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Time and Ambiguity: Reassessing Merleau-Ponty on Sartrean Freedom

WILLIAM WILKERSON

MERLEAU-PONTY DISAGREED WITH SARTRE about freedom, from the *Phenomenology of Perception* to his last manuscripts, published as *The Visible and the Invisible*. Even their more famous political dispute was, in Beauvoir's words, a "carbon copy" of this ontological dispute.¹ Despite the visibility of this link between politics and metaphysics, discussions of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre rarely see another important link between their conflict over freedom and their conflict over fundamental ontology. This essay explains that link. At the risk of spoiling the suspense, let me state its thesis at the outset: the disagreement over freedom springs from a disagreement about the nature of temporality, and beneath that, about the proper place and understanding of ambiguity in human existence. In fact, these latter disagreements are the fundamental ones; the disagreement over freedom is only their consequence.

I. SARTREAN FREEDOM

Merleau-Ponty obviously never lived to see the changes Sartre's theories underwent in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and although he discusses some of Sartre's political writings (most notably in *Adventures of the Dialectic*), from the *Phenomenology* to *The Visible and the Invisible*, his criticisms of freedom generally focus on the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*. This limits his critique, and Beauvoir rightly took Merleau-Ponty to task for ignoring *Saint Genet* and other texts Sartre wrote after *Being and Nothingness*.² While Sartre's *The Communists and Peace*, a central target of Merleau-Ponty's *Adventures of the Dialectic*, is not philosophical like *Being and Nothingness*, Merleau-Ponty does ignore its tendency to move in the direction

¹Simone de Beauvoir, "Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism" ["Pseudo-Sartreanism"], *International Studies in Philosophy* 21 (1989): 3–48, at 20.

²Beauvoir, "Pseudo-Sartreanism," 7–8.

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of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* and develop a more ambiguous concept of freedom. Merleau-Ponty thus interprets Sartre's attempts in the early 1950s to understand a complex social formation like the revolutionary proletariat through the ontological lens of *Being and Nothingness*. As a consequence, Merleau-Ponty rightly sees that such an ontology will not do the work Sartre requires of it in these later works, but wrongly assumes that Sartre is working with the same ontology.³ Beauvoir does not help the situation by largely defending *The Communists and Peace* with passages from *Being and Nothingness*. Nor does Sartre really aid his case by writing to Merleau-Ponty, in a letter dating from the time of the controversy, that despite changes necessary to the ideas of *Being and Nothingness*, "all the theses of *Being and Nothingness* seem to me just as true [in 1953] as in 1943."⁴

In light of these facts, and because Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of Sartrean freedom are directed almost exclusively at the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*, I will mostly focus on *Being and Nothingness*. I also remain with this text because I do not intend to defend Sartre, and any decent defense of Sartre will have to do more than merely mention the later works like *Saint Genet* and *The Communists and Peace*. (Indeed, I do not intend to defend Merleau-Ponty either, but in the interest of honesty, my sympathies do lie with him.)

As it happens, simply understanding Sartre's theory of freedom, even within the confines of *Being and Nothingness*, is no easy task. This may be because Sartre has two concepts of freedom at work in this text.⁵ The primary freedom, the one that Sartre says we have in all places and at all times, the one that is our nature without being a nature, Sartre calls "freedom of choice" or original choice. The literature on Sartre often calls it "ontological freedom." Second to this freedom, Sartre describes a practical or situated freedom and calls it "freedom of obtaining."⁶ The former,

³As some examples of Sartre's possible development in *Communists and Peace*, consider his claim that "the historical whole determines our powers at any given moment, it prescribes their limits in our field of action and our *real* future; it conditions our attitude toward the possible and the impossible, the real and the imaginary, what is and what should be, time and space." Here Sartre argues that the meaning of the moment transcends individuals' capacities for bestowing meaning, so that the bourgeoisie will not be able to use hunger as a weapon unless "the future is carefully blocked off, [because] the future is born of action and turns back on it in order to give it a meaning; reduced to the immediate present the worker no longer understands his history." In both cases, Sartre wants a freedom and a motivation that mix and go beyond mere immediacy. His subsequent discussion of why the proletariat can form neither as passive thing nor as a spontaneous movement is structured by this same thinking. In all these cases, however, Sartre remains fairly silent on exactly what explains these features of human existence and meaning; it could be his old concepts of in-itself and for-itself, or a somewhat different picture of existence that is just coming into view. *The Communists and Peace with A Reply to Claude Lefort* [*Communists and Peace*], trans. Martha Fletcher, John R. Kleinschmidt, and Philip R. Berk (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 80, 81.

⁴Sartre to Merleau-Ponty, 29 July 1953, in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Jon Stewart (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 350–54, at 351.

⁵Many have argued this claim: Dagfinn Føllesdal, "Sartre on Freedom," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1981), 392–407; David Detmer, *Freedom as a Value* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1988), 57–69; Margaret Whitford, *Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre's Ontology* [*Merleau-Ponty's Critique*] (Lexington, KY: French Forum Publishers, 1982), 56–69; Jon Stewart, "Merleau-Ponty's Criticisms of Sartre's Theory of Freedom" ["Merleau-Ponty's Criticisms"], in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, 197–214, at 202; and ironically, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les Aventures de la dialectique* [*Aventures*] (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1955), 264; *The Adventures of the Dialectic* [*Adventures*], trans. Joseph Bein (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 196.

⁶Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1943), 528–29; *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 483–84.

ontological freedom, is our nihilating opening onto the world that produces time, differentiation, and sense. Dagfinn Føllesdal assimilates this freedom to Husserlian *Sinngebung*, the act by which there is meaning for a consciousness. Whether this characterization goes too far can be debated, but certainly Sartre thinks that the character and differentiation of our world arrives through our questioning and disclosing consciousness. However, Sartre certainly does not think that we simply make up the world. Sense arrives for consciousness at the juncture of being and nothingness, where a consciousness takes up the world that lacks consciousness. Nonetheless, the world does not *determine* our consciousness of it. We choose how we disclose the world, in some ways by choosing what questions we ask of it, and for this reason, acts of consciousness can be called free, and the process by which sense arises can be called dialectical, since I require the world for my questioning, but the world only gains sense from my questioning.

Ontological freedom, however, is not the practical freedom we ordinarily think of when choosing between actions or life plans in our everyday activity. When, for instance, we choose between two different career paths, or between two different job offers, we exercise a practical freedom of obtaining—the freedom to obtain real particular ends in our life. My situation (economic, social, and even physiological, if a choice would make demands on my body it cannot meet) limits what this practical freedom can obtain, and as such it cannot be exercised at all times and in all situations like ontological freedom. Nonetheless, the two freedoms connect. If we stay with the example of choosing a career, we can say that ontological freedom is an original choice of our being in the world that lays down for me values and motivations, even a whole way of disclosing the world and my life, such that the choice between job offers, and even the goal of having jobs, seems both sensible and important. In this respect, ontological freedom makes situated freedom possible in a double sense: (1) the world is polarized and meaningful for me because of this original choice, and (2) situated freedom originates in an ontological feature of human existence—our nihilating or negating action that frees us from being determined by our situation. That is, if we can choose between options, it is not only because they appear meaningful, but because our situation determines neither our understanding of it nor our response to it.

Many of Sartre's most striking and famously egregious claims about freedom, such as his claim that we are wholly and forever free or not free at all,⁷ or his claim that the slave is as free as the master,⁸ in fact refer to ontological freedom, and recognition of this makes these claims seem much less troublesome. Slaves are free to the extent that they can choose to accept their condition as natural, can choose to rebel against it in their mind, or even to attempt escape; if the subject in each of these cases is not determined by the world, this is because consciousness remains a free act of nihilating the actual situation, and indeed it would seem that such an absolute freedom must be given in order that practically different possibilities exist for people in similar situations.

⁷Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 485; *Being and Nothingness*, 441.

⁸Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 594; *Being and Nothingness*, 550.

2. FROM CRITICISMS OF PSEUDO-SARTRE
TO PSEUDO-MERLEAU-PONTY'S CRITICISMS

Ever since Beauvoir's spirited defense of Sartre in her essay, "Merleau-Ponty and pseudo-Sartreanism," it has been a common theme that Merleau-Ponty, despite his great acuity as a philosopher, and despite his obvious familiarity with both Sartre's theories and their sources, misread the complexities of this theory of freedom in order to establish the uniqueness of his own philosophical views.⁹ Merleau-Ponty, in Beauvoir's view, created a "pseudo-Sartre" that would stand against his own positions as a foil. It seems to me, however, that followers of both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty have in turn created a pseudo-Merleau-Ponty by misreading or simplifying his criticisms of Sartre. Just as pseudo-Sartre's positions are broad, simple, and hence easily refuted, pseudo-Merleau-Ponty's criticisms are mostly broad, simple, and readily visible in his texts. More, just as a grain of truth about Sartre hides in the pseudo-Sartre, so there is something generally correct about pseudo-Merleau-Ponty; the criticisms he makes of Sartre are sometimes not so much wrong as oversimplified and disconnected, both from each other and from the general disagreement that Merleau-Ponty has with Sartrean ontology.

Pseudo-Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of freedom in Sartre can be broken down into four main themes. I will state them in summary fashion below, providing textual support from Merleau-Ponty and the literature. I will also present some of the diagnoses of where pseudo-Merleau-Ponty supposedly goes wrong in his interpretation of Sartre.¹⁰

1) *Freedom is everywhere and nowhere.* Because Sartrean freedom must be totally present in all human actions, it becomes a meaningless category. Since all actions are equally free, none are genuinely free. Pseudo-Merleau-Ponty's point here seems fairly obvious: we generally think that some of our actions are merely habitual results of past choices, or even actions that we engage with no conscious thought or willing at all. But, according to the Sartrean view, every action I undertake begins with my nihilating activity, and I can never be less than totally free. I must, in some way, originate everything, even every meaning and motive in my life that could explain my choices. The meaningful distinction between real choices I make in my life and habitual (or even autonomic) responses to the world collapses, and everything results from the for-itself and its awesome freedom. Against this, Merleau-Ponty writes, "free action, in order to be discernable, has to stand out against a background of life from which it is entirely, or almost entirely, absent. We may say in [Sartre's] case that [free action] is everywhere, but equally nowhere."¹¹

⁹Detmer (*Freedom as a Value*, 85) presents a paradigm statement of this claim.

