

“A Past Which Has Never Been Present”: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal

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Abstract

Merleau-Ponty’s reference to “a past which has never been present” at the end of “*Le sentir*” challenges the typical framework of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, with its primacy of perception and bodily field of presence. In light of this “original past,” I propose a re-reading of the prepersonal as ground of perception that precedes the dichotomies of subject-object and activity-passivity. Merleau-Ponty searches in the *Phenomenology* for language to describe this ground, borrowing from multiple registers (notably Bergson, but also Husserl). This “sensory life” is a coexistence of sensing and sensible—bodily and worldly—rhythms. Perception is, then, not a natural given, but a temporal process of synchronization between rhythms. By drawing on Bergson, this can be described as a process in which virtual life is actualized into perceiving subject and object perceived. Significantly, this process involves non-coincidence or delay whereby sensory life is always already past for perception.

Keywords

Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, past, prepersonal, perception

Dedicated to the Memory of Martin C. Dillon

At the end of the chapter entitled “*Le sentir* [Sense Experience]” in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty notes:

Hence reflection does not itself grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been present.¹

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¹) “La réflexion ne saisit donc elle-même son sens plein que si elle mentionne le fonds irréflecti qu’elle présuppose, dont elle profite, et qui constitue pour elle comme un passé originel, un passé

The evocation of “a past which has never been present” finds recurrent echoes in French thought since Merleau-Ponty. Levinas, Derrida, and Deleuze have all used the expression in different philosophical contexts. But readers of *Phenomenology of Perception* may be puzzled by this reference to an “original past” and with good reason. The *Phenomenology’s* emphasis on the field of presence of the lived body and on the primacy of perception, understood as givenness in the flesh, seems to preclude such a concept of pastness irreducible to the present. The picture of time in the chapter on “Temporality,” for instance, is one that closely follows Husserl’s theory in his lectures *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, centering on the primordially of the living present.² The idea of an “original past,” a past that does not derive from retention of a former present, seems to have no place in the conceptual map of the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Given its incongruous character, one may be tempted to simply bracket this reference to an “original past” in reading the *Phenomenology*. But how one reads this past has consequences for one’s reading of the *Phenomenology* in general and for understanding Merleau-Ponty’s ambiguous concept of the “prepersonal” in particular.³ As an “anonymous life which subtends my personal one” (*PhP* 165/192), as “[b]odily existence which runs through me, yet does so independently of me” (*PhP* 165/193), the prepersonal has a range of possible senses in the *Phenomenology*. This concept not only undergirds Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the lived body, it also influences the ways in which perception, affectivity, and time can be understood in the text. I will argue that taking seriously Merleau-Ponty’s evocation of the prepersonal as an “orig-

qui n’a jamais été présent.” (*Phénoménologie de la perception* [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945], 280; translated by C. Smith as *Phenomenology of Perception* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962], 242; translation modified). Citations will hereafter be given in the text and abbreviated as *PhP*, with English pagination before French.

² Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, trans. J. B. Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991); cited as *PCIT*, using German pagination.

³ This concept of original past can also be linked to what Merleau-Ponty will later call a “vertical past” that disrupts the serial or linear order of time. See *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. C. Lefort, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 244; *Le visible et l’invisible*, suivi de notes de travail, établi par C. Lefort (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), 297. See also, M. Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, Including Texts by Edmund Husserl*, ed. Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 16.

inal past” leads to a new reading of bodily temporality and its role in perception in the *Phenomenology*.⁴

To elaborate this reading of the prepersonal, I will draw on two philosophers of time of significance for Merleau-Ponty, namely, Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl. Although the *Phenomenology* is a text that is more sympathetic to Husserl than Bergson, the kind of past evoked here is arguably Bergsonian. The reference to an “original past, a past which has never been present” resonates strongly—for this reader of Merleau-Ponty as it has for others⁵—with Bergson’s concept of “past in general.”⁶ It will be necessary, then, to explicate the unstated parallels with Bergson that give rise to such a concept of the past at the end of “*Le sentir*.” My claim in what follows is not that the *Phenomenology of Perception* is a Bergsonian text (any more than it could be a purely Husserlian one). Although Merleau-Ponty was clearly influenced by Bergson, his misreading of Bergson in the *Phenomenology* has been well documented.⁷ (I analyze this misreading elsewhere; my purpose in this paper is rather to trace the positive Bergsonian echoes in “*Le sentir*.”) In light of Merleau-Ponty’s misreading of Bergson, my project of making visible the resonances between Merleau-Ponty’s prepersonal and the Bergsonian past needs to be carefully framed. One could say that these resonances inhabit Merleau-Ponty’s text *despite* his misreading of Bergson. But I think a better, if more complicated, claim can be made. For the misreading of Bergson explains, first, why Merleau-Ponty does not refer to Bergson in the context of “a past which has never been

⁴ This can also make visible continuities between the *Phenomenology* and later works, in particular between the concepts of original past and invisible, prepersonal and flesh. These connections remain hidden when only the dominant framework of a philosophy of consciousness or presence is used to read the *Phenomenology*.

⁵ In this regard, I am in agreement with Leonard Lawlor who argues for a Bergsonian interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s phrase in *Thinking through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 89; abbreviated as *TFP*. My thanks to Rudolf Bernet for bringing to my attention this phrase in the *Phenomenology*.

⁶ Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire: Essai sur la relation du corps à l’esprit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1896), 148; cited as *MM*. Gilles Deleuze calls this “past in general” a *pure past*, borrowing the term from Bergson’s concept of *souvenir pur*. Cf. *Le bergsonisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), 54.

⁷ Significant work has been done on this topic: Renaud Barbaras, *Le tournant de l’expérience: Recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998), 35–42; Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 116–17, 122; and Leonard Lawlor, *Thinking through French Philosophy*, 89–90. In addition, I analyze this misreading in “The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Immemorial Past,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 2 (2007):177–206.

present” despite the obvious Bergsonian echo and, second, as Leonard Lawlor shows, how Merleau-Ponty can simultaneously criticize one version of Bergson’s theory of time (Merleau-Ponty’s own misconstrual), while holding a concept of pastness close to Bergson’s actual position.⁸

Behind this complex (mis)appropriation of Bergson, an additional factor is, I believe, at play. This is Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl’s lectures *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*. At work here is Merleau-Ponty’s tendency to develop his own thought by way of the unthought in Husserl.⁹ In “*Le sentir*,” I will argue, Merleau-Ponty is trying to explore an undeveloped and marginal reflection from the appendices to Husserl’s Time Lectures: perception may be, not an instantaneous act, but a temporal process that involves diachrony. The question of non-coincidence in perception—which Husserl raises and quickly abandons—opens the way for Merleau-Ponty to think perception as a constant negotiation of sensing and sensible, as a process that inscribes an original sense of pastness. As I will suggest, the route to a Bergsonian past is confirmed, unexpectedly and despite their obvious differences, by a fleeting idea in Husserl.

Reading the “Original Past”: The Prepersonal as Sensory Life

From a biological layer of existence (*PhP* 146/171), a prenatal past, or childhood stage of development (*PhP* 347/399) to the habit-body (*PhP* 91/107) and the tacit cogito (*PhP* 406/465), there are multiple articulations of the prepersonal in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.¹⁰ But the sense of the prepersonal as an original past—constituting a forgotten or unconscious dimension of embodiment—remains one of the most puzzling of Merleau-Ponty’s for-

⁸ Lawlor, *TFP*, 89–90.

⁹ As Renaud Barbaras has argued in *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 219. For Merleau-Ponty’s relation to the unthought in Husserl, see his later “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in *Signs*, trans. R. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159–60. That Merleau-Ponty is reading Bergson through Husserl in the *Phenomenology* also explains how the misreading of Bergson comes about.

