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B. Scot Rousse

bsrousse@berkeley.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an interpretation of the existential conception of selfhood that follows from Merleau-Ponty's account of perception. On this view, people relate to themselves not by "looking within" in acts of introspection but, first, by "looking without" at the field of solicitations in which they are immersed and, eventually, in Merleau-Ponty's words, by "making explicit" the "melodic unity" or "immanent sense" of their behavior. To make sense of this, I draw out a distinction latent in Merleau-Ponty's view between a pre-reflective sense of self and a reflective self-interpretation. The former is a suite of abilities and dispositions in light of which a person is aware of and drawn to act in a situation. This sense of self undergoes transitions over time, is constitutively susceptible to moments of disorientation, and tends toward but never achieves full coherence. Reflective self-interpretation is an activity whereby someone—provisionally and defeasibly—clarifies, articulates, and gets a better "grip" on how they are pre-reflectively drawn to act. I ground this interpretation in a detailed reading Merleau-Ponty's treatment of romantic love and I corroborate it by examining his account of the emergence of class-consciousness in the self-interpretation of a worker.

1. Introduction

What conception of selfhood is implied by Merleau-Ponty's account of perception? The title of part III of *Phenomenology of Perception*, "Being-for-Itself and Being-in-the-World," points the way. The self's relation to itself, its being "for-itself" (*pour-soi*), must be investigated in tandem with its intimate involvement in the world, its being-in-the-

world (*être-au-monde*).¹ Merleau-Ponty looks for the self in our ability to get around in the everyday world. The self, in this view, is tied into the way the world directly shows up as a meaningful field of possibilities and solicitations.² On this account, who I am – my identity as a particular person – is first and foremost a matter of how I am pre-reflectively solicited to act.

In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty remarks that “there is no ‘inner man,’ man is in and toward the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself” (lxxiv/11). For Merleau-Ponty, the self is not located in a cul-de-sac of inner awareness or self-consciousness. The self in this *existential* sense is first and foremost *out there* in the layout of solicitations guiding one’s ongoing action. To take up a phrase from Charles Taylor, the existential self is an *orientation* from out of which we act and reflect.³ I will refer to this pre-reflective, practical orientation as a person’s *pre-reflective sense of self*. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, one’s sense of self is constitutively susceptible to moments of disorientation or disequilibrium, as when we are confounded or caught off guard by how we are solicited to act. When that happens, we can be drawn into a moment of *reflective self-interpretation* wherein we clarify, bring into focus, and express in our comportment a revised stand on who we are. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-

¹ All unadorned citations in the main text are to Merleau-Ponty (2012), followed by the pagination of the French edition (1945).

² A solicitation is the positive or negative motivational force that an affordance—a feature of the environment that allows a certain action—can have for an agent. For a relevant recent account of the distinction between affordances and solicitations, see Dings (2018). The distinction ultimately comes from Gibson (1979, p. 139). Gibson sketches a distinction between an affordance as a feature of an animal’s environment and the “temporary special attraction” affordances can have for the animal. It has become commonplace for interpreters to appeal to Gibson’s notion of affordances in explaining Merleau-Ponty’s views of perception and action; see, e.g., Bredlau (2018), Dreyfus (2013, 2014), Marratto (2012), and Romdenh-Romluc (2011).

³ See Taylor (1989, p.28). For more on the phenomenology of the self as an orientation in the world, see Ahmed (2006) and, in recent Merleau-Ponty interpretation, Bredlau (2018, pp. 32-35). Bredlau connects this sense of existential orientation to Gibson’s notion of affordances in a footnote (2018, p. 102n16). For recent work on “existential” selfhood, see Knudsen (2021) and Wrathall (2017). As Wrathall puts it, on an existential account of selfhood, “The ‘I’ picks out my particular way of polarizing affordances into solicitations to act” (2017, p. 229).

Ponty's main examples of this are a person who arrives at the insight that he has fallen in love, and someone who comes to the stance of identifying *as* a worker in class-based solidarity with other workers. Again, such a clarified sense of self amounts to a revised sense of direction, a renewed orientation with respect to what matters and solicits one's action, affection, and commitment.

Merleau-Ponty does not himself use this precise terminology or systematically work out a distinction between a pre-reflective sense of self or reflective self-interpretation.⁴ However, I will show that such a distinction is latent in his view and that it clarifies the implications that his phenomenology of perception has for a phenomenology of selfhood.

2. *Systematic and Hermeneutic Context*

Any appeal to a philosophically over-burdened notion like "the self" requires some explanation. In contemporary phenomenology, one of the most prolific philosophers working on the nature of the self is Dan Zahavi. To sort out how I will be using some contested philosophical terminology, I will briefly to situate my notion of a pre-reflective sense of self with respect to Zahavi's conception of the self. In a variety of publications Zahavi has drawn on the tradition of phenomenology to defend a tripartite "multidimensional" conception of the self. First, there is what Zahavi calls "pre-reflective self-awareness," or "minimal selfhood." Zahavi postulates this form of selfhood to capture the asymmetrical givenness of experience as *my* experience. In the phenomenological tradition, the qualifier "pre-reflective" captures how this givenness of experience as mine happens prior to reflective, explicit or "thetic" (objectifying) self-reflection. Zahavi characterizes this minimal, pre-reflective self as a formal, strictly

⁴ Of course, the notion of *sense* is fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and grounds the notion of a "pre-reflective sense of self." In previous work, I referred to this dimension of selfhood as a "pre-reflective self-understanding" (Rousse, 2019). Merleau-Ponty does not make much use of the term of "interpretation." Arguably, the phrase "reflective self-expression" would be better rooted in his philosophical lexicon, however, I favor "self-interpretation" over "self-expression" to connect my reading of Merleau-Ponty with the broader phenomenological tradition of reflection of the self, stretching back from Heidegger before him the Charles Taylor and Dan Zahavi after. The closest Merleau-Ponty himself comes to making the distinction I mark between a pre-reflective sense of self and a reflective self-interpretation is his distinction between a tacit and a spoken *cogito*. I discuss this below in §6.

individual dimension of experience that is separate from and foundational for the other two dimensions of selfhood he explores: interpersonal selfhood as experienced in emotions like empathy and shame, and the normatively situated, substantive dimension of selfhood expressed in personal commitments and self-interpretations (e.g., being in love or being a factory worker ready to go on strike).⁵

Zahavi contends that the substantive-normative dimension of selfhood is “a question of our self-interpretation, of who we take ourselves to be.”⁶ When I use the term “self” in this paper, I am aiming at the dimension of selfhood constituted by such normatively situated, substantive, self-interpretive commitments. In the end, Zahavi himself stays largely non-committal about how to conceive of this phenomenon of “taking ourselves to be” someone or other; his main concern is to argue for the dependence of this dimension of selfhood on minimal selfhood.⁷ He links his account of substantive selfhood with the discourse on practical identity from Korsgaard, and with “the values, ideals, and goals one has ... what has significance and meaning for one.”⁸ A practical identity, for Korsgaard, amounts to an explicit, descriptive self-conception of myself as, say, the lover of Albertine or a factory worker. As I will argue below, for Merleau-Ponty, what has significance for me is not always a function – and may be beyond the scope – of my explicit self-interpretation. Zahavi’s non-committal stance regarding how to properly conceive of the substantive, self-interpretative dimension of selfhood is related to an oversight at the core of his theory.

