexual schema”, “Eros” and “Libido” are just placeholders for talking about the body-schema with regard to *the mode of the relationship it entertains with the object*. In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s usage of “sexual schema” does not imply that there is a defined number of categories of schemas for the body. Bodily movements become integrated to this “totalité affective” through the body’s ability to make things relate to itself. This is to say that the body can be affected by things when there is a relationship put in place where the body is *concerned* by these things because these things appear concerning to it. When this happens, the embodied subject can project themselves into a sexually intended world. They can put themselves “en situation érotique” and make it unfold “jusqu’à l’assouvissement” (Ph.P 182). See, for instance, the way Merleau-Ponty describes what is going on for Schneider: “Si les stimuli tactiles eux-mêmes, que le malade dans d’autres occasions utilise à merveille, ont perdu leur signification sexuelle, c’est qu’ils ont cessé pour ainsi dire de parler à son corps, de le situer sous le rapport de la sexualité [...]” (Ph.P 183). Clearly, he is saying that there is a pre-objective meaning in the perceptual stimuli that is sexual in nature, such as a caress or a kiss, and those stimuli contribute to creating an expressive relationship of meaning between the body-schema and the sexual undertones of those stimuli. This relationship of meaning is the body’s *situatedness* within a relation of sexual atmosphere.

Even though we may interpret the body as a site of meaning-making, Merleau-Ponty carefully emphasizes that the body endows itself with a sexual meaning for an object by reaching this object in the world: “La perception érotique n’est pas une *cogitatio* qui vise un *cogitatum*; [...] elle se fait dans le monde et non pas dans une conscience” (Ph.P 183). As a matter of fact, it is not just erotic perception that creates itself in the world but any kind of affective perception. In that way, we experience the world on a mode of encountering things as they exist for us – which is precisely what this chapter was meant to demonstrate. However, in order to experience the world as existing for us, through affectivity, it is necessary that we follow along with it too. Our intentionality has to “follow” the “mouvement général de l’existence” and fold with it so that this affective relationship can be sustained (Ph.P 183).⁴⁹ At this point,

we are far from interpreting affectivity as the result of representations tasked with the goal of synthesizing relationships between different body parts and the external world. We possess a body-schema that can be erotically affected by the pre-objective meanings obtained in the external world and used to establish a relationship of concern – of affect – between the body and these objects. By “concern” and “affect” we simply mean to say that meaning is created and expressed by the body-schema’s disposition toward the recipient of this expression. The result of the body-schema being affected is a sheer feeling of fear and fright if the body’s relationship of meaning-making with a sexual object relates to the memory of a traumatizing sexual experience; or the development of new exciting possibilities incarnated by the body-schema, translated into kinks and fetishes, because the schema cooperates with the object to project unprecedented sexual meanings based on what is given to it by the object; or, in the case of the *Phénoménologie*, a complete blockage of speech in one’s mouth due to one’s inability to fully access the pre-objective meanings concealed within an intersubjective relationship (Ph.P 187 and further).⁵⁰

Sex is, for Merleau-Ponty, the prime example that leads him to claim that the entirety of the body-schema can be affected. His first move was to criticize the intellectual and empiricist views that reduced it to either a synthesizing of representations connected to body parts or a functionally biological process. As we can clearly see, the zone of affectivity extends much further than just sex. His analysis of aphasia demonstrates that the body-schema relates to ontology and the existential character of meaning-making: “Mais ce qui est « fixé » sur la bouche, ce n’est pas seulement l’existence sexuelle, ce sont, plus généralement, les relations avec autrui dont la parole est le véhicule” (Ph.P 187).⁵¹ Evidently, there are not just objects in the external world that can afflict the body-schema with all sorts of affections – sexual or otherwise – but interpersonal relations are part of this as well. The body’s apprehension of interpersonal relations specifically expresses more than just a perception of another living consciousness. It relates to the existential situation experienced by both subjects:

Mais si le corps exprime à chaque moment les modalités de l’existence, on va voir que ce n’est pas comme les galons signifient le grade ou comme un numéro désigne une maison : le signe ici

n'indique pas seulement sa signification, il est habité par elle, il est d'une certaine manière ce Pierre absent ou comme les figures de cire, dans la magie, sont ce qu'elles représentent. (Ph.P 188).

The last sentence of this passage indicates that the body-schema addresses things in the world on the mode of the relationship of meanings that is established between them (Whitney 2019, 308-309). However, it does so because it already embodies the meaning of this mode of relating to objects. In other words, a body being sexually aroused is expressing a sexually loaded situatedness because its relationship with the world is co-constituted by the world appearing as sexual for the body. As a result, the affected body-schema always echoes its existential situatedness (Ph.P 188).