¹⁰ To attempt to impose a harmony on these different senses of the prepersonal is not the project of this paper. Their commonality lies in their status as unreflected, but there are also clearly ways in which certain formulations of the prepersonal may call for (or exclude) others. For example, understood in terms of their deployment of time, the habit-body calls for a deeper, original past, while the tacit cogito, with its presupposition of presence to self, excludes such a past.

mulations. This is echoed by other references in the *Phenomenology* to an “absolute past of nature” (*PhP* 137/160), “primordial silence” (*PhP* 184/214), or “prehistory” (*PhP* 240/277). But these terms remain marginal and are not fully thematized in the text. Indeed, what Merleau-Ponty means by “a past which has never been present” has been an issue of contention among commentators. There are two readings that I want to briefly consider.¹¹ M. C. Dillon, in an essay on “The Unconscious,” in which he compares Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, argues that this phrase be read in the context of the relation of reflection to the unreflected, which Merleau-Ponty is considering at the end of “*Le sentir*.”¹² In this reading, the “original past” was never present to reflective consciousness but is “fully present to pre-reflective perceptual consciousness”;¹³ this past is nothing other than unreflected experience. In contrast, in *Thinking through French Philosophy*, Leonard Lawlor argues that the unreflected must be interpreted in terms of the notion of original past, itself read in the context of the *Phenomenology*’s chapter on “Temporality.”¹⁴ By shifting to Merleau-Ponty’s misreading of Bergson in that chapter, Lawlor presents a convincing case for the Bergsonian character of the original past. Left open by both thinkers is the question of what the unreflected must be in “*Le sentir*,” if it is to inscribe an original past. In other words, how does one take seriously both the originary nature of the past referred to by Merleau-Ponty (as Lawlor does) and the context of “*Le sentir*” in which it is invoked (as Dillon insists)?

¹¹ Other thinkers have, of course, taken up this phrase. Notably, David Michael Levin refers to the original past in the context of a comparison between Merleau-Ponty and Levinas in “Trace-work: Myself and Others in the Moral Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 6, no. 3 (1998): 345–92. Levin reads the prepersonal as an early childhood stage of moral development that continues as a trace in the adult ego. Though I find this reading productive in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s studies of child psychology, I believe the original past should not simply be read as an empirical stage of existence; it is a structural dimension of the present that configures bodily temporality as delay. My reading is hence close to Bernhard Waldenfels in “Time Lag: Motifs for a Phenomenology of the Experience of Time,” *Research in Phenomenology* 30 (2000): 107–19. Although Waldenfels only refers to Merleau-Ponty’s “past which has never been present” in passing, he theorizes different levels of pastness or forgetting. Among these, childhood experience (posited as not consciously lived through) is secondary to the originary forgetting that structures our existence as perpetual lag (115).

¹² M. C. Dillon, “The Unconscious: Language and World,” in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. P. Burke and J. Van der Veken (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 69–83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁴ Lawlor, *TFP*, 88–90.

In what follows, I take up Dillon's suggestion of reading "a past which has never been present" in the context of the chapter on "*Le sentir*." I will focus, however, not on the status of reflection in that chapter, as Dillon does, but on Merleau-Ponty's account of unreflected life. In "The Unconscious," Dillon understands unreflected life to be equivalent to perceptual consciousness, conceived as an operative form of presence to self and world in the guise of the *tacit cogito*¹⁵ (*PhP* 404/462). What remains unexplained is the underlying temporality, the originary sense of pastness evoked by Merleau-Ponty. In this regard, Dillon's impressive study in *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* offers more extensive resources for thinking the prepersonal—by problematizing the notion of *tacit cogito* as corporeal reflexivity, understanding time in terms of the paradox of immanence and transcendence, and (significantly for my purposes) insisting on the *Gestalt* as a dynamic and emergent phenomenon of experience.¹⁶ Though I agree with Dillon that "experience is *gestaltet* at the perceptual level," I believe it is necessary to look at the process through which such organization takes shape.¹⁷ That is to say that meaningful, perceptual organization can be traced back to a plural and ambiguous ground that comes to expression in cultural-historical-linguistic forms of perception. In addition to the distinction between the unreflected and reflection, I propose a further nuance within Merleau-Ponty's theory of the unreflected between sensory ground (or "original perception" [*PhP* 242/279]) and perception as acquisition. The process by which the sensory ground comes to form in perception allows us to understand how perception can be nonarbitrary yet contextually, historically, and culturally specific, how a polymorphous unconscious becomes perceptual consciousness, and how perception is not an innate faculty but a temporal process (in which learning and habituation have a place).

To elaborate the distinction between sensory ground and perception, the sense of "original" pastness evoked by Merleau-Ponty must be examined. Here, Lawlor's reading of "a past which has never been present" fills in Merleau-Ponty's reference by supplying its temporal context. In showing how the unreflected cannot be understood without a consideration of time, Lawlor

¹⁵ Dillon, "The Unconscious," 73.

¹⁶ M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2nd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 104–5 (*tacit cogito*), 43–44 (time), 65–68 (*Gestalt*). The sense in which perception has an "autochthonous" organization for Dillon is neither naturalism nor naïve realism, but pregnancy of the sensible, a diachronic meaning unfolding through time (67, 78). The theory of the prepersonal that I present in this paper seeks to deepen this vein of Dillon's account.

¹⁷ Dillon, "The Unconscious," 74.

argues that the “original” and nonderivative character of the past in Merleau-Ponty’s phrase must bring us to Bergson. In a move that builds on Lawlor’s argument, I think that a return to “*Le sentir*” and a re-reading of its Bergsonian dimensions are called for. Thus sensory life would be that “primitive complicit[y] with the world” (*PhP* 424/485, cited in *TFP*, 90), which at once grounds perception and assures its opacity and non-coincidence. Without subsuming Merleau-Ponty to Derrida, one could say that sensory life makes perception possible, while ensuring its impossibility as full and instantaneous presence to the world.

It must be admitted that the descriptions of time woven through the *Phenomenology* are ambiguous. But the dominant threads, especially in the “Temporality” chapter, bring time back to the “field of presence” of the subject (*PhP* 415/475 and 423/484), experienced “with no intervening distance and with absolute self-evidence” (*PhP* 416/476). Indeed, the present is privileged because “it is the zone where being and consciousness coincide” (*PhP* 424/485). It is from this field that both past and future are understood to issue as dimensions of disintegration, so that “[t]ime exists for me because I have a present” (*PhP* 424/485). And the reality of the remote past is derived from its former presence (*PhP* 416/475). Though Merleau-Ponty makes several attempts to think time as differentiation (*PhP* 419/480), the past—whether proximate or remote, retained or recollected—continues to refer back to, and depend upon, the present of the subject.¹⁸ In contrast to this picture of time, Merleau-Ponty’s account of sensory life in “*Le sentir*” allows us to glimpse a different structure of bodily temporality, one that involves an irreducible sense of pastness, an irrevocable non-coincidence or delay.

What permits Dillon’s and Lawlor’s divergent readings of Merleau-Ponty is the fact that unreflected life is not a fully worked-out concept in the *Phenomenology*. In other places in the text, it is taken to be the equivalent of the intentional arc that runs between perceiving subject and perceived object (*PhP* 136/158). Elsewhere, it comes into focus as the figure-ground, or *Gestalt*,

¹⁸ As John Sallis has perceptively shown, there is one comprehensive problem in the *Phenomenology*, that of subjectivity. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s question in the “Temporality” chapter is how time is related to subjectivity, and his answer is given in terms of their structural identity (“Time, Subjectivity, and the Phenomenology of Perception,” *The Modern Schoolman*, 48 [May 1971]: 343–57). Merleau-Ponty famously criticized this philosophy of subjectivity later in his career (cf. *The Visible and the Invisible*, 200/253). Decisive, in my view, is not only the focus on the subject but also that this subject is understood in the *Phenomenology* as presence (to the world and to itself). The desire for subjective presence doubly limits the ability to think the alterity of time (and hence the originary nature of the past) in that text.

structure of perception (*PhP* 60/73–74). But in the chapter on “*Le sentir*,” this “unreflective fund” is revealed to contain a “primary layer of sense experience [*cette couche originnaire du sentir*]” (*PhP* 238/276). This offers a more suggestive sense of the prepersonal that is closely linked to both bodily affectivity and temporality, as we shall see. What does Merleau-Ponty mean by describing the unreflected, or more precisely, the prepersonal, in terms of original sensibility? This “primordial layer” of sensibility is not the equivalent of any sense field, nor is it a synthetic unity of the senses (*PhP* 227/262). Thus, “I must be particularly careful not to begin by defining the senses; I must resume contact with the sensory life [*la sensorialité*] which I live from within” (*PhP* 219–20/254). To describe this life as “sense experience,” as in the English translation of “*le sentir*,” is also misleading. It is not a conscious experience, which would require *something* appearing as a figure against a background, or a difference being registered in the perceptual field. Neither is this properly speaking perception—except to name perception’s “non-thetic, pre-objective and pre-conscious” ground, what Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls “*perception originnaire*” (*PhP* 242/279).¹⁹ For perception is an act of recognition that relies both on a distinction being instituted between subject and object poles and, more importantly, on their coexistence.²⁰ It is this original intertwining or coexistence that sensory life designates—sensibility, I argue, being the condition of possibility of perceptual experience and of the existence of different sense fields. Sensory life is thus anterior to the distinctions of subject and object and to the divisions between the senses; it is the generative ground of these divisions, of experience, of things, and ideas (*PhP* 219/254).²¹

Coexistence of Rhythms

What Merleau-Ponty points to in the context of unreflected, sensory life is the mutual belonging of lived body and world or, more precisely, of sensing (*sentant*) and sensible. Not only is “the body...our anchorage in a world”

¹⁹ To avoid conflating terms, I will call this primordial layer “sensory life,” and reserve “perception” for the experience generated out of this ground.