Zahavi reserves the pre-reflective dimension of selfhood for the empty, formal, asymmetrical givenness of experience. In doing so, he does not provide a place for the commitment-based (i.e., substantive, non-formal) dimension of selfhood that is *pre-reflectively* operative in the habits and

⁵ For the supposedly foundationalist status of the minimal self, see Zahavi (2014, p. 14, 24, 50, 89). I am using “substantive” here to contrast with the “formal” characteristic of Zahavi’s minimal self, and not to suggest that there is an inner or underlying “substantive self.”

⁶ Ibid., p. 90.

⁷ Ibid., p. 89.

⁸ Zahavi (2005, p.105). On practical identity, see Korsgaard (1996).

style of a person's absorption in the world. An example of this that Merleau-Ponty explores is how a person can be pre-reflectively oriented in world in terms of their love for another, without identifying as such in an explicit self-interpretation. As I will argue, in Merleau-Ponty's picture, such a *pre-reflective sense of self amounts to a suite of commitments and dispositions in light of which a person is pre-reflectively aware of and solicited to act in a situation*. In this way, again, the self finds itself *out there* in the layout of solicitations. This is Merleau-Ponty's existential conception of selfhood, and it is left out of Zahavi's account.⁹

As a reading of Merleau-Ponty, my reconstruction of how the self finds itself *out there* in the world sharpens and expands upon recent interpretations provided by Don Beith, Kirsten Jacobson, and Scott Marratto. Beith emphasizes how, for Merleau-Ponty, one's pre-reflectively operative habits both orient one in the world and "are an expression of [one's] very self."¹⁰ Indeed, for Beith's Merleau-Ponty, "Habits are intricately caught up in our character."¹¹ Moreover, Beith points out that, for Merleau-Ponty, our habits and our immersion in the world are not ontologically or phenomenologically separable from each other, for our "habits are called forth by specific worldly situations."¹² The interpretation I present below works out the implications of such claims, especially by connecting them with Merleau-Ponty's remarks on personal commitment (e.g., love and class-consciousness), which Beith completely omits from his account.

Kirsten Jacobson, in turn, reads Merleau-Ponty as holding that "I find myself in and through the things, the people, and the places of my unfolding life," and therefore that the self "is spread throughout the world."¹³ Jacobson focuses on our memory-mediated relation to meaningful *things*, such as the things in our home, that support us in who we are and reflect us back to ourselves. In her short article, Jacobson does not extend her

⁹ I present a detailed criticism of this aspect of Zahavi's view in Rouse (2019).

¹⁰ Beith (2018, p. 103).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.107.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Jacobson (2015, p. 29, p.30).

reflections from things to affordances and solicitations. But an account of how the self is “spread out through the world” for Merleau-Ponty is inadequate if it remains at the level of things while leaving out the situations and solicitations through which things engage us in their significance.

Next, in line with what I am calling the “existential” self, Scott Marratto argues that “the claim that the bounds of self are indeed ‘pushed out into the world’” is central to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.¹⁴ Marratto convincingly argues that this claim is the ontological upshot of the main concepts of Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception, for example, his treatments of depth, color, movement, temporality, the body schema, the tacit cogito, and so on. Yet, Marratto’s discussion remains largely in the register of ontological generalization. He too neglects to extend his account to address Merleau-Ponty’s remarks on phenomena such as love or personal commitment, and he makes no concrete attempt to explain what it means to say that “the bounds of the self are pushed out into the world” on the phenomenological level of an individual’s everyday experience (such as in the experience of love or political commitment).¹⁵

My focus on affordances and solicitations accords with work done by commentators such as Hubert Dreyfus, Sean Kelly, and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc. For these interpreters responsiveness to solicitations and maintaining equilibrium (tending towards a better “grip”) in one’s pre-reflective coping in the world are the keys for interpreting Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.¹⁶ Yet, these scholars too swerve widely around questions about Merleau-Ponty’s conception of selfhood: None of them investigate how his treatments of the emergence of love and class-consciousness in Parts Two and Three of *Phenomenology of Perception* illustrate his fundamental notions of a responsiveness to solicitations and the tendency toward maintaining equilibrium in (or a “grip” on) one’s

¹⁴ Marratto (2012, p. 21).

¹⁵ Marratto’s view does, however, have the virtue of highlighting the intracorporeal nature of the self according to Merleau-Ponty, a feature of his view that I have had to largely omit in my limited space here. Bredlau (2018) is another notable recent account of how relations to concrete others (and not just generalized or anonymized social existence) are involved in constituting our orientation in the world and thus our very selfhood.

¹⁶ Dreyfus (2014, ch.11), Kelly (2006), Romdenh-Romluc (2011).

situation.

With this stage-setting in place, I can now turn to my argument. My interpretation launches off from a passage where we find Merleau-Ponty drawing a direct line from his account of perception to an account of the self's relation to itself:

Once the unquestioned belief in sensations has been removed . . . the notion of the "immediate" is transformed: henceforth it is no longer the impression of the object that merges with the subject; rather, the immediate becomes the sense, the structure, and the spontaneous arrangement of parts. My own "psyche" is not given to me in any other way, since the critique of the constancy hypothesis again teaches me to recognize the articulation and the melodic unity of my behaviors as originary givens of inner experience and to recognize that introspection, reduced down to its positive content, also consists in making explicit the immanent sense of a behavior. (58–59/85)

But why should a critique of the constancy hypothesis, which is a view about the supposedly constant relation between the objects of perception, perceptual stimuli, and experience, lead to a picture of how the self relates to itself? In exploring this question, I first need to review two main threads of Merleau-Ponty's positive account of perception (and his corresponding rejection of the constancy hypothesis): his conception of perceptual sense and his notion of a perceiver's having a grip on, or being geared into (*en prise*), the world (§3). I go on to show how, given this account of perception, the distinction between a pre-reflective sense of self and a reflective self-interpretation is at work in *Phenomenology of Perception* (§§4–5). I end by clarifying some ambiguities surrounding the phenomenon of reflective self-interpretation (§6).

3. *Merleau-Ponty on Perception*

3.1 *Perceptual Sense*

To say that perception is imbued with sense is to say that it is both holistic and anticipatory. One of the main conclusions of the first and second parts of *Phenomenology*

of Perception is that our perceptual system, through the medium of the body, is attuned to meaningful wholes rather than isolated parts, holistic gestalt configurations rather than the atomic sensations assumed by the constancy hypothesis. An apple, for example, looks whole (and not like a flat sensation) because it looks graspable, and we bodily anticipate that its backside will support our grasp (in the shape our hand takes as we reach for it). Merleau-Ponty gestures toward this anticipatory sense of wholeness in his definition of "sense": "Each part announces more than it contains, and thus this elementary perception is already charged with a *sense*" (4/26). Perceptual sense is also experienced as being open-ended. We can never take in a perceptual scene all at once since we are immersed amidst things not a transcendental consciousness spread-out above them (see 348/390). *What I have just said about perceptual sense holds for one's relation to one's own emotions and personal commitments; these are also "open," promising something more to understand. I establish this below in §5 by examining Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the emergence of romantic love and class-consciousness.*

Analogous to our anticipation of the continuation of a melody upon hearing its opening notes (see 81/107), in the unfolding of our perceptual experience we anticipate not only that the things whose front sides we see have backsides available for exploration, but also, for example, that a stone on the path will support our gait as we step upon it. For my behaviors to have a "melodic unity" (58/85) is for my actions and commitments to tend toward (but never finally arrive at) an overall coherence even if I am not focally aware of this or planning it as such. *As I show below in §5, for Merleau-Ponty, just as I respond to perspectival partiality and indeterminacy by anticipating the hidden backsides of objects, I anticipate and am drawn along in my everyday action by a partial and developing sense of what matters to me, what draws my commitment, affection, and attention, and defines me as the person I am (for example, my romantic affection for another, or my commitment to a political ideal).* Tensions and disharmonies in my motivational propensities draw me toward an improved equilibrium and a better "grip" on my situation and thus upon myself. Merleau-Ponty's treatment love and class-consciousness, which I discuss in §§5-7 below, develops these claims, as does his own account of a perceiver's "gearing into" or "being at grips with" the world.

