

Perceptual Faith and Reflection in Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract

Perceptual Faith and Reflection in Merleau-Ponty

Jeff Beer

The following thesis is first of all an attempt to explore the relationship between what Merleau-Ponty calls the “perceptual faith”—generally understood as a prereflective faith in the perceived world as real and in common—and reflection or ‘intellectual consciousness’. The suggestion will be that the objectivism operative in everyday perception acts as an irresistible model for the presumption of a purely reflective activity. Insofar as there is an argument it is located in the section on perceptual faith. There an effort is made to show that while it is a perceiving, situated subject that has faith in the perceived as real, that is, in others as co-inhabitants of a common world, this faith, what Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls a “natal pact,” because it is anonymous, because the subject is inserted or “buried in the world,” should be understood as testifying to and being ‘honored’ by or made possible vis-a-vis the surrounding world, which we have called a “world of institutions” or “work of faith.”

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List of Abbreviations

Works by Hannah Arendt

HC The Human Condition
LM The Life of the Mind

Works by Maurice Blanchot

ES “Everyday Speech”

Works by Edmund Husserl

C The Crisis of European Sciences
and Transcendental Phenomenology

Works by Alfred Schutz

SLW The Structures of the Life-World

Works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty

HLP Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology
Ph.P Phenomenology of Perception
PP The Primacy of Perception
S Signs
SB The Structure of Behavior
TL Themes from the Lectures
VI The Visible and the Invisible

INTRODUCTION

It's interesting how sometimes the most helpful and perhaps even the most faithful commentary on an author's work is not that which lights upon the text itself and accepts or rejects it, but insists on the situatedness of the work within a broader project, and even within a broader truth that the work participates in, the horizons of which, perhaps scattered about the entire collection of writings that an author may produce, perhaps even awaiting us in an *impensé* or "unfinished thought" (TL 114), can quite easily be displaced, forgotten, or just continue to go unnoticed, even as they appear here and there in various more or less determinate formulations, or in those silent exchanges between words, in their "lateral implications" (TL 114), where in a movement, like the invisible extension of an arm, something about the work seems to have been organized, and to have been suddenly held out. With Merleau-Ponty the temptation to isolate aspects of his thought from a broader project that propels them and is thus proper to them, even if this broader project is not everywhere said, is as he would say "quasi-irresistible," and indeed he would say it is inevitable, not only because in seeing what we do see we wouldn't know what we're not noticing, because we're not noticing it, but also because in principle we "see the things *through the other end*," we "[...] disregard Being and prefer the object to it, that is, a Being with which we have broken [...]" (VI 248, modified). Disregarding the historicity and contingency of a philosopher's broader gesture, and favoring the object, we glide around in a reduced landscape oriented by what Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls "tufts" or "thickets of meaning," yet all the while terminating our gaze in manageable

wholes, 'theses', 'topics', 'notions', just as around us in everyday life we see not and think not (though we may feel) the invisible life that sustains the spectacle precisely because we are heading straight for it, or it's heading straight for us. We see "the things themselves," things like invasions, nation-states, lions, what Merleau-Ponty calls the "visible," without ever having to awaken ourselves to the silent chatter, to the kinships proper to these 'objects' in order to perpetrate them, or live in them, or get past them, since doing so would only get in the way. This is not to say that these residues do not contain a truth, because they do, even if it is a partial or subordinate truth whose significance ought to be assigned to another level. At the same time, once reflection awakens within this reduced landscape, which causes us no trouble in lived experience, and indeed is our accord with the world, a kind of natural Cartesianism takes root by which we take ourselves to be unaffected observers, capable of soaring above these 'things in themselves', supposing that all there is to get from an author is just there in itself on the page and that we need only to look and see for ourselves what the words "refer" to, only to eventually be thrown into confusion since "how is it that I perceive the things themselves, where they rest, and that they occur within me, on this side of my body?"¹—and thus inevitably into crisis where we are faced with a world that a disembodied reason cannot understand. In these respects it is a welcome gesture, and I think an important reminder of the nature of Merleau-Ponty's efforts, to what he was trying to do as a phenomenologist, when James Edie insists that "in interpreting [*Phenomenology of Perception*] alone and in isolation from his other writings, we must take seriously its *programmatic character*" (PP xv)...

1 Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000) p. 11.

Taking seriously the programmatic character of Merleau-Ponty's work is to see in it, from his earliest writings, including his dissertation *The Structure of Behavior* through the extant manuscripts and working notes that comprise *The Visible and the Invisible*, a sustained effort to work out the meaning and implications of the thesis of the “primacy of perception” whose horizon seems to me to have been and continues to be an original and profound response to the nature² of the crisis of reason. Part of this response consists in Merleau-Ponty's tracing of the nature of the crisis to a truth-intentionality and objectifying power³ rooted in prescientific, prephilosophical, or naive perception, i.e., in a being-in-the-world that Merleau-Ponty calls “perceptual faith.”

In this thesis our attempt is to describe this perceptual faith and the manner in which it manifests at the level of rationality. Broadly put our contention can be stated as follows: (1) Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of lived perception reveals a prescientific and prephilosophical objectivism that serves as an inevitable model and point of departure for rationalistic reflective enterprises including the notion of an exclusively reflective enterprise (not tied to a situation); (2) the perceived world that immediate perception opens onto is taken for granted as objective, that is to say, in common and real or “in itself” beyond the individual situatedness of a perceiving subject.

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- 2 Both Nietzsche and Marx established what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a “pure interrogation,” a pure suspicion or questioning which “may provide a language [praxis, will to power] for their successors [...] the beginnings of analyses with a quite new depth—[but which] cannot by contrast *guide* posterity [...]” (TL 101). In other words, we must not renounce philosophy in the wake of the deconstruction of rationalistic systems, but rather incorporate interrogation into the philosophical gesture as such, and seek in these systems their truth, that is, we must create a new philosophy, “[...] taking into account the world in which we live where it becomes clear that [the] negation of metaphysics cannot take the place of philosophy” (TL 103, modified) and where metaphysics or the closing off of an ontology to a world taken as already understood is reappropriated as an occultation that remains “at each instant possible.”
- 3 We have in mind the following suggestion: “[...] the crises of psychology result from reasons of principle and not from some delay of the research in this or that particular domain” (VI 23).

This one world, in other words, is already lived and taken for granted prior to critical thought as an intersubjective world that we have “faith” in not because it is a world open to doubt, but precisely because we are so deeply instituted in it and in reality doubt it not—faith, that is to say, “language transcends us and yet we speak” (*Ph.P* 392).

Toward these ends, our tasks in the thesis are as follows: (1) to elaborate the thesis of the primacy of perception in order to provide a background for the discussion of Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of lived perception; (2) to show how this thesis is pursued through the notion of perceptual faith (*la foi perceptive*), that is, our prereflective taken-for-grantedness with respect to the world; (3) to identify in the perceptual faith a mode of relation to the world or mode of insertedness whereby “the world” is taken as complete and “in itself” yet at the same time “for us” or appearing only from a point of view; (4) to sketch out the transition from the natural attitude to its implication at the level of scientific and philosophical reflection; (5) to conclude with a discussion of why 'high-altitude thinking' or the “*pensée de survol*” is “quasi-irresistible.”

Our approach to Merleau-Ponty's work will perhaps seem on the face of it to bypass its most important and intriguing aspects, which in a sense is true. After all, we are not trying to show the “enigma,” the “quasi-organic” (*PP* 12) bond that is inconceivable for naturalistic or classical (rationalistic) thinking, and in that sense the signifying power that Merleau-Ponty restores from beneath the sedimentations of objective thought, i.e., the speaking subject, the significative intention, intentional

transgression, thinking according to another; these aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work remain for the most part on the periphery of our discussion. What we are trying to show is how it is that we find ourselves or get ourselves in a position where we do not see this enigma. "I borrow myself from others" (*S* 159). "It is through my relation to 'things' that I know myself [...]" (*Ph.P* 383). Why is this, or rather, how is this not obvious if we prove it at each moment? How is our "naive certitude" of the world and others "[...] as weak when it wishes to convert itself into theses as it is strong in practice" (*VI* 13)? How is Cartesianism a "natural sequel" (*Ph.P* 71) to perception, and thus an ongoing possibility and even an ongoing probability? What is it about lived perception that encourages the adoption of an attitude of non-situatedness or non-dependence such that the project-character of our lives and the world in which we live is lost or continues to go unrecognized? How does the rationalistic ethos rooted in lived perception become taken for granted in its diverse forms as part of our relatively permanent reality and mode of relatedness and so how might a de-politicized, detemporalized idea of ourselves and the world in which we live become true, because we so naturally come to live it?⁴ These are our guiding questions, and to address them we are not going to outline Merleau-Ponty's interrogative philosophy, but rather see if we can put ourselves on the verge of it; we are not going to elaborate that buried universe of expressive or instituting powers, but strike a route along its clearings; and we are not going to start with the crisis, but rather see if we can get there.

4 Arendt expresses this concern well: "The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society. It is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known" (*HC* 322).

I. THE PRIMACY OF PERCEPTION

The theme of the primacy of perception is a sound basis from which to enter into Merleau-Ponty's work. The reason is that the thesis, we think, announces a general task that Merleau-Ponty deepens over the course of his entire career: that of returning to the experience of the perceiving body in order to locate the basis of a rationality which by Merleau-Ponty's time is suffering under relativism, nihilism, and scepticism:

Everything we believed to be thought through, and thought through correctly—freedom and authority, the citizen against authority, the heroism of the citizen, liberal humanism, formal democracy and the real democracy which suppresses it and realizes it, revolutionary heroism and humanism—has all fallen into ruin (*S* 22-23).

As a response to this “nameless adversity” threatening reason across European institutions and thus as a “[...] vigilance which does not let us forget the source of all knowledge [...]” (*S* 110) the return to perception (as a “phenomenology of rationality” that is also an “archaeology” of “brute” perception) should be seen as a series of deeper and deeper recoveries: at the most general level, that of consciousness of rationality⁵; and most centrally that of the “speaking subject” behind the “thinking subject,” capable of originating operations, in which the contingency of rationality can be seen at work; and finally that of the surrounding world with which the subject is inextricably intertwined. In this section our aim is to provide a brief summary of the thesis of the primacy of perception in order to show in Section II how the return to perceptual life is brought into focus with the notion of primordial or perceptual faith.

5 In this Merleau-Ponty sees a key role for philosophy: “Philosophy's role as consciousness of rationality in contingency is no insignificant residue. In the last analysis, only the philosophical consciousness of intersubjectivity enables us to understand scientific knowledge” (*S* 111).

In “The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences,” Merleau-Ponty provides two direct statements of his thesis of the primacy of perception: (1) “The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence” (*PP* 13); and (2) ‘By these words, the “primacy of perception,” we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action’ (*PP* 25).

We would like to focus on two aspects of this thesis. First, Merleau-Ponty is stressing that our access to the world is through our bodies, and that this bodily commerce with or inherence in the world, which is to say, perception, is the ultimate foundation for all knowledge, all higher-level idealizations. This is what Dillon refers to as the epistemological thesis.⁶ According to this thesis the perceiving subject is “[...] not this absolute thinker; rather [the subject] functions according to a natal pact between our body and the world, between ourselves and our body” (*PP* 6), that is, the subject is situated and, insofar as the subject is a thinker, has/is an “incarnate mind.”⁷ Second, this is coupled with the ontological thesis that the perceived world of immediate experience is not possible or necessary but real: “[...] in perception [the phenomenal object] is “real”; it is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of

6 M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988) p. 51.

7 “The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind. I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world, going against doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness. These philosophies commonly forget—in favor of a pure exteriority or of a pure interiority—the insertion of the mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relation which we entertain with our body and, correlatively, with perceived things” (*PP* 3).

perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which is it given exhaustively' (*PP* 15). Seen in these two ways the primacy of perception seems to reverse the relationship that we ordinarily find in philosophy where reason is understood to correct the illusions or 'mere appearances' of ordinary perception, but this is not a reversal. For Merleau-Ponty it is a question of discovering the reason behind reason, of putting to reason the task of facing up to its origins in prereflective life, that is, in what it does not constitute but which provides it with its basis, and thus "[...] to work toward [reason's] aggrandizement" (*PP* 30). Even if "[i]t is by considering language that we would best see how we are to and how we are not to return to the things themselves" (*VI* 125), the primacy of perception is by no means a renunciation of reflection either: "[...] without reflection life would probably dissipate itself in ignorance of itself or in chaos" (*PP* 19).⁸ Indeed, the interrogation of perception as foundational, a task that the thesis of the primacy of perception offers a