²⁰ This subject-object dichotomy characterizes perception in our modern epoch. My aim is not to imply its ubiquity, but rather to show that it is an acquired (historical, cultural) form of perception based upon a more fundamental, polymorphous ground.

²¹ This anteriority can be understood as both transcendental ground and temporal delay. To anticipate section 4, the relation of sensory life and perception is one where the difference of ground and grounded is experienced as perceptual lag.

(*PhP* 144/169), but it is “sensitive to all the rest” (*PhP* 236/273). The body is “in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system” (*PhP* 203/235). Correlatively, the world is there prior to any constituting operations on the part of body or consciousness (*PhP* 217/251); it solicits the body, exercising upon it an affective pull and a vital sway (*PhP* 210/243). The relation of body and world is thus not an external or causal one (*PhP* 214/248). It is a “living connection,” according to Merleau-Ponty, a relation of internal implication and mutual expression (*PhP* 205/237). In this sense, body and world mirror one another, so that every perception is accompanied by a motor and affective shift in the body, and every shift in the body corresponds to a change in the world perceived (*PhP* 206/239). Sensing and sensible are simultaneous at this level; there is no way of going behind their relation, or decomposing it.²² Thus Merleau-Ponty calls the relation of sensing and sensible a *co-naissance*, “coexistence,” or “communion” (*PhP* 213/247): “The subject of sensation . . . is a power [*puissance*] which is born into, and simultaneously with [*co-naît à*], a certain existential environment, or is synchronized with it” (*PhP* 211/245).

It is important to note that the coexistence of body and world at the level of sensory life does not imply their coincidence or submersion one by the other. Such coincidence would mean that the world were wholly given to the body or that the body was a reducible part of the world. In either case, the idea of an original past would be elided; body and world would be fully co-present terms. Rather, the *co-naissance* to which Merleau-Ponty refers is that of different rhythms of existence, different speeds or tempos of being, which define different bodies, material things, and aspects of the world. In the chapter on “*Le sentir*,” Merleau-Ponty notes that colors have different affective pulls, motor physiognomies, and vital significance (*PhP* 210–11/243), so that there is a “particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red” (*PhP* 212/245). The sensible world is not a sum of objects fully delimited and defined in advance; rather “in the sensible a certain rhythm of existence is put forward” (*PhP* 213/247). The body negotiates and lives these rhythms in

²² The theme of the indivision of sensing-sensible runs throughout Merleau-Ponty’s work. It should be noted that since there is no way of going behind this relation, as ground, sensory life can be said to be an abyss. For an account of the difficulty of thinking sensation, as both indistinction and duality, see Barbaras, *Le tournant de l’expérience*, 13–14. To see how this indivision of *sentir* plays a role in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, see Marc Richir, *Phénomènes, temps et êtres: Ontologie et phénoménologie* (Grenoble: J. Millon, 1987), 93–94.

terms of various affective attitudes and motor behaviors. The body's motricity establishes "the variable amplitude of [its] being-in-the-world" (*PbP* 210/243; translation modified)—an amplitude that adapts to the rhythmic differences of colors in order to be able to see them. The body's affectivity is defined by its openness to, its ability to take up and "sympathize" with, these rhythms (*PbP* 214/247). The lived body does not therefore arise in isolation. In being born with the world, our bodies develop as particular rhythms that negotiate with and respond to the dynamic rhythms and qualities of the world. But my body is also born into a world with other bodies, so that prenatal and childhood rhythms already develop in contact with maternal, caregiver and companion bodies, in an original sympathy that Merleau-Ponty will later describe.²³ It should be noted that in "*Le sentir*" Merleau-Ponty does not address the double negotiation, resonance or dissonance, that takes place between different lived bodies. Nor does he explicitly acknowledge the importance of social, cultural, or linguistic rhythms (whether phonetic or discursive) in the formation of one's bodily rhythm—despite admitting the correlative role of the body in linguistic comprehension (*PbP* 235/272). (Although a full account is beyond the scope of this essay, I believe that Merleau-Ponty's theory of sensibility can be productively extended in this vein. Thus certain intersubjective and horizontal rhythms can already be understood to supply an initial measure, upon which one's own bodily rhythm is improvised.)

The idea of living bodies or the material world expressing rhythms of being finds its antecedent in Bergson's *Matière et mémoire*. This is echoed in *L'évolution créatrice* by the idea that different tendencies of life coexist within an "*élan vital*" and together constitute a multiplicity of interpenetrating and sometimes dissonant rhythms.²⁴ In this sense, living bodies have their own durations, so that "[p]artout où quelque chose vit, il y a, ouvert quelque part, un registre où le temps s'inscrit."²⁵ For Bergson, there is not one rhythm of dura-

²³ For initial sympathy or syncretism in childhood, see "The Child's Relations with Others," in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 119–20. Interesting in this regard are recent studies in child psychology that make use of the notion of rhythm to study intersubjective coordination and social development; see Jaffe et al., *Rhythms of Dialogue in Infancy: Coordinated Timing in Development*, Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, serial no. 265, vol. 66, no. 2 (Boston: Blackwell Publishers, 2001). My thanks to Florentien Verhage for bringing this study to my attention.

²⁴ Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1907), 119–20 and 259.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

tion, one tempo of temporal change. Rather, there are faster or slower, more or less contracted or expanded rhythms that define all the possible degrees of difference between non-living matter and pure mind (*MM* 232). Most interesting in Bergson's account is the connection he draws between the rhythm of a life (its temporality) and its sensori-motor configuration (its body). This link is due to the role that affect plays in Bergson's theory. Affect arises, according to Bergson in *Matière et mémoire*, when the complexity of a living body is such that it hesitates between various courses of action. The causal sequence of excitation and automatic response is thus interrupted and affect takes its place. Affects prefigure possible future actions and institute a delay in the body so that it has time to choose. The body waits before acting; it has the time not only to perceive but also to remember (*MM* 11–12). It is in this way that affectivity symbolizes, for Bergson, a body's hold on time. For to feel is to no longer repeat the past automatically but to imagine, remember and actualize the past and, with it, to influence the future (*MM* 251). In affect there is a hesitation that opens up the past to being acted out differently. But bodies exist in varying complexities and are thus affectively open in different ways. Each bodily affectivity (or sensori-motor schema) corresponds to a particular scope and intensity of remembering and anticipation—so that each body incarnates a particular rhythm of duration; it has a different temporal pattern. And this rhythm represents a way not only of living time in the present but of actualizing the past and opening up the future. According to Bergson, the rhythm of a life—the tension of its duration—is mirrored in the affective complexity of its body.²⁶

Despite their different ontological frameworks, it is interesting to compare Bergsonian rhythm to what Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology* calls bodily

²⁶ “Chacun de ces degrés successifs [de la durée], qui mesure une intensité croissante de vie, répond à une plus haute tension de durée et se traduit au dehors par un plus grand développement du système sensori-moteur... et l'organisation plus complexe du système nerveux... ne fait que symboliser matériellement... la force intérieure qui permet à l'être de se dégager du rythme d'écoulement des choses, de retenir de mieux en mieux le passé pour influencer de plus en plus profondément l'avenir, c'est-à-dire... sa mémoire” (*MM* 249–50). It should be noted that I am drawing on chapter 4 of *Matière et mémoire*, which provides a concept of duration or rhythm that bridges the dualism of matter and mind, body and memory (a position that I think Bergson comes to hold in the book, though not unambiguously, cf. my “The Memory of Another Past: Bergson, Deleuze and a New Theory of Time” in *Continental Philosophy Review* 37(2004):203–39). A different, dualistic account of bodily temporality and recollection would be produced by reading chapter 2 (see David Morris' astute reading in “The Logic of the Body in Bergson's Motor Schemes and Merleau-Ponty's Body Schema” *Philosophy Today*, 44 (2000): 60–69).