3.2 *Perceptual Grip (Gearing into the World)*

3.2.1 *Maintaining Equilibrium*

Being geared [*en prise*] into the world, for Merleau-Ponty, means tending toward an overall equilibrium in my perception and action. When he claims that what is immediately given in experience is not an atomic sensation, but “the sense, the structure, and the spontaneous arrangement of parts” (58/85), Merleau-Ponty highlights how perception tends to resolve into a provisionally stable configuration of a determinate thing against an indeterminate background. Such a configuration enables us to attain our bearings and tracks a transition from shifting or ambiguous perceptual takes to more determinate and stable ones. Moreover, when I am geared into the world like this, maintaining a sense of stability and poise in my situation, “my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they anticipate from the world” (261/298).¹⁷

When we sense that we are deviating from balance or equilibrium in our perceptual situation, we experience a tension which we are bodily drawn to reduce. If someone sits in front of me at a movie theatre, obstructing my view of the screen, I automatically crane my neck or shuffle my body to get an improved view. In one of Merleau-Ponty's examples, “I saw a large shadow moving on the periphery of my visual field at a distance, I turn my gaze to this side and the phantasm shrinks to its proper place: it was only a fly close to my eye” (311/350). In this, I participate in the transition to a more stable perceptual grip [*prise*] on my situation. *For Merleau-Ponty, as I will show below in §§5-6, such a (defeasible) transition toward greater clarity and equilibrium is also involved in the movement from pre-reflective sense of self to reflective self-interpretation.*

In some cases, our perceptual experience remains suspended in indeterminacy, as a figure-ground configuration fails to take hold. As Merleau-Ponty points out, “I am sometimes obliged to wait for the organization to produce itself” (275/313). In one of

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty sometimes extends his notion of being at grips with the world to a notion of a *maximum* grip toward which perception tends; see 316/356 and 332/374. Maximum grip figures especially in his account of perceptual constancy. For further discussion of these themes, see Dreyfus (2014), Kelly (2006), and Romdenh-Romluc (2011, pp.115–23). On maximum grip in general, see Wrathall and London (2019). For a convincing criticism of Kelly's (2006) attempt to use the notion of maximum grip to illustrate Merleau-Ponty's supposed commitment to “a view from everywhere,” see Matherne (2017).

Merleau-Ponty's examples, the masts of boats in a harbor can become mingled with background trees on the coast in an initially disorienting way. There is a moment of instability before things click into place: "The spectacle was suddenly reorganized, satisfying my vague expectation" (18/40). *As I explore below in §6, in Merleau-Ponty's picture, a person's own sense of self – their guiding sense of who they are and what commitments and relationships ultimately matter to them – can also become caught in moments of sustained indeterminacy.*

3.2.2 *Losing Grip*

Merleau-Ponty's notion of being at grips with the world leads into his account of perceptual illusion and, ultimately, as I will argue below in §5.2, into his account of illusions in one's own self-interpretation (particularly the illusion of being love). In developing this theme, he describes someone strolling on an unpaved lane, with gravel and stones upon it, as well as shadows and patches of sun. During the stroll, a patch of sunlight initially, if also indeterminately and ambiguously, shows up as a stone on the path: "the flat stone only appears, like everything that is far off, in a field whose structure is confused and where the connections are not yet clearly articulated" (310/350). Yet this shiftiness is such that it still solicits the stroller's gait forward: "I already prepare to sense this smooth and solid surface beneath my foot" (310–11/350).

When the scene finally clicks into place and the anticipated stone is revealed to be a spot of sunlight, a re-figuring takes place: the parts are organized into a different whole with a different figure-ground structure and a different motor significance such that alternate bodily responses are elicited. What looked like a bright stone surface raised up as separate from surrounding dark gravel is suddenly is sunk back into the surface of the ground. Once this corrective transition happens, the perceiver's experience is also retroactively reorganized, and it looks obvious that it was just a spot of sunlight all along. Such a corrective re-figuring is possible, in principle, for any given experience (cf. 359–60/402). *As I will show in §§5.2-7, this general structure is at work in Merleau-Ponty's account of the self: our guiding sense of self and our reflective self-interpretations are always susceptible to being superseded in corrective transitions and reconfigurations.*

4. *Pre-reflective Sense of Self: The Polarization of a Field of Possibilities*

One of Merleau-Ponty's technical terms for the flexible layout of solicitations guiding a person's action in their everyday situations is *polarization*: a "person's projects polarize the world, bringing magically to view a host of signs which guide action" (115/143, translation modified). For the world to be polarized is for some things and possibilities to stand out as salient and relevant, soliciting our engagement with them, and for others to repel us or to recede into the margins or background as irrelevant. I have been claiming that, for Merleau-Ponty, we are first of all given to ourselves in our sense of how we are solicited to act. A person's orientation in a situation emerges from what Merleau-Ponty, in the just-quoted passage, refers to with the blanket term of "projects": the skills, dispositions, and personal commitments that define me as a person. Like the sense of direction I have around a familiar city, even though I cannot provide an accurate objective description or representation of it, our embodied sense of self is first and foremost unthematized and unformulated; it is not a self-conception but a sensibility, a sense of direction or orientation; a *pre-understanding*, to use Heidegger's term.

Extrapolating from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of agency, we can say that a pre-reflective sense of self consists of an individually inflected suite of abilities and dispositions in light of which I am aware of and solicited to act in my current situation. This involves a constellation of factors: some are personal and have to do with my own individualizing commitments; others are general, or, as Merleau-Ponty also puts it, "pre-personal" or "anonymous," and pertain to me insofar as I am "one" among many. Hence Merleau-Ponty's remark that the "generality" and the "individuality of the subject" are "two moments of a single structure that is the concrete subject" (477/514-515).

This multidimensional pre-reflective sense of self tends toward an overall coherence or stylistic unity—what we could call a "motivational gestalt"—that is correlative to the stability and equilibrium of my awareness and understanding of my situation. It is in virtue of the provisional coherence and stability of my pre-reflective sense of self that my behavior displays, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, an "immanent sense" or "melodic unity" that can be articulated and made "explicit" (58–59/85) in an act of reflective self-interpretation.

4.1 *General Factors of the Sense of Self: Embodiment and Social Norms*

There are two motivational factors that Merleau-Ponty describes as general. First, the body is the all-important foundation for any openness to affordances and solicitations: “The body is our general means for having a world” (147/182). Merleau-Ponty points out that the very structure of body—that it has hands capable of grasping and manipulating things of a certain size, for example—is a general way of structuring possibilities in advance. “Insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, and a world, I sustain intentions around myself that are not decided upon and that affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose. *These intentions are general*” (465/503, my italics). Anything showing up with salience the foreground of my perceptual field as relevant to my purposes speaks to the general configuration of my body.

