

## ALTERITY IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S *PROSE OF THE WORLD*

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### ABSTRACT

I argue in this paper that Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides a compelling account of alterity in *The Prose of the World*. I begin by tracing this account of alterity back to its roots in *Phenomenology of Perception*. I then show how the dynamic of expression articulated in *The Prose of the World* overcomes the limitations of the account given in the earlier work. After addressing an objection to the effect that the account given in *The Prose of the World* fails for the same reason as the one given in *Phenomenology of Perception*, I argue that the key to Merleau-Ponty's more successful account of alterity is provided by the phenomenon of orientation.

One of the most persistent questions in Merleau-Ponty scholarship concerns the degree to which the ideas of flesh and reversibility, developed in *The Visible and the Invisible*, are able to account for alterity. On the one hand, Emmanuel Levinas has argued that Merleau-Ponty articulates our relation to others as a relation of knowledge, and that this obscures the radical heterogeneity of the other.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Claude Lefort has attempted to show that the notion of reversibility is unable to account for the asymmetrical relationships, such as those between infants and adults or between oneself and one's own name, in which genuine alterity is made manifest.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, M.C. Dillon has argued that the doctrine of reversibility "is uniquely capable of disclosing the kind of transcendence known as alterity."<sup>3</sup> What Dillon means by alterity, though, is simply that the other necessarily remains opaque to me, that I cannot make my perspective on the world coincide wholly with hers. The other on this account is not radically heterogeneous to me, but rather a variant perspective on the one world that we share in common. More recently Jack Reynolds and Christopher Adamo have argued, in different ways, for a similar position. Both argue that the concept of reversibility is unable to

account for alterity as Levinas and the later Derrida conceive it. Nonetheless, both count this as a strength of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy on the grounds that Levinas' and Derrida's conceptions of alterity are ultimately untenable.<sup>4</sup>

I am convinced by those scholars who argue that the ideas of flesh and reversibility that Merleau-Ponty articulates in *The Visible and the Invisible* leave no room for anything like the wholly Other. I am convinced as well that the ideas of embodied subjectivity and tacit cogito that Merleau-Ponty had developed in his earlier major work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, also exclude the possibility of radical alterity. In what follows, however, I would like to argue that the philosophy of expression that Merleau-Ponty develops in *The Prose of the World* does provide important resources for thinking about alterity. This text, which Merleau-Ponty left unfinished and unpublished, represents a transitional period in his thought, initiating the movement away from the transcendental perspective that persists in *Phenomenology of Perception* and toward the more ontological project of *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Nonetheless, I want to argue, it is only in *The Prose of the World* that Merleau-Ponty advances a set of concepts that establish the possibility for an adequate account of radical alterity. I will begin by showing how the ideas from *The Prose of the World* that are especially relevant to alterity are prefigured, albeit inadequately, in *Phenomenology of Perception*. I will then show precisely why *Phenomenology of Perception* fails to account for alterity and how *The Prose of the World* constitutes an improvement. In doing so, I will argue that the key to Merleau-Ponty's articulation of alterity in *The Prose of the World* is to be found in the phenomenon of orientation. I will conclude with an examination of the relationship between the account of alterity advanced in *The Prose of the World* with what I take to be the less adequate account in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

### ***Alterity in Phenomenology of Perception***

The most basic insights contributing to Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity are worked out in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he advances the idea of the meaning-bestowing subject as a necessarily embodied subject. This embodied subject, unlike the transcendental ego of Husserlian phenomenology, cannot give sense to the world without finding itself given always already *in* the world. Merleau-Ponty locates a moment of passivity within the subject's act of sense-bestowal, a responsiveness to a worldly sense that the subject could not have posited. He reveals, in sum, a kind of otherness which takes the form of a sense that the subject cannot appropriate in reflection and that motivates the intentional acts in which meaning is constituted.

Merleau-Ponty's most compelling description of the irreducible corporeality of intentionality is given in the chapter titled "Sense Experience," where he discusses the experiences of patients who had been blind since early childhood and whose sight had been restored through surgery. From the perspective of the natural attitude, one might expect that as soon as the bandages were removed from their eyes, the patients would look out immediately onto the same world as those who had been sighted their whole lives. This, however, turns out not to be the case. The world onto which the newly-sighted patient first looks is a world of scarcely determinate colors and forms. The patient sees not coherent, integral *things*, but only the sensory qualities that under normal circumstances would adumbrate those things. Merleau-Ponty, quoting from Marius von Senden's *Space and Sight*, presents a particularly striking case of this inability to perceive a visual thing: after the operation "the patient states that he can see, but does not know *what* he sees. . . . He never recognizes his hand as such, and talks only about