8 An important point to note here is that the return to perception is not a return to pre-thought, but to a non-theoretical mode of being. Philosophy does not know more than this brute experience, it "[...] seeks contact with brute being, and in any case informs itself in the company of those who have never lost that contact" (*S* 22). Of course, one of the goals of Merleau-Ponty's return to natural perception is to show the ambiguity that necessarily attends being inserted and in doing so, reflection's limited rights: "[...] philosophy which searches *beneath* science is not in turn "deeper" than passions, politics, and life. There is nothing more profound than experience which passes through the wall of being [...] Those who go by way of passion and desire up to this being know all there is to know. Philosophy does not comprehend them better than they are comprehended; it is in their experience that it learns about being' (*S* 22); "Even when our knowledge of things is concerned, we know far more about them in the natural attitude than the theoretical attitude can tell us—and above all we know it in a different way" (*S* 163). Notice that these recognitions of the power of brute experience to express what could never be fully explicated by explicit reflection does not force philosophy into the 'half-silence' with which the artist works. Indeed they give the philosopher more of a reason to try not only to understand the signifying power of brute expression, but also to show the limitations inherent in trying to think the historical resources of that power, which means the philosopher may have to learn how to write differently, since he or she knows that ideas [...] like every style [...] are elaborated within the thickness of being [...]" (*VI* 119) and not outside it. Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception [...] does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth" (*PP* 13).

general sketch of, will, of course, have to take place through reflection since [...] the unreflected [*irréfléchi*] comes into existence only through reflection [...]" (PP 30). For Merleau-Ponty the question is not exactly whether we can or can't think what we are doing, but rather what it is that we are doing when we think, which is to say, "what is the relation between intellectual consciousness and perceptual consciousness" (PP 19)? This question seems to animate most of Merleau-Ponty's work. In the discussion session following Merleau-Ponty's presentation of his thesis on the primacy of perception at the Collège de France Merleau-Ponty addresses this question directly when he says that in lived perception there is a "[...] mode of access to the object which is rediscovered at every level" (PP 34). This is quite an important suggestion: it is this "mode of access" that Merleau-Ponty is referring to, both in *Phenomenology of Perception* and in *The Visible and the Invisible*, with the notion of "perceptual faith." Perceptual faith is thus the 'buried object' that we are focusing on because we believe it is absolutely central to understanding Merleau-Ponty's return of the rational order to its roots in brute perceptual life, where it is shown that reflection is not a turn-about to a "pre-empirical subject which holds the keys to the world" and comprehends 'things'; "reflection must become aware of its object in a contact [...] which at the outset exceeds its power of comprehension" (S 104). In this faith Merleau-Ponty thus discovers a precritical 'objectivism' (the world appears as in itself, the idea appears as true and given) which belongs to and testifies to a transcendental plurality of speaking, anonymous subjects and a common world in which they are inserted, and it is to this faith under these aspects that we shall now turn our attention.

II. PERCEPTUAL FAITH

[...] before the reflection, and in order to make it possible, a naïve frequenting of the world is necessary [...] (VI 51).

We must conceive of a primordial *We* [*On*] that has its own authenticity and furthermore never ceases but continues to uphold the greatest passions of our adult life and to be experienced anew in each of our perceptions (S 175).

The social is already there when we come to know or judge it (*Ph.P* 362).

That aspect of the thesis of the primacy of perception which stresses our (unexamined) prereflective engagement with the perceived world as real (the “ontological” dimension of the thesis) corresponds to the notion of perceptual faith that we find at the center of Merleau-Ponty's attention in *The Visible and the Invisible*.⁹ The increasing focus Merleau-Ponty gives to this faith, first formulated in

9 The notion of perceptual faith appears in *Phenomenology of Perception* for the most part as primary or primordial opinion or faith. It is also referred to in various contexts as a “pre-conscious possession of the world” (*Ph.P* 298), “the miracle of the real world” (*Ph.P* 323), “primary comprehension” (*Ph.P* 327), confidence, trust, and belief in the world. These terms are at the same time the source of inevitable confusion since they normally imply or are identified with explicit acts of positing when what they are actually meant to signify is a “primordial contact with being” which is a pre-thetic living-with or being-instituted, a being already “buried” in the world. For our purposes here, that is, considering the faith we have in the perceived world in terms of its relation to reflective life, the following instances are relevant: “We agree that the matter and form of knowledge are results of analysis. I posit the stuff of knowledge when, breaking away from the primary faith inspired by perception, I adopt a critical attitude towards it and ask ‘what I am really seeing’” (*Ph.P* 241). The chapter “The Thing and the Natural World” contains the following example: “It is the momentum which carries us beyond subjectivity, which gives us our place in the world prior to any science and any verification, through a kind of ‘faith’ or ‘primary opinion’” (*Ph.P* 343). And on the following page, “Yet we do not cut consciousness off from itself, which would preclude all progress of knowledge beyond primary opinion, and especially the philosophic examination of primary opinion as the basis of all knowledge” (*Ph.P* 344). In “Other Selves in the Human World” we read: “My awareness of constructing an objective truth would never provide me with anything more than an objective truth for me, and my greatest attempt at impartiality would never enable me to prevail over my subjectivity (as Descartes so well expresses it by the hypothesis of the malignant demon), if I had not, underlying my judgements, the primordial certainty of being in contact with being itself, if, before any voluntary *adoption of a position*, I were not already *situated* in an intersubjective world, and if science too were not

The Structure of Behavior as immediate, direct, or naive consciousness, then in *Phenomenology of Perception* as primary or primordial opinion, and in *The Visible and the Invisible* as perceptual faith, attests to its central place in Merleau-Ponty's thought. We have suggested that one of the main reasons for this is that in the certitudes of lived perception Merleau-Ponty sees an "archetype" for rationalistic thinking that occludes yet testifies to our "natal pact" with the world and one another and thus which needs to be interrogated in order to see how this eclipse of our 'circuit' occurs and why, for example, empiricism, idealism, or solipsism, are "motivated errors."

Here our aim is not, however, to follow Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of perceptual faith, because in a sense such an interrogation actually takes place over an entire life's work, even though the statement of this interrogation as a philosophical mode is most directly formulated in and thus might seem to be particular to *The Visible and the Invisible*. In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, this natural trust or faith in the perceived world enters into the very definition of phenomenology:

upheld by this basic [*doxa*]" (*Ph.P* 354). In "The *Cogito*" chapter Merleau-Ponty makes an important link between the illusion of being unsituated and the perceptual faith: "The belief in absolute mind, or in a world in itself detached from us is no more than a rationalization of this primordial faith" (*Ph.P* 409). In the final chapter "On Freedom," Merleau-Ponty sees a similar relation: "Just as reflection borrows its wish for absolute sufficiency from the perception which causes a thing to appear, and as in this way idealism tacitly uses that 'primary opinion' which it would like to destroy as opinion, so freedom flounders in the contradictions of commitment, and fails to realize that, without the roots which it thrusts into the world, it would not be freedom at all" (*Ph.P* 456). It is notable that in every instance the perceptual faith is linked to reflection, which borrows the certainty of going to the things themselves found in immediate perception. This suggests that in Merleau-Ponty's work the perceptual faith, while it does signify being situated in *the* world along with a "belief" in the world and 'things' as "resting in themselves," plays a primarily 'negative' role in overcoming philosophy as reflection, where an unsituated observer, whether through nihilation, as we find in Sartre, or through a reduction to a transcendental subject, which we see in Husserl, would take for granted the capacity for pure access to a world-in-itself, or for pure reflection.

What is phenomenology? [...] It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with philosophical status (*Ph.P* vii).¹⁰

And so what we mean by saying that our aim is not to take up the interrogation is simply that we are not going to attend in any rigorous way to Merleau-Ponty's notions of the speaking subject, original speech, intentional transgression, all of which are really the fruits of an interrogation of the naive faith spread out over a career. Nor then is our aim to characterize the “hyper-reflection” by which such an interrogation proceeds, that would “take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account” (*VI* 38). For now we are heading in the other direction, toward the silence that interrogation wishes to make speak and that inspires a rationalization of the faith.

Thus our aim here is much more modest: to offer a description of perceptual faith and to highlight what is taken as understood in everyday perception, that is, what is this faith in precisely? And who or what maintains this faith? This will allow us to approach the “view from nowhere” from its source in immediate, lived experience, that is, the “lived world” (*Lebenswelt*) where the presuppositions of “absolute mind” and “absolute truth” as well as pure objectivity and pure subjectivity are found germinating in their preliminary, unarticulated forms. Once we have elucidated these “natural certitudes” (for example, the *lived* indubitability of the world in natural

¹⁰ Consider also the following definition: “In the last analysis, phenomenology is neither a materialism nor a philosophy of mind. Its proper work is to unveil the pre-theoretical layer on which both of these idealizations find their relative justification and are gone beyond” (*S* 165).

perception) we shall then try to show how it is that they are converted into reflection (as, for example, an attitude of indubitability taken toward the 'thought of the world') and attempt to sketch a passage to the *pensée de survol* or absolute spectator attitude.

“We see the things themselves, the world is what we see: formulae of this kind express a faith common to the natural man and the philosopher—the moment he opens his eyes” (VI 3).¹¹ This, the first sentence of *The Visible and the Invisible*, is Merleau-Ponty's frequently cited description of perceptual faith. What the description attempts to convey is that before philosophy, before science, before any critical evaluation, the subject experiences the world as straightforwardly “in itself” and in common (“for everyone”).¹² “The visible about us seems to rest in itself” (VI 130) When I open my eyes I find myself already absorbed in the world as real, I take it for granted, I reach for things that I 'know' are there, others already exist for me absolutely; in this everydayness I live among things with others, not alone; “I perceive things directly without my body forming a screen between them and me [...] (SB 219).

A negative definition of the perceptual faith can be given by saying that this unity of the subject with a world is not a unity between a cogito, tacit or otherwise, with an idea; in other words the “synthesis” (of an 'object') or “coexistence” (of subjects as a plurality) is not a 'cognitive' operation though there may be cognitive elements. This is quite an important point to make because frequently perceptual faith is described as

11 We should note that Merleau-Ponty's “thing in itself” is not a Kantian thing-in-itself, it is not located in the noumenal realm 'behind' appearances but rather is a mode of givenness of the surrounding world, of what appears: “[...] the thing presents itself to the person who perceives it as a thing in itself, and thus poses the problem of a genuine *in-itself-for-us*” (*Ph.P* 322).

12 In Alfred Schütz's *Structures of the Life-World* this faith is referred to as “natural attitude” (in contrast to the theoretical attitude): “[...] it is “self-evident to me in the natural attitude that these trees “really” are trees, for you and for me, these birds “really” are birds, and so on’ (*SLW* 7).

an assent to something like a “world thesis” or the proposition ‘the world exists’, and some commentators summarize perceptual faith by making the statement that “seeing is believing.”¹³ But this language can be quite misleading. Though “belief” here is meant metaphorically, and in that sense refers to a corporeal assent to the world and others already inscribed in the subject, not to an intellectual subsumption of a perceptual manifold under the permanent concepts of a transcendental ego, that is, not to a specific judgement or belief about anything¹⁴, the impression it may give is that of the latter, a consciousness immanently opting to acknowledge the existence of the world or others, to “act as though” there are others. For Merleau-Ponty, at the level of naive faith, there is no such privilege. Keeping the (primordial) faith in others is not something we choose; though we may lose faith in what we take to be *possible* on the part of another person, this distance only takes place because we already know (in a non-intellectualizing way) the other person exists, and we cannot say ‘no’ to the other’s total being precisely because it is mixed into our own and gives us the power to speak, before the ‘no’. This is the faith that “perceptual faith” is aiming at: others are there already without question, prior to any critical regard in our prepersonal, prethetic, incarnate experience; we have (perceptual) faith in them just as we have trust in our perceptual field in general as the field of the real even if we stumble

13 For example, Rosenthal describes this perceptual faith as consisting of “living in the belief, before the question arises as to validity or verification, that the world in which we live is the real world.” Rosenthal, *Pragmatism and Phenomenology, a Philosophical Encounter* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1980) p. 174. Merleau-Ponty uses the same terms, but when he says “believe” in relation to perceptual faith, the “belief” is not an “I believe” linked to “the world exists,” it is a bodily “I am able to” that is at the same time a “the other exists,” or “the world exists.” such that the other is approached not through an idea but through a corporeal devotion.

14 “There is the absolute certainty of the world in general, but not of any one thing in particular” (*Ph.P* 297).

across what turn out later to be illusions. While we are not suggesting that the language of belief is entirely problematic, we simply wish to point out that perceptual faith is not a belief in or attitude toward the world that the perceiving subject takes up voluntarily; at the level of naive faith, the world is not yet a thesis or idea to which a subject could voluntarily subscribe¹⁵; the “attitude” that the world is given¹⁶ as real, or that others really do exist, and that can be declined (without however relieving oneself of the primordial faith) only emerges at a higher level, namely that of reflection¹⁷:

The natural attitude really becomes an attitude—a tissue of judicatory and propositional acts—only when it becomes a naturalist thesis. The natural attitude itself emerges unscathed from the complaints which can be made about naturalism, because it is “prior to any thesis,” because it is the mystery of a *Weltthesis* prior to all theses. It is, Husserl says in another connection, the mystery of a primordial faith and a fundamental and original opinion (*Urglaube, Urdoxa*) which are thus not even in principle translatable in terms of clear and distinct knowledge, and which—more ancient than any “attitude” or “point of view”—give us not a representation of the world but the world itself” (S 163).