Rebutting Sartre's claim that a mountain's overwhelming size for me is relative to a goal that I have freely posited to climb it, Merleau-Ponty observes: “Whether or not I have decided to undertake the climb, these mountains appear large because they outstrip my body's grasp” (464/503).¹⁸ The capacity of the general structure of the body to sketch out in advance a horizon of possibilities amounts to, in Merleau-Ponty's terminology, a “spontaneous valuation” (465/504):

Without these spontaneous valuations, we would not have a world, that is, a collection of things that emerges from the formless mass [i.e., from the indeterminate background] by offering themselves to our body as things “to be touched,” “to be taken,” or “to be climbed.” (465/504, my brackets)

The second general motivational factor at work in the polarization of a field of possibilities is the horizon of shared norms and cultural meanings into which a person is socialized. Again with reference to Sartre's views, this time regarding the supposed absolute freedom of a worker to adopt revolutionary class-consciousness, Merleau-Ponty writes:

¹⁸ For Sartre's position, see Sartre (2018, pp. 629–30).

We thus recognize, surrounding our initiatives and ourselves taken as this strictly individual project, a *zone of generalized existence* and of projects already formed, significances which trail between ourselves and things and which confer upon us the qualities of “man,” “bourgeois,” or “worker.” (476/514, my italics)¹⁹

What is at stake here, however, transcends the question of what is involved in a political conversion. To be ideologically and morally situated is for some circumscribed array of identities and projects to be available and attractive, for some considerations to automatically strike one as worthwhile, soliciting a stand and motivating action, and for others to be of only marginal importance or totally irrelevant. All of this belongs to the pattern of shared intelligibility, the general normative space in which everyday life takes place. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty refers to “a *halo of generality*, or an atmosphere of sociality” (474/512, my italics) and also to a “historical *a priori*” that orients a person’s life and decisions (90/117).

4.2 *Personal Motivational Factors*

There are two related but distinguishable senses of the personal or individual operative in *Phenomenology of Perception*. First, “personal” captures the way decisions can play a role in shaping someone’s life: “personal acts create a situation: I am a mathematician because I decided to be one” (223/260; cf. 265/302). Yet, for it to be possible for me to decide to become a mathematician, I must live in a world where being a mathematician is an available identity, a tradition to which I can become attracted and, through training and initiation, eventually belong: “My decision takes up a spontaneous sense of my life that it can confirm or deny, but that it cannot annul” (473/511). Such decisions amount to moments of reflective self-interpretation. Put in contemporary terms popularized by Richard Moran, Merleau-Ponty’s first sense of “personal” points to the fact that there is a fundamental, practical asymmetry between first- and second- or third-person perspectives.²⁰ My decision to become a mathematician plays a pivotal role in my

¹⁹ For Sartre’s contrasting position, see *Ibid.*, pp. 572–75.

²⁰ Moran (2001).

constituting *myself* as one, but my decision for *you* to become a mathematician does not have the same existential efficacy.

The second, related, sense of the “personal” or “individual” in Merleau-Ponty’s picture of agency pertains not to first-personal decisions, but rather to the substantive commitments, attachments, and evaluative stances (some of which will be sedimented prior decisions) that individuate my pre-reflective way of getting around in the world. Merleau-Ponty mentions the “general world to which we must first belong in order to be able to enclose ourselves within a particular milieu of a love or an ambition” (86/113, my italics). To “enclose myself in a particular milieu” is to be oriented and guided in everyday action by a personalized sense of what specifically matters *to me*, for example, the well-being of the person I love. As we could expect, given Merleau-Ponty’s mention of “a particular milieu of a love,” this aspect of his view indeed comes out most clearly in his discussion of love.

5. *Self-interpretive Transitions: Love and Class-Consciousness*

5.1 *Love*

For Merleau-Ponty, what motivates and individuates a person will change over time, sometimes undergoing temporary, peripheral fluctuations, other times undergoing fundamental reconfigurations in the core of who they are. This observation is the basis for his distinction between illusory and real love and is the context in which we find an account of reflective self-interpretation in his work. Throughout his discussion of love, Merleau-Ponty works out some of the implications that his “critique of the constancy hypothesis” has for how “my own psyche is given to me” (58–59/85). Just as he denies that the perception of the world around us is a matter of internal sensations or impressions, Merleau-Ponty denies that our own emotions are given as fully formed, determinate inner impressions uniquely accessible to introspection or inner perception. Instead, emotions are a matter of “affective intentionality” (396/436), that is, they are part and parcel of our embeddedness in the world and amidst others, part and parcel of the suite of dispositions in light of which we are aware of and drawn to act in our situations.²¹

²¹ I cannot do justice here to the cluster of issues surrounding Merleau-Ponty’s notion of

Coming to a reflective grasp on my own emotions, “grasping myself from a distance” (451/490), is not a matter of looking *within* from a stance of detachment, but of looking *without* at the melodic unity and immanent sense of my behavior. This is to attune to, articulate, and render more determinate an emerging sense of self (and correlative sense of and grip on my situation) that is already orienting me in my everyday action.

Merleau-Ponty presents the love one person has for another as an inflection in the structure of solicitations guiding their pre-reflective absorption in the world:

It is simply a question here of what we are *doing*. I discover that I am in love . . . Thinking back to the previous days or months, I notice that *my actions and my thoughts were polarized*, I uncover the traces of an arrangement or a synthesis that was in the making . . . The love that worked out its dialectic through me and that I have just discovered is not from the outset a hidden thing in my consciousness; rather *it is the movement by which I am turned toward someone, the conversion of my thoughts and behaviors*. (399–400/439, emphasis modified)

This is precisely an example of someone “making explicit the immanent sense of a behavior” (58–59/85). There are grounds to believe that Merleau-Ponty is extrapolating from an episode in Proust, so I will refer to the people in the example as “Marcel” and “Albertine.”²² The immanent sense or melodic unity of Marcel’s behavior—what

affective intentionality. For starters, the discussion in Romdenh-Romluc (2011, pp. 172–79) is helpful. Of course, affect belongs to a web of interrelated phenomena such as emotions, feelings, moods, attunements, and so on, the whole affective gamut that Steinbock gathers under the rubric of “the heart.” For Steinbock’s recent Merleau-Ponty-informed mapping of this realm of phenomena, see his (2021, especially Chapter 1 and Appendix 1).

²² The evidence that this example is inspired by Proust is indirect since Merleau-Ponty does not mention either Proust or his characters by name here. However, Merleau-Ponty’s description of the case distinctly recalls Proust’s reflections on love, habit, and self-opacity in the narrator’s realization that he is (still) in love with Albertine, for example: “I had been mistaken in thinking I could see clearly into my own heart.” In a comment on how habits pre-reflectively guide our behavior and can thereby surprise us with unexpected emotions, he adds: “I was so much in the habit of having Albertine with me, and now I suddenly saw a new aspect of Habit. Hitherto I had regarded it chiefly as an annihilating force which suppresses the originality and even the awareness of one’s perceptions, now I saw it as a dread deity, so riveted to one’s being” (Proust,

Merleau-Ponty here calls “an arrangement or synthesis in the making”—consists in the fact that, behind the back of Marcel’s own reflective self-awareness, a certain spectrum of possibilities, those related to the beloved, stand out as especially significant and solicit his action, affection, and attention while competing commitments and interests are relegated to the margins of irrelevance. It is this priority of the beloved in the polarization of the lover’s field of possibilities that leads Merleau-Ponty to remark that, in *both* real and illusory love, the beloved is, for a time, “the mediator of my relations with the world” (397/437). This is an example of what I sometimes refer to as the emergence of a new motivational gestalt. Through falling in love, Marcel undergoes a reconfiguration in his pre-reflective sense of self, correlative to a reorganization of the field of solicitations that guide his action, which eventually comes into focus in a moment of reflective self-interpretation (or, alternatively, falls completely *out* of focus in the case of a disillusionment, on which see below).