¹⁰Two relatively well-known commentaries, Gary Brent Madison's *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981) and M. C. Dillon's *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), are left out of this discussion, as neither treats the question of freedom and its relation to Sartre.

¹¹Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945), 500; *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1962; 2nd ed., 2002), 437/507. (Here and subsequently I will follow the custom of giving citations to the French and both English editions. As the English editions have different pagination, I will refer to both editions, in order of publication, separated by a slash.)

While John Compton and Jon Stewart both discuss this criticism of Sartre,¹² David Detmer is exemplary on this point of pseudo-Merleau-Ponty.¹³ He describes a pseudo-Merleau-Ponty who imputes a false dilemma to Sartre on this issue. Since pseudo-Merleau-Ponty believes Sartrean freedom is everywhere and nowhere, so the interpretation runs, pseudo-Merleau-Ponty claims that either (a) Sartrean freedom is omnipotent and can do or undo anything from instant to instant, or (b) it is purely “inner” and ineffective. Both alternatives, of course, would damn Sartre’s theory as absurd, and both are clearly not fair to Sartre’s view. Option (a) would render Sartre’s theory absurd insofar as we do not and cannot continually remake our freedom, and we cannot do anything we please. At any rate, this horn of pseudo-Merleau-Ponty’s dilemma gets Sartre wrong: his situated freedom of obtaining clearly cannot be said to be omnipotent, but must always overcome a coefficient of adversity. As for (b), this kind of inner freedom would be meaningless for real action in the world, and cannot explain even the most basic features of human action. And again it runs afoul of Sartre’s notion of situated freedom, which is more than merely inner.

2) *Sartrean freedom is purely “inner” and abstract.* As we saw above, this criticism is the flip side of the point that freedom appears to be everywhere and nowhere, according to scholars like Detmer and Compton. To the extent that ontological freedom exists at all as a genuine form of freedom, it must exist as a purely “inner” and ineffective freedom—a freedom to choose to think whatever one wants, regardless of what one can actually *do*. Again, if the idea that all actions are equally free is to be sensible, since I cannot do everything I choose, the freedom in question must be merely an abstract freedom, a freedom of thought to *think* only as I choose. Merleau-Ponty writes that Sartre is “very near the Kantian idea of an intention which is tantamount to the act, which Scheler countered with the argument that the cripple who would like to be able to save a drowning man and the good swimmer who actually saves him do not have the same experience of autonomy.”¹⁴

3) *Sartre cannot explain doing.* Sartre’s view of a total freedom cannot make sense of *doing*: because freedom is everywhere present, each action must be sustained by a continual action of free choice and each choice will be undone the next instant unless I sustain it. I do not commit myself to whole acts, to projects, or even it seems, to simple bodily motions without having to recommit myself the next instant. Again, *contra* Sartre, Merleau-Ponty writes that “the very notion of freedom demands that our decision should plunge into the future, that something should have been *done* by it, that the subsequent instant should benefit from its predecessor.”¹⁵ Versions of this pseudo-Merleau-Ponty can be found across the entire literature, originating in Beauvoir’s early criticism and repeating itself in Compton,¹⁶ Detmer,¹⁷ and Rabil.¹⁸

¹²John Compton, “Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Human Freedom” [“Sartre and Merleau-Ponty”], *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): 577–88, at 579–80; and Stewart, “Merleau-Ponty’s Criticisms,” 200–03.

¹³Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 85–88.

¹⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 500; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 437/508.

¹⁵Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 500; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 437/508.

¹⁶Compton, “Sartre and Merleau-Ponty,” 586–87.

¹⁷Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 85–88.

¹⁸Albert Rabil, *Merleau-Ponty, Existentialist of the Social World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 120.

These three criticisms of Sartre most readily strike a reader of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology*, drawn as they are from a single section of the freedom chapter. A further, more searching and subtle criticism appears in both Merleau-Ponty's texts and the literature about them, and this criticism merits a more complete discussion.

4) *For Sartre, meaning is "centrifugal."* That is, Sartre thinks like a rationalist who believes that all the meaning in the world is conferred through the free action of consciousness. In short, ontological freedom is a kind of Husserlian *Sinngebung* (a term Merleau-Ponty explicitly adopts in discussing Sartrean freedom) that is pure, instantaneous and goes in only one direction, from consciousness to the world (hence the term "centrifugal"). According to Beauvoir, were this claim of pseudo-Merleau-Ponty true, it would render Sartre's theory unable to account for political action and revolution, other selves, meaning in historical events and finally free action.

In Detmer's view, the charge that Sartre is a rationalist originates in the all or nothing quality that pseudo-Merleau-Ponty sees in ontological freedom. (In short, it originates in [I] above.) Since this freedom must be everywhere present at the beginning of any consciousness, all meaning in the world and every feature of my situation originates in a free consciousness that must continually recreate the sense of the world.

Margaret Whitford's version of this objection holds that pseudo-Merleau-Ponty does not object to the description of an original choice that lays down the meanings and values of my action.¹⁹ After all, Merleau-Ponty says that our projects polarize the world, and our capacity for placing the world in abeyance is the core of our freedom. Rather, Whitford claims that Merleau-Ponty cannot see how the for-itself, which must be always and only nihilation, can explain human choosing, which supposes that the world appear meaningful in some respects separately from my own action. That is, if the for-itself is a nothingness, it must be only the activity of nihilation. It cannot be "filled up" with any being, and must be all and only activity, an activity so pure it will never acquire. Hence, the world will not really have a meaning of its own, it will have only the meaning bestowed upon it by consciousness in a continual, centrifugal nihilation. This is why she believes the key to pseudo-Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Sartre is to be found in his claim—in *Sense and Non-Sense*—that Sartre needs a theory of passivity.²⁰ On this reading, Sartre cannot explain how the world could have a meaning of its own, or how it could offer resistance to a consciousness, since the subject must constitute at each moment the meaning of the world.

John Compton put forth a similar analysis. Take any of the various registers in which Sartre and Merleau-Ponty disagree—embodiment, nature, social being, history, action; in the end they come down to the inability of Sartre to see human consciousness and freedom as immanent within them. Rather, human freedom must in the end be ultimate and autochthonous, for "Sartre can see nothing between the undifferentiated and meaningless mass of physical existence, *à la La*

¹⁹Whitford, *Merleau-Ponty's Critique*, 65–77.

²⁰Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-sense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 77.

Nausée, on the one hand, and the spontaneous upsurge of human consciousness, on the other.”²¹ Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of Sartre all amount to the same point, that meaning must originate in an interplay of the elements of an already partially meaningful world, a world of which the subject is intimately a part, and this must mean that freedom cannot be ultimate or “categorical,” as it is in Sartre.

As a final example, Monika Langer argues that Merleau-Ponty ignores the extent to which Sartre’s ontology, as early as *Transcendence of the Ego*, already has an “interworld” in which consciousness and world are already internally related. This interworld implies that meaning does not arise entirely from the actions of the for-itself or consciousness, but is already dialectical. Her version of pseudo-Merleau-Ponty thus mistakenly criticizes Sartre for describing an absolute freedom that stands against the world of things and cannot account for the situated nature of genuine human freedom, and that bestows all meaning upon an inert world.²²

In all of these forms, and others,²³ this criticism aims directly at ontological freedom, arguing that it cannot, in the end, explain the meaning and sense of the world that would support freedom. As such, it appears less directly an attack on the notion of freedom *qua* being free, and more on freedom *qua* originator of meaning. However, if Sartre cannot have the latter, he also cannot have the former, since our ontological freedom consists in our ability to question and determine the meaning of a situation.

When it comes to defending Sartre from pseudo-Merleau-Ponty, Sartreans claim that pseudo-Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms originate in the two following mistaken interpretations of Sartre:

5) *Pseudo-Merleau-Ponty ignores the distinction between ontological and practical or situated freedom.* Detmer, a defender of Sartre, and Whitford, who seems more sympathetic to Merleau-Ponty, both allege some version of this claim. The motivation for this defense is obvious. Pseudo-Merleau-Ponty seems, especially in the first three criticisms, to be arguing as follows: ontological freedom has a total ubiquity that real, situated freedom does not. Real, situated freedom does not lie behind all human action; real, situated human beings are not free in all situations such that slave and master are equally free, and real, situated human beings engage in self-sustaining and meaningful doings. The ubiquity of ontological freedom must mean that it is radically different from situated freedom, and only an ever-present, continually engaged, inner and ultimately useless freedom can work in this peculiar way. However, so the defense of Sartre runs, pseudo-Merleau-Ponty ignores the fact that Sartre never meant for ontological freedom to explain or stand in for real, situated freedom. Hence, pseudo-Merleau-Ponty attacks a straw position (a *pseudo*-Sartre) and can be readily dismissed.

²¹Compton, “Sartre and Merleau-Ponty,” 588.

²²Monika Langer, “Sartre and Merleau-Ponty: A Reappraisal” [“Reappraisal”], in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, 300–25.

²³Ronald Hall, “Freedom: Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Sartre,” in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, 187–96. Hall claims that meaning is more foundational than freedom for Merleau-Ponty. Stewart’s “Merleau-Ponty’s Criticisms” claims that there is no genuine world of meaning and thus no theory of history in Sartre. Stewart’s version of this criticism comes close to my own discussion of acquisition, below.