bearing or style (*PhP* 150/176). This is a temporal unity in which affect, movement, and perception are united (*PhP* 150/175–76), although Merleau-Ponty's analysis shows that style is given primarily in affective and kinaesthetic terms rather than objectively or representationally (*PhP* 148/173–74). Style is a dynamic form and not a static or objective unity; it is the body that tacitly unifies itself in its movements, gestures, and engagements with the world in a “melodic ‘how,’” to use Dillon's term²⁷ (*PhP* 150/175). This means that style is not an essential form that precedes the body's experience in the world, since style is formed in negotiation with the world and others. Indeed, by negotiation, I do not mean a series of calculated decisions on the level of personal acts, but rather a lived through, sensing flow that modulates its movements in felt resonance or dissonance with the sensible to which it belongs. I shall examine this body-world negotiation below, but it is important to mention that it is this negotiation that gives the vitality and singularity of bodily style. Far from making styles interchangeable or general, the constant negotiation and becoming implied in Merleau-Ponty's idea of style are part of what distinguish one style or rhythm from another. For the manner in which a style changes will be unique to the body incarnating it; it will define an inimitable history of sensory encounters and motor responses—a continuously improvised rhythm or becoming. This represents a departure from Bergson's metaphysical picture of pre-established and fixed rhythms of duration, posited as a “series of beings,” where the differences between rhythms appear unbridgeable.²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, portrays the genesis of bodily rhythm in non-essentialist, relational, and dialogical (arguably diacritical) terms. Rhythms can be negotiated, modulated, and modified in Merleau-Ponty's picture. They arise from a genuine coexistence of bodies and world and evolve according to the sensory negotiations between them. Bodily rhythm constitutes a *diachronic sensibility* that continues to be negotiated in each new encounter. The outcomes of sensory encounters take up and improvise upon this history each time, and so, though continuous, are not predictable beforehand (*PhP* 215/249).

Here Merleau-Ponty's account of bodily affectivity goes farther than Bergson's. Though Merleau-Ponty shares with Bergson the sense that a body's

²⁷ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 79.

²⁸ Cf. *MM* 232. As a corollary, the material world has only one rhythm for Bergson, that of non-living matter (*MM* 234). Merleau-Ponty differs from Bergson in this regard, for in the *Phenomenology* the world is characterized by a multiplicity of material rhythms corresponding to different colors, sounds, and qualities and requiring constant negotiation on the part of one's lived body.

affective openness correlates to its temporal patterning, affectivity for Merleau-Ponty is not merely a symbolization of the body's past. Affectivity is, more importantly, an opening onto the rhythmic differences of the world. Bodily rhythm incarnates a past and thereby opens a future, but for Merleau-Ponty this is a future of responsiveness. The body strives not simply to actualize its own past in action but to resonate and give expression to worldly rhythms in perception (to see an ever more differentiated and meaningful world).²⁹ Bodily affectivity may hence be configured in terms of past experiences with the world (a delimitation that takes the form of nascent movements that anticipate already given worldly rhythms), but it is also a dynamic and dialogical affectivity that modulates its openness in response to the world. Bodily affectivity stretches to attend to rhythmic differences hitherto unnoticed, “felt in our experience by no more than a certain lack” (*PhP* 153/179). This is because bodily rhythm already draws upon a lacunary history of sensory encounters—upon an inexhaustible sensory life where body and world intertwine but never fully coincide. It is this non-coincidence of sensory life (which I will study below) that allows bodily affectivity to remain responsive and habitualities fluid. (There is no question for Merleau-Ponty of automatic repetition of a sedimented past, an imposition on the present, since sensory life defines an open temporality that is dialogical and never self-enclosed.)

Given the openness of bodily rhythm, how are we to understand its individuating function? For Merleau-Ponty, bodies are individuated by their style or rhythm.³⁰ It is in this sense that lived bodies can be compared to works of art, for both are “individuals” in Merleau-Ponty's sense (*PhP* 151/177). In both body and work of art, unity or meaning is not a matter of subsumption under a law and is incommunicable by any other means (*PhP* 150/175). Both are “beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed,” in which the style is inherent in the material form (*PhP* 151/177). Here I should note that, although rhythm is clearly a metaphor for the temporal form or pattern that a body or aspect of the world draws in time, Merleau-Ponty's use of the term remains vague.³¹ Even in musicological terms,

²⁹ A striving that Merleau-Ponty qualifies as a “blind expectation” (*PhP* 153/179).

³⁰ I use rhythm and style interchangeably in this text. A further distinction may be possible between bodily rhythm (as yet nascent, tacitly lived and not appropriated as “mine”) and bodily style, which is what I and others recognize my body to be at the level of body image or representation.

³¹ The above comparison to Bergson is hence aimed at providing conceptual tools to make the notion of rhythm more precise, without ignoring the differences that set Merleau-Ponty's use of rhythm apart from Bergson's.

rhythm is an ambiguous concept.³² What is clear is that Merleau-Ponty does not intend rhythm to be a purely formal element that can be detached from one medium and identically repeated in another; each rhythm materializes and becomes incarnate as a singular way of being, e.g., a concrete color or lived body.³³ If, as Bernhard Waldenfels notes, “[r]hythm accounts for the *return of the same*, which is measured out in beats,” this sameness can only be experienced against a deeper contrast or temporal differentiation, which means that rhythm not only supports an emergent order or identity but also continually alters it.³⁴ When, in Merleau-Ponty’s account, my body takes up another rhythm (e.g., learns to see a color), this is not a matter of identifying with that color. Rather, the temporal differentiation that defines my body opens up the possibility of differential and tangential repetitions; my already sedimented style is improvised upon, so that it comes to synchronize with that color.³⁵ If further repeated and reinforced, this improvised ability becomes a habit and my sensori-motor schema (“I can”) is recast.³⁶ It is in this sense that rhythms are relational. The propagation or communication of a rhythm between world and bodies, and even between different senses, is not the application of a formula but a becoming or repetition in which continuity is a function of difference.³⁷

³² Cf. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), especially 131–32 and 152–53.

³³ Cf. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 79.

³⁴ Waldenfels, “Time Lag,” 113–14.

³⁵ Thus the color “may pass on to my body a similar manner of being, fully pervading me, so that it is no longer entitled to be called a colour”; or, in the case of sound, “the acoustic element disappears and becomes the highly precise experience of a change permeating my whole body” (*PhP* 227/262–63). Here, “[t]he sensory experience . . . is distinguished only by an ‘accent’ which is indicative rather of the direction of the sound or the colour” (227/263). For Merleau-Ponty, this is the stage where the body takes up the rhythm of the sensible in a non-objectifying way and on its own terms; he presents it as continuous with, and, as we shall see, the basis for, that rhythm appearing as a thing.

³⁶ Habits are hence inscribed within the flow of bodily rhythm. This rhythm not only makes habituality possible but also provides the means for its destabilization (see the account of bodily affectivity above). For a detailed account of Merleau-Ponty’s habit-body in light of Bergson’s body memory, see Edward S. Casey, “Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty” in *Man and World* 17 (1984): 279–97.

³⁷ In other words, rhythm need not assume regularity or invariance. See Jaffe et al. for such a definition of rhythm: “a recurrent nonrandom temporal patterning that may or may not be strictly regular” (*Rhythms of Dialogue in Infancy*, 1).

Temporality of Perception

Merleau-Ponty's example of seeing color provides a way of deepening our consideration of the negotiation of rhythms. Seeing color is not a simple act; it is neither an intentional act in which consciousness constitutes the extended noema to include color attributes, nor is it a physical, causal operation in which the eyes are affected by light waves and intensities (*PhP* 210/243). Rather, both the body, which learns to distinguish color, and the determinate colors, which come to be seen, are generated out of the sensory encounter. The body affectively anticipates and kinaesthetically responds to a particular rhythm in the world; by modulating the gaze appropriately, this rhythm is perceived as a particular concrete color in the world. Both perceiving and perceived arise together by a process of negotiation or synchronization between the rhythms of body and world. Perception is in this sense an acquisition; it is neither innately determined nor given in an instantaneous blink of the eye. We *learn* to perceive according to Merleau-Ponty. Hence the well-known description in the *Phenomenology* of color-perception as a perceptual-motor habit acquired in childhood. Learning to distinguish blue from red, Merleau-Ponty notes, is a habit that transforms both one's body, which acquires "a certain style of seeing," and the world, which comes to express richer, color-differentiations (*PhP* 153/179).