a moving, white patch.”<sup>5</sup> This, in the language of phenomenology, is a failure of sense-bestowal: the patient is unable to intend a unity of sense across the visual data with which he is confronted. This failure reveals a great deal about the ways in which we constitute meaning. It seems as if the problem must have one of two possible explanations: either the patient fails to see things because he does not know how to focus his eyes or else the patient does not know how to focus his eyes because the world gives him nothing to focus on.<sup>6</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, these two explanations are in fact inseparable. On the one hand, the newly-sighted patient certainly does not know how to focus his eyes in the way necessary to see things, and not just sensory qualities. Prior to the surgery, the patient related to the world primarily through the sense of touch; he encountered the world by running his hand over the surfaces of things. After the surgery he naturally attempted to do something analogous with his eyes: “to distinguish by sight a circle from a rectangle, he has to run his eyes round the outline of the figure, as he might with his hand. . . .”<sup>7</sup> But of course one does not see a thing the same way that one feels it, namely little by little, segment by segment. One sees a thing by fixing on its Gestalt, on its integral sensuous physiognomy, just as one reads by taking in at one glance whole meaningful units, and not by moving the gaze successively from left to right, letter by letter.<sup>8</sup> Thus it is certainly true to say that the patient fails to see things owing to his failure to focus his eyes in the way necessary to see them.

However this explanation, which locates the problem exclusively on the side of the perceiving subject, tells only half the story. What this example reveals especially clearly is that the act of sense-bestowal is inseparable from a kind of receptivity to the very world whose sense is being constituted. The patient’s inability to focus his eyes correctly is inseparable from the fact that nothing in his world presents itself as something to be focused on. The act of focusing

is essentially prospective: one focuses on things with the expectation that something given as vaguely promising a meaning, as a nascent object, will become something given “in the flesh,” as a fully coherent thing.<sup>9</sup> The patient would be able to see his own hand *as* a hand only on condition that the hand itself be given as motivating and sustaining that intended unity of sense. This kind of vaguely given sense, which Merleau-Ponty calls a “nascent *logos*,” is the condition for all acts of sense-bestowal.<sup>10</sup> One can function as subject only insofar as one is already subjected to the nascent *logos* of the world.

This nascent *logos* presupposed in every act of sense-bestowal helps to make visible something in the constituting subject that is essentially pre-reflective and inappropriable. “Each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them.”<sup>11</sup> The sensuous given that adumbrates a meaning is addressed not to me *qua* reflecting subject but rather to “another subject beneath me.”<sup>12</sup> For those of us accustomed to encountering the world visually, the movement and the color before our eyes efface themselves in favor of the sense that they adumbrate: we are able unproblematically to intend the unity of sense “hand” across these adumbrations. But how do we do that? It cannot be the case that we first have discrete encounters with purely given, atomistic sense data and subsequently decide to project a meaning onto them. As Merleau-Ponty shows, if the first givens of perceptual experience did not motivate any meaning whatever, then the subject’s constitution of their sense would be entirely arbitrary. If the subject in the case we have been examining could simply impose a meaning on the givens of his experience, then he would have no difficulty seeing his hand as a hand. The problem is that he, the reflectively choosing subject, cannot do it despite his best efforts. What

cases of failed perception like this bring out is the existence of an otherness that necessarily subtends constituting subjectivity, a “lived body” that has already sided with the world and that knows, albeit pre-reflectively, how to respond to the adumbrations of sense that are the first givens of perceptual experience.

The conception of this inassimilable, pre-reflective otherness beneath constituting subjectivity that Merleau-Ponty advances in *Phenomenology of Perception* does indeed describe a kind of alterity, but one, I want to argue, that fails to capture the phenomenon sufficiently radically. The pre-personal, anonymous lived body that Merleau-Ponty isolates does resist the movement of reflection that would make of it an anonymous lived body *for consciousness*. And the moment of passivity that is essential to the conception of the lived body really is ineliminable: it cannot, for reasons we have seen, be treated as an *act* of the constituting subject. Resistance to the movement of reflection and an ineliminable passivity at the level of the subject’s opening out unto the world are certainly hallmarks of alterity. Nonetheless the pre-personal, responsive body that Merleau-Ponty describes in *Phenomenology of Perception* is still in many ways a transcendental body; its function is understood primarily within the problematic of constitution that is central to the phenomenological project.<sup>13</sup> Thus although the lived body is thought as escaping traditional constituting subjectivity, it is also and just as importantly conceived as what *supplements* it. Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the lived body are oriented by the coherent world that it helps to constitute, a completely ordered and knowable world in which “at every instant experience can be co-ordinated with that of the previous instant and that of the following, and my perspective with that of other consciousnesses. . . .”<sup>14</sup> This transcendental orientation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology obscures the radicality of the

alterity that it discovers: the other is conceived not as absolutely other, but rather as the latency of the known, fully coherent world.