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- 15 The difficulty of putting this communion or coexistence into a language that forces us to enter into the dichotomies that we wish to overcome is noted by Bannan in *Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*: “The attempt to characterize the [meaning-bestowing or meaning-structuring] action itself leads Merleau-Ponty to use several terms without, apparently, being quite satisfied with any of them. Thus in a remark quoted above he speaks of *synthesis*. At other times, when the issue is the relation with other persons, he will use the term *co-existence*, which by itself is not very suggestive of action. At still other times (and in fact most often) he will use the term *constitution* to designate the originating activity of the phenomenal subject, despite the intellectualist history of that term.” John Bannan, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967) p. 89.
- 16 Just as we must not say that the world is a thesis in natural perception, since the world is lived before “the world” is given as an idea to be or not to be accepted, we must say that the ‘object’ in the world “[...] is [...] not actually *given* in perception, it is internally taken up by us, reconstituted and experienced by us in so far as it is bound up with a world, the basic structures of which we carry with us, and of which it is merely one of many possible concrete forms” (*Ph.P* 327). In other words, in natural perception I do not at each instant posit objects but find myself already bound up in a more ambiguous relation: “Natural perception is not a science, it does not posit the things with which science deals, it does not hold them at arm’s length in order to observe them, but lives with them” (*Ph.P* 321). The object is understood to be “the antepredicative being towards which our whole existence is polarized” (*Ph.P* 322).
- 17 Even at this higher level (the “theoretical attitude”) there is this naiveté: while the assent to the “thesis” of the world may be suspended, perceptual faith in the world is preserved (S 162).

We see the things themselves, the world is what we see, and representations of the world (as an ideal object) are possible because we have already lived in the world and this living gives us an idea of the world as comprehensive without our comprehending it; because of our insertedness, 'the world', if by the world we mean something like everything past, present, and future, lies of course outside the range of thinking, or rather includes thinking but is certainly not reducible to thought, which is to say that "intellection" is interior to experience and is in a sense a modality of a more generalized existence (not where to be is to be an idea, but where to see is to be seen, that is, to be is to be a body among others in a world in which we appear) that does not attempt to mean the world before being absorbed in it in the first place; perceptual faith is thus not an intellectual unity but a corporeal unity, a prereflective, ambiguous insertion. If it were merely a cognitive relation that defined the subject's situatedness not only in a world but as a member of a plurality such that speaking about the subject would be impossible without reference to other people and to institutions and 'things', if perceptual faith were the result of immanent acts of consciousness, then there would be no situatedness since the subject would be but an independent consciousness:

We do not say that the *notion* of the world is inseparable from that of the subject, or that the subject *thinks himself* inseparable from the idea of his body and the idea of the world; for, if it were a matter of no more than a conceived relationship, it would *ipso facto* leave the absolute independence of the subject as thinker intact, and the subject would not be in a situation. If the subject *is* in a situation, even if he is no more than a possibility of situations, this is because he forces his ipseity into reality only by actually being a body, and entering the world through that body (*Ph.P* 408).

Here then we begin to return to a positive definition of perceptual faith: it is a corporeal faith, it signifies a "natural pact" or "primordial contract" between a

knowing (lived) body-subject and an already meaningful world, and this subject of faith is thus inseparable from the world and the body through which the world is lived:

[...] the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world. The ontological world and body which we find at the core of the subject are not the world or body as idea, but on the one hand the world itself contracted into a comprehensive grasp, and on the other the body itself as a knowing-body" (*Ph.P* 408).

In this sense, just as it is not up to me whether others or the world exists, it is not up to me whether or not this mountain is too steep to climb; my body already "knows" that it is unclimbable, and I am already an (instituted, historical) natural self embodying these "absolute valuations" before I attempt to realize these projects in a thinking subject quite irrespective of the perspectives that reflection allows me to take (*Ph.P* 440).

What we have tried to do so far is define the perceptual faith as an accomplishment of the body proper and not of a transcendent or even tacit cogito; the world is not there for me in itself because I believe in it; rather it is there for an embodied subject that has lived and "knows" the world because it is situated in it. That we find our bodies already moving with a particular style before we have decided where to go or what to do, that cries and shouts are already meaningful, already make us shudder or leap up before we ask ourselves what they mean, that my feet already anticipate the pavement below me—all of this attests to a faith in the world both beyond and yet through and thanks to our finitude. The central aspect of the perceptual faith is thus that our contact with the world is indiscernible from it existing for us. Another way to put this is to say that "being in the world" is at one with our "being in truth," or that

the “[...] assurance of seeing and the assurance of seeing the true [...] are one and the same thing—faith, and therefore not knowledge, since the world is here not separated from our hold on it, since, rather than affirmed, it is taken for granted, rather than disclosed, it is non-dissimulated, non-refuted” (VI 28). Perceptual faith is not a knowledge of things that could be falsified but a contact with things that precedes explicit forms of knowing and that is betrayed in a style of being in the world: “Before our undivided existence the world is true; it exists. The unity, the articulations of both are intermingled. We experience in it a truth which shows through and envelops us rather than being held and circumscribed by our mind” (PP 6). Lastly then, because the perceptual faith is that of a lived body it would be well to say not only that being in the world is one with being in truth, but more than that, it is the ‘I am able to’ or actual I-can of the body proper that is one with “the world exists.”¹⁸

The reason why I am able to understand the other person's body and existence “beginning with” the body proper, the reason why the compresence of my “consciousness” and my “body” is prolonged into the compresence of my self and the other person, is that the “I am able to” and the “the other person exists” belong here and now to the same world, that the body proper is a premonition of the other person, the *Einfühlung* an echo of my incarnation, and that a flash of meaning makes them substitutable in the absolute presence of origins (S 175).

Before going further we would like to bring together some of the preceding remarks by suggesting that one way of considering the perceptual faith is as a “counterproof” to universal doubt. We have noted that our faith is in a world already there before we

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty notes in the work of Piaget the stage at which the relative purity of this faith is decisively transformed: The child “lives in a world in which he unhesitatingly believes accessible to all around him [...]” before reaching the age of “[...] about twelve years old [when] the child achieves the *cogito* and reaches the truths of rationalism. At this stage, it is held, he discovers himself as a point of view on the world and also as called upon to transcend that point of view, and to construct an objectivity at the level of judgement” (Ph.P 355).

judge it, but it is also there before we hallucinate it, before it gives itself out as an illusion; it is a faith, in other words, that is not upset by illusions “[...] because illusion too makes use of this belief in the world and is dependent upon it while contracting into a solid appearance, and because in this way, always being open upon a horizon of possible verifications, it does not cut me off from truth” (*Ph.P* 297): if what I seem to have seen, a mouse, is on second glance only a shadow, there is not then a shattering of the true by the false, but rather one true evidence (*it seemed to me that I saw a mouse*) gives way to another (*it was only a shadow*) which cancels out or corrects the first one without abolishing it because both phases of perception belong to the same real world. Was there really a mouse there? No, but this does not mean that when I thought I saw a mouse I was seeing a quasi-reality, since I already have faith in the world as real, and since it is true that I thought I saw a mouse. In other words, even in illusion, where one might be expected to lack perceptual faith, faith is always there in the form of a perspective anticipating an eventual disclosure of the true or in the sense that the real is already distinguished from hallucination even if what is being hallucinated is at the same time 'true' for the subject.¹⁹ Distinguishing between the true and the false, or the more true and less true, within the realm of appearances, it is important to note that the 'true' is never absolutely true and that tomorrow new evidence may emerge, which is to say we dwell in the realm of

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty refers to the example of a schizophrenic patient “[...] who said he could see a man standing in the garden under his window, and pointed to the spot, giving a description of the man's clothes and general bearing, was astonished when someone was actually placed in the garden at the spot in question, wearing the same clothes and in the same posture. He looked carefully, and exclaimed: 'Yes, there is someone there, but it's somebody else'” (*Ph.P* 334). What is important here is that the patient continues to distinguish between the real of perception and the hallucination, that is, has not broken the “natal pact” between body and world.

appearances not as possibly real, but as our mode of being in the real. As Alfonso Lingis says in “Being in the Interrogative Mood,”²⁰ “[...] the perceived is not [...] to be characterized as possible or probable,” in relation to an as such, since all perception, including illusions, “radiate forth from the world itself [...] and each gives itself out not as probable but *as real*”²¹ (my emphasis). At the level of perceptual faith, whether or not we consider what perceiving is, there is one world into which we appear and act. This world is the permanent setting of our lives and knowledge and all of the changes introduced into our lives and knowledge take place within this one world, this “interworld” “[...] which persists on the horizon of my life as the distant roar of a great city provides the background to everything we do in it” (*Ph.P* 327-328).

It is notable that in this “primordial contract” Merleau-Ponty finds a “refutation” of Cartesian doubt. It is not, again, doubtful that there is one world even if we doubt it with the uncertainty that attends the fact that our access to the world is one of seeming; what is doubtful is thus the certainty, through and through, that is to say, it is certain that “there is the world,” and the break-up of one appearance for another—“I thought I saw on the sands a piece of wood polished by the sea, and *it was* a clayey rock” (*VI* 40)—does not tear us away from this fundamental adhesion, but rather is our way of extending [...] a perpetual enterprise of taking our bearings on the constellations of the world [...]” (*VI* 103). “Certainty is doubt” (*Ph.P* 396), then, not

20 Alfonso Lingis, “Being in the Interrogative Mood,” *The Horizons of the Flesh; critical perspectives on the thought of Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Garth Gillan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) p. 84.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

in the sense that appearances are mere approximations of the real or are possibly real, but rather that the real appearances that I have now can be replaced by more exact ones that do not nullify the reality or truth of the previous ones but co-exist in an “order of implication” (VI 199). The moment I open my eyes, *there's the world again*, and here I am, and here are these 'things', my bed, my shoes, the chairs, resting silently and holding out a kind of meaning that seems to be concentrated in them; not only is there an 'adherence' on my part to a world as existing but also the existence of other people is already enveloped in the movement of my body, and 'things' around me already have a “motor significance” in a lived space that I “inhabit” or “haunt.” These things that I find myself surrounded by, and the people I anticipate seeing, have a bodily presence to me, they call for a style of behavior and are thus merged with the “I am able to” before I find myself judging whether they're real or not, and before thinking and judging others, before I convert them into a provisional existence, grant or relinquish it, make a problem of other minds, and so on. The whole time we are questioning others, they are already there, and we know others more than we will ever believe in them, and so the problem is not to know them, but to know how we know them and to recognize as fundamental the ambiguity that attends our knowing (*Ph.P* 383): “We would not overwhelm them with our importunate comments, we would not stingily reduce them to what is objectively certified of them, if they were not there for us to begin with” (*S* 159, my emphasis). Is this all just a dream? Can I be certain of only my own thinking nature?²² For Merleau-Ponty these questions mask other

22 This is of course what for Descartes was indubitable: the thought of the world. It is not that Descartes was wrong about this certainty, it is rather that this certainty did not extend far enough. It is that he was not certain of his gaze or approach to the world through the body.

questions, these questions mask the question of *what is this faith in the world* that I make use of when I suppose that I am thinking the world, then doubting whether what I'm seeing, or feeling, is really real, or even when I doubt as a voluntary act, which is to say, methodically? And the answer, "yes, this must be just a dream, how can I be sure others really exist?" relinquishes one positivity, "the world,"²³ in favor of another, the dream, but the dream as real, which I would then be forced to relinquish as well, since how could I know it is a real dream? And again, just what is it that one is doubting? "The world" here is a deeply obscure idealization. This is why Merleau-Ponty sometimes refers to the doubt of the world, since it is in reality only the doubt of an idea that is somehow taken as "everything," as a "pseudo-nothingness" (*Ph.P* 399).

For Merleau-Ponty absolute doubt and absolute certainty of the world are not equal positions which we could adopt: "To ask oneself whether the world is real is to fail to understand what one is asking, since the world is not a sum of things which might always be called into question, but the inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn" (*Ph.P* 344). And this doubt, whether it is methodical or not, this movement away from the world into the realm of phantoms, the loss of the "objective" relation that comes with dialogue, the reduction of the intersubjective dimension of 'things',

Unfortunately, his reduction has the effect of "[...] definitively doing away with naive consciousness: perception is no longer sensible and direct contact with the things, but an intellectual operation by which we have a lucid and certain idea of something." Robert Vallier, "Institution: Of Nature, Life, and Meaning in Merleau-Ponty and Schelling (2001) p. 72.