That perception is acquired means that it is the result of a temporal process. The basic structure of this process is dictated by the original non-coincidence, or asynchronicity, of the rhythms of body and world that coexist in sensory life. A close reading of "*Le sentir*" reveals that this perceptual process involves openness, call, and response. At the prepersonal level, the body is affectively open to the world. This is not a passive or static posture, as if the body were a blank slate or a material, unformed *hyle*. The body is already a tentative rhythm, since it has a sensory history, constituted from previous encounters with the world and others. Bodily rhythm is played out in terms of barely conscious, "nascent movements" or kinaestheses; it represents a particular, felt, motor power. But in the sensory encounter, this bodily rhythm modulates itself in an attempt to anticipate the world's rhythms, in a receptive attitude of waiting. The body's nascent movements vary, in order to lend the vague rhythms of the world stability and reality from the body's own being—to provide them with support for their appearance as objective realities (*PhP* 212/245). In this encounter, the world calls to and invites the body to resonate with it (*PhP* 214/248). The sensible possesses a certain power of suggestion, a way of questioning or addressing the body (*PhP* 212/245–46)—so

much so that an arrhythmia may arise when my body's nascent movements anticipate a color and the world suggests another (*PhP* 214/248, citing Werner, UEE, 158). Explicit perception occurs as a bodily response that is both affective and motor. Thus, "before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning. . . . I must find the attitude that will provide it with the means of becoming determinate, of becoming blue; I must find the response to a badly formulated question" (*PhP* 214/248, translation modified). The body must develop the rhythm or pattern of movement that can synchronize to the worldly rhythm in question, allowing the body to see a distinct color.³⁸ Hence the sensing body is instituted as perceiving subject, while the sensible ceases to be a universe of indistinct rhythms and becomes a world of concrete, perceived things.

Returning to Merleau-Ponty's example of distinguishing blue from red, discussed earlier in the *Phenomenology*, complicates this theory of sensibility (cf. *PhP* 153/179). The call that issues from the sensible is not that of a thing requiring recognition but that of rhythmic difference. Such difference, though suggestive, is not defined in itself; it is but an absence, lack, or "tension" (*PhP* 232/268) that calls to be noticed and to be articulated into a world of positive things (e.g., blue vs. red). To allow a rhythm to become determinate is, then, to learn to distinguish it from others. Perceptual form is figure-against-ground and, in that sense, must take up the rhythmic differences of the sensible, making (at least) one dimension of this difference perceptible as a difference *between things*. Bodily rhythm modulates itself affectively and kin-aesthetically, varying its system of movements until it comes to resonate with this rhythmic difference of the world. To perceive is not to fill a lack in the world (indeed, this negativity should be located not in the sensible as such but in the relation of sensing and sensible, for it is a *felt* lack). To perceive is to modulate the body schema based on this lack so that it is felt as more than a simple negative; it becomes the differential infrastructure that allows a perceptual form to appear. Thus, to perceive is not to coincide with a sensible in-itself but to coexist with the sensible in a mode of synchronization that allows it to come into focus, to be sensible for itself.³⁹ This is what Merleau-Ponty will

³⁸ This may be compared to improvising a dance; it is a tacit and felt, not a calculated, response on the part of the body. Learning to dance to a piece of music involves picking up on its rhythms and actualizing them in the continuity of one's bodily style. Different bodies may dance to the same music, improvise on the same rhythm, in varying ways.

³⁹ This relation of body and world can best be described by the verb "*seconder*," to use Mauro Carbonè's term (*La visibilità de l'invisible: Merleau-Ponty entre Cézanne et Proust* [Hildesheim:

repeat in later works drawing explicitly on Bergson: “We are not this pebble, but when we look at it, it awakens resonances in our perceptive apparatus; our perception appears to come from it... our perception of the pebble is a kind of promotion to existence for itself.”⁴⁰ Perception is not correspondence but resonance—a *becoming-meaning* in which the sensible takes on perceptual form and becomes what it will have been (as I will argue below).

For Merleau-Ponty, the sensory encounter should therefore be understood as a dynamic pairing between body and world. This is an exchange that transcends the distinctions of subject-object and activity-passivity:

It is my gaze which subtends colour, and the movement of my hand which subtends the object's form, or rather my gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other. (*PhP* 214/248)

Beyond traditional dichotomies, Merleau-Ponty appears to be searching in “*Le sentir*” for terminology to describe sensory life and how it becomes perception. He speaks of “communion” (*PhP* 212/246), “sympathy” (*PhP* 214/247), and “synchronization” (*PhP* 211/245). Merleau-Ponty appeals to magical, theological, and aesthetic registers (cf. *PhP* 212–14/245–47). But he also borrows from Bergson in referring to “a past which has never been present.” The implication—which is not explicitly worked out by Merleau-Ponty but that I will develop below—is that perception is a process of (mutual) actualization, of being made present. Keeping in mind the elliptical nature of Merleau-Ponty’s evocation of Bergson, parallels can still be drawn between the perceptual process in “*Le sentir*” and the actualization of the virtual past in *Matière et mémoire*. Significantly, these parallels will allow us to understand how Merleau-Ponty can appeal to sensory life as “a past which has never been present” at the end of the chapter.

If “[w]e must rediscover, as anterior to the ideas of subject and object, ... that primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being” (*PhP* 219/254), then both body and world—sensing and sensible—could be considered only

Georg Olms Verlag, 2001], 177, 185; *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy* [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004], 37).

⁴⁰ Translation modified. He concludes: “What we believed to be coincidence is coexistence” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. J. Wild, J. Edie and J. O’Neill [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963], 17; originally published as *Éloge de la philosophie et autres essais* [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1953], 25).

“virtual” prior to the negotiation and synchronization that takes place between their rhythms. They solidify into particular identities and divide into subject and object through the process of actualization, of being made present.⁴¹ But the virtuality of sensory life cannot be fully rendered in terms of presence or representation. Although perception converts the elements of the sensory encounter into recognizable and representable identities, this is a transformation of the inherent ambiguity and intertwining of the sensory—a transformation that the sensory suggests but as a result of which it comes to be overlaid and forgotten qua sensory life.⁴² What was a multi-dimensional field of rhythms in which differences worked to both separate and connect—a web of differential relations that no single perspective or axis of comparison could exhaust—becomes seen as an opposition of figure-ground. It is not sensory life that is perceived but an actualized and represented version thereof.

The non-representational character of sensory life and its status as original past bring us to Bergson’s “past in general.” This virtual past (what Bergson calls “*souvenir pur*”) is not a container indifferent to its contents nor an inert acquisition.⁴³ It has a power (*puissance*) that, like the sensible in Merleau-Ponty’s theory, is not that of efficient causality but of suggestion.⁴⁴ What the past suggests is not a copy of the present from which it was formed but a different way of living time—a particular rhythm of duration that characterizes a plane of pure memory. Pure memories are not atomistic or separable moments but planes in which the whole past coexists at different levels of tension (corresponding to sheets in Bergson’s famous image of a cone) (*MM* 181). To each plane belongs a different style or configuration of pastness. It is thus artificial to speak of individual, datable, *pure* memories. Pure memory is not recollection as such but what grounds and configures our recollections and perceptions. Actualization is the process by which one rhythm of duration (or plane of the past) comes into the present. Memories are extricated from the past and rendered as individual *memory-images*. What was a fluid and polysemic

⁴¹ At least in the form of perception that is found in modernity, which is the dominant mode of actualization analyzed here. (That other modes are possible is implied by my analysis, though how we can arrive at different ways of seeing is the topic of another paper.)

⁴² To echo David Michael Levin (who relates Merleau-Ponty to Heidegger in this context): there is a “bodily felt sensory connectedness that *precedes and secures* ‘perception’ as we ordinarily think of it—perception, that is, as a relation between a subject and its object” (*The Philosopher’s Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 209).

⁴³ Henri Bergson, *L’énergie spirituelle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1919), 99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

past—where events interpenetrated and were over-inscribed with meaning—is decomposed into distinct moments, selected out in terms of present interest, and united into a univocal and coherent representation. In this way, the suggestive richness and complexity of the past is reduced in light of utility and indexed relative to the present (*MM* 156). But as an interconnected and infinitely detailed whole, the virtual past is unconscious; it cannot be represented as such. The virtual past therefore lies outside consciousness and the present; it constitutes an original kind of forgetting. Rather than simply implying a loss, this unconsciousness is the generative ground for conscious discernment, for perceptual differentiation, in the present.