This transcendental, subject-centered orientation of *Phenomenology of Perception* is expressed most explicitly in the idea of the tacit cogito, which Merleau-Ponty describes as an “indeclinable subjectivity”, a “presence of oneself to oneself” that is “anterior to any philosophy.”<sup>15</sup> The tacit cogito functions in *Phenomenology of Perception* as the condition of possibility for the kind of worldly, situated subjectivity that is described throughout the text. As the case of the newly-sighted patients has demonstrated, perception is never just immersion into the sensible given. The act of perception rather presupposes, and indeed discloses, a pre-personal, anonymous subject. Although this subject has always “already sided with the world,” it can never belong wholly and without reservation to the world. If the subject lost itself in its individual acts of perception—if it were not constantly present to itself, even if only as a field of experience independent of the objects of experience—then perception would indeed be reduced to immersion into the sensible given. The condition of possibility for our openness to the world, then, is the self-presence of the tacit cogito: “The primary truth is indeed ‘I think’, but only provided that we understand thereby ‘I belong to myself’ while belonging to the world.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The Dynamic of Expression**

In his works on the philosophy of expression following the publication of *Phenomenology of Perception*, and especially in *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty begins to move beyond the transcendental perspective of the former work and consequently toward a more radical vision of alterity. Expression, as Merleau-Ponty understands it in *Phenomenology of Perception*, has as its condition of possibility an unspoken or tacit cogito. Just as the perceiving subject never loses itself in its individual acts of perception, so the speaking subject

never loses itself in any of its expressions, or more generally, in any particular empirical language. This is demonstrated, according to Merleau-Ponty, by our capacity to learn new forms of expression. Without the unspoken cogito, present to itself prior to any linguistic expression, we would find ourselves wholly subject to language, “much as the realist believes he is subject to the determinism of the external world, or as the theologian believes he is led on by Providence.”<sup>17</sup> In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty abandons the idea of an unspoken, pre-expressive cogito and the transcendental perspective that it implies. Although subjectivity remains important in this work, it ceases to play a foundational role. One could characterize the change in perspective between the two works somewhat schematically as follows: instead of referring sense to its ground in the indeclinable subjectivity of the tacit cogito, Merleau-Ponty attempts in *The Prose of the World* to grasp the very advent of sense itself and to reconceptualize subjectivity on that basis.<sup>18</sup>

The necessity for such an inquiry into the genesis of sense is articulated in the first two chapters of *The Prose of the World*. Just as the adumbrations given in perceptual experience tend to efface themselves in favor of the things they make present, so the process of expression tends to disappear in favor of the accomplished expression that it makes possible.<sup>19</sup> As a result we tend to think of language as a stock of ready-made significations and that “every signification which enters man’s experience carries with it its own formula, as the sun, in the minds of Piaget’s children, bears its name in the center.”<sup>20</sup> This conception of language is reinforced by the experience we have when we struggle to give expression to an idea that we have only vaguely before our minds. We feel that there must be some expression that will capture our meaning; it seems as if the only problem is to determine precisely which expression that is. And when we finally do succeed in giving adequate expression to our idea, it seems in retrospect as if

the correct words were there waiting for us all the while, as if the thought had been perfectly expressed always already in precisely this formulation.

While this conception of language as treasury of fully established and perfectly determinate significations does have a basis in our experience of expression, it is also entirely incapable of accounting for some of the most basic realities of human communication. From the perspective of this conception of language, I would communicate my thoughts to another by rendering them in the formulations that are ready made to convey them. The one to whom I communicate would understand my meaning simply by converting the formulations back into the thoughts that they represent. These translations of thoughts into linguistic formulations and of the linguistic formulations back into thoughts would leave no remainder; the formulations would be perfectly sufficient vehicles of thought. If this were true, then communication could never bring me to understand anything differently from the way I already do. If I am able to comprehend what my interlocutor is saying, i.e., if I recognize all the words that she is using, then I should be able to convert her words into thoughts that I already have. But of course communication does transport us beyond the world as we already understand it. Merleau-Ponty offers an example of this phenomenon in Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma*. One of Stendhal's characters in the book is Rassi, the Minister of Justice.<sup>21</sup> Rassi, Stendhal informs us, is a rogue. Because Rassi is an important character, it is a necessary condition of my understanding the text that I know the established meaning of the term "rogue." But this knowledge is far from sufficient. I do not understand the character Rassi simply by knowing that he fits the description of a rogue. As I read the text and come progressively to catch on to Stendhal's unique style of expression, I acquire a more nuanced and more vivid understanding of the stock signification "rogue." If I have successfully caught Stendhal's meaning, then I will no longer think of Rassi

simply as a token of a type. Rather my understanding of what it is to be a rogue will advance beyond what I would have understood prior to my having read the text. My communication with Stendhal will have genuinely expanded my world.

What this example suggests is that sense is never given once and for all. There is no formulation that could capture a sense entirely without remainder. Rather there is a dynamic proper to expression that sustains the perpetual open-endedness of sense. When I first encounter *The Charterhouse of Parma*, I already know what a rogue is; it is a part of my stock of significations. But then my reading of the text inflects that apparently well-established signification in ways that I did not expect. I am left with a genuinely new signification that becomes a part of my stock. And then further communication will once again inflect that signification in ways that I will not have expected. This dynamic of expression continues indefinitely.