6) Merleau-Ponty ignores the place of facticity in Sartre's theory. This, in fact, is Beauvoir's way of stating criticism (4) above, and many scholars defend Sartre against criticism (4) with this very claim. In Beauvoir's view, Sartre holds that consciousness can only be consciousness by engaging the world, by losing itself in the world and by becoming the finite human perspective upon a world. Consciousness as such can only be embodied, and humans always find themselves in the midst of a historical situation beyond them. For this reason, it is mere "pseudo-Sartreanism" to assert that consciousness must establish itself in each moment and that its constitution of meaning is through and through centrifugal and wholly without weight or thickness. Summarizing Merleau-Ponty's pseudo-Sartreanism, she writes, "if there is no history, no truth, temporality, no dialectic, then the meaning of events is imposed on them by decree, and the action is reduced to a discontinued series of arbitrary decisions."²⁴

Compton, not as sympathetic to Sartre, nonetheless notes that Sartre intends to be a realist in the end, and it is a grave mistake to ignore this fact.²⁵ The for-itself always begins in negation, and negation, we might say, is always negation of something. Consciousness by itself is indeed nothing; consciousness of something already implies the "trans-phenomenal being" in the preface to *Being and Nothingness*, and so facticity must be present for consciousness. Langer, of course, makes a similar argument when she develops an interworld out of the Sartrean ontology. This interworld sees consciousness and the object of consciousness as an insoluble and dialectical unity, expressed in Sartre's insistence that the for-itself is a relation.

3. FROM PSEUDO-MERLEAU-PONTY TO MERLEAU-PONTY, FROM FREEDOM TO TIME

I hesitate to claim that the four main criticisms belong only to a *pseudo*-Merleau-Ponty, in part because Merleau-Ponty does indeed say some of these things, and indeed the third and fourth criticisms come close to my own interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's criticisms. I am also chary of the notion that (5) and (6) are completely mistaken as readings of Sartre, who may be entitled neither to a proper place for facticity nor to a sensible division between ontological and situated freedom, given his ontology. As I mentioned, the problem lies in the fact that most of pseudo-Merleau-Ponty's criticisms are incompletely stated and not connected to the general problem that Merleau-Ponty has with the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*. Putting it directly, and restating the thesis I will defend for the rest of this paper: Merleau-Ponty's disagreement with Sartrean freedom is

²⁴Beauvoir, "Pseudo-Sartreanism," 19. Two discussions of this particular text of Beauvoir are worth mentioning in this context. William McBride and Karen Vingtes both point out that Beauvoir's defense of Sartre is far from convincing. McBride argues that Sartre's later *Critique of Dialectical Reason* shows that he saw Merleau-Ponty's criticisms as largely on target. See William McBride, "Taking a Distance: Exploring Some Points of Divergence between Beauvoir and Sartre," in *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence*, ed. Christie Daigle and Jacob Golomb (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 189–202, at 191–92. Karen Vingtes goes even further, stating simply that Beauvoir defends "a Sartreism that is, in fact, a Beauvoirism" (*Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992], 56).

²⁵Compton, "Sartre and Merleau-Ponty," 581.

really a disagreement with Sartrean views of *time*, and this problem with time, in the end, originates in a disagreement over the meaning and place of ambiguity in human existence.

The links between these themes reveal themselves in the simple fact that the entire third and final section of *Phenomenology of Perception*, and not merely the final chapter on freedom, criticizes Sartre. The subtitle, *L'être-pour-soi et L'être-au-monde*, deliberately contrasts the basic ontology of Sartre (*être-pour-soi*) and Merleau-Ponty (*être-au-monde*). These points are obvious, no doubt, but less obvious is that the criticisms in the freedom chapter rely upon the results of the previous chapters on the *cogito* and temporality.²⁶ Indeed, I would say that we must grasp the significance of those chapters in order to fully grasp the argument against freedom.

As a starting point for unraveling these interconnected criticisms, let us first note that Merleau-Ponty not only knows the distinction between ontological and situated freedom, he actually *structures* his discussion of Sartrean freedom in the *Phenomenology* around the contrast between these two kinds of freedom, although the text covers this fact by using different terms.²⁷ Merleau-Ponty begins by discussing an ontological freedom that is an absolute origin of meaning in the world, but he refers to it with the Husserlian name, *Sinngebung*. Freedom in the Sartrean sense is such a *Sinngebung* ("sense-bestowal") because it is the nihilating act that bestows meaning upon the world, establishing the field of possibilities within which I may act. This *Sinngebung* contrasts with Merleau-Ponty's other term, 'doing', a term which frequently stands in for situated freedom (typically, Merleau-Ponty uses the French verb '*faire*').

Of course, calling ontological freedom by this Husserlian name may already appear to be an unfair slander of Sartre's view. When Merleau-Ponty describes *Sinngebung* with such terms as 'centrifugal', 'idealist', or 'rationalist', he seems to ignore that the process of creating meaning in Sartre is already dialectical, and not merely idealist. If there is sense-bestowal in Sartre, it is only as a negation of the in-itself, implying that any sense originates in the opening between the inert and the activity of consciousness. As Beauvoir put the point, the "delirious" pseudo-Merleau-Ponty has ignored the central place of facticity in Sartre's theory and has given an unfair characterization of ontological freedom.

Except that he has not: Merleau-Ponty's point is precisely that the theory of time and temporality implicit in the discussions of nihilation and ontological freedom cannot account for *acquisition*, one of the fundamental concepts of the entire *Phenomenology*, and a necessary condition for facticity to be taken up within experience.²⁸ Acquisition plays through the whole of the *Phenomenology*, beginning

²⁶These points may be obvious, but they have not always been noted: in his introduction to the collection *The Debate Between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre*, Jon Stewart states that only in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* does Merleau-Ponty really come to an explicit criticism of Sartre. Jon Stewart, "Introduction," in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, xii–xl, at xxi, xxvi.

²⁷Consider also Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the "two freedoms" at the conclusion of *Les Aventures de la dialectique*, where he clearly and explicitly acknowledges the distinction. See *Aventures*, 264; *Aventures*, 196.

²⁸It is difficult to find, in the texts we are considering, Merleau-Ponty explicitly acknowledging the importance of facticity to Sartre. In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty criticizes and discusses Sartre obliquely, and with few direct references, while *Aventures of the Dialectic* is unrelentingly critical and

obliquely in the opening discussions of embodied habit and becoming fully explicit in the *cogito* chapter. There, Merleau-Ponty takes up the question of truth in many forms: the truth of perception, the truth about our emotional states, the seemingly analytic truths of math and geometry, and in each case attempts to demonstrate that no truth can be established without some background of presuppositions and bodily abilities. These background conditions highlight a focal point within my experience and establish a state of affairs about which I can render a true judgment. He writes that,

if it were possible to lay bare and unfold all the presuppositions in what I call my reason or my ideas at each moment, we should always find experiences which have not been made explicit, large-scale contributions from past and present, a whole “sedimentary history” which is not only relevant to the *genesis* of my thought, but which determines its *significance*. (*Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 455–56; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 395/459)

The distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact (analytic and synthetic claims, we might also say) is overcome because any truth claim supposes some prior relation to another claim, such that no truth can be simply the unfolding, on the side of the predicate, of things already contained on the side of the subject, and no truth could ever be simply true on its own, independent grounds. Moreover, perception, consciousness, or judgment about any single state of affairs, or to use a Sartrean term, any *thetic* consciousness of something *X*, must suppose a prior and bodily acquisition against which it could stand out as that state of affairs. In discussing the bodily nature of this acquisition, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes two layers in the lived body—the current body and the habit body.²⁹ The habit body carries forward the past acquisitions in the form of skills, habits, and predispositions to perceive the world in specific ways, while the current body finds itself engaged in the world through the habit body. The habit body is the pre-personal, pre-conscious, and thus “anonymous” ground of my perception and consciousness. It provides me with a “hold” on the world and allows me to understand it and act within it. The habit body, we might say, is the presence of the past in the current moment, and, as we will later see, it anticipates the future.

The importance of acquisition, then, lies in both its necessity for providing a background for present truth and its centrality for our embodiment and its pre-reflective hold on the world; my body, as acquired habits, carries the past into the present so that I might experience the present. This is why, in summarizing the work of the *cogito* chapter, Merleau-Ponty simply says that he is “restoring to the

almost nothing positive about Sartre can be found in it. Only the public lecture printed as “The Philosophy of Existence” finds Merleau-Ponty acknowledging that “situation” is a fundamental theme in Sartre. “The Philosophy of Existence,” trans. Allen Weiss, in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, 492–503, at 498. These facts would seem to lend support to Beauvoir’s charge that Merleau-Ponty ignored Sartrean facticity. To prove my point, therefore, I shall simply have to reconstruct Merleau-Ponty’s arguments and show how they are not so much about the lack of facticity in Sartre’s theory, but rather about the inability of Sartrean ontology to explain facticity’s place in experience. In a similar vein, I will show that some of Merleau-Ponty’s more directly critical remarks about facticity in *Adventures* do not ignore facticity, but argue that Sartre cannot account for it.

²⁹Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 111–12; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 82/95. I have substituted ‘current body’ as a translation for ‘*le corps actuel*’ rather than use Colin Smith’s ‘body of the moment’.

cogito a temporal thickness,”³⁰ because he means to show that immediacy, in any sense of that term, but especially in the temporal sense, is impossible within human experience, and a “moment” of consciousness can never be instantaneous, but instead must spread across time. These claims, in turn, rest on Merleau-Ponty’s view that time is of the body.