Following Proust, Merleau-Ponty dramatizes a clash between how the lover is being pre-reflectively solicited to act and how he reflectively interprets himself. This discordance eventually yields a moment of self-interpretive insight. Merleau-Ponty accordingly describes the person in the example as experiencing “impatience for the day of [the] date [with Albertine] to arrive” (399/439, my brackets), “hours of boredom prior to [the] date” and “joy when it approached” (400/440). There is a transition already underway in Marcel’s pre-reflective sense of self, but it has not yet clicked into place for him in an explicit way. We have here a situation phenomenologically analogous to a perceptual scene that has not yet clicked into place in a stable foreground-background structure and motivational significance. Marcel has not yet picked up on the emerging significance of his emotional experience vis-à-vis Albertine; he did not yet grasp the immanent sense already unfolding in his own behavior. Speaking in the voice of the lover, Merleau-Ponty writes: “Perhaps nothing of the facts that *I now take as proof*

1993, pp. 564-565). Merleau-Ponty explores Proust’s picture of love and habit in this very passage from Proust in *Institution and Passivity* (2010, p.29). In the terms of this later work, the emergence of the love involves the “institution” of new sense on the basis of redefinition of the significance of one’s own past, as also happens with the event of puberty. For more on this issue, see Beith (2018, ch.4) and Burke (2017).

escaped me . . . But alas, I had not brought these facts together” (399/439, my italics). To bring the facts together is to recognize, focus, and acknowledge the new motivational gestalt that has emerged in his sense of self. We have here a self-interpretive analog to what happens when a visual gestalt clicks into place, “through the sort of appropriation we all experience when we say we have ‘found’ the rabbit in the foliage of the visual puzzle” (58/84).

Beyond giving rise to a more stable way of behaving with respect to Albertine and reducing the disequilibrium experienced in relation to her, Merleau-Ponty notes that the lover gains a new reflective grasp on his life and a new way of expressing what is at stake: “I now discover *that I can no longer conceive of my life without this love*” (399/439, my italics). Marcel’s coming to the explicit expression that “I am in love” confirms a conclusion that had already been offering itself through the immanent sense of his behavior. This is a moment of self-interpretive transition. Such transitions are “motivated” in Merleau-Ponty’s special sense of the term: being brought about neither by causes, nor by a rational judgment.²³ Motivated phenomena participate in the general tendency of experience to be drawn from indeterminacy to determinacy so as to enable us to get a better “grip” on our situation. When Marcel is motivated to articulate the reconfiguration in his field of solicitations *as love*, he brings this new emotional gestalt into focus and stabilizes it.

Marcel’s “discovery” of being in love is not based on an introspective observation of an independently existing emotional fact as, for example, Qassim Cassam argues with respect to this episode in Proust.²⁴ For Cassam, moreover, a person’s introspective self-observation is explicitly mediated by theories about, e.g., the nature of romantic love. Merleau-Ponty would see here the same illegitimate generalization of the “analytic attitude” he finds in empiricist and intellectualist accounts of perception. Moreover, to treat love as an independent, determinate emotional fact awaiting discovery would be to commit to a “constancy hypothesis” about emotions: an emotion would be a fully formed

²³ See Walsh (2016) and Wrathall (2006).

²⁴ Cassam (2014, p. 181–84).

reality within us, “a hidden thing in my consciousness” (399–400/439) in Merleau-Ponty's words, causing and constantly corresponding to certain experiences of “inner perception.”

For Merleau-Ponty, the “discovery” of being in love is inseparable from a holistic re-gestalt of the lover's motivational propensities. What eventually looks like straightforward evidence of being in love, e.g., the impatience, boredom, and joy in advance of the meeting, is constituted as such evidence only retroactively, *après coup*, after the emotional re-gestalt and corresponding sense of his situation have clicked into place. That is why Merleau-Ponty specifies a transitional moment at which Marcel can “now” take the facts as proof (399/439).²⁵

Drawing these threads together, Merleau-Ponty remarks: “love cannot be given a name by the lover who lives it. It is not a thing that one could outline and designate . . . it is rather the way the lover establishes his relations with the world” (401/441). The “lover who lives it” is undergoing the love as a modulation in his pre-reflective sense of self; caught up in living its solicitations, he has not yet been drawn to make the love explicit (to “outline” or “designate” it) in a moment of reflective self-interpretation. Indeed, it is part of Merleau-Ponty's view that the pre-reflective dimensions of experience will always precede and exceed the reflective dimensions (see 251–52/288–289, 414/454). In sum, articulating this existential pull toward Albertine and avowing it *as love* is a way for Marcel to respond to this new vital tension in his life, a way of actively reaching for a better “grip” (*prise*) on his relation to Albertine and his basic orientation in the world. This relationship now more focally becomes one of the guiding beacons on his existential map, and his field of solicitations more distinctly reflects to him his defining relation to Albertine.

By making use of the notion of “articulation,” I am drawing on the resonances given

²⁵ Again, this anticipates Merleau-Ponty's later notion of institution. The institution of a new sense also involves a retroactive redefinition of the significance of the past events leading up to this transition. As Merleau-Ponty's puts it: “What defines human institution? A past which creates a question, puts it in reserve, makes a situation that is indefinitely open. . . Human institution always resumes a prior institution, which has posed a *question*, i.e., a question which was its anticipation—and which has failed. It reactivates this problem and human institution reunites its givens in [a] totality that is centered otherwise” (2010, pp.22-23).

this term by Taylor in connection with the phenomenon he calls “strong evaluation.” The latter are evaluative stances, often not explicit, on fundamental questions regarding what is important in life. An articulation is a provisional linguistic expression that seeks to capture and give shape to our motivations, emotions, and orientation in a field of solicitations. We are drawn to articulate our motivations in moments of tension or disequilibrium, moments when we need an insight into how to go on. As Taylor argues, to be drawn to a new linguistic expression of our emotion as love as opposed to fascination or fear of being alone, or as jealousy instead of anger, is (defeasibly) to clarify or better define it, and to renew our sense of direction or orientation in the relationship in question.²⁶ I return to this below.