I want to argue that a similar operation can be found in the process of synchronization, described by Merleau-Ponty in “*Le sentir*,” by which body and world emerge from the “communion” of sensory life and become present to each other in perception. In contrast to Bergson, it is not one rhythm of the past that is actualized in Merleau-Ponty’s account, but two rhythms, sensing and sensible, which negotiate a joint actualization. In “*Le sentir*,” the perceptual process involves both a decomposition and recomposition of sensory life, by which this life is transformed into perceiving subject and object perceived. The multiplicity and complexity of rhythmic interplay is reduced not only to a selection of distinct rhythms that are discerned but to particular axes of difference that become the dimensions through which perception occurs. This selection is evident in the pairings that form between body and world: hands pair with texture and eyes with color (*PhP* 214/248, cited above). These pairings delimit the fields of the senses and map out habitual lines of actualization (and differentiation) by which rhythms of the world can be experienced. In this way, the senses are constituted as distinct and functionally different fields. Synaesthetic experience, in which barriers between the senses break down, reveals by its exceptional nature the selection and delimitation of rhythms that take place in normalized perception in modernity.⁴⁵ Body and world, which intertwined in sensory life, are distinguished along subject-object lines. World-rhythms become distinct colors and sounds, while bodily rhythm distills into

⁴⁵ “When I say that I see a sound, I mean that I echo the vibration of the sound with my whole sensory being, and particularly with that sector of myself which is susceptible to colours” (*PhP* 234/271). Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “[s]ynaesthetic perception is the rule” is ambiguous in my view, for he also claims that synaesthesia has been unlearned in modernity and replaced with a scientific mode of perception (*PhP* 229/265). My argument is that, although synaesthesia may be the rule for sensory life, it is not so in modern perception. This explains why we do not explicitly experience perception as synaesthetic, except in limit cases.

separate senses and capacities that mirror the perceptual forms taken by the world. Finally, actualization involves an ongoing recomposition or transition-synthesis. The rhythms that are selected out come together in the presumptive unity of an intentional object-pole, to which corresponds the open unity of the senses in a reconstituted subject-pole (*PhP* 233/270).

It is important to examine the role of the *Gestalt* in this process of actualization, for perception involves discerning differences, a relief, in the perceptual field. Without such differentiation, nothing would be perceived. Rhythms must hence be set off against one another and against the perceiving body, which forms the ultimate background to perception (*PhP* 101/117). But saying that perception has a *Gestalt* structure is not yet to specify how figure and ground interact, how difference is constructed as an axis for this interplay, nor is it to exclude culturally and historically learned forms of *Gestalt* perception. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty appears to recognize in “*Le sentir*” the ways in which the *Gestalt* can become congealed in modern perception: through fixity of the gaze that “separat[es] the region under scrutiny from the rest of the field... interrupting the total life of the spectacle” (*PhP* 226/261), or in scientific attitudes that sediment as norms of perception and fragment the synaesthetic richness of sensory life (*PhP* 229/265). We find hints of a critique of modernity and of perception as representation in the *Phenomenology* that, as David Levin has argued, echo Heidegger.⁴⁶ This suggests that although the *Gestalt* is always selective—though it involves the actualization and structuring of sensory life into perceptual form—the relation of figure and ground can work in different ways. Specifically, modernity seems to inscribe a reified form of *Gestalt* that defines the figure *in opposition* to the ground.⁴⁷ The figure is delimited as *object* (and nothing more) against a ground that is assumed to be completely present and at our disposal, a passive and *indifferent* ground. Here difference is made to work oppositionally and reductively in the service of objectification. Hidden are not only the multiplicity of differences in sensory life but the positive power of difference to connect—the way rhythms belong to one another and to the world (an intertwining that could give rise to a more embedded and responsive perception). Indeed, what is hidden in this way is the belonging of figure to ground and the suggestive power of the sensory ground to produce further differentiations and hence to profile figures

⁴⁶ Levin, *The Philosopher's Gaze*, 170–215. In this respect, Heidegger's “The Age of the World Picture,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), must be highlighted.

⁴⁷ Cf. Levin, *The Philosopher's Gaze*, 177.

differently. Thus what is forgotten is the dynamic potential of the *Gestalt*, its fluidity and openness to variable and inverted forms (what Merleau-Ponty will later call its “winding”).⁴⁸ It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty is not advocating an overcoming of all forgetting, for the *Gestalt* remains selective. But there is forgetting that erases itself, reducing sensory life to the fixity of perceived objects with no sense of loss; and there is forgetting that leaves a trace in perception of the excess of sensory life (a “secret memory”)⁴⁹—hence continually destabilizing given objects, showing them to be more than mere objects, and opening up the *Gestalt* to becoming.

Whatever form the *Gestalt* may have, actualization should not be understood as an imposition on the virtual, a putting into form of the formless (as Bergson already showed). Actualization is not external to sensory life but is, rather, its becoming-meaning or coming into form as life. This is emphasized by Merleau-Ponty’s description of perception as synchronization. Body- and world-rhythms are not entities to be discovered but vital forces that already suggest the forms they take in perception, without being reducible to these forms. For instance, the pairing and interplay of sensing and sensible seem to call forth the split into active and passive elements—eyes and color, hands and texture, etc.—while keeping a trace of their affinity and indivision. (This indivision is witnessed, for example, in the hand touching a tabletop and being at once touched by it.) The communion and polysemy of sensory life hence leave traces in perception, even while its rhythms overflow perceptual representation. Thus, although sensory life can be described in terms of negativity or lack (*PhP* 153/179), it is clearly a lack that is *felt* and that makes a difference in the perceptual outcome. Though not yet conscious, this lack is fecund.⁵⁰ This unconsciousness points to the peculiar “spontaneity” that belongs to sensory life as “original past”; drawing on Stéphanie Ménasé, such spontaneity could be understood as “*surgissement*” that lies outside the control of consciousness and is not opposed to passivity.⁵¹ It is in this sense that sensory life represents

⁴⁸ Cf. *The Visible and the Invisible*, 194/247 and 205–7/258–60. David Levin argues that this fluid *Gestalt* designates a new cultural seeing that Merleau-Ponty calls for in his work (*The Philosopher’s Gaze*, 202). I believe that this project remains ambiguous in the *Phenomenology* (which sometimes reductively transposes perception onto sensory life, as discussed below).

⁴⁹ As Merleau-Ponty describes the productive power of forgetting in *L’institution, la passivité, notes de cours au Collège de France, 1954–1955* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2003), 256.

⁵⁰ To echo Merleau-Ponty’s later terminology in which the past is a fecund absence or “circumscribed negativity” (*Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 20, 29).

⁵¹ Stéphanie Ménasé, *Passivité et création: Merleau-Ponty et l’art moderne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003), 134.

Merleau-Ponty's attempt in the *Phenomenology* to articulate the relation of body and world beyond the dichotomies not only of subject-object but also of activity-passivity.

Perception is therefore neither arbitrary nor determined in advance but motivated by sensory life. As surface, perception both refracts and keeps a trace of sensory depths. Other forms of actualization are thus possible (e.g., non-objectifying ways of seeing or synaesthetic perceiving), but not without breaking with historically sedimented forms. It is here that I would locate the place of other rhythms—whether social, linguistic, cultural, economic, or intersubjective—in the selection and delimitation that takes place in perception. Of these, Merleau-Ponty explicitly discusses language (*PhP* 235–36/272–73) and science (*PhP* 229/265) in “*Le sentir*.”⁵² The negotiation between sensing and sensible (as well as the formation of bodily style) occurs within a field occupied and framed by other rhythms with varying suggestive force. Which lines of actualization come to be privileged and sedimented is motivated by this complex and multi-rhythmic interplay. It is important to note that culture, society, or language are not simply rhythms that can be frontally perceived (i.e., actualized as things, for example, as norms of another culture or words of a text). Insofar as they constitute the horizons of our sensory life, these rhythms are not external to sensory life but are laterally felt within it; they operate as dimensions through which sensory life actualizes itself, through which it becomes meaning. These dimensions are not reflective impositions on experience but structure perception from within. Perception is hence a culturally and historically specific process. This is not only the case for *Gestalt* perception, which is configured in modernity according to cultural investments in representation and in the metaphysics of subject-object. In addition, I would argue that gendered and racialized perception are neither natural nor innate ways of seeing but are instituted within a social-historical field where actualization follows oppositional schemas of hierarchized difference (e.g., masculine-feminine, white-black)—so that the heterogeneity of rhythmic differences is reduced to binary identities.⁵³ Understanding sensory life in this wider sense allows us to see how perception can arise from the contin-

⁵² Elsewhere in the *Phenomenology*, we find: economic and historical forces (*PhP* 171–73/199–202), language as rhythm (186–88/217–19), and intersubjective resonances in childhood (352–55/404–8).

⁵³ For an understanding of bodies as field of differences, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 19.

gency of sensory synchronization, yet often remains conventional in its actualized form.