Merleau-Ponty further elaborates this dynamic of expression in terms of an “envelopment of language by language,” i.e., an envelopment of the subject’s signifying intention by the existing system of significations and conversely of the system of significations by the subject’s signifying intention.<sup>22</sup> Whenever I attempt to express myself, I am compelled to do so by means of an already existing system of meanings. If I were to completely disregard the stock of significations as it already existed in my language, then I would produce nonsense, and would therefore express nothing at all. This is what it means to say that my signifying intention is enveloped by the already existing system of language or, in the Saussurian vocabulary that Merleau-Ponty borrows here, that *parole* is enveloped by the *langue*. From the very beginning my signifying intention is embedded in and thus limited by the system of language. I can, in other words, never constitute meaning without already having been constituted by it.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to conceive the subject's signifying intention as determined completely by the *langue*. Rather the *langue* is what it is only as animated by a subject's intention to express herself. Without the subject's intention to bend the system of language in order to express a signification that did not already exist, the *langue* would be reduced to a mere code, where significations corresponded one to one with their already determined signifieds. It would be inconceivable in such a situation to say anything new at all, so that once again genuine expression would be impossible. But as we have seen, it is indeed possible to say something new and unexpected. Stendhal intends to present to his readers an interesting and novel portrait of a rogue. This intention is not determined completely by the meaning of rogue that is already a part of the stock of Stendhal's language. His intention animates and reshapes the signification "rogue," and this new sense of the term is then recycled back into the available stock of significations. This is what it means to say that the system of already existing significations is enveloped by the signifying intention.

Given this mutual envelopment of *parole* and *langue*, of the expressive intention and the stock of significations of which that intention makes use, ought we to understand the subject of expression as active or as passive? Is the subject best conceived as the subject *of* sense or as subject *to* it? According to Merleau-Ponty's account, these moments of activity and passivity are inseparable. On the one hand, our activity of producing sense depends on a prior receptiveness to it. The subject can only constitute sense insofar as she is already embedded in a sense that she could not have constituted. But on the other hand, the subject is receptive to sense only insofar as she takes it up and animates it with an expressive intention. A being without any expressive intention at all, e.g., a desk, obviously does not stand in the same receptive relation to sense as

does a speaking subject. The subject, then, constitutes sense only insofar as she is receptive to it and conversely, is receptive to sense only insofar as she constitutes it.

Merleau-Ponty's account of the dynamic of expression, and of the inseparability of activity and passivity that it entails, brings into view once again a kind of alterity. Specifically, it shows that we can inhabit a world that is meaningful, that broadly speaking makes sense, only at the price of our being constantly exposed to meanings that are not already our own. Our acts of sense-bestowal are shown to depend on a prior openness to the world in which we allow sense to be bestowed on us. I cannot, for example, pick up on the sense of Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma* if I refuse to allow the term "rogue" to mean anything beyond what I already take it to mean. In order to do anything more than merely turn over in my mind significations that are already fully transparent to me, I must remain open to having those significations altered, and possibly even overturned.

But does this conception of the dynamic of expression make visible an alterity any more radical than the kind that we saw in *Phenomenology of Perception*? At first sight it seems that it does not. The description given above could function, with only minor modifications, as a description of the alterity revealed in the case study of the newly-sighted patient. We might say that the patient could inhabit a world that was visually meaningful only at the price of his being already exposed to the adumbrations of meaning given by the things themselves. We could also say that his active sense-bestowal (e.g., his recognition of his hands *as* hands) presupposed his receptivity to a prior bestowal of latent sense.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, we saw in that case study that Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the pre-reflective lived body "beneath" the reflective, constituting subject were oriented by the ideal of successful sense-bestowal. The alterity at which Merleau-Ponty's account arrived was conceived not on its own terms, but rather as a

necessary condition for the constitution of a knowable, orderly world of coherent things.

Likewise it seems as if his account of the exposure to otherness entailed by the dynamic of expression is oriented from the beginning by the ideal of achieved, successful expression. If we must be exposed to a sense that is not already our own, this is only so that we can ultimately catch on to that sense and make it our own. In both cases it seems as if Merleau-Ponty's account obscures the radicality of otherness by presenting it as inflected toward the same.

Nonetheless, I want to argue that there is an important difference between these two accounts. The dynamic of expression, to which we find ourselves given over always already, pulls in two opposite directions at once. On the one hand it tends toward the successful formulation of a signification. This tendency is what we experience, for example, as we read the first pages of a novel, before we have caught on to the author's world of meaning: we feel the intimation of a sense that we expect to capture more and more fully as we continue reading. If the expression comes across successfully, then we will internalize the author's meaning to such an extent that it will seem in retrospect as if we could have written the novel ourselves.<sup>24</sup> But on the other hand this building up of completed significations can proceed only through the negation of the subject's already existing world of meaning. In the process of catching on to another's meaning my own mastery of the sense of the world is undermined. The sense of the world that I bring with me to the encounter—the sense that is very much *my own*—is brought radically into question. It is this moment of the dynamic of expression that Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he insists that “there can be speech (and in the end personality) only for an ‘I’ which contains the germ of a depersonalization.”<sup>25</sup> There is nothing in *Phenomenology of Perception* that corresponds to this movement of depersonalization. There, the capacity to express oneself in new ways or to understand the novel expressions of others is conditioned by the constant,

inexpressible self-presence of the tacit cogito. Openness to alterity is subordinated to the necessity of a more originary sameness. Thus the I of *Phenomenology of Perception* cannot, at the most fundamental level, contain any germ of depersonalization. The idea of the contestation and unmaking of the sense-bestowing subject that Merleau-Ponty introduces in *The Prose of the World* points to an alterity considerably more radical.