5.2 *Illusory Love*

The interpretation I have been presenting is further elaborated in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of *illusory* love. As Merleau-Ponty presents the case:

When I said: “I love her,” I was not “interpreting” [that is, reflectively attributing meaning to otherwise meaningless events]; and my life really was engaged in a form that, like a melody, demanded a certain continuation. It is true that, after the disillusionment (after the revelation of my illusion *regarding myself*) and when I later attempt to understand what has happened to me, I will uncover beneath this supposed love something other than love: a resemblance of the “loved” woman to another person, boredom, habit, shared interests or convictions, and this is just what allows me to speak of illusion. (397/437, my brackets)

This is an emotional version of the illusory stone on the path. Just as the patch of sunlight temporarily formed a perceptual-motivational gestalt of a stone-on-the-path soliciting the

²⁶ See Taylor (1985) and (1989). Merleau-Ponty himself usually uses “articulation” to refer to an endemic feature of perceptual experience itself. A perceptual experience is well articulated for Merleau-Ponty when it has a relatively clear figure-ground structure and related motivational significance. I say more about articulation and its relevance to Merleau-Ponty's conception of self-interpretation in §6.

walker's gait, guiding him forward, offering a place to step, an illusory love is a temporarily stable and fragile motivational gestalt in the person's pre-reflective sense of self (and correlative awareness of his situation), guiding his actions in the relationship. The "melodic unity of [his] behavior" (58/85) draws him along toward "a certain continuation [of the relationship]" (397/437). The relationship with the pseudo-beloved shows up in his polarization of possibilities as having the highest priority; everything else is of derivative importance. Prior to any reflection, spending more time with the pseudo-beloved, or undertaking acts in his or her service, stand out as the most important. In this sense, the love the lover has for the beloved (or pseudo-beloved) is not an inner feeling, it is *out there* in the structure of his world, in the layout of solicitations guiding his everyday action. Being thus solicited, the lover also eventually becomes motivated to explicitly conceive of and avow himself *as* being in love.

Further, just as the perceptual sense of stone-to-be-stepped-upon gets eventually superseded by a better-formed gestalt of patch-of-sunlight-surrounded-by-shadows, the emotional gestalt of being-in-love draws the person along to the point when it suddenly loses cohesion and resolves into something more stable. It turned out to have been a fragile motivational configuration—not love but, in Merleau-Ponty's catalog of plausible alternatives, fear of being alone, fascination, or enthrallment by resemblance to another (397/437). The seeming-love turned out to have been geared into only a fleeting and peripheral aspect of the person's sense of self: "the man at 40', when it has to do with a late love; 'the traveler', when it has to do with an exotic love; 'the widower', if the false love is sustained by a memory" (398/438).

The self-deluded lover is brought up short in how he was drawn to act, stumbling over the step he was ready to take toward deepening the relationship. For example, going on a trip to meet the pseudo-beloved's parents is now revealed to be a dreadful prospect rather than a welcome opportunity to deepen their bond. Given this gestalt switch, what previously struck the deluded lover as adorable and charming in the beloved gets, like the sunspot on the path, retroactively "crossed out" (359–60), taking on a new significance, perhaps as a manifestation of repellent and narcissistic self-obsession. The person emerging from the grip of such an illusory love looks back in surprise about how he had been drawn to act and prioritize this connection with the other. This transition gives rise

to a new inflection in his reflective self-interpretation: "I wasn't in love; I was caught up in the adventures of my travels."

On Merleau-Ponty's account, *both* true love and false or illusory love have this phenomenology, that the beloved becomes, for a time, the focal point of the polarization of the lover's field of possibilities, "the mediator of my relations with the world" (397/437). The fact that cases of love that turn out to be illusory also have this phenomenology is precisely what gives them the semblance of love in the first place. Moreover, to say that the beloved (or pseudo-beloved) temporarily assumes an ultimate priority in structuring the layout of the lover's field of possibilities is not to say that the two individuals have fused into a unity in which the distinctions between them vanish, thereby exemplifying what Ellie Anderson calls "inauthentic love's failure to honor difference."²⁷ Thus, Anderson is mistaken in her claim that Merleau-Ponty attributes this mediating function of love specifically to false love in distinction from true love. Anderson writes that "Merleau-Ponty ... identifies false love with a sense of union, wherein the loved one becomes 'the mediator of my relations with the world'."²⁸ Instead, Merleau-Ponty's concern is to distinguish *both* true and false love, on the one hand, from loving in bad faith, on the other hand. His point is to deny that the beloved plays such a mediating role in cases of bad faith love. In the latter, "I [give] the name 'love' to emotions that [are] not worthy of it ... [because] I did not believe for a moment that my life was engaged in this feeling" (397/437). In these bad faith cases, "there was never even a semblance of love" (397/437), where the semblance in question, as mentioned, lies in the fact that the relation to the beloved (or pseudo-beloved), for a time, structures the field of the lover's possibilities and thereby "insinuates itself into my fundamental relation with the world" (398/438).

This remark about what "insinuates itself into my fundamental relation with the world" (398/438), which I take to be an equivalent expression to being the "mediator of my relation to the world," is from Merleau-Ponty's discussion of a parallel distinction between real, illusory, and bad faith instances of an adolescent mystical crisis. A premise of this discussion is that a mystical crisis is an event whose existential magnitude is comparable to falling in love: it

²⁷ Anderson (2021, p.100).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99. Note that while I tend to refer to *illusory* love (to keep in view the comparison to Merleau-Ponty's treatment of an illusory stone on the walking path), Anderson tends to refer to *false* love.

entirely reconfigures the person's motivational gestalt (and correlative orientation in the world) so as to prioritize that which has to do with their relation to the divine (or the source of the mystery). As with love, the illusory mystical crisis counts as illusory precisely because it *seems* to insinuate itself into the person's "fundamental relation to the world," but ultimately turns out only to have engaged a fleeting or peripheral aspect of who the person is (such as being in the process of going through puberty, in this example). Like the case of the sunspot that appeared to be a stone on the path, soliciting one's gait forward, Merleau-Ponty's claim is that people recognize the illusion as such only *retrospectively*, after being brought up short by how they were being drawn to act (e.g., suddenly finding myself repulsed by a life of religious commitment while on the way to join a monastery).²⁹

5.3 Class-Consciousness

It is instructive to compare Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of love with his account of the emergence of class-consciousness in a factory worker. We have here another case of a person undergoing a self-interpretive, existential transition. In this context, Merleau-Ponty marks the transition in terms of what it is "to evaluate oneself" (*se valoriser*) or "to recognize oneself" (*se reconnaitre*) in a new way. Merleau-Ponty again contrasts his views here with Sartre's. For Sartre, what it takes to identify oneself with a revolutionary project of class revolt is a free act of consciousness to see history and society as involving class antagonism.³⁰ Merleau-Ponty responds:

I certainly do not become a worker or a bourgeois the day that I commit to seeing history through the lens of class warfare. Rather, "I exist as a worker" or "I exist as a bourgeois" first, and this mode of communication with the world and society

²⁹ As is often the case, the interlocutor in the background of this topic is Sartre with his claim that the significance of the mystical crisis depends only the person's later free choice (as opposed to how well it enables them to maintain a grip on their life and situation.) See Sartre (2018, pp. 649-650)

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 572–575.

motivates both my revolutionary or conservative projects and my explicit judgements (“I am a worker,” or “I am bourgeois”) (468–69/507).

Belonging to the bourgeoisie or the working-class is first and foremost a matter of the pre-reflective polarization of a person's field of possibilities. People are born into their social class and socialized into the sensibilities and sense of possibilities that go along with it. The normal thing for a person like me to do is to get a job selling my labor for an hourly wage, living check to check, being able to “control neither the conditions, nor the products of my labor” (469/507), and yet to carry all this with a sense of inevitable fate, rather than, for example, seeing it as the result of the domination of an antagonistic ruling class. For a working-class person, investing in property or buying assets on the stock market simply do not show up as relevant in the polarization of their field of possibilities. Such is the continuation called for by the “melody” or “immanent sense” of a working-class life.