Our description of the body-schema as the prime medium for meaning-making through its relationship with the world provides a strong basis for reconsidering the ways in which heroes experience a momentum to sacrifice themselves. If the body-schema generates meaning in relation to how it is affected by its situatedness, there is no doubt that a heroic action can be the result of this phenomenological unfolding. Facing the overwhelming shock of facticity that is presented to them, the potential hero's body-schema can be affected by this traumatizing picture. In being affected, the body-schema develops a relationship with the situation and generates meaning under an embodied, incarnated, appearance. This appearance takes the form of movements and physical reactions acted out in order to get away from this existential trap. We can rightly suspect that Merleau-Ponty's own intuition about the meaning of heroism is translated one way or another by the body-schema into an embodied meaning of the same sort: Heroes "really were outwardly what they inwardly wished to be" (SNS 258).⁵²

Put in conjunction with Merleau-Ponty's concept of reversibility to demonstrate the meaning of chewing for an infant, which we will articulate further in the next section, we begin to see that one's moral impetus for sacrifice is their way of manifesting how another's death appears for them. The hero's body raises the stakes, which were put up by the initial meaning of seeing someone about die, by expressing acts and motions in a manner that responds to this initial meaning. What is specific to the

body-schema here, however, is that it is *because* it has been affected by the event that it is able to generate an unprecedented series of movements merely embodying the meaning of its affectivity. The point is simply to stress the importance that the body-schema must take up its situatedness and how it is being affected by it in order to formulate a response expressed as something the body has never done before.⁵³

3. MEANING & MORAL ORIENTATION

AFFECTIVE MEANING

We have seen in the last section that the body-schema can be transformed depending on how it is being affected by the relationships it entertains with the world. These relational connections mutually shift the world as existing *for the body-schema*, thus provoking or welcoming affective significations in or to it, and the body-schema as instilling the world with its own significations. The body-schema is also always “paired” with other body-schemas in such a way that its transformation is always grounded by its relations with other bodies (Bredlau 2018, 34). But we have yet to explore the actual contents of those significations being exchanged between the hero’s body and the world. We have merely set up the basis for figuring out that heroes are bodily affected by what they perceive. A discussion of the way that their perceptions contain actual meanings that can be put into words remains the last step to better understand what spontaneous heroism is about. In other words, under what form a moral signification such as “save this person” takes place within the hero’s perception?

It is because perception is always involved in bringing up something against its background (SC 23, 70) that significations arise as a “mode d’articulation, comme une convenance à soi qui demeure hors de soi, et sa relative positivité comme une « chute » de l’articulation dans ce qu’elle articule” (Barbaras 1990, 332). The divide between the object that becomes the focus of perception and the rest of the phenomenal field that it belongs to *articulates* the sense in which the object exists. The focus on intentionality, in creating a sensorial contrast, expresses the sense in which the object is given. Obviously the moral signification that motivates the hero’s need to save someone will not be explicitly materialized – not even in speech. Our problem in trying to understand reasons why someone might

selflessly sacrifice themselves is that we were looking for the significations themselves *as tangible rather than intelligible*, when in fact signs and significations are variations of the same thing: “je n’entends pas *autre chose* que des sons, et pourtant, ce ne sont pas les sons eux-mêmes que j’entends” (Barbaras 1990, 330). (Within his work on language and meaning, Merleau-Ponty draws a contrast between tangibility and intelligibility, wherein the former describes what can be physically perceived and the latter concerns what can be taken up intellectually without perception.⁵⁴) In other words, there is no “content” of significations but merely the significations serving as signs for themselves. What the hero sees is not necessarily the specificities of what’s being expressed to them tangibly: the spatial configuration of the victim’s body and the danger they face, that the actual pain they suffer is their nerves acting up along with other hormonal and physical reactions going on. The hero does not quantify each object of their phenomenal field in order to judge that there is indeed a danger and that something needs to be done within a specific timeframe. Rather, the hero’s understanding of what’s at stake is expressed in a qualitative way. Not only is this facilitated by the pre-personal experience of the original meanings contained in the object, but the meaning is transmitted through the physicality of things themselves.⁵⁵ There is, as a matter of fact, a relationship of “reversibility” between the signifier and the signified, a term that comes up in Merleau-Ponty’s later period to describe the inherent relation that exists between perceiving and perceived (Daly 2016, 78).⁵⁶ i) This reversibility is explained by Barbaras and Marratto to describe the “concealing” function of spoken language vis-à-vis its reliance on the act itself of conveying meaning (Barbaras 1990, 330; Marratto 2012, 174). But significations are not “on the inside” properly speaking, they are literally the product of a “lateral” relationship between the signs – between the foreground and the background in perception (Ibid). There is a differentiation at play here that needs to be accounted for as well. ii) This reversibility of signs and significations is *embodied* through the intercorporeal relations we have with others, and accounts for the possibility of having shared experiences of the same phenomenal fields. In other words, it is because of this reversibility between perceivers and their objects that the hero and the victim can be experiencing the same significations, but from different points of view.⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty illustrates this through his infamous passage about a 15-month-old infant who knows a priori what biting