23 It's interesting how when we think "the world," we never of course accomplish the task, and yet the thought is incredibly synthetic, because it does have about it the weight of a thought that tries to aim at the world, but of course, again, it never does *reach* the world. What is intriguing is that this at once dense and impoverished thought can at the same time be waged as an aim, i.e., that it can be acted on as though what was being acted on really was *the* World.

the slackening of the desire to speak and the concretion of words—this private or decommunalized life, no matter how impoverished it becomes never becomes a being-out-of-the-world.²⁴ This empirical or worldly solitude is always a “clandestine positivism” (VI 120), a “shadow in us rather than outside” (VI 98); it is after all “only a test of primordial bonds” and not a radical rupture into the “experience” or transcendental solitude of a pure or transcendental ego for “[...] I can fly from being only into being” (*Ph.P* 360). To say that I pre-exist things is already to reveal faith in things and in a sense to already give them a place, just as to say that I am already solitary 'prior to' the other person is already to situate myself in “[...] relation to a phantom of the other person, or at least to conceive of an environment in which others could be” (*S* 174). And so the question is not whether the world or others exist, the question is, what it is for the world to exist, and what is intersubjectivity (VI 95-96)?²⁵

Having arrived at the question of what it means to live in a shared world we are now in a position to consider natural perception's more radical dimension. First we said that faith in the perceived world is not an intellectual but corporeal synthesis; then the suggestion was that this faith, not a solitary act of a cogito-subject, is linked to an anonymous and “natural self” (*moi naturel*) which the thinking subject is an abstract moment of, in other words a natural self whose practical 'mastery' (“absolute adumbrations”) the 'thinking subject' owes its illusion of unsituatedness to; but now we must go further. Since this prepersonal faith is not something one bestows upon oneself, since it is not I who chooses this faith but rather this faith that becomes me as

24 Recall that Descartes says 'I think, therefore I am', and not 'I doubt, therefore I am' (*Ph.P* 399).

25 The question then becomes . . . what does it mean to share a world? *The crucial question.*

an intercorporeal subject “buried in the world,” since “it is not I who makes myself think any more than it is I who makes my heart beat [...]” (VI 221), since, that is, “[...] it is not entirely my body that perceives [...]” (VI 9), we must ask who or what, then, honors this “primordial contract” (*Ph.P* 213)? Who or what does the 'binding'? As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[...] *what*, across the successive and simultaneous *community* of speaking subjects, wishes, speaks, and finally thinks” (VI 176, my emphasis)?

In a way, the prepersonal nature of the perceptual faith offers a starting point: “each one of us must be both anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual, and anonymous in the sense of absolutely general” (*Ph.P* 448). Even though “[...] it is necessary that [...] *I* be there in order to speak, that *I* must be there in order to perceive” (VI 176), when I station myself on a mountain high above the city and look around at the sky “[...] I do not possess it in thought [...]” even if in immediate experience I seem to because at a moment when I am dwelling in this “theatre of a certain living pulsation,” the whole gestural, tactile world of significance that this union holds out seems somehow to rest there at the end of my gaze and to live outside me and in itself; “[...] I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within' me [...] I am the sky itself [...]” (*Ph.P* 214). And so if we are going to construe the perceptual faith as an achievement of some kind, a “gift of nature, with no effort made on my part” (*Ph.P* 216), it is not that of a cogito, it is not realized in a thinking subject, and yet not exactly or not *only* that of a speaking or perceiving subject either, it is also that of a plurality and a dynamic and intersubjective world.

Being in the world is, in other words, a copresence such that all speech, whether directly or indirectly, is always addressed to other people; even our private 'worlds' within this one world bend into each other in the sense that the wall between these 'worlds' "[...] is a wall we build together, each putting his stone in the niche left by the other" (*S* 19); this does not mean that the participants in this 'we' are in it together, whatever 'it' happens to be, or that it does not break up at a higher level, just that an unacknowledged co-institutedness and intersubjectivity is already at work for these distances to be established and such that "[s]olitude and communication cannot be the two horns of a dilemma, but two 'moments' of one phenomenon, since in fact other people do exist for me" (*Ph.P* 359); there is always a common issue or transaction or border of contention however divergent and limited our perspectives on them become.²⁶

If we attempt to reflect on sharing a city, for example, the intermundane space or interworld (Merleau-Ponty) or web of relations (Arendt) that binds us does so not because you and I simultaneously believe in the city or coincide with it on the surface, or even because we are both actionable under the same body of laws or because we are identical as subjects of rights, or because we both recognize or forgive or tolerate each other, or because this spectacle spreads itself around us in the same way, which it

26 The point we are trying to make here is that the historicity which a plurality's perceptual faith testifies to is not to be found buried inside a constituting subject or in a multiplicity of constituting subjects but rather must be understood in some way as being buried in the surrounding world. It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty's return to the body is at the same time a return to the world, and it is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty alternates between "perceptual faith" and "primordial faith": 'perceptual' emphasizes our 'natural trust' in the perceived world' while 'primordial' emphasizes the perceived world as a real, surrounding world which is itself a 'trust' in which we have invested and which has been heavily invested in us.

never does. Even though it may be a subject or party that legislates or apologizes, a neighbor or a head of state that forgives, even though the experience is that of a subject or subjects, it is not exactly or not only a party or an individual that forgives or gives a speech, it is what and who these individuals represent, it is the residents and 'residences' of the interworld as a social-historical program of already-instituted regimes that are themselves forgiving, that realize and hold together the significance of the gesture that is honored and bound through institutional frameworks. "We live in a world where speech is an *institution*" (*Ph.P* 184) whether we know it or not, and whether we take it up or not as dialectical project without a pre-given telos, the 'ends' of which are always to be negotiated. There is nothing like an "invisible hand" here. Need I initiate the apology? Is it I who begins painting? In a way, yes, but these initiatives "take flight from where they roll in the wave of speechless communication" (*S* 17, modified); they are responsive to traditions which the gesture plunges us into, and the meaning of the gesture is carried by and finds support in these traditions as the gesture sets in motion or 'reactivates' a world of anticipations. Will you be there? Will "crowned" be there "[...] if I really balance and shade my napkins and rolls as they really are [...]" (*Ph.P* 19)? The point is that this 'there' is not in me or you or the painting, it is somewhere in-between. It would thus be better if one were attempting to locate the perceptual faith of a society to go through archives, inspect monuments and landscapes, lend oneself to common affairs and news, because it is by way of these historical 'promises' that our words and deeds achieve volubility and duration and special kind of mobility: speech speaks, thought thinks, the glance glances.

Because we borrow everything from others, and because “[...] even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance [...]” (*HC* 50), it would at least be more accurate to say that it is the 'city' in itself that binds or communalizes, “in itself” “[...] in the sense that it is not made up of mutually exclusive parts, that each part of the whole is 'sensitive' to what happens in all the others, and 'knows them dynamically’” (*Ph.P* 215); it is more accurate to say that the surrounding world realizes this copresence or coexistence that Merleau-Ponty calls perceptual faith than to say that either of us or that both of us do, precisely because it is literally in the world that the phenomenalization, the inscription of word and deed, and thus the institution or transformation of reality (objective world) takes place, not in someone's head, even if the “thought of feeling” has an atmosphere of irrefutable self-evidency. It is the open field that is transformed in its possibilities, just as when I am told that these people have just won their freedom they begin to modulate space differently, or how when a new tradition in painting is born all of the painting before it undergoes a transformation, and that's not something I do, it's something we're doing, it's an event, and it's something I've learned to see or hear²⁷; it is thus the interworld that is where this faith is kept and

27 These photos of friends and family on my walls are not a 'reminder' of those with whom I share a life, they more or less bring them to me, orient and mobilize me toward a world in which we co-exist, which is another way of saying that I turn toward the world with them in it. Even if they are far from me, “I can be there,” and even if they lived in another time they are present in a temporality we share, and so I am there then, or rather we are here now, and we are drawn together toward the same world as living space regardless of the geographical distance. We are always in a sense here and elsewhere, always over-devoted, but this here

tested and transformed, not, again, that this means we're in it together, for we can certainly appear as 'common enemies', but because we live in the midst of things together, because 'we see the things themselves', 'the world is what we see'. No matter how unworldly or otherworldly what comes between us gets it is always the accomplishment of a plurality which is to say is always operative in between people.

For Arendt and Merleau-Ponty, this interworld, this in-between, is of our making, it is a 'public work' or "invisible community" more permanent than our finite lives, and the moment of dialogue is the moment of rediscovering the surrounding world in this, its essentially programmatic character²⁸, which is to say as a common realm of

and elsewhere are not abstract contradictions, nor are they of mere psychological interest; they are the actual experience of the 'binding power' of the surrounding world orienting us, and for that matter potentially disorienting us, i.e., of lived space that can shrink or overflow:

I arrive in a village for my holidays, happy to leave my work and my everyday surroundings. I settle in the village, and it becomes the centre of my life. The low level of the river, gathering in the maize crop or nutting are events for me. But if a friend comes to see me bringing news from Paris, or if the press and radio tell me that war threatens, I feel an exile in the village, shut off from real life, pushed far away from everything. Our body and our perception always summon us to take as the centre of the world that environment with which they present us. But this environment is not necessarily that of our own life. I can 'be somewhere else' while staying here, and if I am kept far away from what I love, I feel out of touch with real life" (*Ph.P* 285-286).

The example is interesting not only because it describes how we live space and are not simply 'in it', but also because of this insistence that lived space while it is 'spread over' and not tied to an actual location is nonetheless bound for a world. Faith here is not in an idea, but in a world to be co-inhabited and toward which we are destined (even the truths of geometry have a "geography," that is, emerged within a situation, even if these truths are identical across all situations) in which case we might say not only that we are condemned to meaning, but also that we are condemned to—destined for—situations that 'know' and have faith in us.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty's description of dialogue makes precisely this point, not only that dialogue is a form of "instructive spontaneity" that "teaches us our thought" but also that it orients us toward a common world: "In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. We have here a

significant forms, even if this dialogue has been reduced to a wave or a word or a smile. Even if this unfinished landscape, this interworld has been reduced to silent checkpoints instead of meeting places, “closed in upon itself, not open onto a world to be understood [...]” (HLP 14) but a world as already understood, and perhaps even hated, it remains a world in common, a world not above, or below, but between us.²⁹

This is our train, these are our ideas, even this weather is a work between us for when it appears on the horizon as a threat it is as though the differences that came between us in our everyday lives were suddenly neutralized, drawing us closer together, not because it is just a typhoon³⁰, but because it “[...] radiates from a central *Wurfelhaftigkeit*” (Ph.P 324), is “for everyone” in that it bears the possibilities of our surroundings being broken up and of lives being lost and shattered and emptied out.

dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behavior in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world” (Ph.P 354).

29 'My viewpoint differs from the Christian viewpoint to the extent that the Christian believes in another side of things where the “*renversement du pour au contre*” takes place. In my view this “reversal” takes place before our eyes. And perhaps some Christians would agree that the other side of things must already be visible in the environment in which we live' (PP 27).

30 Is it really just 'wind' in the sense of a Kantian in itself? If it was it would be insignificant because it would not appear (not even as 'wind'), just as “[...] private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist. Whatever he does remains without significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to other people” (HC 58). A storm is sometimes a possibility of losing a home; the point is that 'there is a storm' only for a copresence or a plurality. Because the 'object' (what I point my finger at and what seems to demand, as Merleau-Ponty says, that you see the same spectacle, and since it appears as common I am impatient with you when you do not see it) appears to us as the (common) “goal of a bodily teleology” (Ph.P 322), at the same time as it appears as absolute across all of these familiar holds, because, that is, the object appears within the horizon of culture and history, we can understand why it is that “[...] if we try to describe the real as it appears to us in perceptual experience, we find it overlaid with anthropological predicates” (Ph.P 320). That is to say, the reason we say that a table has legs, or that a chair has arms, the reason why we give hurricanes human names, is not that we are simply “projecting” human meaning, and rather that our knowing, i.e., lived bodies are the vehicles for our negotiation with things: “[...] the whole of nature is the setting of our own life, or our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue” (Ph.P 320).