The sense of alterity as force of depersonalization is brought out especially vividly in the following passage from *The Prose of the World*: “Speaking and listening not only presuppose thought but—even more essential, for it is practically the foundation of thought—the capacity to allow oneself to be pulled down and rebuilt again by the other person before one, by others who may come along, and in principle by anyone.”<sup>26</sup> The phenomenology of perception had revealed the necessity of a kind of inverted sense-bestowal: we can only bestow sense to the world to the extent that we allow the world to bestow its sense to us. The world itself, for example, intimates the sense “hand” and we as incarnate subjects take up that intimation by focusing our eyes in the way necessary to actually see a hand. But this inverted sense-bestowal does not dispossess the subject of its own sense. On the contrary, it reveals a subject that already possesses, albeit latently and unreflectively, the sense that the world intimates to it. The pre-personal subject does not encounter anything radically other in this inverted sense-bestowal because that subject has always “already sided with the world.” And as we have seen, the subject’s belonging to the world presupposes its belonging more fundamentally to itself. In the account given in *The Prose of the World*, however, the subject really does encounter something other. The sense that the subject catches on to is not already her own. The subject, in other words, has *not* already sided with the other sense that confronts her. This not having already taken the side of the other’s

sense is precisely what is made manifest in the necessity of allowing ourselves to be pulled down and rebuilt by the other.

We can also articulate the difference between these two conceptions of the relation between self and other in terms of symmetry and asymmetry. In Merleau-Ponty's account from *Phenomenology of Perception*, the subject's act of sense-bestowal and the world's intimation of sense happen as one event. The subject's activity and his receptivity are conceived as two sides of the same coin. We can, of course, distinguish the two sides of the event for analytic purposes into subject and object, for-itself and in-itself. But if we press that distinction too far, then we return to the same traditional philosophical prejudices that Merleau-Ponty refutes in the first chapters of the text. The relation between the two sides is better described as symmetrical, or to borrow a term from Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, reversible. It is precisely this conception of the relation between self and other that, according to Levinas' well-known critique, cannot do justice to alterity in all its radicality and heterogeneity:

the reversibility of a relation where the terms are indifferently read from left to right or from right to left would couple them the *one* to the *other*; they would complete one another in a system visible from the outside. The intended transcendence would be thus reabsorbed into a unity of the system, destroying the radical alterity of the other.<sup>27</sup>

Alterity, in other words, is recuperated in an anonymous, pre-personal third that mediates the relation between self and other. But this critique seems not to apply to the more asymmetrical account that Merleau-Ponty gives in *The Prose of the World*. There the subject's catching on to the sense of the other cannot be conceived merely as the actualization of a sense that is already pre-reflectively the subject's own. The sense of the world that the subject brings with him to the encounter with the other is irretrievably lost. That the subject can be pulled down and rebuilt by

the other suggests that the sense of the other really is other, that the subject does not recuperate the alterity with which he is confronted.

### **An Objection**

But one might object here that Merleau-Ponty's rhetoric of depersonalization and of being pulled down by the other runs against the grain of his broader account of expression and that the asymmetrical relation described above is only apparent. The depersonalization that the subject must undergo can be conceived as merely a vanishing moment in the constitution of a new sense. Because in the dynamic of expression the subject eventually makes the sense of the other her own, she does not actually experience that sense as alienating or as a contestation. To shift somewhat the emphases in Merleau-Ponty's account, we might say that the subject *allows* herself to be pulled down by the other *in order to* be built up in a new way. Stated in this way, the relation between self and other appears quite symmetrical. Moreover, one might object that the subject could not be pulled down by the other in the first place unless the two already stood in some relation mediated by a third. If the other were *absolutely* other, then the communication of sense from one to the other would be inconceivable.<sup>28</sup>

The third that would mediate the relation between self and other would be sense itself. This mediating sense must not be understood as an already agreed upon set of significations, but rather as a kind of signifyingness, a perpetual intimation of meaning, to which we ceaselessly respond. Merleau-Ponty offers a compelling example of this pre-thematic signifyingness in a specifically perceptual context in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

If I walk along a shore towards a ship which has run aground, and the funnel or masts merge into the forest bordering on the sand dune, there will be a moment when these details suddenly become part of the ship, and indissolubly fused with it. As I approached, I did not perceive resemblances or proximities which finally came together

to form a continuous picture of the upper part of the ship. I merely felt that the look of the object was on the point of altering, that something was imminent in this tension, as a storm is imminent in storm clouds. Suddenly the sight before me was recast in a manner satisfying to my vague expectation.<sup>29</sup>

Prior to my constituting the meaning of the spectacle before me as a ship that has run aground, I experience the scene as pregnant with sense. I know that there is *some* sense there suggesting itself before I am able to make that sense explicit. Indeed as we saw in the case of the newly-sighted patient, this prior signifyingness of the spectacle is a necessary condition of my being able to determine its meaning more thematically.