This view of a thick, embodied present provides the grounds for the criticisms of Sartrean freedom. Facticity, the supposed given in which I find myself situated, and which Sartre says the for-itself must nihilate in the process of consciousness, will not appear as facticity without acquisition. I cannot havethetic consciousness of *X* without presupposing an entire acquired field of abilities and other knowledge, most of which comes through the activation of my body as a perceptual instrument that enables me to contextualize *X*. I will call this the *thesis of acquisition*, a central tenet of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, appearing in his discussions of time, consciousness, knowledge, embodiment, and language use. In all cases, expressing something involves calling upon presuppositions, and calling upon presuppositions requires that the past weight of context can stand with me and make *X* stand out as *X*. On the assumption that an instant is truly instantaneous, that it is the asymptote of nothingness that we approach by subdividing time into its smallest part, the thesis of acquisition teaches us that knowledge in the instant would be impossible. To be conscious of *X* is to have already in view a background that requires an instant broader than a mere knife-edge, for I must become conscious not only of *X*, but of the conditions that make it stand out for me as *X*. If we regard facticity as the given of which I become conscious, the thesis of acquisition shows that I cannot become conscious of facticity in an instant because I cannot become conscious of it without a background that “gives” it to me. In other words, facticity is never actually *given* if we take the term ‘given’ in a narrow sense according to which it is an uninterpreted and immediate ground for my consciousness. Thus, Sartre may work to include facticity in his theory, but ultimately fails to show *how it can be taken up into our experience*. Consciousness of facticity and experience requires an acquisition that Sartre cannot explain.

Now why cannot Sartre explain this acquisition, according to Merleau-Ponty? The answer comes swiftly in the seldom discussed temporality chapter of *Being and Nothingness*. There, Sartre explains the origin of both dynamic and static temporality in the negating activity of the for-itself. Being for-itself cannot acquire in the present what it is, for this would render it something or being in-itself; affirmation is the death of being for-itself. It can only negate in the present, and so acquisition must happen “behind” it, that is, in the past. Hence, it automatically generates the past in nihilating. Nothingness, Sartre tells us, becomes being again in the past. Concurrently, the for-itself, in negating the in-itself, will perpetually lack that full being that it cannot be, and so transcends towards the future. The negating brings a new being into view. In both cases, nihilating activity temporalizes at the present, which itself is only the genesis of the past-future differentiation. At the present I am not what I am (i.e., I am not the in-itself, but I am the in-itself in my past, for that has re-congealed into being), and I am what I am not (i.e., I am precisely this

³⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 459; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 398/464.

being who is defined by a future project, but which I therefore am not) and at the present I am only the transition between these.³¹

This view implies that the for-itself must “continually” be spontaneity or freedom, since any stoppage in the nihilating process will congeal temporal existing into a frozen and inert being-in-itself. At each instant—or more properly through an unbroken process—the negation must occur again, otherwise there will be no time and no flow.³² But while this means that we must use temporal predicates to describe the very thing that creates time (a contradiction Sartre explicitly accepts), it also means that acquisition will never be possible except in the past, so that in the present, the for-itself can carry over nothing to provide background forthetic consciousness.³³ This is not to say that Sartre regards time as a series of discrete instants. He explicitly denies the instant, conceived as a little bit of being-in-itself, for such an instant cannot possess the internal relation to other instants necessary to generate a unity of temporal moments.³⁴ The present moment for him consists of nothing more than the transitional overlapping of the past and future, or as he put it in *Saint Genet*: “The instant is the reciprocal and contradictory envelopment of the before by the after.”³⁵ However, this transitional overlapping can neither acquire nor carry forward the past into the continuation of the process without violating the conditions of nihilation and spontaneity. Indeed, even if Sartre denies the pointillist view of a succession of instants, the impossibility of acquisition remains acute, since the present really consists of nothingness, and nothingness cannot have the full being that Sartre assigns the past without becoming being itself. Merleau-Ponty neatly summarizes the direction of this thinking: “in the name of freedom we reject the idea of acquisition,”³⁶ and here he merely echoes Sartre’s view that a spontaneity that acquires could not be a spontaneity: “A spontaneity which posits itself *qua* spontaneity is obliged by the same stroke to refuse what it posits; otherwise its being would become an acquisition and I would be perpetuated in being as the result of being acquired.”³⁷ Either the for-itself must, in the present, re-establish its context in the very same moment that it establishes that which emerges from context, in which case the world will be remade at each instant, and meaning will indeed be “centrifugal,” precisely as Merleau-Ponty says,

³¹Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 165–85; *Being and Nothingness*, 130–49.

³²Hazel Barnes put this point excellently when she characterized the temporality of consciousness in Sartre as “unbroken activity.” Hazel Barnes, “Sartre’s Ontology: The Revealing and Making of Being,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. Christina Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 13–38, at 19.

³³See Whitford’s discussion of these same points in *Merleau-Ponty’s Critique*, 78–97. She sees the disagreement between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty over time as stemming from the fact that Sartre focuses on the continual possibility of change, conversion, and freedom, to the extent that he ignores those things that Merleau-Ponty emphasizes: the continuity of our projects and the improbability that a project or way of life undertaken will simply change. She also sees Sartre as unable to explain continuity with any success, and presents an interesting discussion of his attempts at attaining continuity. Yet, she ignores the possibility that Sartre meant for the negative relation of non-being itself to be the explanation of continuity, a point I take up later in this paper.

³⁴Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 167–72; *Being and Nothingness*, 132–36.

³⁵Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: New American Library, 1964), 10.

³⁶Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 500; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 437/507.

³⁷Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 183; *Being and Nothingness*, 148.

or Sartre must abandon the conception of a spontaneity that can only negate or that is “pure” in this respect. The latter option, of course, comes close to the one that Merleau-Ponty himself follows, the former amounts to his characterization of Sartre’s view.³⁸

In sum, Merleau-Ponty’s argument holds that consciousness of anything *X* supposes a bodily acquisition that requires a temporal thickness or a “carry-over” in time that Sartre wants but cannot establish because of his conception of temporalizing negation. Since acquisition is necessary for consciousness, Sartre’s claims about consciousness cannot overcome their internal contradiction, and we are left with the idea that Sartre’s centrifugal bestowal of meaning must repeat at every instant.³⁹ And thus Merleau-Ponty writes:

The very notion of freedom demands that our decision should plunge into the future, that something should have been *done* [*ait été fait*] by it, that the subsequent instant should benefit from its predecessor.... Each instant, therefore, must not be a closed world; one instant must be able to commit its successors and, a decision once taken and action once begun, I must have something acquired at my disposal. (*Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 500; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 437/508)

Here then, the point does not so much turn on the fact that we must be making continual choices, as some have read pseudo-Merleau-Ponty, but rather that spontaneity and freedom, in the ontological sense, cannot successfully explain continuity in action or even significance in my world, because such bare spontaneity cannot explain how a state of affairs can appear as meaningful and significant without carry over from the past into the present. This is why Merleau-Ponty can agree with Sartre’s famous example that a rock is unclimbable only for a subject that has established climbing as a project, but still *disagree* that the subject lays down the meaning of the world that establishes something as unclimbable. The apparent confusion on Merleau-Ponty’s part resolves itself when we see that something is unclimbable only given a self that wants to climb it, but that self cannot choose this meaning entirely on its own; only for an embodied subject with acquired abilities and a hold on the world could something appear within the facticity of situation as an obstacle or a help. This then further explains why, even given a project of climbing a mountain, some rocks remain unclimbable in contrast to others and “the self which qualifies them as such is not some acosmic subject; it runs ahead of itself in relation to things in order to confer upon them the form of things.”⁴⁰ The body establishes the possibilities of my action and world, through its *temporal* structure. The acquired hold of my habit body in the world “runs ahead of itself” and establishes the possibilities in the future. The rock is thus unclimbable only for a living body with an acquired way of acting.

³⁸Consider also the remark in the temporality chapter of the *Phenomenology* that the “monster” that Sartre rejects of a spontaneity that acquires itself is, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, time and subjectivity itself. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 490; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 427/496.

³⁹In this respect, Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of Sartre on the topic of acquisition amount to an attack on the idea of givenness or immediacy itself. Nothing can be experienced that does not suppose a background that provides the sense of an experience, and it is precisely this givenness that Merleau-Ponty thinks Sartre’s view of time and consciousness commits him to.

⁴⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 504; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 441/512.

This dispute about time and bodily acquisition recasts many of Merleau-Ponty's more famous criticisms of Sartre. In *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty makes claims about the inadequacies of Sartre's theory of history such as this one: "If ... everyday action does not have a hold on a history, revolution is a convulsion, it is at once explosive and without a future" (*Aventures*, 182; *Adventures*, 135). Here, Merleau-Ponty claims that Sartre allows no pre-existent meaning in the proletarian experience from which revolution would be a natural outgrowth, a view supported by Merleau-Ponty's claim, in the same essay, that

the thought of thoughts, the *cogito*, the pure appearance of something to someone—and first of all of myself to myself—cannot be taken literally and as the testimony of a being whose whole essence is to know itself, that is to say, of a consciousness. It is always through the thickness of a field of existence that my presentation to myself takes place. (*Aventures*, 267–68; *Adventures*, 199)

In other words, because there is no temporal thickness, there is no acquisition, and without acquisition there is no meaning, no facticity from within which a subject could chose or even establish a relationship of consciousness. Revolution will be an expression of the moment without organic connection to an actual historical development that would render it either probable or improbable. Let us be clear again, however: it is not that Sartre cannot recognize meaning in our past, nor that he does not think we have facticity, but rather that his theory of time will not allow for a continuity of meaning that can explain action in the present as sensible and sensibly motivated. Hence, Merleau-Ponty announces early in *Adventures of the Dialectic* the form of his overall critique: "Sartre's entire theory of the [Communist] Party and of class is derived from his philosophy of fact, of consciousness, and *beyond fact and consciousness, from his philosophy of time.*"⁴¹ The difficulties with coming to terms with the meaning of states of affairs in the world ("facts") originate in the very notion of a nihilating consciousness, and beyond this, in the temporality that underwrites this consciousness.