feels like when seeing one's mouth showing the act of chewing (Ph.P 404-405). This reversibility is key to shared experiences as well (VI 187). Let us explore further these two ways of apprehending sign and signification. i) A victim's face is not expressing pain and suffering "comme les galons signifient le grade ou comme un numéro désigne une maison", their face *is* the suffering that we interpret and that we can speak about in the same way that "le signe ici n'indique pas seulement sa signification, il est habité par elle" (Ph.P 188). But how do we match a seemingly arbitrary sign to a conceptual signification? What makes it possible that tears on someone's face refer to the concept of "crying"? We do so because the bodily mechanism *articulates a relationship of differentiation between perceptions* (Barbaras 1990, 63-64). Differentiation between objects is always at the heart of perception as that is what allows us to see that phenomena can be distinct from one another amidst the generality of being. This differentiation is further articulated both temporally and sensorially. In terms of time, a sign articulates its signification because it is the product of its temporal unfolding. We decipher some sense in a situation because it inherited *what happened before* and presents to us the accumulation of resulting effects from relationships (between bodies and/or between objects) – the same way that this neighborhood does not smell like grass anymore, but the smell turned into a burning smell, and my eyes posing on cookie cutter houses shift onto one of them with flames inside, and so on. There is a transition from before I experience a situation of danger into the danger itself, and each transition leaves the next one open-ended. Somebody's face is articulating something: It is because they do not have "crying" as their only emotional ability that I can tell when they are crying from when they are not. The crying carries with it a process of forming tears, shifting facial muscles, in such a way that by the end of it the physical mechanisms are not mechanical anymore but existential, significative, and I see "crying" and "pain" rather than "a face shaped such a way with contracted muscles and eyes producing transparent drops of liquid." Contributing to the emergence of the signification is not only differentiation and articulation within the sign-object itself, but the relationship articulated with perception as well. The signification is further informed by perception, such that a house on fire signifies different things whether it is real life or a movie, and its meaning will be experienced within a grander sense of the world we are experiencing right now. I can also perceive

someone's face as crying in pain because what their face does I can do as well, and my own facial acting inherently confers to me that I am crying – my own awareness that I am crying is not detached, in a dualist sense, from my embeddedness in the same way I would feel this detachment when I think I am crying when my body is not doing it.⁵⁸ So the sign *is* the signification and vice-versa, because the signification acts as a further manifestation of the phenomenon it refers to.⁵⁹ The signification is neither another dimension of experience nor a concept merely limited to the “mind” in a dualist sense. Significations and meanings are experienced through perception insofar as they are embedded in things and constitute the effect of a series of articulated sign-objects in time. Significations arise out of movement: the actual movement of objects and the movement of my perceiving them such that I can describe “how they look”, because there begins to be a qualitative expression being felt in perception. Moreover, the significance of things is further revealed by the “projects” and “expressivity” embodied by perception itself (Marratto 2012, 173).⁶⁰ The body is a “pouvoir d'expression naturelle” because its relationship with the world manifests references to objects themselves and what they signify based on this relationship (Ph.P 211; Marratto 2012, 173). This is another way through which significations get articulated. In other words, what the hero perceives pre-personally is those significations articulated through the ways in which the situation appears to them. This point is crucial to understand in order to see that the hero's motivations are not purely empathetic, that they are “feeling” the other person's pain or imagining themselves in their shoes, but rather that the distress and helplessness of others appears for the hero as soliciting them to act on it.

ii) This reversibility and unity of sign and signification also applies to bodily experiences. The body-schema is always shared with others insofar as it always has a foot in the general field of existence and its ability to have a pre-personal field depends on the body also existing *for other bodies*. The possibility of having a shared experience with someone else is explained by Merleau-Ponty's reversibility as well. When trying to rescue a child hanging on a window of an eight-story building, Shontakbaev Sabit squeezes himself through the window frame, shifts his body onto the unstable windowpane, and extends

his hand to grab the toddler's feet. In that moment, both of them act as perceiver and perceived, and in this way a shared experience of the same world can be achieved. Merleau-Ponty explains that if I squeeze my right hand with my left hand, I can actively feel the left one *perceiving* the other while I cannot really feel the other one being perceived, because if I try to feel my right hand I automatically stop feeling the left one as doing the touching and as being touched instead. But it turns out that this also applies to other bodies as well. Within a handshake, I am as much perceived as I am perceiving somebody's hand (VI 187). Significations can be interpreted differently because their signs can be exhausted by reversible corporeal relations. Not only are they both "on the same side" of their body (Daly 2016, 258), a hero and a victim both share the same world, the same landscape, and their actions will be coordinated to a minimum in virtue of the fact that they happen within the same context (Ibid). The bare necessity for having a shared experience between two bodies is to achieve an "opération concordante de son corps et du mien" such that it is neither the hero nor the victim who perceives the danger, but an anonymous perception accessing the generality of the experience (Ibid). In this way, even if the same danger provides different significations to multiple subjects, these subjects all share the same generality of experience to the extent that one's signification is reversible to the other's, such that the hero's outwardness expresses what they "inwardly wished to be", which, in a manner of speaking, is to say that their saving grace reverses the victim's helplessness (SNS 258).⁶¹

We finally arrive at a point where significations can also accrue a *moral* character in virtue of being affective. Indeed, what we have explored so far is an effective or efficient meaning of signification, insofar as it informs perception further about the world that it inhabits. But based on our previous understanding that the body-schema sustains *affective* relationships with its environment, there is a basis to claim that significations are affective as well, especially when they concern the possibilities for anyone's experience like freedom. The mode of the relationship between the body-schema and its object of perception articulates an affective meaning because the former is concerned by the latter, such that whatever happens to the object will affect the body-schema as well (Daly 2016, 265). This is more than

empathy or *Einfühlung*, a projection of one's experience of another's through communication,⁶² because the hero literally shares the same experience as the victim through the relationships established between their bodies and their freedom. The moral motivations provided to perception arise out of the body-schema's apprehending the object insofar as it exists *for the body-schema* so that a relationship on the mode of existing for the subject can be entertained, which causes the body-schema to become affected by this object, and the shared intercorporeal experience providing the hero with the necessary perceptual knowledge that what the victim perceives also affects them so much that the hero's existentiality becomes pared by this situation.⁶³ In the end, then, there can be cases in which a perceptual signification is effective in two ways: It provides knowledge about what something is like, and it can affect the body so much that it is also effective in *motivating* the body to react.