Our embeddedness in a general signifyingness prior to the constitution of determinate significations is also made manifest when people from very different backgrounds succeed in communicating. I am able, for example, to make sense of a text like *Bhagavad Gita* even though the world of meaning that it presents, and that it presupposes, is different in almost every respect from the world of meaning that is familiar to me. My practical relation to the world has never been oriented in the least by the idea of caste-based duty grounded in a world order (*rita*) at once natural and moral. My relations with others have never been premised on the idea that their true selves are indestructible. And I have never made sense of the world in terms of the three *gunas* of *tamas*, *sattva*, and *rajas*. Nonetheless, I do not encounter *Bhagavad Gita* as pure nonsense. Likewise, I can learn to communicate in languages other than my own. I can reach a point where the Portuguese “Eu não vejo ninguém” immediately conveys the sense “I don’t see anyone,” even though the significations taken individually suggest something different. (The Portuguese sentence contains a double negative: I don’t see nobody.) I can even come to understand languages like Fula (Peul), which express negation by means of tone, even though specifically

grammatical information is not conveyed by tone in my native language.<sup>30</sup> These examples of communication across differences would be inconceivable if there were not a level of latent, pre-thematic sense subtending the very different worlds of established significations. This general signifyingness would mediate the relation between self and other. Alterity, one might argue then, is never really the kind of radical heterogeneity that Levinas has in mind, but rather a variant of the one world of pre-thematic sense in which we are all embedded always already.

### **Orientation**

This objection is correct, both as an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and as a description of the matter itself, in everything except its conclusion. To be sure, the dominant trend in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is toward a conception of self and other as intertwined. Moreover, self and other really do confront each other within the element of sense. Nonetheless, I want to argue that the very element of sense that mediates the relation between self and other also exposes the subject to a radical alterity. The argument that I am proposing is similar to the one that Levinas puts forward in his essay "Meaning and Sense:"

For a Frenchman there does exist the possibility of learning Chinese and passing from one culture to another, without the intermediary of an *Esperanto* that would falsify both tongues which it mediated. Yet what has not been taken into consideration is that an *orientation* is needed to have the Frenchman take up learning Chinese instead of declaring it to be barbarian (that is, bereft of the real virtues of language) and to prefer speech to war.<sup>31</sup>

It is always *possible* for me to learn another language or to understand another culture. But why would I actually choose to do it? It is not because I feel limited in my expressive possibilities by the English language that I choose to learn another. As Merleau-Ponty points out, borrowing from Saussure, our own language seems to us more expressive than any other simply because it

is our own. The native French speaker experiences “l’homme que j’aime” as a more complete expression than “the man I love” just because “l’homme que j’aime” is in French.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, I do not experience a lack in my moral understanding of the world that can only be made good by the idea of *rita*, or a lack in my theoretical grasp of the world that can only be filled in by knowledge of the three *gunas*. It would be understandable, then, if I were simply to ignore cultures and languages different from my own. I could regard knowledge of other cultures and languages as entirely superfluous. Indeed, given my experience of my own system of expression as self-evidently correct, I might even regard others as barbaric or stupid. Of course sometimes that is exactly what I do. But very often I do not. My sense of the world has changed a great deal over time, and this as a result of my having taken seriously the worlds of others. Among the questions that Levinas poses in “Meaning and Sense” is, How can we account for that? Granted that we *can* be pulled down and rebuilt by others, how can we account for its actually happening?

The answer is that our openness to the worlds of others is not dependent on a more fundamental self-presence. It is not an act attributable to any kind of subject. Rather we find ourselves oriented toward others always already. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty had already shown the connection, reflected in the French word *sens*, between our capacity to determine the sense of something and our being oriented toward that thing in the right way. “We have no way of knowing what a picture or a thing is other than by looking at them, and their *significance* is revealed only if we look at them from a certain point of view, from a certain distance and in a certain *direction* [sens], in short only if we place, at the service of the spectacle, our collusion with the world.”<sup>33</sup> In order, for example, to understand a painting that I see in the museum, I must view it in the right way. I cannot stand behind the painting or with my eyeball

one millimeter from its surface and expect to make any sense of it. I must orient myself in such a way as to see the painting as it demands to be seen. Meaning and orientation, then, are inextricable. If we rarely think about this connection, it is because our bodies already maintain a pre-thematic openness to being guided in their orientation by the things themselves.

The same connection between meaning and orientation pertains to situations that are not explicitly perceptual. In order to make sense of what another person is telling me, I must orient myself to his world of meaning. I must not insist on hearing his words in whichever way I please, but must rather hear him as he demands to be heard. If his world of meaning is sufficiently foreign to me, then there will be a period of time during which his sense will seem to me confused and indeterminate. This is something like the feeling I have when I change the radio station and find myself thrown into the middle of another song in a different key: I experience for a brief moment a kind of auditory disorientation during which I fail to catch on to the song's musical sense. In both cases, though, if I keep listening I will eventually reorient myself in the way necessary to pick up the sense. Once again, I can do this only if I am already open to being guided by the sense of the other.