In this sense to lose a 'thing' is to lose a 'star' in which this open index or register of our lives radiates, and to lose a family is to lose the very "I am able to" that we are. What is crucial about this evacuation and denormalization is not that it is the result of a "mother earth" canceling our work out, but that it strips the sedimentations at work in our everyday institutions down to their "ontological cores," to a kind of "mother in-between" intact in its most basic forms, that is, it unveils not a blank landscape, but an objective landscape of 'common property' or sacred institutions in a kind of uncanny copresence and clarity: 'Dr.', 'neighbor', 'home', 'anger', 'children', 'fatherhood', 'food', 'hiding place' (*Ph.P* 189). I have never met you face to face, and "I will never know how you see red, and you will never know how I see it; but this separation of consciousnesses is recognized only after a failure of communication [...]" (*PP* 17) when I have returned to solitude, indeed I am astounded when I suddenly find myself glimpsing at all these vague presences as subjects with "streams of life," so much that I can't keep it up for long or it overwhelms me, or rather what overwhelms me is that though I may see hats and clothes, "which could conceal automata," I know each person as "another myself," (even more inconceivable, I prereflectively know that we share a situation), and I know them (not judge, but pre-know, pre-"judge") not by way of a universal categories but with bodies that are outside themselves or ek-static. Shall we say that "I know them with my mind"? No, I know them with my body.³¹ Is

31 "We think we think with our brain; personally, I think with my feet. That's the only way I come into contact with anything solid. I do occasionally think with my forehead, when I bang into something." This is Lacan's reply to Chomsky at a conference at MIT in 1968 where Lacan gave a presentation. It is quoted in an interview by Christopher Hanlon with Slavoj Žižek ("Psychoanalysis and the Post-Political"), and the original source is Elizabeth Roudinesco's biography *Jacques Lacan*, tr. Barbara Bray (New York: Polity, 1997) pp. 378-379.

it true then that I do not know you since I know the most important things about you, that is, the world of common gestures and tasks and things, the co-operative essences from which we proceed and which appear so clearly in a reduced space such as a disaster situation? These evacuations put front and center the commonality of the perceived world which is quite beyond a solitary consciousness (and therefore beyond a philosophy of consciousness) and quite beyond or ahead of the question of whether there is a world, and instead puts to us the question of what is intersubjectivity, which is also a question of “[...] knowing how my experience is related to the experience which others have of the same objects” (*PP* 17). They are related because the other is another myself, a familiar style of behavior, that is, another openness upon an 'objective' world that is not independent of the world of thought (since thought is in the world) but rather not dependent on the 'thought of the world' or 'thought of seeing':

Just as my body, as the system of all my holds on the world, founds the unity of the objects which I perceive, in the same way the body of the other—as the bearer of symbolic behaviors and of the behavior of true reality—tears itself away from being one of my phenomena, offers me the task of a true communication, and confers on my objects the new dimension of intersubjective being or, in other words, of objectivity (*PP* 18).

The natural and social world is not an object in which I am or am on top of or which is in me or which each of us subscribe to; it is a quasi-transcendental more or less durable and relatively “permanent field or dimension of existence” (*Ph.P* 362). It is not the creation of either of us or both of us, but a “closely woven fabric” from which we unfold (are instituted) and acting into which we are constantly transforming as an operative constellation (are instituting with respect to and not simply 'products' of or passively 'conditioned' by). Once we see that our faith in the real is linked to this

field that is beyond either of us and yet at the same time is an open field that we participate in and take further, it should not come as a surprise that in the 'prepersonal' aspect of the perceptual faith "[...] there is a decentering of the priority of the subject of perception, and [that] greater attention is given to the (ontological structure of the) perceived world without assigning a logical priority to it."³² The transcendentals within this "true transcendental" are those durable "invariants" from which we proceed. They are not pure if by pure we mean untainted by human history; far from it, "[...] the transcendental descends into history. [...]" (*S* 107); they do not preexist us but are the crystallization of tradition which is a more or less open institution that binds a plurality and defines its freedom. This in-between, as the world of institutions, is thus itself a "work of faith," burrowing through which its members are a "continued birth."

It is not a multiplication of private worlds the private reality of each of which is as doubtful as it is certain, it is not a common intellectual consciousness by way of which all subjects are 'in truth' in the same way, since "[...] this would suppress the undeniable plurality of consciousnesses [...]" (*PP* 17), it is rather this lived (bodily), primary, anonymous and communal faith that must be elucidated, not only to show how relativism or 'solipsism' emerge from within this faith and have an authentic basis, but also to provide science and philosophy, which "proceed from" the certainties of the perceptual faith, that is, the presuppositions of the "for everyone," and "the true idea given," with a basis in the lifeworld from which they emerge and in

32 Robert Vallier, "Institution: The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's 1954 Course at the Collège de France" (2005) p. 5.

which they continue their existence. What is it about this faith in perception and in the perceived world, or rather what is it about the communion of the “I am able to” and “the other exists” and “the world exists” that, differently than the reductions of “natural” disasters where the in-between is leveled down to a kind of vividly common landscape, constantly occludes this “in-between” and somehow occludes this copresence in a common world? “How are we to understand both that the thing is the correlative of my knowing body, and that it rejects that body” (*Ph.P* 325)? What is it about everyday or natural perception that prompts us so irresistibly into the attitude of an unsituated or God's-eye point of view? This is the focus of the following section.

III. THE PARADOX OF PERCEPTUAL FAITH

Our perception ends in objects, and the object once constituted, appears as the reason for all the experiences of it which we have had or could have (*Ph.P* 67).

At the end of the previous section we suggested that reductions or evacuations (such as those brought about by floods or conflict) level down the common sphere or in-between to its most irreducible dimensions, to its most basic resources and in this way inevitably draw a plurality closer together, and furthermore that once the institutions (educational, familial, legal) that both constitute and support these resources are destroyed, reality itself is in danger since the space of appearance and the will to appear shrinks; the ultimate horizon of these eliminations is thus a "worldless" landscape where there is "nothing to be done," and where "nothing happens." In everyday life, a different kind of "evacuation" occurs, which has more the character of an occlusion or eclipse of the in-between than a reduction to its axes; rather than the communal objects or hinges that bind us appearing between us in a state of emergency, the in-between, the ontological space of appearance, disappears in "moments of respite" or phases of passivity where practical comprehension of our surroundings and the exchange of ready-made speech and already-instituted behavior become a relatively permanent mode of relation. For Merleau-Ponty the reduced landscape that remains operative in this eclipse sets the perfect conditions for and constantly "see-saws" with the God's-eye point of view or illusion of unsituatedness because of how this everydayness constantly re-establishes 'autonomous regions':

No one will deny that here the process of expression brings the meaning into being or makes it effective, and does not merely translate it. Thought is no 'internal' thing, and does not exist independently of the world and of words. What misleads us in this connection, and causes us to believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression, is thought already constituted and expressed, which we can silently recall to ourselves, and through which we acquire the illusion of an inner life (*Ph.P* 183).

An inner life of 'thought' set over against the world and words, but which at the level of brute experience causes no problems. What is characteristic of already-instituted language ("empirical use" of language) is the loss of the desire to speak (*vouloir-dire*) or get something true or right in language.³³ One no longer experiences what Merleau-Ponty calls the "significative intention" and opening up of a certain indeterminate gap that would be filled by a speech which we could not know in advance, and thus one no longer signifies but constantly reactivates an already-spoken world by a "[...] Speech and by a Thought which we do not have but which has us" (*S* 19); rather than sublimating our heavy incarnation through language that "[...] carries us beyond the heavier flesh of the visible to the lighter, more rarified flesh of

33 Because the relation to language or to a form of behavior has become almost entirely passive we must also say that there is not only a loss of the desire to aim at the truth but also that the everyday attitude is strictly speaking 'without truth'. In "Everyday Speech" Blanchot makes precisely this point: "[...] in the everyday we are neither born nor do we die: hence the weight and the enigmatic force of everyday truth [...] in whose space, however, there is neither true nor false" (*ES* 20). There is no (strictly speaking) true or false in everyday speech and behavior because of the passive relation to already-established institutions. Taking this further we may say that significance is also absent in everyday behavior and languaging, that the everyday "[...] belongs to insignificance, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secret, but perhaps also the site of all possible signification [...]" (*ES* 14). That is, the "reduced landscape" that we operate within where there is no active relation to speech or behavior, and where the space in-between deeds and words, the site of their differentiations, has gone silent, becomes the birthplace of all subsequent meaning, specifically the spectator standpoint. What happens when reflection takes its bearings here? When it considers, for example, language as an already accomplished system in which meanings need simply be contemplated from a distance? "[...] Taking language as a *fait accompli*—as the residue of past acts of signification and the *record* of already acquired meanings—the scientist inevitably misses the peculiar clarity of speaking, the fecundity of expression" (*Ph.P* 85).

language”³⁴ and in that way bringing to the light of day the continued birth that we are as perceiving, that is, situated subjects, we experience a kind of ease or fluidity by settling into and following along in the ready-made exchanges within the already-instituted that Mallarmé refers to as “the worn coin placed silently in my hand” (*S* 44).³⁵

Just as novel forms of expression eventually become taken for granted such that the instituting operation is no longer required and one need only 'live in' the language providing an effortless signification for each solicitation, 'objects' also tend toward their completion in everyday perception through a tireless effecting of a practical synthesis or incorporation of new dimensions into the habitual body thereby providing for the embodied subject 'holds' on a world that appears as a site of completed objects and typical situations which appeal to already-instituted forms of behavior, which is to say within which I 'find' my arms or legs, and navigate a situation unproblematically:

[...] this stone is white, hard and cool, and it seems that the world is crystallized in it, that it has no need of time in order to exist, that it wholly unfolds itself in the instant, and that any additional existence would involve it in a fresh coming into being, so that we are tempted to think that the world, if it is anything at all, can only be a collection of things analogous to this stone, and time a collection of perfect instants. (*Ph.P* 333)

All around me the world seems to rest in itself, this book is simply lying in the world,

34 Robert Vallier, “Institution: The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's 1954 Course at the Collège de France” (2005) p. 5.

35 It's not that “empirical speech” is 'bad', for even authentic or original “[e]xpression is a matter of reorganizing things-said, affecting them with a new index of curvature, and bending them to a certain enhancement of meaning” (*S* 19). The point is that a distinction should be made between “spoken speech,” (*la parole parlée*) and “speaking speech” (*la parole parlante*), between “that which was of itself comprehensible and sayable” and “[...] that which is to be said, and which is as yet no more than a precise uneasiness in the world of things-said” (*S* 19).

and these words have determinate meanings which I can readily find in a dictionary. I dominate it. In a way this is how it seems sometimes, and in a way this is our accord with the world (whenever, that is, we live in it unproblematically); what we are trying to point out is that once we are almost entirely surrounded by already-constituted language, the in-between 'empties out' and when reflection arises within this setting it arises to find itself in a kind of atmosphere of solitude or independence.

To put this illusion of 'autonomous regions', this 'perfect landscape' for the presumption of absolute autonomy, in a somewhat more formal context, we will now turn to Merleau-Ponty's description of the certitudes operative in lived perception. On the one hand, "[w]e see the things themselves, the world is what we see" (VI 3). This is the first (taken-for-granted) certainty of our "primordial contract": "[t]here is the world" (VI 30), "in front of us," "in itself." It's just there, we act into it, we take it that others can act into it, "no questions asked." This contact with being is given the name exteriority or "transcendence"³⁶ since if I try to describe immediate perception 'things' appear to rest in themselves despite the individual perspective I may take on them; they are there "for everyone" (PP 16). The second "natural certitude" is that the experience of the perceived world is nonetheless *mine*, that the world appears only if I am situated and take up a perspective from somewhere. This aspect of the faith in perception, because it refers to the subject or to a consciousness is given the name immanence, presence, or interiority (PP 16). Together these two certainties, one, that I 'transcend' my perspectives and live the 'object' as determinate, presumptively

³⁶ And sometimes absence, since consciousness must in a sense be absent from itself for the phenomena of the world to appear, that is to say, my perception must in a sense take leave of itself in order that something appear "in itself." that is to say open equally to other gazes.

complete, “equally accessible to all” or “for everyone,” and the other, that it is *my* gaze that reaches the 'things'—this certainty that *at the same time* “[...] my vision is at the thing itself and [...] my vision is my own” (VI 29), this, that is, “for everyone” (in itself) and “given to me as absolute” (for us) form what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the paradox of perception (PP 16). It is a paradox, Merleau-Ponty says, of “[...] all being in the world: when I move towards a world I bury my perceptual and practical intentions in objects which ultimately appear prior to and external to those intentions, and which nevertheless exist for me only insofar as they arouse in me thoughts or volitions” (Ph.P 82). This paradox can be captured by saying that at the level of our everyday being in the world there is “*for us an in itself*” (Ph.P 71, SB 186). This combination of perspective and truth (or we should say 'reality') is not a paradox for immediate experience because the 'object' in natural perception is not the result of a distinct act but is rather the “correlative” of my body, that is, its existence is inseparable from its existence “for us.”³⁷ When I perceive this table I only see an aspect of it, I do not see its hidden sides, and yet from whatever point of view I take it is there for me absolutely, the table is what I see, and it is straightforwardly there for me, “lying in the world.” The “it seems to me that” of ordinary perception is thus not separate from our knowledge of things, indeed it is the subject's mode of access to things, and the perspectives are “manifestations” (SB 186) of one table which is there

37 '[...] in immediate consciousness this perspectival character of my knowledge is not conceived as an accident in its regard, as an imperfection relative to the existence of my body and its proper point of view; and knowledge by “profiles” is not treated as the degradation of a true knowledge which would grasp the totality of the possible aspects of the object all at once' (SB 186).

as a table “for everyone.”³⁸ That is, “I grasp in a perspectival appearance, which I know is only one of its possible aspects, the thing itself which transcends it” (SB 187).