The outstanding particularity here, though, is that what the hero experiences is their relationship to the pre-personal freedom itself, the freedom that is general and available to everyone, as if they were responsible for this freedom and not just their own personal freedom. We can confidently return to the *Phénoménologie's* ending, where Merleau-Ponty wonders to what extent we can sacrifice our own freedom and suggest that spontaneous heroism highlights further the relevance of the pre-personal for answering this issue.

Moreover, the way in which the body-schema becomes affected by a signification serves as a moral motivation insofar as it expresses *what ought to be* in the subject's experience. The body-schema seizes a certain way of existing based on its relationship with the world, and disturbances in this relationship will affect the body-schema in such a way that its response manifests the wrongfulness of the transformed relationship, in the same way that aphasia manifests itself in a patient who could not live her romantic relationship anymore (Ph.P 187-189). We already know that an obvious answer is that one sacrifices themselves when their situation is no longer bearable or experiential – the lack of freedom is so extreme that phenomenological experience is almost no longer possible.⁶⁴ Here, however, we begin to see descriptive claims about experience counting as normative claims as well.

The amazing result from this investigation, however, is that the generality of a phenomenal field confuses the personal and impersonal involvement of people. Merleau-Ponty's announcement that there is a pre-personal realm of experience becomes a normative claim too, such that it *ought to be* for anyone that the world can be shared. When this is no longer the case, the generality of experience – of freedom – becomes the responsibility of someone else in particular, depending on how they perceive the significations of this danger such that their body could know, through all the obstacles threatening freedom, that there is a gap somehow somewhere that leaves room for resolving this danger allegedly *sans issues*. This is also why moral motivations will not be the same in situations that might be different or similar.⁶⁵ None of this could take place if the body-schema did not apprehend the *style* of its experience with the phenomena. Past and future constantly “haunt” the body in such a way that embodiment becomes a “style of being”, a manner of moving through the world that accounts for habituation and future possibilities (Daly 2016, 119-120, 114). Style is Merleau-Ponty's term for describing “un mode de formulation” of beings and Being that alludes to “the perceived world” (ILVS 1481; Daly 2016, 114).⁶⁶ It does not refer to strict phenomenological conditions for there to be a phenomenon, but rather a sort of way in which it can manifest itself that remains to be determined in its singularity. This concept allows us to specify that there are variations to what the hero perceives and that they can behave heroically *even if they do not perceive every intricacy of their experience*. This is why some of their actions are not perfect at all, or why some of them can fail, because they may recognize the manner in which a resolution to a danger appears but the technical steps to this resolution remain to be experienced.⁶⁷ Through perception they perceive significations that display a certain style of experience such that they get an idea of what they should be experiencing, leaving the definite details to be determined when they will be making a move. What I hope to have conveyed here is that we can be “pulled” in different directions based on what we perceive. Moral significations are to be understood as objective because they emanate from the same sign-objects, sign-objects that both heroes and victims perceive. Yet there can be differences between the way you and I might perceive different moral significations in the same object and only one of us might act on it. This difference does not merely depend on how much we can be affected by the object, but on

how our bodies themselves relate to it. That is why we can be *oriented* by perceptual significations toward further perceptions and bodily movements, such that an initial moral orientation blossoms into heroic action —something with which we can now conclude our investigation.

CONCLUSION: (RE)ORIENTING MORALITY

Some concluding words need to be said here with regard to moral orientation. This is a phenomenological concept recently put forward to describe the phenomenon of being *encouraged* or *oriented* to act a certain moral way, which helps to put into perspective the claims I am advancing here. In this case, it can describe the bodily knowledge that seems automatically available to spontaneous heroes to act heroically. Many accounts of moral experience place too much emphasis on the subject's cognition at the cost of neglecting its relationship with the world on the level of perception (Harbin 2016, 52).⁶⁸ Our account of spontaneity in Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that non-deliberate judgements can be made considering the amount of knowledge that the world itself provides to us through the senses. Some scholars such as Harbin and Wiinikka-Lydon support the idea that there is moral orientation by highlighting the moral *disorientation* caused by disturbances and absences of the perceptual relationship we have with the world. Our investigation complements Harbin and others' method by reversing their approach which is to look directly at the phenomenon of moral orientation rather than its absence. In this context, spontaneous heroism, then, is revealed as a matter of orientation at the perceptual level and we have seen that moral significations can be obtained perceptually as well. The descriptive perceptions of our experience turn into moral motives because these perceptions become contingent upon being shared with others.