Non-coincidence and Delay

The virtuality of sensory life, its status as “a past which has never been present,” means that this life cannot be entirely rendered in perception. A non-coincidence remains, not only between the various rhythms that make up sensory life, but between this past and the perceptual present which actualizes it. Indeed, these two instances of non-coincidence are related, for the difference and negotiation of rhythms in sensory life ensures that perception lags behind sensibility—so that consciousness and being do not coincide, despite Merleau-Ponty’s claim in the “Temporality” chapter (*PhP* 424/485). Perception is characterized by a delay. It is in this sense that “I cannot see the object except by distancing it in the past” (*PhP* 240/277). It is curious that Merleau-Ponty echoes Bergson here, who had famously said: “[T]oute perception est déjà mémoire. *Nous ne percevons, pratiquement, que le passé*” (*MM* 167). From Merleau-Ponty, who wrote “The Primacy of Perception,” such a claim needs further explanation.⁵⁴ Is this an abandonment of perception for memory? Or is a reconceptualization taking place in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking whereby perception is decentered with respect to the present and infused with memory? As mentioned, Merleau-Ponty’s misreading of Bergson elsewhere in the *Phenomenology* does not diminish the rapprochement between their positions in “*Le sentir*.” Rather, it is in this way that Merleau-Ponty can strangely echo Bergson on the significance of the past in perception, while continuing to explicitly disagree with a Bergson whom he misconstrues as reducing the past to the present.⁵⁵

But another motivation may lie behind this opening of perception to the past in “*Le sentir*,” making the appeal to a Bergsonian past possible at the end of the chapter. In conceiving perception as a temporal process, Merleau-Ponty appears to be exploring a hint found in Husserl’s *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (a hint that Levinas will elaborate some twenty

⁵⁴ “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, 12–42. My thanks to Len Lawlor for raising this objection.

⁵⁵ In “Temporality,” Merleau-Ponty notes that Bergson falls short of an “authentic intuition of time”: “When he says that duration ‘snowballs upon itself,’ and when he postulates memories in themselves accumulating in the unconscious, he makes time out of a preserved present, and evolution out of what is evolved” (*PhP* 415n/475n).

years later).⁵⁶ In Appendix V, entitled “Simultaneity of Perception and the Perceived,” Husserl meditates on the possible diachronic nature of perception. He asks “[b]y what right can one say that perception and what is perceived are simultaneous?” (*PCIT* 109). This is not a question about objective time, nor is it a matter of objects that have already existed prior to my coming on the scene. Rather, more interestingly, what must be asked is “whether the apprehension begins simultaneously with the datum of sensation or whether the datum must not be constituted—even if only for an extremely brief period of time—before the animating apprehension can commence” (*PCIT* 110). Putting aside the language of hylomorphism and constitution, what Husserl considers—and briefly accepts—is that perception may only properly be perception *of* what has already passed (at least in part). He notes that when perception begins, “a part of the datum of sensation has already elapsed and is preserved only in retention” (*PCIT* 110). In this sense, retention is not simply the repetition of a primordial impression that prolongs perception (as Husserl generally claims); rather perception relies on retention as its access to what it perceives. “A difference in time,” Husserl admits, “therefore exists between the beginning-point of the perception and the beginning-point of the object” (*PCIT* 110). This would mean that to perceive is to intend what has only marginally or pre-consciously affected us, what has not been present to us but has been retained in primary memory. In this way, perception would have to involve a necessary relation to what is past, and this past would not itself have been perceived (objectified in a primordial impressional consciousness) in the first place. Seeing would be in perpetual delay with respect to what it sought to see.

It should be noted that for Husserl the delay in perception occurs with respect to an original coexistence of what, retrospectively, can come to be called consciousness and object. In other words, the difference in time referred to by Husserl does not occur between the *real* beginnings of consciousness and object, as if consciousness accidentally came on the scene too late (such real beginnings have been bracketed). Rather, the difference in time occurs between

⁵⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, “Intentionality and Sensation” (1965), in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 140–45. Levinas’ reading of Appendix V of Husserl’s Time Lectures is double: (i) The proto-impression is indistinction of sensing and sensed in the form of absolute passivity; it is the pre-intentional source of consciousness. (ii) Consciousness arises through delay, by dephasing the sensing and sensed; it is a form of memory or senescence. It is in this association of consciousness and time that Levinas and Merleau-Ponty agree most.

a perceptual consciousness that discerns “something” and the prior moment where a coexistence of sensing and sensible was indistinguishable in “sensation” (*PCIT* 127–28). In the Time Lectures, Husserl has not yet developed a theory that can positively account for this pre-intentional, pre-perceptual moment. In his later *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, this is explained within a theory of affection.⁵⁷

At the end of Appendix V, Husserl elides the diachrony he has uncovered in perception and reinstates the coincidence of perceiving and perceived through a reduction to immanence (*PCIT* 110–111). The question is decisively settled in Appendix IX with the rejection of any retention that does not derive from a prior impressional consciousness (*PCIT* 119). Indeed, Husserl reaffirms the primordially of perceptual self-givenness in the present. At stake is not only the intuitive self-evidence of lived experience, guaranteed by its immediate perceptual self-presence, but also the phenomenological sense of the “now” as the locus of that self-presence. Husserl reasons: “If [the beginning-phase of an experience] were intended *only* by retention, then what confers on it the label ‘now’ would remain incomprehensible” (*PCIT* 119).⁵⁸

At first view, Merleau-Ponty does not seem to share Husserl’s worry. The temporal differential in perception remains a necessary one in “*Le sentir*.” It is not merely that we perceive only the past, but this past—the unreflected, sensory life that we seek to perceive—was never present. That perception involves a delay is hence neither an accidental failure of attention, nor an asynchronicity of rhythms that can be overcome with practice, but a structural part of the perceptual process. This delay evinces an original forgetting at the heart of perception.⁵⁹ Perception seeks to seize “a past which has never been present” and that can never be made present as such; it perceives this past in actualized form as part of the present, but in so doing it misses the virtual nature of this

⁵⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, trans. Anthony J. Steinbock (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001). It is unclear whether Merleau-Ponty read this part of Husserl’s *Nachlass*. His reading of Husserl’s Time Lectures, however, became more critical in his later work. (For engaging parallels between Husserl’s *Analyses* and Merleau-Ponty, see Anthony Steinbock, “Saturated Intentionality,” in *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Donn Welton [Oxford: Blackwell, 1999]).

⁵⁸ For more on what is at stake for Husserl in considering, and rejecting, the post-factuality of the consciousness of now, see Rudolf Bernet, “Is the Present Ever Present?” *Research in Phenomenology* 12 (1982): 85–112.

⁵⁹ On originary forgetting, see Waldenfels, “Time Lag,” 115. As Merleau-Ponty notes: “Between my sensation and myself there stands always the thickness of some *primal acquisition* which prevents my experience from being clear for itself” (*PhP* 216/250; translation modified).

past. In other words, we seek to perceive sensory life but can only do so by reducing its virtual and rhythmic complexity, by obviating its character as “original past.” The perceptual process hence involves a third non-coincidence. Not only is there an asynchronicity of coexistent rhythms in sensory life and a delay between sensory past and perceptual present. But in addition, what comes to be perceived through this temporal differential is not the original past as such; rather, it is a refracted and actualized past that has been converted into presence.

This non-coincidence poses a problem for the status of the present. Can Merleau-Ponty explain the experience of the now, i.e., how it is that objects appear to us as present and not as perpetually past? Husserl’s worry resurfaces, but Merleau-Ponty’s answer draws on both Husserl and Bergson to describe, in remarkable terms, the temporality of focusing in visual perception:

I open my eyes onto my table, and my consciousness is flooded with colours and confused reflections . . . which so far is not a spectacle of anything. Suddenly, I start to focus my eyes on the table which is not yet there, I begin to look into the distance while there is as yet no depth, my body centres itself on an object which is still only virtual [*virtuel*], and so disposes its sensitive surfaces as to make it a present reality [*actuel*]. I can thus reassign to its place in the world the something which was impinging upon me, because I can, by slipping into the future, throw into the immediate past the world’s first attack upon my senses, and direct myself towards the determinate object as towards a near future. (*PhP* 239/276; translation modified)

The perceptual process is hence “indivisibly prospective . . . and retrospective” (*PhP* 239/276–7). To borrow Husserlian terms, it protends the retention of an as yet virtual situation, which “so far is not a spectacle of anything,” but that becomes through retention a “determinate object” correlated to a distinct subject, an actual present (*PhP* 239/276). Strictly speaking, the present *is not*; it *will have been* (grammatically expressed by the future perfect in English or *le futur antérieur* in French). Only as immediate past can sensory life be actualized and brought into focus, so that the sensory is always already past in relation to perception. But once the body has learned to synchronize with some worldly rhythms, once certain lines of actualization are sedimented, it becomes possible for the body to anticipate the actualized forms these familiar rhythms would take. Habit bypasses the effort, hesitation, and time required for synchronization; it projects onto sensory life the objectified form it anticipates it *would have had* through actualization. (Habit thus goes beyond the tentative protensions involved in bodily kinaestheses to anticipate the representational outcome of synchronization and posit it as already present. It involves “fore-knowledge” [*PhP* 216/250].)