To be oriented in sense in this way is to be exposed to radical alterity. Orientation toward the other is a basic, irreducible characteristic of our being-in-the-world. The world onto which this orientation opens me is the world in which I become who I am. Specifically, I encounter the sense of the other, which I am predisposed to understand, and I make it my own. This appropriation happens whether I accept the sense of the other or reject it. For example, let us suppose that I had never given much thought to the issue of poverty in the third world or to the moral obligations that it entailed. Let us suppose that I then read Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence and Morality." When I first begin reading, I find his perspective somewhat foreign.

But as I continue, suppose that I start to find his argument compelling. I am especially won over by the analogy he proposes between our obligation to starving persons in the third world and our obligation to save a child we find drowning in a shallow pond. All of a sudden my world is a different place. The starving children that I see on the news become people to whom I am connected in a morally powerful way. The goods that I might otherwise have spent my money on come to appear as unnecessary. And as my practical orientation to the world changes in response to my new understanding, I come to view myself differently. My concern for the well-being of these people whom I will never meet, but who need my assistance in order to survive, becomes an essential component of my identity. In appropriating a sense of the world that I first encountered as foreign, I become who I am. But I also appropriate the sense of the other when it does not win me over. Having read *Bhagavad Gita* I am still not inclined to interpret natural or social phenomena in terms of the *gunas*. Nonetheless, once I have understood the idea, I cease to experience it as other. I have internalized it and brought it into connection with the rest of my world of sense. If I continue to disagree, I do so in terms of other categories with which I have brought the *gunas* into relation. My sense of myself comes to include my not accepting the *gunas* as concepts helpful toward my understanding of the world.

It is this movement of appropriation of the other's sense that Merleau-Ponty's account tends to emphasize. What he emphasizes less, but what is just as essential to his account, is that the orientation that makes appropriation possible is itself inappropriable. My orientation never is, and in principle never can be, really my own. Rather it is my orientation, my originary exposure to the other, that first gives there to be sense at all. The very donation of sense, in other words—the *giving* of sense as opposed to the always already *given* sense that Merleau-Ponty tends to emphasize—happens in this exposure. My being oriented to the sense of the other thus

marks an ineliminable passivity in my being-in-the-world. Contrary to the thesis of the tacit cogito from *Phenomenology of Perception*, there is no originary self-presence that could ground the sense of the world. Rather I constitute the sense of myself and of the world only in responding to the sense that my orientation first gives me. Orientation, then, is prior to me. Because my becoming who I am is utterly dependent on the orientation that first gives sense, I can never recuperate it in an act of reflection. Orientation is present as a radical alterity at the heart of my subjectivity. This alterity constitutes the “germ of depersonalization” that the subject must contain if he is to inhabit a meaningful world. I can never be wholly who I am, a finished product completely established in my sense of myself and of the world, because as oriented I am exposed constantly to a sense that is absolutely unforeseeable and that contests in advance any identity that I might constitute. Although Merleau-Ponty does not emphasize it, this kind of radical alterity is essential to the account of expression that is his primary focus in *The Prose of the World*.

### **The Place of *The Prose of the World* in Merleau-Ponty’s Oeuvre**

I would like to conclude with a brief examination of the relation between *The Prose of the World* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, with regard specifically to the question of alterity. In the latter work, Merleau-Ponty gives an account of alterity that is considerably less radical than the one suggested by *The Prose of the World*. As he had done in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues in *The Visible and the Invisible* that our exposure to the other presupposes a more basic sameness. This prior sameness is understood in terms of reversibility, the model for which is given in the experience of touching and being touched. Merleau-Ponty provides as an example of this phenomenon the experience of the left hand touching the right hand while the latter touches some object in the world. The right hand in this example can be

experienced either as touching or as touched, as subject or as object: it functions as subject insofar as it touches the object in the world and as an object insofar as it is touched by the left hand. The roles of subject and object are thus reversible. But importantly, this reversibility is “always immanent and never realized in fact.”<sup>34</sup> I can never experience my right hand simultaneously as subject and as object. “Either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it*—my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering.”<sup>35</sup> What this phenomenon reveals is that I can never fully coincide with myself, either as subject or as object: as touching, I am also touched and conversely, as touched, I am also touching. As such I am necessarily exposed, outside myself and thus other to myself. But this distance that opens up between me and myself is not the unbridgeable ontological gap between subjectivity and objectivity, conceived as two incommensurable orders of reality. If, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, “my left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things,” this can only be because the difference between me and myself “is spanned by the total being of my body,” because the touching and the touched belong more fundamentally to the same flesh.<sup>36</sup>

One can use this analysis of the phenomenon of touching and being touched to describe our relations with other human beings as well. According to Merleau-Ponty, “the handshake too is reversible.”<sup>37</sup> When another person shakes my hand, I cannot touch him touching me. There is nothing I can do to make my experience of touching him and of being touched by him coincide with his experience of touching me and of being touched by me. This experience is indeed different in important ways from the experience of touching oneself touching an object in the world. In the latter case, I can experience my right hand as subject, albeit not at the same time

that I experience it as object. In the former case, however, I am unable even in principle to experience the subjectivity of the other's right hand. The distance between the other human being and me is, so to speak, greater than the distance between me and myself. Nonetheless, this greater distance still presupposes that the other and I belong more originally to the same flesh. If the other and I belonged to incommensurable orders of being, then I could never experience myself as being touched by him. Nor, by extension, could I experience myself as being seen or as being addressed by him.