This research fulfilled two goals: i) To provide a newer interpretation of heroism within Merleau-Ponty's work that showed his interest for this theme in relation to freedom, perception, and morality rather than politics. In readdressing his references to heroism we clearly saw that they contain heavy allusions and assumptions based on his view on perception and freedom, which suggests that heroism's place within his work is not merely political in nature. ii) We used this interpretation in order to further

inform modern testimonies of heroism so as to finally provide a decent sketch of a phenomenology of heroism. This latter goal allowed us to present the following argument based on phenomenological observations: Heroes do not merely act either from deliberation or automatic response, but instead they perceptually obtain the necessary moral significations to behave heroically. These moral significations are provided at the level of perception through the pre-personal level of experience, the way in which the body is already accessing the general being of things to ground itself. Moreover, the body's sensing these significations becomes affected in terms of its capabilities and its relationship to the event, such that it becomes predisposed to act heroically. All of this, again, ties up to the body's relationship to its experience of freedom. For others to move through the world and to experience a myriad of things there needs to be a freedom that is *generally (anonymously)* available to everyone. The freedom experienced by others continually slips and slides away as they articulate and further sediment the horizon of possibilities that is available to them. But this *glissement* of freedom from one experience to the next might create a trap for heroism in which the hero falls into when there is no future freedom to be shared between them and those in danger, with whom they used to share an undetermined horizon of possibilities. The hero is just as much "unfree" as the next person looking at the scene and all those who may literally fall off a building, a cliff, or a bridge. The hero falls into heroism because, in order for them to be exposed to a freedom that is available for everyone else, they also have to be responsible for this freedom when it is no longer available to others.

By using Merleau-Ponty's work on perception, we were able to get closer to his project for a moral phenomenology as well (Daly 2016, 3).⁶⁹ His work allowed us to understand that we can obtain suggestive meanings about our situation, and these suggestions can turn into moral impetuses or moral expectations *that orient us toward a further articulation of our experience*. It may happen sometimes that *the unfolding of a situation seems expected of us*: A war prisoner refuses to talk despite being tortured because "la situation historique, les camarades, le monde autour de lui, *lui paraissaient attendre de lui cette conduite-là*" (Ph.P 518, my emphasis). We can say the same about spontaneous heroes as well when

they claim that they “just did what needed to be done” (Rand & Epstein 2014). This in itself is a form of expectation both from the hero, who is expecting a certain kind of unfolding, and from the situation and the people involved who seem to expect *someone* to unfold the situation.⁷⁰ Our overall investigation demonstrated that intersubjective relationships shape and condition these expectations – like when we feel expected to help a friend because we appreciate them or when someone cries for help because they simply know that *there is someone out there* – but without conditioning the specific behaviors required for these situations and merely because of how we are affected by changes that could occur in these relationships. More than that, we were able to see with Merleau-Ponty that these expectations also emerge out of the situations themselves through the pre-objective meanings that they convey. As such, then, the world is constantly orienting us toward certain possibilities and projects that are more realizable than others in virtue of our situational and bodily disposition. But the phenomenological character of moral orientation also conveys a deep level of uncertainty that needs to be accounted for in the literature on heroism. This uncertainty is the nothingness experienced in the center of the action, the absolute lack of knowledge and complete surprise about what happens next. The argument I present in this research only works by “tracing the experience backward” so to speak, by starting from testimonies of heroic experiences contrasted against Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of spontaneity. It would be a sort of Kierkegaardian leap of faith to say that this is always the case because not every heroic experience is the same and they can only be recalled by those who lived them rather than be described as they occur.⁷¹

Where this research becomes significant is that it provides a descriptive angle that is rarely discussed in psychology and moral phenomenology (of selfless sacrifice) that reveals the way that spontaneous heroism can and does spring not from deliberation, resolve, uncanny ability, but by an affective exposure to slippery situations of uncertainty that call on our freedom in unexpected ways. This uncertainty and the affective motive of spontaneous heroism manifests itself when the hero, having overcome their dangers and saved somebody else, experiences post-traumatic stress disorder (which is not uncommon)⁷², at the heart of which lurks a deep and constant fear that dangerous situations could happen

again, anytime, and that they are closer to death now than they were before – that they could fall again into the arms of someone who needs to be saved. This is part of being involved with the world when every commitment to a specific form of freedom slides away into another. The world keeps us on our toes by having us involved with it before we consciously experience it. In this way, the dangers experienced by civilian heroes were always organically introduced into their phenomenal field and their commitments to those dangers, their unbelievable behaviors resolving these dangers, merely lead away to other contingent freedoms and perceptions that have yet to be present and remain uncertain for now. “Personne n’est sauvé et personne n’est perdu tout à fait” (Ph.P 199).

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ENDNOTES

¹ See also Smyth 2016 about the ambiguity of the *Phénoménologie*'s ending.

² Throughout this paper I will refer to plural and singular interchangeably to describe the number of people saved by those heroes.

³ Especially Ami Harbin's book *Moral Disorientations*, Susan Bredlau's *The Other in Perception*, and Scott Marratto's *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity*.

⁴ See for instance Smyth 2016, 1.

⁵ The fact that freedom has to be "for everyone else" hints that it participates in the generic realm of possibilities for perception that Merleau-Ponty calls the "pre-personal level of perception", which will become clearer as we address this concept subsequently.