Further, if we look again at a passage from *Adventures* that Beauvoir took as proof that (pseudo-)Merleau-Ponty ignored facticity in Sartre's theory, we see that it also concerns time. The passage comes in a footnote, and claims that, for Sartre, consciousness "does not open *onto* a world, which goes beyond its capacity of meaning; it is exactly coextensive with the world."⁴² In short, consciousness lacks depth and the world lacks meaning unto itself; rather, there is only the meaning that consciousness places in the world, and hence consciousness is *alongside* the world, but never stands before a world whose meaning outruns it. Of course, this seems to assert a lack of facticity, as it denies any given beyond that which the work of consciousness establishes. But here again this comment comes as the conclusion of a longer discussion of Sartre's implicit denial of temporal continuity in freedom. In the main text, Merleau-Ponty writes that I cannot "date" my choices because they stand as the front of an acquired history that is already present in the now and that already projects a future. Any genuine freedom that would open my consciousness to the world must be diffused across the entirety of temporal

⁴¹Merleau-Ponty, *Aventures*, 144; *Adventures*, 105; emphasis mine.

⁴²Merleau-Ponty, *Aventures*, 266n1; *Adventures*, 197n137.

continuity and cannot be the origin of it from moment to moment. Thus consciousness, if it lies *alongside* the world rather than penetrating its depth, will not attain freedom. The problem is that the temporality of ontological freedom is wrong, not that there is no facticity in Sartre.

In light of this reconstruction of Merleau-Ponty's arguments, I think we must conclude that Merleau-Ponty does not ignore facticity in Sartre's thinking, as in (6) above. Rather he claims that facticity cannot find a proper place within Sartre's theory, no matter how much Sartre wished to include it. And the reason for this stems directly from the theory of time Sartre argues for in *Being and Nothingness*, and only indirectly from the theory of freedom.

With the issue of time in view, Merleau-Ponty's more specific criticisms of Sartre's theory of freedom also take on a fresh significance. For the temporality of Sartre's *Sinnggebung* does not make sense on its own, and so it certainly cannot explain actual or situated freedom. As I already mentioned, some have thought that pseudo-Merleau-Ponty criticizes Sartre for substituting an ontological freedom, the *Sinnggebung*, for our situated freedom, or even claimed that Merleau-Ponty ignores the distinction altogether. In fact, Merleau-Ponty objects to ontological freedom because it cannot *generate* situated freedom. Putting it plainly: on the assumption of Sartrean ontological freedom and its temporal structure, we could not then have a coherent or meaningful form of situated freedom.

Consider that Merleau-Ponty states his opening criticism of the Sartrean view of freedom in the *Phenomenology* as a conditional, a fact which I emphasize below:

If in effect our freedom is equal in all our actions and in our passions, if it is not to be measured in terms of our conduct, and if the slave displays freedom as much by living in fear as by breaking his chains, then one can only say that there is no free action, freedom being short of all actions, and in no case could we declare, "Here freedom appears." (Phénoménologie de la Perception, 500; Phenomenology of Perception, 436-37/507)⁴³

The argument, plainly, concerns the difficulty of establishing free action on the ground of ontological freedom: given Sartre's conception of ontological freedom, which will be equally present in all action, passion, situation—indeed in the very act of establishing meaning—there cannot be doing or action. The claim is not that ontological freedom will not work *as* situated freedom, as in (5), but rather that we cannot get free action if freedom is construed as ontological freedom. The argument following in the text establishes this claim by arguing that doing requires acquisition and temporal continuity in two different ways. First, doing means that something is done in the doing, that the action becomes part of its own facticity, and this must mean that there is some acquisition in the very process of free ac-

⁴³Here I have deviated from Smith's translation, reading '*la liberté est en deçà de toutes les actions*' as 'freedom being short of all actions'. 'Freedom is this side of all actions' could also work here. In any case, both are superior to Smith's translation, which reads, 'freedom being anterior to all actions'. My argument in this paper does not depend on any translation infelicities, but the idea that *la liberté*, which earlier in the sentence names Sartrean ontological freedom, falls short or is short of all action, or is on "this side" of freedom, is idiomatically correct and certainly fits with the idea that ontological freedom cannot generate doing or action. I should also mention that the original French contains no actual word that could be rendered 'then', I have included one here only to emphasize the connection between the consequent and the multiple antecedents, each of which does begin with the French '*si*'.

tion.⁴⁴ In turn, this means that spontaneity must give up some of itself and become an acquisition that stands through the past and into the present, something that Sartre denies to ontological freedom because of his views on time. Second, in the case of situated freedom, the actor must choose an action from among multiple possibilities, all of which must be meaningful, so that a constituting consciousness would have to spread itself across multiple, projected futures and sustain all of them as meaningful. In order for the facticity of situation to present me with meaningful options, the past must spread into the present as the acquisition that renders the present moment and its choice sensible. As I said, Sartre does not deny facticity, but his scheme will not allow it to stand as the meaningful context for my actions, because acquisition is the death of spontaneity. For both of these reasons, “the ready-made freedom from which we started is not reducible to a power of initiative, which *cannot be transformed* into *doing* [faire] without taking up some proposition of the world.”⁴⁵ Note exactly what Merleau-Ponty says here: the ontological freedom, present always and always reforming itself according to the laws of spontaneity, cannot become the kind of situated freedom which we see in human doing, without a ground of acquisition. And again, in *Adventures of the Dialectic*: “this type of [ontological] freedom never *becomes* what it does. It is never a doing—one cannot even see what this word might mean for it.”⁴⁶

Given this, Merleau-Ponty’s arguments concerning freedom rely upon the specific results of his work on the *cogito* and on temporality. Moreover, we can now see what is wrong with saying that Merleau-Ponty views Sartrean freedom as entirely inner and ineffective, as in criticism (2). In one important sense, Merleau-Ponty is charging Sartrean freedom with being ineffective—indeed he claims that there can be no action on Sartre’s scheme, but this does not mean that Merleau-Ponty also charges Sartre with having a purely “mental” freedom. Instead, ontological freedom will not generate situated freedom because the temporal structure of ontological freedom cannot explain actual human doing. As a misinterpretation of the temporality of consciousness, Sartrean ontological freedom could no more explain a “mental” freedom than it could explain an active, situated one.

In contrast with this reassessment of (2), we see that criticism (3), that Sartre cannot explain doing, is indeed something Merleau-Ponty claims, but that (at the risk of sounding repetitive) the problem concerns time and the possibility of establishing the continuity necessary for both action and meaning, for doing requires that the past should continue into the present, that something might be done, and yet also that the past neither dominate nor determine the present. This will be true for both ontological and situated freedom. In the case of ontological freedom or the *Sinnggebung*, the consciousness of any particular state of affairs needs

⁴⁴It also helps to see that the French verb ‘faire’ can be translated as ‘to make’—implying the creation of something.

⁴⁵Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 502; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 439/510. Emphasis on ‘cannot be transformed’ (*ne saurait se transformer*) is mine, the stress on ‘faire’ is original.

⁴⁶Merleau-Ponty, *Aventures*, 264; *Adventures*, 196; emphasis mine. Once again, we should be mindful that the ontology Merleau-Ponty criticizes here may no longer be that of *Being and Nothingness*. In fact, Sartre’s view about the role of future and past contexts in determining motivation seems to be one of the things changing in *The Communists and Peace*, just as Sartre tends to treat Genet’s childhood as an acquisition weighing upon him without determining him.

a background that diffuses consciousness beyond the instant and that shows the place of the acquired past in the present moment. In the case of situated freedom, we must choose an action from among multiple possibilities, so that consciousness must sustain multiple, projected futures as meaningful. More, the action, to be unified, must carry its past with it into the present and future. That something might be *done* (or made) by our action supposes a deep continuity in time that the bare spontaneity of Sartre cannot encompass.

The dispute over freedom develops out of a dispute over time. To fully appreciate the scope of this disagreement, however, we must also look at Merleau-Ponty's own theory of the time-freedom relationship. This will not only provide more context for the time-freedom question, it will show how the time-freedom dispute originates in a dispute over ambiguity. Here of course I cannot present a thorough investigation of Merleau-Ponty's theories of both time and freedom, I intend only to explain enough to grasp the full extent of his objections to Sartre.

On the question of time, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre actually share a common understanding of what to explain, but differ on how to explain it.⁴⁷ For both, time consists of a unified multiplicity: one single moment, for example the beginning of my noon class, can be anticipated as the future, experienced in the present, and recalled in the past. In each of these aspects—past, present, and future—the same moment is differentiated into three temporal horizons. Merleau-Ponty and Sartre strive to hold together both this differentiation into temporal horizons and the singular unity of the moment; both philosophers strive to explain the paradox of time as both a continuously developing unity and a process of differentiation.⁴⁸ For Sartre we saw that nihilating action establishes both unity and differentiation. Temporal differentiation occurs in the present as the for-itself nihilates and throws around itself both future and past. Time is not a series of instants but the nihilating process of producing temporal structure and flow. The future and past comprise myself as “not-myself”—the future is me as I will be but am not now; the past, of course, is myself as I was but am not now. Since Sartre regards the relation of non-being as a bond, the unity of the temporal “Diaspora” occurs through the same process as its differentiation. Nihilation bonds myself now to myself as I am not.

Like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty believes time requires a strong continuity: the passage of the now actually joins together the future and the past, but this strong continuity cannot eliminate the differentiation of the three horizons of past, present, and future. Again, like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty thinks that both the unity and multiplicity of time must have the same source.⁴⁹ Unlike Sartre, Merleau-Ponty rejects a nihilating consciousness as this source and argues that time's unity is both *sui generis* and self-contained. The unity of time is unique because time unifies itself by its very passage, or, putting the point more plainly, it attains unity in the

⁴⁷Whitford's discussion of temporality is again useful here in pointing out similarities between the two philosophers. *Merleau-Ponty's Critique*, 78–97.