Merleau-Ponty constructs a narrative whereby what initially seem to be the hard facts of life begin to make sense in a new way. The worker learns that laborers in a different trade received a raise in their wages after a strike. Wages in his own factory then go up as well, but so does the cost of living, so much so that it is impossible to make ends meet, not only for him, but for all workers, day laborers, and small farmers in the area. Being initially experienced as separate, ad hoc facts to be endured, gradually the concatenation of these events begins to reveal a new meaningful gestalt: “Social space begins to become polarized, and a region of ‘the exploited’ appears” (470/508). Without having yet to reflectively interpret himself as a proletarian, the factory worker begins “to feel himself moving towards a certain crossroads to which the village worker's path also leads” (470/509). There is a new “melody” or “immanent sense” of his behavior taking shape. When he does finally arrive at the self-interpretive avowal of being a proletarian, it is not because he introspectively looked inside and discovered a new fully formed emotion or commitment, nor is it because he finally made a radically free choice. Rather, it is because he was drawn to a confirmation, concretization, and articulation of an existential transition that was already underway in his pre-reflective sense of self: he was making explicit the immanent sense of his behavior.

6. *Clarifying Self-interpretation*

I have been arguing that Merleau-Ponty's existential conception of selfhood is an extension of his overall picture of perception and action. However, I need to say more about the view of reflective self-interpretation that follows from Merleau-Ponty's account. These remarks will lead me away from the interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's text towards a philosophical extension of what I take to be his underlying yet underdeveloped view.

There are two modalities of reflective self-interpretation built into Merleau-Ponty's picture, one that emphasizes the receptive dimension of human agency and another that brings out the active dimension. Both are elaborations of the receptive activity operative in the capacities that are central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: the capacities for anticipatory perceptual sense-making, for being drawn to toward a better perceptual grip on our unfolding situation, and for experiencing new solicitations on the basis of past experience and newly acquired (or reconfigured) commitments and dispositions (what he calls "the intentional arc").

My discussion so far, consistent with Merleau-Ponty's own, has given more attention to the receptive modality of reflective self-interpretation. When receptivity is prioritized, the new self-interpretive insight arrives in a flash, like a gestalt switch. The examples of the lover and the worker display this pattern: things suddenly click into place and make sense in a new way. In Merleau-Ponty's description, these shifts do not issue from any episode of explicit self-reflection. Just as the trees suddenly differentiate from the masts, and just as the perceptual scene reconfigures from stone-on-the-path to spot of sunlight-surrounded-by-shadows, these shifts largely *happen* to one, brought about as a response to tensions and disequilibria in one's experience. But this receptivity is not passivity.³¹ Perceivers participate in the reconfiguration of the perceptual field by letting themselves be drawn to do a doubletake, look more closely, or move closer. Similarly, the lover and the worker participate in clarifying their sense of self through a pre-reflective responsiveness to the disequilibria gathering in their lives: making more plans with Albertine or initiating more conversations with other workers about their own difficulties,

³¹ Unless it is "generative passivity" in Beith's (2018) sense.

for example. The moment of articulative expression—"I love her!" or "My suffering is bound up with theirs!"—also actively contributes to the existential transition that is underway, making it more determinate, securing it, clarifying it, although defeasibly and provisionally.

What about the active modality of reflective self-interpretation? It arises in those moments when I find myself *suspended in indeterminacy* in how I am drawn to act and to understand myself. This happens, for example, when I am pulled in different directions or disoriented in my sense of what a situation calls for. In these cases, the emerging new "melodic unity" in my pre-reflective sense of self (and correlative sense of my situation) does not directly click into place. The sustained moment of disequilibrium or disorientation draws forth a form of active, interpretive self-reflection.³² Such a moment of reflection, Merleau-Ponty insists, "presupposes" and "draws upon" a "pre-reflective fund" of experience of the world (252/289), what I am calling the pre-reflective sense of self. In such situations of disorientation, I need to get a better higher-order grip on my own first-order grip on the world, a reflective activity that is inseparable from language according to Merleau-Ponty and that is, moreover, continuous with the explicit, reflective project of existential phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty's notion of motivation and his conceptions of expression and reflective thought point further in the direction of what he would say about such cases of reflective self-interpretation. To spell this out, I will again draw from Taylor's conception of articulation and self-interpretation, which Taylor himself developed largely from his reading of Merleau-Ponty (and Heidegger).³³

³² I say more about the active modality of reflective self-interpretation in Rouse (2019).

³³ For Taylor's acknowledgment of the influence of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger on his thinking in these matters, see Taylor (2016, pp. 29-33) and (1989, p. 535, n.2). Despite these commonalities, Merleau-Ponty does not share Taylor's conception of how articulation enables a progressive supersession of interpretations toward more adequate contact with what Taylor, in *Sources of the Self* anyway, calls "moral sources" (e.g., God, self-responsible reason, nature, artistic creativity, etc.). Taylor's (1985, pp.29-33) deployment of his notions of articulation and strong evaluation in his argument against Sartre's conception of the radically free choice of one's values closely follows Merleau-Ponty's argument against Sartre's notion of radical freedom in the "Freedom" chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*. It is not surprising, then, that aspects of Taylor's conception of the self are useful for elucidating Merleau-Ponty's.

Keeping with the spirit of Merleau-Ponty's account, we can build it into the case of the factory worker that the move to reflectively interpreting himself as a proletarian takes time to become motivationally effective. Depending on one's specific background and prior ideological and moral commitments, people in such a situation may begin to feel the pull of the commitment but still hesitate, being not yet fully gripped by it and needing to digest what it involves—for example, how it will fit with other commitments to family, tradition, and so on.

Similarly, the realization of being in love does not always happen in a re-gestalt flash. Here too one can begin to be aware of a momentous existential pull toward another person, and explicitly come to entertain the self-interpretive question, "Am I in love?" With the motivational sense of my situation remaining suspended in indeterminacy, I can be drawn to reflectively explore the emerging gestalt, for example, by attending more carefully to the gamut of my motivations, including those that seem marginal, and by questioning whether an alternative emotional configuration makes better sense of my situation: "Am I just scared of being alone?" or "Am I just captivated by the resemblance to someone from my past?" In such self-reflection, I am actively looking for an expression or articulation (and corresponding understanding of my situation) that best reduces the sense of tension and that clarifies, makes sense of, and grants further determinacy to the sense of self that is taking shape in how I am being solicited to act. Such is the case of someone "making explicit the immanent sense of a behavior" (59/85). To land on a fitting articulation of my motivations is not to describe a fully formed, independent object; it is to clarify and secure my emerging sense of the situation I am in. In Taylor's words, "Articulations are attempts to formulate what is initially inchoate, or confused, or badly formulated. But this kind of formation or reformation does not leave its object unchanged. To give a certain articulation is to shape our sense of what we desire or what we hold important in a certain way."³⁴ According with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on gestalt configurations, Taylor goes on to add that such interpretive self-reflection is carried on "with a readiness to receive any gestalt shift in our view of the

³⁴ Taylor (1985, p. 36).

situation.”³⁵ Such a gestalt shift could issue in a self-interpretive avowal such as, “I am a proletarian ready for revolution,” or “I love her.”