⁶ But Saint-Exupéry's status as a recognized hero turns out to be contentious. See for instance Smyth 2016, 7-22. Contrary to what Smyth suggests, even though Saint-Exupéry's political thought differs from Merleau-Ponty's and that the former does express complete disregard for embodiment at times, I believe Merleau-Ponty is picking up these words because they speak to his exposition of the struggle with freedom. Even Smyth's reformulation of Saint-Exupéry's words into what he actually meant ("Quand le corps se défait, l'essentiel se montre. L'homme n'est qu'un noeud de relations. Les relations comptent seules pour l'homme." PG 171) simply shows that a body needs a relational situation (Smyth 2016, 23-28). Moreover, I believe readers can interpret Merleau-Ponty's references to Saint-Exupéry as how the former would interpret the latter as a case study. Even if the latter doesn't support the former's claims, his behavior illustrates the former's view in action.

⁷ This issue is somewhat differently exposed by Smyth in terms of evaluating the extent of one's *political engagement*. Smyth argues that heroism is Merleau-Ponty's illustration of an engagement that is motivated by a Marxist and historical conception of resolving the problem of freedom (Smyth 2016, 71-105). Not only is Smyth overlooking the kind of heroism that can both resolve the issue of freedom while remaining apolitical, such as in the cases of civilian sacrifice I present subsequently, but he is also neglecting the *existential* part played by perception which Merleau-Ponty suggests in the following passage. Instead, he attributes the existential meaning of heroic behavior to a political status (oppressed versus oppressor, class struggle, etc.). This is mainly due to his narrow focus on Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty's experience of the war only.

⁸; Rodney's case is presented further below.

⁹ Citing Saint-Exupéry again: "Mais certes au cours de ma vie, lorsque rien d'urgent ne me gouverne, lorsque ma signification n'est pas en jeu, je ne vois point de problèmes plus graves que ceux de mon corps." (Ph.P 100; PG 169) Freedom as well, as an engagement, is merely "valable que pour un cycle de temps." (Ph.P 519)

¹⁰ "Ma liberté peut détourner ma vie de son sens spontané, mais par une série de glissements, en l'épousant d'abord, et non par aucune création absolue." (Ph.P 519)

¹¹ See also Cléro & Sasso 2002, 316-317

¹² This idea comes up again the 1947 essay *Humanisme et terreur*, where Merleau-Ponty explains that heroes are the only ones who will contest these ideological prejudices held by society (HT xxxi). Heroes do not expect to be approved and supported by others considering the lengths to which they have to fight for what they believe. This echoes to some extent the sorts of situations where acts of heroism will be considered insane and thoughtless from a utilitarian ground because of how risky they can be. In another footnote, Merleau-Ponty recalls the uneasiness experienced by soldiers who were glorified by their relatives even though they believe they were not necessarily "in the right" to act like heroes by killing their enemies on the front line and defend commendable ideals through means that were not commendable either (HT xxxv). In parallel to the 1945 essay, then, heroes cannot even be perceived as heroes for themselves, and it further reinforces the fact that we cannot ask others to be heroes and we can't judge them for not acting heroically either (Cléro & Sasso 2002, 317-318). But this does not really concern the kind of spontaneous heroism that interests us, especially since Merleau-Ponty had in mind the German occupation in France at the time he was writing this. He later abandoned his view about violence in political rebellion (including heroically *political* sacrifice), which further encourages us to discard this text from our present project.

¹³ "Mais c'est ici qu'il faut se taire, [...] il ne convient pas qu'un autre parle en son nom" (Ph.P 520). "Comment faire l'éloge de l'héroïsme si l'on est un héros ? Et comment le faire si l'on n'en est pas un ? Il vaudrait mieux savoir au juste ce qu'il y a derrière ce grand mot" (SNS 213). See also Worms 2019, 23

¹⁴ It needs to be pointed out that there are different kinds of bodily involvement within heroism. A firefighter's body does not apprehend dangers the same way that somebody who has no training at all would. As we shall see later on,

this is emphatically the case in spontaneous heroism that the person's actions are entirely embodied through their relations with the situation. Even though a firefighter's heroism is also embodied, their body might not be motivated and relating to the situation in the same way because of the training that they have.

This claim is further supported by the fact that heroism concludes a chapter intended to argue that freedom operates on the level of perception. If heroism is an illustration of freedom and its problematic condition, it has to be treated on the level of perception as well. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's treatment of freedom on the level of perception potentially echoes his interest in the "fonctions éthiques" that perception might possess (Cléro & Sasso 2002, 316; see also Any Daly's *Merleau-Ponty And The Ethics of Intersubjectivity*).

¹⁵ See also Smyth 2014, 107-139; This break between the "traditional" conception of heroism in philosophy with a contemporary interpretation also biographically echoes the larger divides that emerged between contemporary 20th century philosophy and classical philosophy as a result of the war (Worms 2019, 23-24).

¹⁶ Katherine Kirby offers a similar view whereby heroic action (and ethics in general) is based on asymmetry between subjectivities (2010), which I strongly oppose in this paper. SNS 324

¹⁷ Because this falls outside the scope of my project, I am merely reporting Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Hegel and I will not evaluate the validity of these claims in depth.

¹⁸ Smyth, instead, derives the focus to how this essay connects with Merleau-Ponty's political thought and Marxist background (2010).