⁴⁸Sartre actually describes this as an analysis of “dynamic” temporality, and contrasts it with static temporality, which deals with non-changing relations of before and after. Since he derives static from dynamic temporality, this contrast does not concern us: dynamic temporality is ultimate temporality for Sartre.

⁴⁹Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 171–72; *Being and Nothingness*, 135–36.

very process of its differentiation. The present appears already split into a soon-to-be past and an anticipation of the future, such that the present simply *is* the overlapping of these two horizons. More, each anticipated future is a prospective past and each past an elapsed present that contained an anticipation of the future. Each horizon of time—past, present, and future—bears an essential and internal relation to the other horizons, so that the three horizons unify precisely by their relations to each other. Hence, when time moves, it must move “throughout its whole length,”⁵⁰ meaning that it flows, not in a single unit like a train passing, but rather that the whole of time continually differentiates itself from itself, the past moments changing in relation to new past and prospective futures, prospective futures altering in relation to the present. This continuous modification of all horizons occurs because each horizon of time is a dynamic, internal relation to the other horizons of time. Dynamic, because it continually changes, internal because each moment changes in relation to the others. I anticipate the beginning of my noon class, I experience the beginning of my noon class in the present, and I retain the beginning of my noon class as a lapsed now; but my noon class as an anticipated future already contained both its potential transformation into a present now and that present moment’s potential degeneration into a past of that present. Of necessity, that retained passed conversely contains its former status as formerly present now and as an anticipated future.⁵¹

Such a conception of temporality provides for both continuity through the internal relation between moments and their counterparts in different temporal horizons, and differentiation through the dynamism of each horizon changing in relation to the others. Time’s passage (its differentiation) is its means of unifying itself. Accordingly, we do not need to derive time from spontaneity, as does Sartre (and for that matter, Kant).⁵² Since time does this to itself, there is no need for something to make time and synthesize its unity; time is the moving synthesis.⁵³ Moreover, not only does this view of time eliminate the need for pure spontaneity to create time, but also this view disallows a subjectivity behind or outside of time, for a subjectivity behind time would be unable to *live* it; subjectivity would be caught in the hole of creating the time that it could not experience, or caught in the contradiction of creating the very time it experiences (a contradiction that, again, Sartre accepts). Conversely, a consciousness that merely reappears at each moment would not know its own experience of time. So, while there can be no

⁵⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 481; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 419/487.

⁵¹Such a conception of time comes close Bergson’s view. *Durée* reveals a holistic unity of consciousness that can only be subsequently atomized into parts placed in a spatialized relation to each other. The unity of consciousness is fully organic and autochthonous. Merleau-Ponty differs from this Bergsonian view by holding onto the activity of synthesis (see note 53, below). Henri Bergson, *L’essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, 68th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948); *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960).

⁵²Sartre, *L’être et le néant*, 183; *Being and Nothingness*, 148. See William Wilkerson, “In the World but not of the World: The Relation of Freedom to Time in Kant and Sartre,” *Epoché* 14 (2009): 113–29.

⁵³Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 483–84; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 421/489. To be precise, Merleau-Ponty denies that there is any synthesis in time, but I take this to mean simply that there is no singular act of a subject to synthesize time, since Merleau-Ponty also describes time as a “transition synthesis” and endorses (with suitable qualifications) the Husserlian idea of the passive synthesis.

subject behind time, the subject must be in time in such a way that it transcends the moment and has a relation to its own past and future. Putting it in the plainest and strangest of terms: Merleau-Ponty believes time not only passes by itself, but that time must be aware of itself.⁵⁴ The interiority of the relation of self to self is the same interiority of each temporal horizon's internal connections to the other horizons: the future as anticipated, lapsing into past as a future that was anticipated and that enjoyed its moment of privilege at the present.

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty once again agree on the basic point: subjectivity is a kind of interiority, or more properly, an affecting of the self by the self. But once again they disagree on the explanation and implications of this fact. Rather than insert the nothingness of the for-itself to create a gap in which this affection can take place, Merleau-Ponty gets an explanation of this self-relation automatically from the nature of time, since the interiority of self to self is the interiority of temporality. Each change in the present reflects a change in the anticipation of the future, and a new addition to the streaming of the past, so that each horizon, as we have said, is internally and dynamically related to the others. Time passes by itself.⁵⁵

Acquisition inevitably follows from this conception of time and subjectivity. Each new present already stands as a previously anticipated future, and the moment when I anticipated *this* present right now has transformed into a past. That is: I was anticipating this moment, now this moment is here, and my anticipation of it has slid into the past. In this way, the past must always contribute to the sense of the present. We do not experience the present as the barest instant of now, like a razor's edge poised between voids of nothingness; rather we experience all the horizons of time in their unity, and the present is always what it is because of the temporal horizons that surround it. In my earlier discussion of the thesis of acquisition, I showed how the body, structured by acquired habits, "presents" the world to me, and how this played out in the argument over freedom. One rock cannot be climbed, while another can, and for Sartre this signification is determined by the freedom of the subject. For Merleau-Ponty, the body with its acquired habits prospectively determines my ability to climb the rock. Here, again, the sense of the acquired past and the projected future determine the sense of the present, and this temporal relation that creates sense does not originate from the action of the subject in nihilating being to make time, but rather from the fact that being a body means being in time.

⁵⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 489; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 426/495.

⁵⁵Appealing to an important source of both Sartre's and his own thoughts on time, Merleau-Ponty presents this depiction of time as the truth of Husserl's analyses of time consciousness. It is hard to say whether this is fair to either Sartre or Husserl. Certainly, Husserl's description of the "absolute time-constituting flow of consciousness" describes an absolute temporality which is neither a thing nor a process, but rather the continuously replicating structure of consciousness and subjectivity itself. But this absolute consciousness, as neither thing nor process could be conceived as nothingness in its action of nihilation, or could very well be seen as the overlapping intentional process that Merleau-Ponty describes. Husserl himself claimed that words and concepts breakdown at this point, but Merleau-Ponty does seem closer to the Husserlian spirit in wanting to see time as both self-constituting and as a network of intentionalities. See Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917)*, trans. John Barnett Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), §§34-36.

I will say more about this somewhat obscure idea of the embodied nature of time below, but for now we can see why Sartrean views of time and freedom are unable to account for passivity, as Whitford correctly states. As we saw, Sartre's denial of acquisition forces the subject to constitute the sense of the past from the present, and cannot, as a consequence, allow the past to stand in the present as its already given context: "[spontaneity's] peculiar nature is not to profit from the acquisition which it constitutes by realizing itself as spontaneity."⁵⁶ Hence the Sartrean subject must be wholly active, rendering passivity impossible. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty argues that in my *doing*, I establish an action that carries itself out and requires, paradoxically, my own passivity in the face of the very action I have begun, just as I must be partially passive before meanings that outrun my conscious ability to constitute them. Thus, passivity is possible because total activity, pure spontaneity, is equally impossible; neither activity nor passivity makes sense on its own, and we are at once "wholly passive and wholly active."⁵⁷

4. FROM TIME TO AMBIGUITY

This last remark about passivity and activity is not, as it sounds, a paradox for Merleau-Ponty. Rather, it expresses the fundamental ambiguity of human being, an ambiguity present in embodied time. To be conscious, Merleau-Ponty argues, is to-be-at (*être à*),⁵⁸ to have a world already presented to me by my sensory fields, a world that I experience through my body. The *Phenomenology* argues extensively that however passive my perception of the world might appear, perception requires the body to act, and so it is never merely the passive reception of sensory data as in a crude empiricism. Because of this, the body moves ahead of itself and engages the world in order to "present" us with stable objects for our exploration.⁵⁹ Any "thetic consciousness of X" I have results from my body's engagement; it has already "made sense" of the X and its context, and if I can reach out and grasp it or contemplate it, this is because the body has come to grips with its spatial relation

⁵⁶Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 183; *Being and Nothingness*, 148.

⁵⁷Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 491; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 428/497. Note that although this statement concerns our freedom, it occurs in the book's discussion of temporality.

⁵⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 487; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 424/493.

⁵⁹A striking example of the way in which the temporal activity of the body makes the world visible is found in the text's analysis of binocular vision (*Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 266; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 230/267). Imagine that while you are looking at something more distant, something passes close by your eyes and your focus shifts. Merleau-Ponty argues, with considerable force, that such a shift in focus results neither from an automatic and merely mechanical process of the body, since the stimuli on the retina are equally asymmetrical from the third-person point of view, nor by a merely mental action process, since focusing requires an act of the body to create the single object of near vision. Rather, the shift of focus in my visual field originates in activity of the body that is both prospective, because it anticipates the closer object as a future focus, and also intentional, because the body intends an object before consciousness intervenes. The body thus works in time to present objects that appear separate from me. He writes, "the sight of one single object is not a simple outcome of focusing the eyes ... it is anticipated in the very act of focusing ... it is not an epistemological subject who brings about the synthesis, but the body ... tends by all means in its power towards one single goal of activity, and when one single intention is formed ... this intentionality is not a thought [because] it does not come into being through the transparency of any consciousness, but takes for granted all the latent knowledge of itself that my body possesses" (*Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 278–79; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 232–33/269–70).

to the thing, distinguished it from its environment, and enabled me to express it. Even if pre-reflectively my body is active, I am also passive in the face of my body's power to present a world that outstrips mythetic consciousness.