In this way, a perceived object “will present itself as preceding its own appearance” (*PhP* 239/277); i.e., it is perceived as already *present* rather than as *to come*. Bergson describes this as “the retrograde movement of the true”—the anachronistic process by which an event appears to have preexisted its emergence, or a judgement its formulation.⁶⁰ Objects, experiences, or concepts are thus taken to be possible—fully defined and worked-out in advance—prior to their actualization. Although Bergson generally portrays this retrospective movement as an illusion, Merleau-Ponty sees in it the logic of perception and truth.⁶¹ Accordingly, perception is a process by which actualized and distinct forms (e.g., identities of subject and object) express, and are projected back onto, the virtual from which they emerged.⁶² Perception may be a prospective actualization, but it is experienced as the discovery of what was always already there. It is this anteriority that makes objects appear real to us—our experience of their presence being given through their inexhaustibility and alterity.⁶³ This inexhaustibility is due to the coexistence and non-coincidence of rhythms in sensory life, a life which at once constitutes the ground of perceptual experience while being irreducible to perceptual form. What allows the experience of anteriority to be more than an illusion for Merleau-Ponty is that it relies on, and holds the trace of, a more original delay—that of sensory life as forever past with respect to perception (*PhP* 238/275).

The very movement of anticipation and memory through which the present is constituted thus precludes the immediacy of self-presence. But the present is not, for this reason, a mirage on Merleau-Ponty’s account. Indeed, the present is both grounded in sensory life and destabilized by it as absolute presence; it is present only in passing. Through forward and backward movements, an actualized present comes to overlay and to coexist with the virtual sensory life that continues to flow beneath the present; this sensory life at once makes the

⁶⁰ Henri Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1938), 13–19.

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 29–30/35–36. Merleau-Ponty sees here “a question of a fundamental property of truth,” which he reads as “the best of Bergsonism” (*ibid.*). In this context, Merleau-Ponty makes use of Bergson’s admission in *La pensée et le mouvant* that the retrograde movement of the true cannot be renounced (19/27), in order to construe this movement in a positive light. For Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of this “retrospective illusion” in his later works, in particular the *Nature* lectures, see Leonard Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 117.

⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 29/35.

⁶³ “The ipseity [of the thing] is, of course, never *reached*. . . . What makes the ‘reality’ of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp” (*PhP* 233/269–70).

present possible and makes it pass. We find here an impulse to rethink the present that will be taken up by Merleau-Ponty in later texts.⁶⁴ If we were to follow it through, we may discover a concept of the present that does not seek to overcome the non-coincidence in perception but reinstates non-coincidence at the heart of the present as passage or dehiscence;⁶⁵ the present becomes the locus where actual and virtual, perceptual and sensory coexist. In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty hints at this “thickness of the present” (*PhP* 238/275). This is the invisible depth that makes the present possible but only by splitting it open, by contracting into its structure an original past, or sensory life, that cannot be reduced to presence (*PhP* 240/277).

Finally, the retrograde movement of the true points to a difficulty in Merleau-Ponty’s account of sensory life—that of describing or naming the unconscious and inchoate ground of perception without borrowing terms from actualized perceptual forms. This explains the ambiguity of the term “perception,” not only in the philosophies of reflection that Merleau-Ponty criticizes, but in his own text. Does “perception” designate the process of actualization, the end result, or the sensory ground? We find multiple uses in the *Phenomenology*. Whereas “naïve” perception relies on the anonymous work of sensibility already accomplished (*PhP* 238/275), “originary” perception designates this “pre-conscious” and unreflected base itself (242/279). And synaesthetic limit experiences are strangely exemplary of a “natural perception” that has been unlearned in favor of scientific and objectifying perception (*PhP* 228–29/263–65). This confusion of terms hides a deeper or “bad ambiguity,”⁶⁶ wherein reflective categories and dichotomies—in particular that of subject and object—are used to understand sensory life, despite Merleau-Ponty’s prescriptions to the contrary (*PhP* 219/254). This conflation of grounded and ground, or visible and invisible, elides the irreducibility and difference of sen-

⁶⁴ See *The Visible and the Invisible*, 184/237–38, 267–68/321; *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 15, 27, 50.

⁶⁵ In the “Temporality” chapter of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes several attempts to think this temporal “dehiscence” or differentiation within a Husserlian framework and starting from the “field of presence” of the subject (*PhP* 419/480, 426/487). These attempts remain unsuccessful, in my view, because they do not rethink the present itself. A more productive point of departure occurs at the end of “*Le sentir*,” with the concept of “past which has never been present,” but Merleau-Ponty does not further develop this line of thought in the *Phenomenology*.

⁶⁶ Cf. “An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work,” trans. Arleen B. Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, 11.

sory life.⁶⁷ One consequence is that sensory life and the temporality it generates are often interpreted in the context of a philosophy of subjectivity. The subject-body is seen as the source of time, while other rhythms, whether worldly or intersubjective, are forgotten (*PhP* 240–41/277–78, 422/483).⁶⁸ The thickness of the sensory is identified with the lived body, and its inter- or intra-rhythmic temporality is reduced to a single rhythm. In this way, the pre-phenomenal and pre-subjective moment of sensory experience is covered over.

Yet, Merleau-Ponty's attempt to define an alternative philosophical method in "*Le sentir*" reveals his recognition of the risk of forgetting the difference of sensory life that confronts any philosophy aimed at studying it (*PhP* 242/279). "Radical reflection" is more than phenomenological reflection in this regard.⁶⁹ Even when Husserl admitted a delay in perception, he saw this delay as one that could be overcome; i.e., we can recapture the past or rejoin the unreflected without loss.⁷⁰ But for Merleau-Ponty perceptual delay reveals a deeper sensory difference that can only be adequately conceived as "original past." Rather than reconstruct this sensory past in the image of its actualized present, radical reflection reveals the trace of the sensory in, and its excess to, what is perceived (*PhP* 241/278–79). Since radical reflection remains relatively undeveloped in the *Phenomenology*, the difficulty is in how recovery of this prepersonal trace is to take place. Foreshadowing later formulations, Merleau-Ponty hints that this can only occur by thinking perception in act, *in the making* (*PhP* 238–39/276), rather than fixing or fragmenting it (*PhP* 226/261).⁷¹ "*Le sentir*" is intended as a performative instantiation of this method (*PhP* 241/278).⁷²

Drawing on Bergson and Husserl, I have attempted to think through Merleau-Ponty's appeal to "a past which has never been present" in "*Le sentir*," and hence to recover perception as a process emerging from prepersonal, sensory life and not as a natural given. To the degree that the concepts of original past,

⁶⁷ For more on this critique of the *Phenomenology*, see Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon*, 16–17, and Lawlor, *TFP*, 81.

⁶⁸ That the dominant framework of the *Phenomenology* is a philosophy of subjectivity has been noted by Sallis, 345, Lawlor, *TFP* 92–93, and Merleau-Ponty himself in *The Visible and the Invisible*, 183/237, 200/253.

⁶⁹ Although Merleau-Ponty characterizes his method as "[t]he new conception of reflection which is the phenomenological conception of it" (*PhP* 220/255), he is clearly putting forward his own version of phenomenology.

⁷⁰ For this ideal of "absolute, perceptual presence," see Bernet, 109–10. But Husserl would not have been Husserl if he had not had some hesitations in this regard, cf. Appendix XII, *PCIT* 129–30.

⁷¹ For later developments of this method, see *The Visible and the Invisible*, 128/170.

⁷² For a discussion of the performative value of radical reflection, see Levin, "Tracework," 358, 380.

rhythm, and synchronization allow Merleau-Ponty to avoid the philosophical dichotomies of activity-passivity and subject-object, they permit a novel, non-essentialist approach to the prepersonal. But Merleau-Ponty's project appears at times to go beyond the descriptive. The effect of radical reflection, he seems to hope, is to renew perceptual experience that has been skewed by objectifications and theories, to allow us to relive the trace of our sensory contact with the world and others (*PhP* 229/265, 211/245). However ambiguous, Merleau-Ponty's account in "*Le sentir*" shows perception to be acquired and to emerge from a richer, multi-rhythmic ground of differences; it opens the possibility for different lines of actualization and new habits of seeing.

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