¹⁹ Which we could most likely put in parallel with freedom's temporal momentum experienced as a series of "glissements" as described above.

²⁰ "Le sacrifice de la vie sera philosophiquement impossible, il ne s'agira que de « mettre en jeu » sa vie, ce qui est une manière plus profonde de vivre" (SC 283).

²¹ Which is also further emphasized by Merleau-Ponty's paraphrasing Saint-Exupéry about his love for life instead of death (SNS 330). Obviously, heroes seek out life and survival rather than death but it seems Hegel forgot about that. Heroic sacrifice is to be understood as a way to resolve a lack of freedom rather than a mere consequence of it.

²² My claim is further supported by Merleau-Ponty's constant describing of heroes as being involved with others, with the world, and essentially dealing with other bodies.

²³ "Impossible, on l'a dit et on le maintiendra, de caractériser le héros autrement que par le sacrifice de soi et la manifestation d'une valeur [...]" (ibid, 23). For Merleau-Ponty too heroism is a sacrifice of self and the expression of a moral value. This is mentioned when, according to him, Saint-Exupéry « lives » his moral duty because he *is* that duty, it represents the follow-up to what and who he is: "parce qu'il ne serait plus rien s'il se dérobaît. À mesure qu'il entre dans le danger, il reconquiert son être" (SNS 328). In a way, the absence of self-awareness leaves space for the hero to be the awareness or intentional focus on their moral impetus.

²⁴ See also Antich 2021a, 19-27

²⁵ Without this spontaneous perceptual judgement "nous n'aurions pas un monde, c'est-à-dire un ensemble de choses qui émergent de l'informe en se proposant à notre corps comme « à toucher », « à prendre », « à franchir », nous n'aurions jamais conscience de nous ajuster aux choses et de les atteindre là où elles sont, [...]" (Ph.P 503).

²⁶ In the same way that the merging of one's existential signification with their body only lasts momentarily (Ph.P 99-100).

²⁷ See for instance Rand & Epstein 2014, which we will discuss subsequently.

²⁸ Notice here, again, that death was not a necessary condition for Rodney's experience since he did not think about it before then.

²⁹ See also Allison and Goethals 2016; Zeno, Blau and Zimbardo 2011; Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou. 2015; Marsh et al. 2014.

³⁰ Just a few examples of the testimonies they used: "Honestly, in a situation like that, you're put in it and you just think he had to be stopped somehow. *You don't think ... you just react. [I] just reacted*; he just *had to be* stopped." "The minute we realized there was a car on the tracks, and we heard the train whistle, there was really no time to think, to process it ... *I just reacted*. I think when we're forced into this kind of situation you become a different person. *I never thought I'd be capable of doing something like that*." "I went ahead and just climbed through the fence and I don't remember ever feeling the electricity. . It was just here is the problem, here's what I need to do and something needed to happen. If nobody came to this woman's rescue, she would die. *I didn't really take the time to think about what would happen*." (Rand & Epstein 2014, emphasis mine.)

³¹ See also Montealegre, Andres, and William Jimenez-Leal 2019

³² See also Harbin 2016, 42-53 for further rebutting of psychological accounts of what she calls “moral resolvism” which is a view that characterizes people acting morally based on a moral judgement rather than admitting that they acted morally without referring to a moral judgement first.

³³ These examples are not to be confused with heroic cases where heroes believe that they did not act out of “nonsacrificial existential necessity”, as explored in Smyth 2020. I will be making the point throughout this paper that the spontaneous heroism performed by these people were also based on a necessary existential sacrifice.

³⁴ Gassama, for instance, had no prior climbing experience (Agnew 2019).

³⁵ This other part of me *belongs to the world* and is already open to it in various ways and operates some sort of synchronicity with it: “qui s'est déjà ouvert à certains de ses aspects et synchronisé avec eux” (Ph.P 250).

³⁶ As we shall see later on, this openness is in fact our body-schema being receptive of new possibilities for being in the world.

³⁷ The act of perceiving always implies another one, from a different point of view or not, which inherently displays a possibility for sharing the same object with another perception: “Autrui n'est nulle part dans l'être, c'est par derrière qu'il se glisse dans ma perception : l'expérience que je fais de ma prise sur le monde est ce qui me rend capable d'en reconnaître une autre et de percevoir un autre moi-même, si seulement, à l'intérieur de mon monde, s'ébauche un geste semblable au mien” (PdM 190).

³⁸ “Le simple usage de cette langue, comme les comportements institués dont je suis l'agent et le témoin, ne me donnent qu'un autre en général, diffus à travers mon champ [...] et en somme plutôt une notion qu'une présence. Mais l'opération expressive et en particulier la parole, prise à l'état naissant, établit une situation commune qui n'est plus seulement communauté d'être mais communauté de faire” (PdM 190).

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir talk about this in terms of *empiètement* (encroachment) between freedoms. See Emmanuel de Saint-Aubert's “Le sang des autres” in *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l'être* (2004).

⁴⁰ Like the soldier in *Humanisme et terreur* who did not consider himself a hero because he killed someone instead of rebelling against the normativity of killing in the name of a political ideal.