Already, we can see how the future approaches me: being embodied means being engaged in such a way that the world pulls me perpetually into future possibilities. To perceive is to relate to the future. And, at the same time, to perceive requires the acquired past as a context for my perception. For one thing, just like doing requires the action to become its own context through a perpetual acquisition, so the perceived object, as I continue to explore it, work with it, or reach towards it, trails behind it a context of itself in past moments. As each past moment was also at one point an anticipation, the object endures and develops through time as my body intends it. For example, I see the front face of a chair, and I sense that it is the front face because my body could "make a tour" around the chair, anticipating new perspectives, and acquiring each of these previously anticipated perspective as they are confirmed in my movement around the chair. From this, the object of my experience appears to have the solidity of a thing. In this way, the body assimilates each moment into itself, carrying forward each moment and linking it to the next; decisions undertaken become directions of action and polarizations of the world in an almost anonymous fashion; once "on a path," I continue "on that path" by virtue of the inertia of time itself, by virtue of a body that seemingly of its own accord can carry on an action. If the differentiation of time provides the ground of its unity, this is because (again, strange as it may sound) time is embodied. Having a body means experiencing the world prospectively against a trailing background continually acquired. Temporality is of the body.

We return then, to the *thesis of acquisition*: this background unity of my experience and activity enables elements in my experience to become focal points—it enablesthetic consciousness. The body gives us the past, insofar as it can never sever itself from its continuity, and decision is our remedy against a total passivity, a total disintegration of each moment. Indeed, decision is the moment of incipient acquisition; thus a decision binds me towards a future, just as a concept acquired stands as a ready acquisition for understanding the moment. In either case, freedom falls into place, not as the origin of all things, but as the interplay of acquisition and the "thrusting" of time itself, as the means by which I construct for myself "symbols" or stable points in the flow of experience that give myself to myself. As time is both being and passing, as it requires the ambiguity of both being and becoming, we are both wholly passive and wholly active. This combination is comprehensible if we assume that all of these categories are not absolute, but rather inter-related features of our experience, each dependent on the other; each ambiguous. We must then say that the thesis of acquisition rests upon a fundamental assumption of ambiguity as an irreducible feature of time and of our being.

We have thus moved from the question of freedom to time, and from time, through embodiment to the issue of ambiguity, and we can summarize the entire dispute between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre by saying that Merleau-Ponty refuses the Sartrean ontology of for-itself and in-itself for lacking genuine ambiguity. As with other features of time and subjectivity, ambiguity is initially a point of agreement

between the two philosophers: both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty sought to explain the ambiguity of human existence. Sartre starts with the unity of our being-in-the-world, and wants to explain the ambiguity of our being a subject in a world of objects, the ambiguity of a subject that can in turn be an object for others, the ambiguity of a pure consciousness that is both embodied and historical, overcome with facticity and yet wholly free—the ambiguity of a being that, to restate his famous definition, is not what it is, and is what it is not.⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty seeks to understand these same ambiguities, but here the similarity ends because he begins with ambiguity at the base of his ontology, arguing that we can never understand experience, perception, embodiment, freedom, indeed time and subjectivity itself, unless we allow that aspects of each occur within a field of ambiguity. In an extremely dense sentence, Merleau-Ponty summarizes the extent of ambiguity in the human condition: “The ambiguity of being-at-the-world is translated by that of the body, and is understood through that of time.”⁶¹ Our ambiguity consists in being *both* psychic and physical, *both* for-itself and in-itself, *both* passive and active, in being the common ground of each side of a duality without being reducible to either, and our ambiguity spawns all these dualities in a continual process of temporal deployment.⁶²

Sartre, on the other hand, generated ambiguity out of the mediation of two non-ambiguous poles: being and nothingness. All attempts at explaining ambiguous features of our existence in *Being and Nothingness* follow this pattern, a pattern to which Merleau-Ponty strenuously objects. In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty argues that the problematic Sartrean ontology of the for-itself and the in-itself can be resolved by his conception of embodied time.⁶³ The for-itself is really Sartre’s failed attempt to grasp the interiority of the self, the relation of self-to-self. By regarding this interiority as the relation of a past anticipating its future, and a future anticipating its slipping into the past, and by arguing that this is the very structure of embodied consciousness, Merleau-Ponty can solve the paradox of Sartrean ontology and claim that “it is as much of my essence to have a body as it is the future’s to be the future of a certain present.”⁶⁴ Each temporal horizon contains an image/reference to the other, so that they relate to themselves, and the present is merely the horizon in which this relation takes place. Because of this, the present is the “hard” moment through which we experience all of the world, and through which we find the past and the present; it is as close as we come to being in-itself.

⁶⁰“It is by ambiguity that, in our own generation, Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, fundamentally defined man” (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman [New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1976], 9–10).

⁶¹Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 114; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 85/98.

⁶²At least since Alphonse De Waelhens, *Une philosophie de l’ambiguïté* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1951), the importance of ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty has been a common theme. Dillon traces this ambiguity back to the notion of the Gestalt, which implies an irreducible, internal relation between focus and ground in all phenomena (see *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 67–68). Here, I mean ambiguity in a very general sense according to which there is no basic, singular and intrinsic foundational element within our ontology, but rather a continual and irreducible relation of parts to the whole.

⁶³Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 494; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 430–31/500–01.

⁶⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 494; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 431/501.

We experience an ambiguous world with poles that seem more personal and less personal, but never a divided world of the for-itself and the in-itself.

Later, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty will deny entirely both the Sartrean ontology and the attempt to solve its problems or patch its weaknesses, and move into a radically different ontology. The criticism then becomes more explicit: the Sartrean ontology can never truly generate the ambiguity it seeks to explain.⁶⁵ Being, defined by Sartre in almost Eleatic purity as all and only being, can never actually be penetrated by nothingness, any more than nothingness, defined as absolute *négalité*, can be entered by being without violating its own purity as nothingness. Once nothingness is defined as “non-being through and through, the thought of the negative condemns itself to define being as absolute plenitude,”⁶⁶ so much so that the “negintuition” of nothingness is already always the thought of pure being, and *vice versa*. Ambiguity requires “mixing” being and nothingness, or it requires an original mediation and a common ground that can only be disambiguated after the fact; it cannot however be created out of two things that cannot, by definition, mediate each other or “mix.” For this reason, any phenomenon that calls upon ambiguity for its understanding will not be explained by a dialectic that fails to achieve genuine ambiguity. The opacity of the world and its meaning, the unknown spaces in the subject from which action partially originates, the possibility of continuity and break in time, the meaning of history, the whole idea of the *probable* in action and history, all of these require a genuine ambiguity and “whether considering the void of nothingness or the absolute fullness of being, [the dialectic of being and nothingness] in every case ignores density, depth, the plurality of planes, the background worlds.”⁶⁷

This is “high-altitude” criticism indeed, attacking as it does the entirety of *Being and Nothingness* from the perspective of its two titular concepts, and it is not surprising that a searing and explicit statement occurs only at the very end of Merleau-Ponty’s dialogue with Sartre. But the issue of ambiguity provides the master-argument against Sartre, in both early and later works. In particular, the problem with Sartre’s theory of time and spontaneity originated in the fact that Sartre could not, from the perspective of a nothingness that must remain nothingness, countenance a spontaneity that could acquire in its spontaneous activity. Acquisition would be the death of nothingness and being as pure categories, since the thesis of acquisition supposes in each case that nothingness take on something of being, and that being lacked in order that it might have taken on something. At any moment, the present must be “thick” enough to hold continuity with the past that partially explains its sense, and also with a future towards which it points. There must be, in the past, something of being, if it is to be now, and there must be, in

⁶⁵Françoise Dastur thus sees *The Visible and the Invisible*, insofar as it is critical, as directed almost entirely at the Sartrean ontology, even though it discusses Husserl extensively. Dastur, “World, Flesh, Vision,” trans. Ted Toadvine, in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of the Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 23–50.

⁶⁶Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), 96; *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 67.

⁶⁷Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’invisible*, 96–97; *The Visible and Invisible*, 68.

the present, something of non-being if the past is to stand around it as its frame. Embodied time, as Merleau-Ponty conceives it, works perfectly to explain this. Sartre's theory of time, on the other hand, comes down to a continuous interplay of being and nothingness, not the genuine fusion of these two categories. Thus, Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, characterized Sartrean negation as lacking genuine "thickness" and making up for this lack with "agility"⁶⁸—the ability to create pseudo-ambiguity by moving fast enough, just as motion is simulated by the rapid succession of static images in film.⁶⁹

However, we might ask, regardless of the rigid ontology of *Being and Nothingness*, does not Sartre still see certain features of human existence as *irreducibly* ambiguous? For example, Sartre argues that our situation is "the common product of the contingency of the in-itself and of freedom, [and] an ambiguous phenomenon in which it is impossible for the for-itself to distinguish the contribution of freedom from that of brute existent."⁷⁰ Sartre's discussion of situation captures the fact of what Heidegger called being thrown—the way in which we find ourselves in a world that seems already underway, significant, and resistant. And since Sartre insists that being gains meaning only within the human world and from the nihilation of consciousness, that is, being gains meaning from our ontological freedom, we find ourselves always in the midst of beings that have meaning. For Sartre, I have already contributed to the world before I come to understand it, such that I cannot untangle what results from the for-itself and what results from what Sartre calls "brute" being in-itself. But while Sartre here accepts ambiguity as a fact of our experience, he does not recognize the source of that ambiguity in our being. Stating it more completely, Sartre here acknowledges that, in my experience, the world always already seems meaningful, and further that what the world means will be relative to my own projects and to the kinds of questions that my particular style of living asks of being. Thus, I can see, once I grant human being a role in making the meaning of beings, that the world I experience will always be both "given" and "interpreted" in ways that I can likely never disentangle, since any further questioning of being I undertake will also be an interpretation based upon a particular set of values and projects.

But the source of this ambiguity remains decidedly unambiguous. Hence Sartre states, before the passage just quoted, that the for-itself might find itself engaged with or threatened by being, but only because "it freely posits the end in relation to which the state of things is threatening or favorable,"⁷¹ and then continues to

⁶⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, 97; *The Visible and Invisible*, 68.