What is important about this paradox is that it “[...] is original and founds a consciousness of reality in a specific manner” (SB 187, modified). Our relation to what is incomplete as nonetheless absolute, that I perceive the table across all perspectives I take on it “[...] even if my knowledge regarding it takes me step by step along an infinite road and cannot ever be complete [...]” (Ph.P 330), provides a clue as to the relation consciousness will bring to bear on itself in explicit reflection, since consciousness will model itself on ordinary perception, that is, our inherence in the world; once consciousness shifts from immediate perception to reflection it will elaborate these certitudes and enter into a situation of bad ambiguity at a higher level, which is to say a paradoxical dialectic whose destiny is a crisis situation or deadlock (philosophically between realism and idealism). Merleau-Ponty thus notes how obscure the certainties of perceptual faith become when we try to think them as theses:

The “natural” man holds on to both ends of the chain, thinks *at the same time* that his perception enters into the things and that it is formed this side of his body. Yet coexist as the two convictions do without difficulty in the exercise of life, once reduced to theses and to propositions they destroy one another and leave us in confusion (VI 8).

For Merleau-Ponty this 'naturalized' scenario is the model for an “[...] ideal of objective or explicit knowledge which classical logic develops [...]” (Ph.P 332) and in which rationalist enterprises take shape and flow back into the philosophical and

38 The “for everyone” or what Merleau-Ponty calls the “in itself” is perhaps the key aspect of everyday perception. We will see in the next section how this “for everyone” is, in scientific or philosophic reflection, taken-for-granted as the mode in which thought is taken to appear.

political landscape of our lives to have effects in our everyday experience and understanding of the world. The obscurity attests to this paradox of perception as an unproblematic genetic instance³⁹ of the crisis of reason that will be set off by proceeding from the perceptual faith (a kind of natural evacuation of ambiguity), that is, taking for granted a distinction between consciousness and nature and inevitably reducing our instituting relationship with the world to either side such that the lived experience of time, for example, and scientific notions of time can only be understood as contradictory. The transition from the paradox of perceptual faith to the paradox of reflection is what we shall now focus on. It is there that we shall try to consider the genesis of aerial thinking in the movement from ordinary perception to reflection.

39 Theodore Kisiel describes the “task of the century” (suggested by Bergson to Einstein) taking up which the truths of science and the truths of lived experience would be shown to be not in contradiction but co-existing in an ‘order of implication’: “[n]ot that the paradoxes [of modern physics, once traced to the lifeworld] will be eliminated, but at least they are to be traced to their genetic instances in the ambiguities of perceptual faith.” Theodore Kisiel, “Merleau-Ponty on Philosophy and Science,” *Phenomenology and the natural sciences*, eds. Joseph Kockelmans and Theodore J. Kisiel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) p. 255.

IV. FROM PERCEPTION TO REFLECTION

[...] reflection borrows its wish for absolute sufficiency from the perception which causes a thing to appear [...]" (PP 456).

The belief in an absolute mind, or in a world in itself detached from us is no more than a rationalization of this primordial faith (Ph.P 409).

[...] the philosophical question is not posed in us by a pure spectator: it is first a question as to how, upon what ground, the pure spectator is established, from what more profound source he himself draws (VI 109).

So far we have tried to show that the thesis of the primacy of perception announces a general task to restore the relation between perception and reflection and that the perceptual faith in which this task is put into focus is founding in the sense that it functions as a kind of "legal basis" (S 166) for the mode of givenness of the 'object' to scientific and philosophic (i.e., positing or critical) consciousness, that is, the natural attitude contains an unthematized double assertion (of the world as in itself, and of the true idea given) that is perfectly livable and necessary in our ordinary practical lives, but which becomes obscure the moment we try to convert these certainties into theses. What we're trying to show now is the transition from immediate experience to reflection, how the certainty with which the subject lives in the world, that is, in already-established language and already-acquired habits, is carried over into reflection as an ideal of absolute knowledge along with a dualistic presupposition of a 'split' between the 'psychic' and 'nature'⁴⁰ (immanence and transcendence) and that a

40 Cf. §10, "The origin of dualism in the prevailing exemplary role of natural science. The rationality of the world more geometrico" and §11, "Dualism as the reason for the incomprehensibility of the problems of reason; as presupposition for the specialization of the sciences; as the foundation of naturalistic psychology." Edmund Husserl, *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Tr. David Carr (Evanston:

crisis engulfs all efforts to reduce this tacit (unthematized) split to either exteriority or interiority, thus bringing the bad ambiguity of ordinary perception to a higher level and occluding the 'good ambiguity' found, for example, in original or authentic speech.⁴¹ We will try to show how for Merleau-Ponty (we shall also be relying on Arendt's work) aiming at an "ideal of absolute knowledge," that is, supposing that a notion of the world is fit to comprehend the world, is made possible by the capacity of consciousness to aim at itself as an object, and modeling itself after natural perception according to which the 'object' tends toward completion, as absolute and "for everyone."

The suggestion that reflection 'imports' or 'translates' the "natural certitudes" of perception, the lived certitude that the world rests in itself and yet that it is I through whose perspective "the world" appears, can be found in all of Merleau-Ponty's work since one of his enduring projects is to rehabilitate the relation between consciousness and nature, a relation that is obscured by the certainty of the world that it founds.⁴²

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty characterizes this relation as follows:

The relation of reason to fact, or eternity to time, like that of reflection to the unreflective, of thought to language or of thought to perception is this two-way relationship that phenomenology has called *Fundierung*: the founding term, or originator—time, the unreflective, the fact, language, perception—is primary in the sense that the originated is presented as determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from reabsorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest (*Ph.P* 394).

Northwestern University Press, 1970) pp. 60-65.

41 Not that the results are meaningless but that they are partial and that part of addressing the crisis will be to show how they are partial, that is, to recognize their 'relative significance'.

42 Some of the most direct treatments of the relationship between perception and objectivist thinking occur in the following texts: *Structure of Behavior*, page 185 to the beginning of page 188 in the chapter "Classical Solutions"; the chapters "The Cogito" and "Experience and objective thought" from *Phenomenology of Perception*, on pages 67-72 and 369-409.

Lived perception, lived time, lived space, these are founding in the sense that they are gone beyond only in the sense that they take on a more abstract and explicit form, and so gone beyond only in meaning (we now *mean* the world, instead of sheerly living it). We saw this in *The Primacy of Perception* where thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) or being-in-the-world meant that perception was to be understood as the fundamental basis for the constructions of reason, providing a model and a starting point (a genetic basis that is also starting point in providing an initial meaning or texture) for the rationalistic forms of the life of the mind—"The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence" (*PP* 13)—and where the initial specification of this relation took the form of a reference to certainty—"The *certainty of ideas* is not the foundation of the certainty of perception but is, rather, based on it [...]" (*PP* 13, my emphasis). In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty gives a more explicit description: "The reflection retains everything contained in the perceptual faith: the conviction that there is something, that there is the world, the idea of truth, the true idea given" (*VI* 30, my emphasis). The suggestion is that reflection translates the general certainty of lived experience into a theoretical certitude with respect to the world ("naive realism") along with a certitude with respect to the experience as that of a subject ("idealism"). But it is what is not translated that is as important: reflection begins in the natural attitude, which is to say, in an already idealized space where the subject is presupposed as separate from a real world but a world which nonetheless the subject comprehends and has access to. Thus the unproblematic gap between the perceiving subject and the world becomes obscure

when reflection emerges within this situation and lends itself to a reduction to either term, for example in the way Descartes will reduce consciousness to mind (S 199). In a sense the philosophical constellation of positionalities of modern European philosophy could all be construed as various attempts to reduce this paradox to one side or another, to “mind,” or “matter,” to the constituting/ideal subject, or to the object, and that by maintaining the naive faith establish themselves into an inescapable crisis situation. For Merleau-Ponty the only way beyond these crises (of objective thought) is by refusing the original evidence of naive faith that objectivist ontology presupposes and recognizing an original contact with being, a primordial “*Ineinander*” or reversibility which this subject-object dualism is interior to and is a “moment of.”⁴³

In *The Life of the Mind* Arendt suggests a similar relationship between philosophical thought and the basic experiences of inhabiting the lifeworld. In particular she focuses on the fallacy of the “two-world theory” that there is the phenomenal realm of appearances and 'behind it' the noumenal realm of “things-in-themselves.” Her first move is to link the fallacy back up to the lifeworld: “The two-world theory belongs among the metaphysical fallacies but it would never have been able to survive for so many centuries if it had not so plausibly corresponded with some basic experiences” (LM 23).⁴⁴ Her second move is to specify what this

43 As we have suggested, a moment of ready-made significations and acquired and stable forms of behavior, in other words, a general practical comprehension or hold on the world such that a spoken word, for example, no longer seems to be open to modulations of meaning but as the sign for a direct definition that is available for everyone in an absolute identity of meaning.

44 What Arendt finds so dangerous about the two-world theory is that when we are under the illusion of there being two worlds we trivialize opinion and appearance by setting it over against Being, which is to say we trivialize the very ontological space of appearance in

correspondence consists of: “[...] when the philosopher takes leave of the world given to our senses and does a turnabout (Plato's *periagōgē*) to the life of the mind, *he takes his clue from the former, looking for something to be revealed to him that would explain its underlying truth*” (LM 23, my emphasis). Merleau-Ponty sees precisely the same re-emergence of the perceptual faith from the level of the lifeworld to the level of scientific reflection: “[s]cience and philosophy have for centuries been sustained by unquestioning faith in perception. Perception opens a window on to things. This means that it is directed, quasi-teleologically, towards a *truth in itself* in which the reason underlying all appearances is to be found” (Ph.P 54). So, to the question of what reflection inherits from the lower dialectics in which it is “enrooted,” Merleau-Ponty and Arendt seems to want to say: a tacit anticipation of absolute truth, that is, of a truth “for everybody” in the same way the 'object' of everyday life appears fully determinate and “for everyone.” In other words, the transition from immediate experience (in Arendtian terms “doing,” which would include all forms of non-reflexive thinking⁴⁵) to reflexive consciousness (thinking as a self-reflexive activity), exacts a transfer of the lived certainty with respect to partial objects that they are absolute into a “seeking” or “wish” for absolute sufficiency with respect to the ideal object: “[I]ike the object, the idea purports to be the same for everybody, valid in all times and places, and the individuation of an object in an objective point of time and

which we live in the name of an atavism that is abstracted from the constataion with which we live in the realm of seeming where “Being and Appearing coincide” (LM 19).

45 Schutz refers to this non-theoretical reflection as “thinking within the natural attitude.” This form of thinking is pragmatically motivated: it takes for granted the validity of an already-acquired “stock of knowledge” that explication and understanding are based on (SLW 7).

space finally appears as the expression of a universal positing power [...]” (*Ph.P* 71).⁴⁶

How is this ideal of pure contact at work? Both Merleau-Ponty and Arendt would say that the attitude (now no longer merely a tacit “thesis”) that we can *think* the world, or think thought in a kind of pure reflexivity, is possible precisely because consciousness is self-reflexive, because we can think or aim at our thought, because we can aim at our thought with our thought. Arendt calls this capacity the “two-in-one”:

Certainly when I appear and am seen by others, I am one; otherwise I would be unrecognizable. And so long as I am together with others, barely conscious of myself, I am as I appear to others. We call *consciousness* (literally, as we have seen, “to know with myself”) the curious fact that in a sense I also am for myself, though I hardly appear to me, which indicates that the Socratic “being one” is not so unproblematic as it seems; I am not only for others but for myself, and in this latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness (*LM* 183).⁴⁷

46 This rich and important description of the shift from the “objectivism” of naive experience to objectivism in naturalistic thinking appears in the chapter “Experience and Objective Thought, Problem of the Body,” from *Phenomenology of Perception*. The train of thought continues as follows: “[once my situated point of view on the world appears to me as a universal positing power] I am no longer concerned with my body, nor with time, nor the world, as I experience them in ante-predicative knowledge, in the inner communion that I have with them. I now refer to my body only as an idea, to the universe as idea, to the idea of space and the idea of time. Thus ‘objective’ thought (in Kierkegaard’s sense) is formed—being that of common sense and of science—which finally causes us to lose contact with perceptual experience, of which it is nevertheless the outcome and the natural sequel. The whole life of consciousness is characterized as the tendency to posit objects, since it is consciousness, that is to say, self-knowledge, only in so far as it takes hold of itself and draws itself together in an identifiable object. And yet the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence, as a crystal placed in a solution suddenly crystallizes it” (*Ph.P* 71).

47 Arendt also offers an interesting description of the return to a primarily prereflective, non-positing contact with the world from the realm of reflexive thinking, when we stop thinking in the company ourselves and return to “doing”: “[...] the two-in-one become[s] One again when the outside world intrudes upon the thinker and cuts short the thinking process. Then, when he is called by his name back into the world of appearances, where he is always One, it is as though the two into which the thinking process had split him clapped together again.” (*LM* 185)

When we turn to self-reflexive consciousness, to this “two-in-one,” the ambiguities that belong to our naive faith in the world are inscribed in the relationship between thought and itself, that is, thought (tacitly) appears to itself as, in principle, revealing absolute truth, which is to say we aim at our thought in such a way so as to expect it to appear, in the way the world appears in the perceptual faith, as absolute, despite its perspectival character, but now in a mode of givenness such that it is expected to disclose the totality of Being: “To think of thought is to adopt in relation to it an attitude that we have initially learned in relation to ‘things’” (*Ph.P* 396). In other words, the ‘perception of being’ in our naive contact with the world is translated into the project of thinking Being from an unsituated position and constructing (inexhaustibly) our commerce with Being out of ideas that being in the world teaches us.