⁴¹ Of course, there could be people such as psychopaths who would not feel this way at all. In this case, we may suspect that this has to do with a decreased level of empathy that Anya Daly describes as fundamental to having intersubjective relations. See for instance Daly 2016, 270-273.

⁴² This also depends on the way that bodies relate to a situation, which we discuss further below. See also Daly 2016, 270-273 for explanations of why someone may not act ethically based on the lack of embodiment and corporeal relationship they have with the world.

⁴³ “Les différentes parties de mon corps, ses aspects visuels, tactiles et moteurs ne sont pas simplement coordonnés. Si je suis assis à ma table et que je veuille atteindre le téléphone, le mouvement de la main vers l'objet, le redressement du tronc, la contraction des muscles des jambes s'enveloppent l'un l'autre; je veux un certain résultat, et les tâches se répartissent d'elles-mêmes entre les segments intéressés, les combinaisons possibles étant d'avance données comme équivalentes [...] Tous ces mouvements sont à notre disposition à partir de leur signification commune” (Ph.P 174). This common signification is established accordingly with the situatedness of the body. See also Ph.P 116.

⁴⁴ It also operates on the basis of the pre-personal field of existence. See also Merleau-Ponty's *La prose du monde* and Colin Smith's *The Notion of Object in the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*.

⁴⁵ See also Whitney 2019, 307-308.

⁴⁶ Citing Goldstein whom Merleau-Ponty agrees with.

⁴⁷ We would need to account for the chapter on time in the *Phénoménologie* in order to be up for this task.

⁴⁸ Gassama and Sabit entertained a relationship with their environment that is “heroically oriented” or “morally oriented” such that they went further ahead than the normative architectural features of their situations.

⁴⁹ This “general movement” also refers to the pre-personal, anonymous, field of experience. Things always exist within a general field, *for anyone*, at first.

⁵⁰ See also Harbin 2012.

⁵¹ See also the passage cited earlier (Ph.P 182).

⁵² See also Smyth 2014, 116.

⁵³ “Nous découvrons par là que les messages sensoriels ou les souvenirs ne sont saisis expressément et connus par nous que sous la condition d'une adhésion générale à la zone de notre corps et de notre vie dont ils relèvent” (Ph.P 189).

⁵⁴ See also VI 30

⁵⁵ See also Whitney 2019, 309-310

⁵⁶ Though Merleau-Ponty was already thinking about this phenomenon as early as in the *Phénoménologie* (Ph.P 127).

⁵⁷ See also Ph.P vi, Ph.P 409, Ph.P 464-465

⁵⁸ See again the description of intercorporeality in Ph.P 404

⁵⁹ “Puisque le même corps voit et touche, visible et tangible appartiennent au même monde” (VI 177).

⁶⁰ “Il faut seulement distinguer des degrés d’articulation et ne pas compromettre la différence phénoménale du sensible et de l’intelligible [...]” (Barbaras 1990, 331-332).

⁶¹ “Par cette « ductilité » de l’articulation, le ceci sensible devient le signe qu’il a toujours été et, par cette intériorité des signes, le monde laisse transparaître l’universalité qu’il a toujours recelée. Il n’y a donc pas le singulier et l’universel, le « ceci » sensible et la pure signification qui transforme tout « ceci » en signe, mais des degrés d’articulation, de généralité : tout comme l’extériorité du monde recouvre déjà une coprésence, mais figée, inaccomplie, et par conséquent voilée, l’universalité du sens n’est encore qu’un mode de la coprésence qui, par son dynamisme propre, accuse la participation de toute chose à toute autre, et met en scène l’équivalence générale du monde et transforme alors l’atome sensible en signe expressif.” (Barbaras 1990, 332-333); Smyth 2014, 116.

⁶² The “classical” conception of empathy from Stein to Husserl, see Daly 2016, 230-236, 267-270.

⁶³ To see the extent of ethical responsibility given to intercorporeality, see also Daly 2016, 266.

⁶⁴ See the discussion of *La guerre a eu lieu* above.

⁶⁵ “Il s’agit ici de réponses qui « se produisent dans le cadre d’une situation d’ensemble de l’excitant et peuvent être différentes quand celui-ci intervient dans des situations totales différentes, c’est-à-dire quand il a pour l’organisme des significations différentes” (SC 47).

⁶⁶ See also ILVS 1480-1481.

⁶⁷ This could be the case for French philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle, who tragically died while trying to rescue two children from drowning at sea in France (Morenne & Specia 2017; BBC News 2017). Not every wave can be surfed and a hero’s return to shore is not necessarily as smooth and methodical as in Gassama and Shontakbaev’s cases.

⁶⁸ Another example is the current scholarship on heroism in Merleau-Ponty that considers it from a merely political, therefore cognitive, point of view.

⁶⁹ For a deeper look into the fundamentals of moral phenomenology, see Kriegel 2008 as well as Sanders & Wisniewski 2012.

⁷⁰ This anonymous *someone* can also be a *something*, like when we expect a miracle or an act of nature when it seems humanly impossible to exit the situation alive.

⁷¹ Put otherwise, the aim here is to understand and lend support to Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of heroism. This research does not and cannot pretend to speak for heroes themselves.

⁷² See also Wilde 2022; See also Wiinikka-Lydon 2020 on “moral injury”.