I believe that the accounts of alterity put forward in *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* are both inadequate in that they present our exposure to the other as presupposing a more basic sameness. But this raises some difficult questions: if in *The Prose of the World* Merleau-Ponty had really discovered a way of thinking alterity that did justice to the radicality and heterogeneity of the phenomenon, then why did he leave the work unfinished and unpublished? If *The Prose of the World* really did constitute an improvement over *Phenomenology of Perception* with regard to the question of alterity, then why did Merleau-Ponty reproduce some of the most problematic features of the latter account in *The Visible and the Invisible*? Doesn't this suggest that Merleau-Ponty had come to recognize a problem in the account of alterity that he had worked out in *The Prose of the World*? All of these questions presuppose that something like the wholly Other was a central concern in *The Prose of the World*. But this is clearly not the case. Merleau-Ponty devotes an entire chapter in that text to the problem of the other, but what he addresses there is the problem of explaining how I can encounter an other who would be something more than an object in my world, an other-for-me. How, for example, is it possible that I can experience another person as having a perspective that is different from mine, but nonetheless one that is of the same world? The solution that Merleau-

Ponty proposes is to conceive the other as “a generalized I.”<sup>38</sup> Neither this formulation of the problem nor its proposed solution bear much resemblance to the problematic of the wholly Other that is associated most closely with the work of Levinas and the later Derrida. That the ideas of depersonalization and orientation advanced in *The Prose of the World* nonetheless provide such important resources for thinking about radical alterity is, I think, entirely accidental. I agree, then, with those scholars who see *The Prose of the World* as marking a transition in Merleau-Ponty’s thought from the broadly transcendental perspective of *Phenomenology of Perception* to the ontological project of *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>39</sup> But I do not believe that it is *merely* a transitional text. As I hope to have shown, *The Prose of the World* is unique in Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre in opening up novel and important perspectives on the question of radical alterity.

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<sup>1</sup> Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith, eds. *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 55-60.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Reynolds, “Possible and Impossible, Self and Other, and the Reversibility of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida,” *Philosophy Today*, 48: 1 (2004), 35-48; Christopher Adamo, “Merleau-Ponty: Reversibility, Phenomenality and Alterity,” *Philosophy Today*, 46: 5 (2002), 52-9.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 222-3. Hereafter *Ph.P.*; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 257. Hereafter *Ph.P-Fr.*

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 231/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 267.

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 223/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 257.

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 224/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 259.

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 232/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 268.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 25.

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- <sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 216/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 250.
- <sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 254/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 294.
- <sup>13</sup> Isabel Matos Dias, *Elogio do Sensível: Corpo e Reflexão em Merleau-Ponty* (Lisboa: Litoral Edições, 1989), 145-55.
- <sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 54/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 66.
- <sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 404/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 462. Translation modified.
- <sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 407/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 466.
- <sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 402/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 460.
- <sup>18</sup> Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 60. Hereafter *The Being of the Phenomenon*.
- <sup>19</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 9. Hereafter *PW*; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Prose du Monde*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 15. Hereafter *PW-Fr.*
- <sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 4/*PW-Fr.*, 8-9. Merleau-Ponty is referring to Piaget's studies of childhood cognitive development, where he shows that children equate knowing the name of a thing with knowing the thing itself. They understand the name of a thing to be inseparable from the thing itself, and at a certain stage of development—around six years of age—believe that the name is literally *in* the thing. “Where is the name of the sun?—*Inside*.—What?—*Inside the sun*....—How is the name of the sun inside the sun? What do you mean?—*Because it's hot (!)*.” Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, trans. Joan Tomlinson and Andrew Tomlinson (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1965), 61-87.
- <sup>21</sup> The name Rassi is given incorrectly as Rossi in both the French original and the English translation of *PW*.
- <sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 24/*PW-Fr.*, 35.
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 89.
- <sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 11/*PW-Fr.*, 17.
- <sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 19/*PW-Fr.*, 29.
- <sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 19-20/*PW-Fr.*, 29-30.
- <sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 35.
- <sup>28</sup> Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 18/*PW-Fr.*, 27. “Speech defects are thus related to disturbances of the lived body and interpersonal relations. How are we to understand this relationship? It arises because speech and understanding are moments in a unified system of self-other.”
- <sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P.*, 17/*Ph.P-Fr.*, 24.

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<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 26/*PW-Fr*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 46.

<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 29/*PW-Fr*, 41-2.

<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Ph.P*, 429/*Ph.P-Fr*, 411.

<sup>34</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 147. Hereafter *VI*; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), 191. Hereafter *VI-Fr*.

<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 148/*VI-Fr*, 191.

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 147;148/*VI-Fr*, 191;192.

<sup>37</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 142/*VI-Fr*, 184.

<sup>38</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, 138/*PW-Fr*, 192.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Claude Lefort's introduction *The Prose of the World*. Merleau-Ponty, *PW*, xix/*PW-Fr*, xi. See also Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 49; 59-60.