While science does not enjoy the same variety of optics as philosophy does when it takes for granted a direct commerce with being, it does proceed from and model itself after the certainties of the naive faith.⁴⁸ Alfonso Lingis gives an apt description of how the ambiguities of naive faith provide a point of departure and a model for scientific consciousness: “The spontaneous belief in beings whose existence appears as the reason for and *telos* of the perceptual experience reappears, in the order of critical cognition, in the form of the protoscientific belief in pure objectivity [...]”⁴⁹; he then adds, quoting Merleau-Ponty, that this mode of consciousness, “far from

48 Merleau-Ponty's most direct attempt to specify what science borrows from naive experience is made in the section “Science Presupposes the Perceptual Faith and Does Not Elucidate It” in the chapter “Reflection and Interrogation” from *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 14-27.

49 Alfonso Lingis, “Being in the Interrogative Mood,” *The Horizons of the Flesh; critical perspectives on the thought of Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Garth Gillan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) p. 80.

dissipating the obscurities of our naïve faith in the world, is on the contrary its most dogmatic expression [...]” (VI 15). Why is science the most dogmatic expression of perceptual faith? Scientific domains appear according to the “suggestions” of naive faith: the “for us” becomes the “psychic” of classical psychology and the “in itself” becomes the “physical” of classical physics, that is to say: “The idea of the subject, and that of the object as well, transforms into a cognitive adequation the relationship with the world and with ourselves that we have in the perceptual faith. They do not clarify it; they utilize it tacitly, they draw out its consequences” (VI 23, my emphasis).

For Merleau-Ponty it is not only that generalized scientific objects are rooted in our ordinary experience of the world as in itself and as for us, it is the unquestioned certainty, that is, a general lack of questioning, that is also drawn from the order of the perceptual faith, questions which are always stopped short by a “pervasively pragmatic motive”⁵⁰: “[...] the pure operation of science [...] takes up for its own profit

50 This is a reference to the work of Alfred Schutz: “We can say that the natural attitude of daily life is pervasively determined by a *pragmatic motive*” (SLW 6). There is much in common between Schutz and Merleau-Ponty, especially on the theme of taken-for-grantedness. One of the main differences between them is that Schutz focuses on the 'taken-for-granted' primarily from the point of view of the solitary subject: '[...] in the natural attitude of everyday life the following is taken for granted without question: (a) the corporeal existence of other men; (b) that these bodies are endowed with consciousness essentially similar to my own; (c) that the things in the outer world included in my environs and that of my fellow-men are the same for us and have fundamentally the same meaning; (d) that I can enter into interrelations and reciprocal actions with my fellow-men; (e) that I can make myself understood to them (which follows from the preceding assumptions); (f) that a stratified social and cultural world is historically pregiven as a frame of reference for me and my fellow-men, indeed in a manner as taken for granted as the “natural world”; (g) that therefore the situation in which I find myself at any moment is only to a small extent purely created by me' (SLW 5). By posing these basic assumptions in terms of a solitary ego and not a lived and living historical body, Schutz's work flirts (not in a 'bad' way) with a philosophy of consciousness, whereas for Merleau-Ponty these 'self-evidencies' lend him to meditations on the actual world (lived in ambiguously) and the actual lived body, in other words, Merleau-Ponty focusses not on these assumptions as 'beliefs' per se, but on their sedimented, carnal horizon and thus on the world that these assumptions testify to in such a way that the distinctions I-other, I-world become more and more obscure. In other words it's not just that we take for granted that there is a world it's that *there is a world*.

our certitude, which is much older than it and much less clear, of having access “to the things themselves” or of having an absolute power to survey the world from above [...]’ in the way that we do in a sense “survey” the world from above when we make our way in the world in our everyday lives (VI 16). In this same way that ordinary perception anticipates eventual disclosure of a practical unity whose synthesis or completion is presumptive, science functions on the presupposition (takes as understood) that its concepts refer in a one-to-one correspondence to real entities that would “fill in the blanks,” which is to say the concept/thought-object becomes to science what the thing was to the naive faith of everyday perception; we have faith in the concept as corresponding to a real entity in the same way that we have faith in the ‘things’ and in other people in ordinary perception: “Science has first been merely the sequel or amplification of the process which constitutes perceived things. Just as the thing is the invariant of all sensory fields and of all individual perceptual fields, so the scientific concept is the means of fixing and objectifying phenomena” (*Ph.P* 54). In other words, when we then turn these comprehensive concepts onto the world we operate as though they were inscribed in nature as such and not a way of seeing that is drawn from our natural life but is also for that reason partial, is already the product of

We’re not at all suggesting that Schutz’s work is less faithful to the world in which we live than Merleau-Ponty’s, just that it speaks more from the point of view or terrain of the monological as a site of taken-for-grantedness than from a more dialogical perspective. This brings up another key difference between Schutz and Merleau-Ponty: the dimension of the erotic and the affective, very present in Merleau-Ponty’s research (see for example the case of Schneider in the chapter “The Body and its Sexual Being” in *Phenomenology of Perception*) is absent for the most part in the work of Schutz. (Again, there is no effort here to compare the merit of each of these authors, rather we are simply trying to attend to some important differences in emphasis.) Here as well it would be not only a matter of speaking of affect from the side of the subject but also, and without contradiction, from within its broader temporality in a social world where a plurality of co-inhabitants exercise something like a shared feeling for the world.

a reduction; we operate on the world as “[...] a system of natural facts rigorously bound together and continuous [...] and with the certainty of our 'belief' in the world in the naive faith, we believe [...] that this system [can] incorporate all things into itself, even the perception that has initiated us into it” (VI 26, modified). Physics and psychology are not the problems here, it is an objectivism where “[w]hat is operative [...] is as always the perceptual faith in the things and in the world. We apply to man as to things the conviction it gives us that we can arrive at what is by an absolute overview, and in this way we come to think of the invisible of man as a thing” (VI 19).

While science objectifies or soars over the world, its truths are not “wrong,” indeed given that “to be in the world” is “to be in truth,” as noted earlier, it is quite impossible that science does not open out onto the world, just as all painting does say something:

How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world? What does abstract art itself speak of, if not a negation or refusal of the world? Now austerity and the obsession with geometrical surfaces and forms (or the obsession with infusoria and microbes; for the interdict put upon life, curiously enough, begins only with the Metazoon) still have an odor of life, even if it is a shameful or despairing life. Thus the painting always says something (S 56).

The difficulty of the sciences in their objectivist forms is that their results, the story they tell us about ourselves and the world, is a very partial story at the same time as a very powerful means of operating on or acting into the world. The broader problem is that they do not reveal the instituting power of the speaking subject from which the thinking subject in which the results of science are realized takes shape. In this way they are unable to make sense of their own results, but again, these results need less to be judged than understood; my perceptions (that the street becomes smaller in the

distance at the same time as I know that it remains the same width as the section on which I stand) are not both false but “both true” because they belong to and manifest the same world. The return to the speaking subject and to the intermundane space is not an attempt on the part of phenomenology to show how scientific analysis is misbegotten because it proceeds from a direct ontology and thus that its results are false: “[...] a return to pre-science is not the goal. The reconquest of the *Lebenswelt* is the reconquest of a dimension, in which the objectifications of science themselves retain a meaning and are to be understood as *true*” (VI 182). The difference is that science is to be seen not as separate from Being but “[...] as an intentional system in the total field of our relationships to Being [...]” (VI 152). And the insistence is that if science is to understand its relative and not absolute legitimacy, its partial and not absolute significance, “[...] it must recognize as legitimate an analysis of the procedures through which the universe of measures and operations is constituted starting from the life world [...] considered as the source, eventually as the universal source” (VI 18).

What we have tried to show in the present section is that Merleau-Ponty and Arendt suggest that the “contours” and truth-intentionality lived unproblematically in the prephilosophical praxis of the perceiving subject continue to be affirmed in scientific and philosophic reflection as unnoticed presuppositions, that a world is simply there to be inspected by a subject capable of absolute survey, a 'thinking subject' which translates the unity of perceptual faith, “I am able to”- “the other exists,” into a kind of “I am able to have an unsituated thought”-“the world exists, it is real, it is finished” that is, into a kind of virtual audacity and supposes it could

'reconstruct' the world with ideas, and finally that the concepts that emerge refer to constituents of the really real, and thus have an unimpeachable ontological status. The whole problem here is that the "really real" is also a symbolic realm which is to say one of language, and that such a consciousness, while it expresses the essential character of the naive faith does not indicate a prior possibility whence it would have issued (*VI* 45, paraphrase, modified), it does not count being as part of its domain, and it does not exhaust the meaning of the world but offers only a glimpse at "features" or "traits" or "degrees" of being; it says that there is 'red' and even that to see red I must have acquired a language but it does not tell us about the secret language, the invisible kinships that give me red in the first place before I take this "neutral" red as an object of thought and as the "effective cause" of my perception, rather than as the 'title' of an index of sense (including 'red') that does not cause but motivates, sense bound to the world as a single fabric that I am caught up in; it does not tell us that

this red [dress] is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it [the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution], with which it forms a constellation (*VI* 132, modified).

As in everyday perception, in rationalistic thinking, whether in science or philosophy, the tendency toward neutralization, the leveling off of the desire to speak and the reliance on ready-made significations, tends to make it seem as if there really were "nothing to do"; this "nothing to do" (and the recognition of it, which is boredom, hence the boredom sometimes associated with the science taken as pure inventorying) is concomitant with the God's-eye point of view where through the optic of a perspectiveless auditor the subject is in the mode of "king on his desert island" (*S* 14).

If we are to understand how it is that we acquire the presupposition of grasping in thought an idea that would gradually mirror the really real, which is already operative when we distinguish between thought and speech, or thought and affect, or of possessing the capacity to think "thought" in a relation of self-transparency, both of which lead us to supposing that not all of us can be right, or "in truth," but only one of us, or all of us in the exact same way, that is, only the absolute sovereign in possession of a complete statement, and where disclosures are understood as exchanges of "mere opinion" set over against a truth that we shall never reach, and not the co-constitution of a world, if we are to understand the results of science as partial openness onto being, but which do not themselves clarify the enigma of our more general openness, that "utilize" the presuppositions of the perceptual faith without elucidating them, the suggestion both Arendt and Merleau-Ponty are making, in part, is that we have to interrogate immediate experience to see in its self-evidencies the incubation of this notion of pure transparency; we have to recognize that consciousness is incarnate, that we have minds, but minds that are embodied and that can thus be structured as 'minds' and that a description of how this is at each moment possible, or how it is possible that we can be almost entirely out of touch with what we're doing, how we're thinking, is crucial. As Merleau-Ponty says,

If philosophy is to appropriate to itself and to understand this initial openness upon the world which does not exclude a possible occultation, it cannot be content with describing it; it must tell us how there is openness without the occultation of the world being excluded, how the occultation remains at each instant possible even though we be naturally endowed with light (*VI* 28).

How could we think tradition since we owe so much to it? How could we survey it from above since it would no longer be an experience? The attitudes we take toward thought, first of all as “thought,” and not affect, and thus affect being distinguished from truth, and then “thought” as our own and not the continuation of a project that precedes us, and that will in some way be here when we have “left,” are not necessary but rather contingent, upon the irresistible sublimation of the faith with which we live the world into a faith within the project of thinking in a kind of intellectual proximity or fusion with the world. If we do not admit this contingency, if we do not take responsibility for our freedom and realize that it is we who are in truth more than we’ll ever know, if we do not rehabilitate historicity and our sense of the “in-between” as the invisible ‘city’ of contingency, if we “[...] admit that sensibility is enclosed within itself, and if we do not seek communication with the truth and with others except on the level of a disembodied reason, then there is not much to hope for” (*PP* 26). How could there be since once the “problem of other minds” is established the most I could ever do is construct an idea of the ‘other’ that withstands counter-examples without ever ‘acknowledging’ them as transcendent? On the other hand, if we admit this contingency, if we feel the movement of our thought as articulations in a field, if we recognize how it is that we blend into each other and “think according to another”—if the other person is not only an “other” but someone in whose presence my

[v]ision ceases to be solipsistic, when the other turns back upon me the luminous rays in which I had caught him, renders precise that corporeal adhesion of which I had a presentiment in the agile movements of his eyes, enlarges beyond measure that blind spot I divined at the center of my sovereign vision, and, invading my field through all of its frontiers, attracts me into the prison I had prepared for him, and as long as he is there, makes me incapable of solitude (*VI* 78)

then we might begin to construe differently what we normally call thought, speech, or others, we might begin to construe consciousness as textured, incarnate, germinating along our bodies, anchored to the social, and not at the cost of no longer being able to say “it's mine,” but to the profit of being able to recognize that “we borrow ourselves from others,” even if this 'our' is a very specific our, and that what we took to be structures of consciousness are actually structures for consciousness (*SB* 221), “*measurants* for being,” and then we shall be on our way to making the recognition that “there are [...] *several ways for consciousness to be consciousness*”⁵¹ (*Ph.P* 124) and that to be conscious is a deeply social mode of being because being a body is being social and having a body is being gifted and there's more than one way to do that.