As mentioned above, self-interpretive insights in Merleau-Ponty's picture are “motivated” phenomena: they are solicited by a person's situation and are involved in the transition from indeterminacy to determinacy so as to produce a greater sense of equilibrium and of being at grips with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, not every motivated phenomenon rises to the level of focal experience, much less conscious awareness or linguistic articulation. However, some motivated phenomena, such as the worker's sense of why he is being drawn to join the strike, can become reflectively grasped, and partake in what Merleau-Ponty says about reflective thought: “This passage from indeterminate to determinate, this continuous taking up again of its own history in the unity of a new sense, is thought itself” (33/55). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty contends that in “the relations between reflection and the unreflected ... the founded term [the reflected] is presented as *a determination or a making explicit* of the founding term [the unreflected]” (414/454, my italics.) This reflective grasping of one's pre-reflective grip on the world in explicit thought is inextricably intertwined for Merleau-Ponty with linguistic expression: “For the speaker, then, speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, speech accomplishes the thought (183/217).³⁶ However, Merleau-Ponty also contends that “when I want to express myself, I crystallize a collection of indefinite motives in an act of consciousness” (309/348). All self-interpretive determinations and articulations are essentially partial, provisional, and defeasible. As shown in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of illusory love, an experience that a person reflectively articulates *as* love might in fact turn out to be a different configuration of motives, e.g., fear of being alone. Any stabilized sense of self, just like any perceptual experience, is always subject to being “crossed out” (359–60) and replaced by one that is more stable and makes better sense of

³⁵ Ibid., p. 40.

³⁶ Here I am running into a multifarious tangle of issues involving Merleau-Ponty's conception of expression and its relation to language, motivation, reflection, and articulation. I do not have the space here to treat these matters with the subtlety they deserve. Walsh (2016) does a helpful job framing the issues and some of the relevant debates.

oneself and one's situation. "Thus," Merleau-Ponty writes, "we do not possess our entire reality at each moment, and one has the right to speak of an . . . intimate sense [of self] . . . that at each moment goes more or less the distance toward knowledge of our life and of our being" (399/439, my gloss).³⁷

With this, we come back again to the main claim I've been pressing. For Merleau-Ponty, the self is not a thing that we grasp; it *is* a grip on situations. At the same time, through linguistic reflection and articulation, we can seek to get a better grip on our grip on the world (that is, get a better grip on how we are solicited to act in the world). This dynamic is precisely what I aim to capture with the distinction between a reflective self-interpretation and a pre-reflective sense of self. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the tacit cogito in relation to the spoken cogito provides one final endorsement of my argument. For Merleau-Ponty, the tacit cogito is a non-thetic (i.e., pre-reflective, non-objectifying) first-personal self-awareness – "the presence of the self to self" (426/465) – that is constitutively bound up with one's immersion in a situation and responsiveness to its solicitations. Hence, Merleau-Ponty can say: "The fundamental truth is certainly that 'I think', but only on condition of understanding by this that 'I am towards myself in being in the world'" (430/469, translation slightly modified).³⁸ As I mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty accordingly describes the tacit cogito as the self's "fleeting hold upon [*prise glissante*] itself and upon the world" (426/465). In a confirmation of the argument I have presented above about the relation between a pre-reflective sense of self and a reflective self-interpretation, Merleau-Ponty then argues that in situations of breakdown or disorientation the self can seek to grasp the grip it has on the world, to make its grip on the world explicit. He specifies, moreover, that this reflexive grasping of one's grip on the world happens in language:

³⁷ In this quotation, the ellipses stand in for Merleau-Ponty's somewhat slapdash appropriation of obscure terminology from Scheler (1973, pp. 40–41), such as the notion of "an 'analyzer' between us and ourselves."

³⁸ For the phrase "I am towards myself [*Je suis à moi*]," Merleau-Ponty cites Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Indeed, his argument here follows closely Heidegger's argument that Dasein exists towards-itself, or "for-the-sake-of-itself," *only* by being-in-the-world. I provide an extensive account of this dimension of Heidegger's conception of the self in Rouse (2013).

Silent consciousness only grasps [*saisit*] itself as 'I think' in general in the face of a confused world that is 'to be thought'. Every particular grasp [*saisie*], and even philosophy's recovery of this general project, requires that the subject deploy powers of which the subject himself does not hold the secret and that, in particular, that he turns himself into a speaking subject. The tacit *cogito* is only a *cogito* when it has expressed itself (426/466-467).

7. Conclusion

In the foregoing, I set out to reconstruct the existential conception of selfhood that follows from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. By doing so, I was following a hint from Merleau-Ponty himself who claims that his "critique of the constancy hypothesis" implies a certain conception of the self's relation to itself. On this view, people relate to themselves not by "looking within" in acts of introspection but, first, by relating to their field of solicitations and, eventually, by attuning to and "making explicit" the "melodic unity" or "immanent sense" of their behaviors. For Merleau-Ponty, the self *is* its stylistic immersion in and grip on its situations; or, to adapt Heidegger's phrase, the self "is its "there."³⁹ To make sense of this, I introduced a distinction, latent in Merleau-Ponty's view, between a pre-reflective sense of self and a reflective self-interpretation. Roughly speaking, the former is the dimension of selfhood manifesting a melodic unity or style in the person's pre-reflective way of getting around in the world and amidst others (their pre-reflective orientation in a field of solicitations). I summarized this by characterizing the pre-reflective sense of self as a suite of abilities and dispositions in light of which a person is aware of and drawn to act in her situation.

This ensemble of motivations that defines our orientation and inherence in the world undergoes transitions over time and tends toward but never achieves full coherence. Meanwhile, reflective self-interpretation is an activity whereby someone, provisionally and defeasibly, "makes explicit"—clarifies, articulates, gets a better "grip" on—how they are pre-reflectively drawn to act. Per Merleau-Ponty's account, the pre-reflective sense of self precedes and exceeds reflective self-interpretation. Moments of

³⁹ Heidegger (1962, p. 182).

reflective self-interpretation happen in response to tensions, disequilibria, breakdowns, and transitions emerging in pre-reflective sense of self. To account for the scope of phenomena, I introduced a further distinction between *receptive* and *active* modalities of reflective self-interpretation. In the former, a new self-interpretive insight (“I love her!”) suddenly clicks into place in an abrupt gestalt shift, enabling the person to make better sense of their pattern of behavior, emotion, and motivation. In the latter, the emerging existential reconfiguration remains for a time suspended in indeterminacy and the person is drawn into a form of interpretive self-reflection in search of an articulation that will resolve the tension and lend greater—yet always provisional, partial, and defeasible—clarity and coherence to their pre-reflective sense of self, giving them a renewed sense of existential direction.

On this picture, people never arrive at a final or correct answer to the question of who they are. Evoking Heidegger's argument that my own being always remains “an issue” for me, Merleau-Ponty writes that “I am never at one with myself. Such is the fate of a being who is born, that is, a being who once and for all was given to himself as something to be understood” (362/404). In the final paragraph of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes a remark that again shows a continuity of this ongoing, incompletable project of making sense of ourselves with the more refined, systematic work of philosophy and phenomenology; it can stand as a recapitulation of the interpretation I have pursued above:

I am a psychological and historical structure. Along with my existence I received a way of existing, or a style [a pre-reflective sense of self]. All of my actions and thoughts are related to this structure, and even a philosopher's thought [and a person's reflective self-interpretation] is merely a way of making explicit his hold [*prise*] upon the world, which is all he is. (482/520, my gloss in the brackets)

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