⁶⁹It is possible that the difference between Merleau-Ponty's criticisms in the *Phenomenology* and in *The Visible and the Invisible* reflect the distinction between what Waldenfels helpfully called "bad ambiguity" and "good ambiguity." In the former, Merleau-Ponty attempts to have an ontology of "both-and" without interrogating the defining features of each. Thus the ambiguity of time contains both unity and differentiation; the body is both intelligent and material; the world is both given and the result of my operative intentionality. In the latter, "good ambiguity," Merleau-Ponty attempts a genuine mixing or "reversibility" in the notion of the flesh. The strength of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Sartrean ontology increased in direct proportion to the strength of his commitment to ambiguity. Bernhard Waldenfels, "The Paradox of Expression," trans. Chris Nagel, in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of the Flesh*, 89–102, at 93–94.

⁷⁰Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 533; *Being and Nothingness*, 488.

⁷¹Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 533; *Being and Nothingness*, 487.

analyze this ambiguity in terms of the brute existent and the freedom that encounters it. The issue between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty here concerns not whether they *saw* ambiguity in our experience—they both did—but whether they included ambiguity in their ontology. Merleau-Ponty did. Sartre did not. Thus, Barbaras writes of Sartre that his philosophy

incorporates into the in-itself and the for-itself the passage between them attested by experience, but it does not restore the very movement of this experience. The passage would become impossible as soon as, under the terms of *Being and Nothingness*, the fixity of the reflective categories is maintained. The passage then would be accomplished only at the expense of renewing their opposition.⁷²

Doing, acting, sensing all require ambiguity in that all require an acquired past and a prospected future simultaneously and together. Time, as that thing in which “being and passing are synonymous”⁷³ is ambiguity: both multiple and unified, both passing and existing. The temporal problem reduces to a problem with understanding how something can truly be and not be at the same time. Thus doing will be accomplished as that which is, passes away, and comes into being, and these ambiguities explain Merleau-Ponty’s claim that, as in criticism (1), freedom is everywhere and nowhere. This “everywhere and nowhere” does not mean, as it might appear, that because all actions are free, none of them are free—that the ubiquity of freedom renders it a meaningless category, but rather that, for Sartre, freedom is literally everywhere and that makes impossible a meaningfully situated freedom that can acquire itself in the process of deploying itself. Freedom is everywhere, because all consciousness originates in the ontological freedom produced by nothingness, and yet nowhere because freedom never really engages in the kind of ambiguous doing that characterizes human existence and its situated freedom. Putting the point more succinctly, freedom, in the ontological sense, is everywhere, but freedom in the real, situated sense, is nowhere. The ontology of being and nothingness allows for no room between the nihilating activity of the for-itself, which must always remain nothing and cannot acquire and so finally cannot *act*, and the complete immobility of being that amounts to complete unfreedom, since it cannot be said to act, move, or change at all. What we need for action is not this omnipresent but ineffective freedom opposed to an immobile being, but rather a freedom that is real, situated, and hence ambiguous. This is why Merleau-Ponty immediately follows his famous claim that Sartrean freedom is everywhere and nowhere with the claim that, in the name of this ontological freedom or *Sinngebung*, we reject *acquisition*, and thus the idea of action disappears. The point should now be clear—freedom is everywhere because without acquisition there is no doing, and there is no acquisition because, in the end, there is no ambiguity.

Finally, I must take up criticism (4), that meaning is “centrifugal.” As with criticism (3) about doing, Merleau-Ponty does assert (4), but as with (3), the real issue is again temporality and ambiguity. Whitford, Compton, and Langer all see that Merleau-Ponty thought that meaning must somehow “pre-exist” my consciousness of it, and must somehow have the real weight of facticity, and that

⁷²Renauld Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 116.

⁷³Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 482; *Phenomenology of Perception*, 420/488.

Sartre appears to deny both of these facets of meaning. Ironically, supporters of Sartre, like Beauvoir and Detmer, also accepted the importance of these claims about meaning, but argue that Sartre's theory can and does explain them. And indeed, Sartre does not intend for meaning to be centrifugal, but the appearance that meaning is centrifugal arises nonetheless, and Merleau-Ponty explains why: a) Sartre's view of time renders holding facticity in consciousness from moment to moment impossible, so that b) there can be no context and no contribution of the past or the future to the sense of my world. Hence, c) the world will have no depth of its own; even as I may negate the world and my consciousness must have something beyond it to be conscious, this consciousness cannot even approximate the real depth of experience. Again, as should be obvious by now, these problems originate in the ontology of an absolute being and a total nothingness, which must remain as they are and cannot, in the context of temporalizing, acquire in the way necessary to generate the ambiguity of having both a world with a meaning of its own and a world which I partially constitute.

5. CONCLUSION: FROM "EARLY" TO "LATE" MERLEAU-PONTY

The argument of this paper has been extensive; let me summarize briefly before concluding. While the disagreement about freedom is one of the most visible in the dispute between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, I have tried to show that this most visible dispute rests upon less visible disputes. Stating my argument in reverse, we could say that Merleau-Ponty accepted that a genuine ambiguity must be included in the attempt to understand human action and meaning, and he charged Sartre with failing to reproduce genuine ambiguity in the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*. Rather, Sartre produced ambiguity by means of the agility of the for-itself over and against the in-itself; he produced ambiguity by holding to the two poles of nothingness and being. This rigid ontology barred him from conceiving both of genuine continuity and of acquisition in temporality. Spontaneity cannot acquire for Sartre, and hence renews itself continually without actually profiting from this renewal. This problem with time, in turn, renders Sartre unable to generate a situated, real freedom out of the ontological freedom that itself generates time. The Sartrean for-itself can neither engage in doing nor experience a world of meaning that outruns its actual present moment and renders choices meaningful. Merleau-Ponty neither confuses ontological with situated freedom, nor ignores the place of facticity in Sartre's theory, but rather believes that Sartre's stated allegiance to these notions is inconsistent with his own views on ontology and time.

It has often been said that Merleau-Ponty's ontology in the *Phenomenology* was expressed implicitly (as in Dillon's *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*) or improperly (as in Barbaras's *The Being of the Phenomenon*) and had to await *Eye and Mind* and *The Visible and the Invisible* to take on explicit and proper form. This certainly has much truth in it, and it should hold as well for Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of Sartre. Until the problem with being and nothingness as exclusive categories really comes to light in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty's criticisms remain somewhat unclear. In the *Phenomenology*, they seem to turn on an inability to explain what seems truly indeterminate or ambiguous within human existence, but Merleau-Ponty remains

focused on human subjectivity and the failure of the Sartrean ontology to explain such categories as meaning, consciousness, and, ultimately, the embodied subject itself. Later, these problems become clarified and are seen to stem from a single, profound mistake in Sartre's early ontology.

Surprisingly, the development between the discussions of the *Phenomenology* and of the *The Visible and the Invisible* can be found in *The Adventures of the Dialectic*, in some of the very passages that Beauvoir singles out as instances of Merleau-Ponty's ignorance of Sartrean facticity. In particular, the notorious passage in which Merleau-Ponty writes that Sartre's philosophy is one in which "meaning, seen as wholly spiritual, as impalpable as lightning, is absolutely opposed to being, which is absolute weight and absolute opacity" now appears not to be about the centrifugal constitution of meaning, but rather about the fact that *being*, as "absolute weight and opacity"—that is, as an absolute and inert being that can only ever be all being—is opposed to a *nothingness* that must always "remain" nothingness and hence is "impalpable as lightning."⁷⁴ The problem is not centrifugal views of meaning, but rather the entire titular ontology of *Being and Nothingness*. Similarly, in describing the problem with otherness in Sartre, Merleau-Ponty claims that the ontology of Sartre cannot countenance others as they appear in our experience because he remains caught: "being-for-itself is all Sartre has ever accepted, with its inevitable correlate: pure being-in-itself," and even if Sartre attempts to recognize the "mixed" form of the self-for-others, outside the purity of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, "there is no hinge, no joint or mediation between myself and other."⁷⁵ Indeed, without their context, both passages sound as though they come from *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Hence, a corollary of this study is that it demonstrates what has been said before: Merleau-Ponty's work is the continuous expression of an impulse to understand our rootedness in the world and a desire to express the extent to which we inhabit and live *in* a world that resists any easy separation between consciousness, action, meaning, and history. Ambiguity is one of the concepts that most serves to capture this perspective on human existence: our consciousness cannot lift itself out of the world, and for this reason it could never be a pure negation, as Sartre characterized it. Merleau-Ponty's interest in nature and biology, from *The Structure of Behavior* to the lectures on Nature, and his continued interest in understanding a fully embodied consciousness, which notion itself gives way to a radically different ontology of the flesh, all demonstrate this attempt to understand how we can both be rooted in the world and yet still have some capacity for a limited consciousness and freedom for acting within this world.

The disagreement with Sartre comes as an expression of this same impulse. The two's ideas no doubt appear close because both felt the dual requirements of our situatedness and our seemingly free consciousness of this situatedness—we might even say the dual requirements of our immanence and our transcendence. Despite the radical nature of Sartrean freedom and the striking ontology of *Being*

⁷⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Aventures*, 168; *Adventures*, 124. Beauvoir cites this passage in "Pseudo-Sartreanism," 6.

⁷⁵Merleau-Ponty, *Aventures*, 190–91; *Adventures*, 142.

and Nothingness, however, it appears that Merleau-Ponty's attempt at understanding this dual requirement was always the more radical in the precise sense that it grants to ambiguity a genuine place, rather than create it out of categories that refuse, ultimately, anything that would remain unresolved or ambiguous. Out of this difference spills the difference in their analyses of time, and ultimately of freedom.

Merleau-Ponty's own theory of freedom in the *Phenomenology*, then, often appears unsatisfactory from the somewhat classical perspective and language in which it is posed. Free and unfree are exclusive terms, and Merleau-Ponty's words, in that final chapter, might sound obscure to some ears. But if the diagnosis of Sartre's failure is true, such an understanding of freedom may be the only one open to us, unless we are to leave the classical terms altogether, a path Merleau-Ponty began before his untimely death.