51 Part of what is so fascinating about the working notes collected in *The Visible and the Invisible* is that they offer a glimpse into the spontaneous thought of Merleau-Ponty. The following note I find very intriguing in relation to this idea that consciousness can take many forms since it is incarnate, not disembodied: 'Extraordinary: the consciousness I have of producing my thoughts, my significations, is identical with my consciousness of their “human” origin' (*VI* 235).

V. THE QUASI-IRRESISTIBILITY OF HIGH-ALTITUDE THINKING

[...] it is natural for consciousness to misunderstand itself precisely because it is consciousness of things (SB 219).

[...] construct[ing] our contact with the world out of what it has taught us about the world [...] is quasi-irresistible [...] (VI 156).

It is inevitable that the consciousness be mystified, inverted, indirect, [because] in principle it sees the things *through the other end*, in principle it disregards Being and prefers the object to it, that is, a Being with which it has broken [...] (VI 248, modified).

Why do we so easily draw distinctions between minds and bodies and thoughts and feelings? Why is it so natural in reflecting upon a life, or a nation, to look at it as a series of private states of consciousness or 'internal' developments (S 175, modified)? Or to suppose that my past can be reduced to private memories that I can contemplate, and that I am not "perched on a pyramid of past life"? Why is it so easy to suppose that these thoughts I have of my contact with others are adequate to our experience? In other words why do we so irresistibly find ourselves inhabiting a God's-eye point of view? As a way of bringing this thesis to a close we would like to discuss this irresistibility.

So far as I can see, for Merleau-Ponty there are at least three dimensions to this irresistibility. First of all, "God-like survey" is irresistible, or we might say here inevitable, because we are "always already" undergoing a version of it in our prephilosophical lives⁵²: "[...] the ideal of knowledge is set up by the perceived thing" (Ph.P 56). Once the perceived world becomes stabilized and manageable, I "know" it, and it seems to stand outside me already defined and understood, not open to

52 Prephilosophical not in the sense of non-philosophical, rather in the sense of not then critical.

change. In other words, there is a constant incorporation of the visible into the invisible, a constant drive toward the level of the taken-for-granted. This “agitation” for independence is thus ready-made in life and to enter into the reflective version of it all that is required is to simply throw a light upon the inversion that we live, we need simply to continue to hold our mode of relation with 'things' over into a mode of relation with what will then appear as 'thought'—one form of 'mastery' passes into another.

The second reason why the presupposition of an absolute spectator, fully autonomous, transparent to itself, in no need of others, is irresistible, is that once instituted, it is really difficult to notice. It “[...] belongs to a region where there is nothing to know,” says Blanchot; it bears a “constitutive [...] trait of being *unperceived*” (ES 15). Once it has become “clear” to me that my thought is my own, or that there's “nothing to be done” because the “I am able to” jointed with 'things' has become invisible, the whole mystery of our inherence in each other and in the world and of the world in us unfolds in what is already a space of resistance where movement itself is 'frozen' within the everyday, already evacuated of the “irrational” where already the notion of defining a truth and of sharing a situation as constitutive of reality must appear as exotic, even unwelcome, until that decisive recognition, if it comes, opens this everydayness onto history. Taking the example of a mathematized, absolutely calculable nature, we “see” according to this optic (once installed in it) and yet we do not see it as an optic precisely because we've settled into it (in such a way that the “mathematized” migrates over to the side of 'nature'), and have perhaps even

defined a whole style of life according to these “settlements,” discovering “[...] 'in me' [...] the permanent horizon of all my *cogitationes* and [...] a dimension in relation to which I am constantly situating myself” (*Ph.P* xiii). We do not see this texture, this “idealized” of idealized space because of a kind of “constitutive absence” of meaning (specifically the 'appears that'), an “imperception” or “non-possession of evidence” and whatever appears evident (“the sun is rising,” “here comes my neighbor,” ‘I could not cease to think without ceasing to exist’) appears (as) evident absolutely, which in a way it is, once you realize that 'is' is a more or less dense seeming, that 'thought' is always a partiality, a layer of a more comprehensive organism, and that it emerges from a more ambiguous order; the question is what else is evident, what else is seeming? And what would situate the former evidence at another level and rectify it? What would be more faithful to the world we live, to the possibilities that cannot simply be elucidated? At what level, in other words, is the “nothing can be done,” or “nothing's happening,” or “everything's the same” of taken-for-grantedness situated (*ES* 15)? For whom are the truths of rationalism happening if “'to be conscious' [...] is a perception-imperception, i.e., an operative and not thematized meaning [...]” (*VI* 191)? Are they not realized at that “state” of equilibrium between the knowing subject and a meaningful world? But an equilibrium which as Merleau-Ponty says is in fact a modality of movement? “Consciousness,” given already as consciousness, is thus defined by an imperception of itself as a texture for consciousness but which is given as (a structure of) consciousness, or in this case of nature, and is built into the meaning of nature itself as absolutely lawful, or absolutely chaotic, at any rate,

objectified. It's the "as" that we don't see, because this 'as' is not exactly some thing to see, it pertains more to a mode of seeing. And this significance, which is already there when we wake up, is latent not necessarily in the sense that it goes unfelt, but rather that it goes unrecognized as meaning; it is a present and at the same time absent meaning which "[...] we never see for a first time, but only see again" (*ES* 14); as a "garb of ideas" (Husserl) it is in a way *right there*, right in front of me as the texture of this field and the telos of these concepts and I begin to 'think' this field unaware of the presuppositions already operative in this 'no-where' and 'no-when' of thinking, just as "Descartes, and a fortiori his reader, begin their meditation in what is already a universe of discourse [...]" (*Ph.P* 401); it's latent in the sense that as a texture and a truth-intentionality it is not a thing but the setting or thickness of 'things', the "cradle" (*Ph.P* 52) or hinge by which we open up to others and weigh in on the surrounding world, "filling in the blanks." And thus the irresistibility stems from the fact that to see, to think, and to think that we think or that we see, and that we think or that we speak, is to take for granted a certain acquisition of experience, a certain 'moment' of the flux as the natural setting, which, since, as Husserl says, I 'live in' it, is far from me:

Husserl is also quite clear that neither Galileo nor Descartes was fully aware of what each was doing, for two reasons. First, because just as every *Nachstiftung* involves some sort of transformation, so too does each of theirs, in the form of a "fateful omission" (*C*, 49) of not interrogating the presuppositions they receive from the tradition. Second, because like every institution, their ideas "live in very diverse noetic modes of consciousness of the persons who function as the bearers of their development: sometimes they strive forward like instincts, without these persons having the ability to give an account of where they are going" (*C*, 9).⁵³

53 Robert Vallier, "Institution: Of Nature, Life, and Meaning in Merleau-Ponty and Schelling" (2001) pp. 96-97.

In other words the self-evidency of the structural scenario of what we unthinkingly call “thinking” and “the world” is irresistibly taken for granted because it just is the very setting that we perpetuate (*Ph.P* 396). The consciousness of the psychologist, the 'world' of the physicist, the history of the historian, 'the mind' of the philosopher are difficult to break out of because they appear as “problems,” as natural sectors under strict, discoverable laws, corresponding to the methods for discovering these laws (*Ph.P* 59).

Why do the systems, imperatives, or results, somehow affected by objectivist thinking seem nonetheless to bear truth? Why when we speak of ourselves as egos, and of our bodies as 'things', are our conversations nonetheless somehow convincing? Somehow true? We have just suggested something like the following: “Once launched, and committed to a certain set of thoughts, Euclidean space, for example, or the conditions governing the existence of a certain society, I discover evident truths” (*Ph.P* 396). However, there is another reason, the third “irresistability” but which also leads us into a more general discussion of truth and philosophy. Just as others are theatres of a certain “elaboration” of the world (*Ph.P* 353), the words we share have an atmosphere of self-evidency about them because they are after all manifestations of one world, they are in some way in truth, even if this truth turns out to be extremely partial or confused. The partiality of our truth is only a problem so long as we cling to the spectator perspective, to the idea of truth as the property of an ego that we suppose would have to be permanent and in absolute possession of itself, in order that there be a truth and that it be valid for us everywhere and at all times.

Once “[...] my contact with the social in the finitude of my situation is revealed to me as the point of origin of all truth” and [...] since we are in truth and cannot escape it, the only thing left for me to do is to define a truth in the situation” (*S* 109). But we must remember, philosophy, for Merleau-Ponty, does not elucidate this point of origin, it does not wend its way into the heart of the visible and expose the secrets of its integrity, it does spread them out beneath its gaze, it does not “fill in the blanks.” The return to immediate experience, to that “work of faith” or “world of institutions,” that “compound of the world and of ourselves” that precedes philosophy (*VI* 102), without which there would be no philosophy,⁵⁴ is not a return to the immediate, is not a coincidence with this instituted “mute life,” and is not the unveiling of a table of variables that would leave us only with answers and no questions, which is at any rate an impossibility. Philosophy addresses itself generally as a question to the answers already operative in our everyday lives but without ever lifting itself out of this primordial bond; it aims at this “antecedent being” (*VI* 123), this perceptual faith, “[...] but neither expects nor receives an answer in the ordinary sense [...]” (*VI* 103), that is, it neither expects nor receives a “sum of statements” or a “signification that would fill it” in the way ordinary experience does, and instead establishes itself onto another stage of questioning, a broader circumscription of this faith which we do not then soar above but utilize, speak according to more than speak about, and thus pose questions about the relation of philosophy to this faith, and in doing so rehabilitate philosophy as interrogation. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he says that

54 “Phenomenology could never have come about before all the other philosophical efforts of the rationalist tradition, nor prior to the construction of science. It measures the distance between our experience and this science. How could it ignore it? How could it precede it?” (*PP* 29).

“[p]hilosophy is the perceptual faith questioning itself about itself” (VI 103). What he is insisting on is that “the existing world exists in the interrogative mode,” and that “[...] it is not only philosophy, it is first the gaze that questions the things” (VI 103). Philosophy thus models itself not only on the “natural certitudes” of the perceptual faith, that there is a world, and that the idea of the world is given, but also on our fundamental mode of being that we find silent in the residue of perception, which is one of questioning, that is, we are “one sole continued question,” which in philosophy, as interrogation, “appears naked” (VI 103). This in a sense addresses the question we posed above about the irresistibility of philosophical systems. What is irresistible about them is not the panorama they afford, and rather that they manifest the same world, but again, not in the ordinary sense, since we are now speaking of the world in the interrogative mode: “if the philosophies in their integrality are a *question* the interrogative thought which makes them speak is not overcome by what will come later” (VI 200). It is in their integrality as questions that they do not one by one nullify and contradict each other but slip into one another and are “justified together by a continuous movement of thought” (VI 199), co-existing within what Merleau-Ponty calls an “*interrogative ensemble*” (VI 187). For Merleau-Ponty philosophy is restored as an “ontological organ” in the interrogative mode as a disposition to radical questioning or wonder and is in that sense a perpetual beginning; it is an openness upon the world (*ouverture au monde*) not closed off within itself and understood, and its questions—“What is intersubjectivity?” or “What does it mean to share a world?” or “Where am I really?”—remain philosophical, that is, open themselves onto what

they are not but which they rely on, that “secret knowledge” that philosophy as interrogation is most faithful to (in its absence) “[...] only if, by a sort of diplopia, at the same time as they aim at a state of things, they aim at themselves as questions” (VI 119), only if they remain an 'it seems to me that' in a double sense, and in that way “span” Being without supposing that by virtue of being questions they are total and heading straight for it: “if only by virtue of its being as a question, it has already frequented Being, it is returning to it” (VI 120). The irresistibility of high-altitude thinking, where what is irresistible is the 'knowing' but as a question which has yet to appear as such, thus puts us on the verge of radical philosophy. We are close to the interrogative mode when we say that to make good of this “work of faith” between us (since it “see-saws” with aerial thinking) we must sometimes contradict ourselves and “foil the trick of perception.” The interrogative mode is in this sense a bearing, a style, most of all a tone, since speech most of all breaks this primordial silence (*Ph.P* 184) not by converting it into so many words but by being so moved by it, by proceeding from a “precise uneasiness” or *vouloir-dire* and immortalizing itself by being converted back into silence, its “mute or reticent inter-locutor,”—“Being in dehiscence” which we thus establish contact with not through coincidence but distance (VI 128). Converted into a thesis, the interrogative mode is not a pure questioning or knowing, which would put us in the neighborhood of crisis, but a “*question-knowing*,” which befits the programmatic character of this “strange domain” “[...] and which by principle no statement or “answer” can go beyond and which perhaps therefore is the proper mode of our relationship with Being’ (VI 129)...

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