

## **Gestalt and Totality. The case of Merleau-Ponty and Gestalt psychology**

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14 March, it is a 100 years since the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty was born. He had a profound influence on French philosophy and social theory, and Cornelius Castoriadis was no exception. Connected via Merleau-Ponty’s pupil Claude Lefort, Castoriadis followed many of Merleau-Ponty’s main theoretical themes, phenomenology and psychology. In this paper, I will present an aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, specifically how he used a psychological theory as part of his theoretical project, namely Gestalt psychology. In an essay published in the collection *Sens et non-sens*, Merleau-Ponty says: “It seems difficult to deny that Gestalt psychology has transformed what we might call the implicit ontology of science, and that they oblige us to revise our conception of the conditions and limitations of scientific knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> In his view, the Gestalt perspectives on perception also had political implications, as he wrote in 1947, where he concluded that the importance of Marx for the understanding of history was “to believe that history has a Gestalt, in the sense that German writers give to the word, a holistic system moving towards equilibrium.”<sup>2</sup>

Today, Gestalt psychology is usually only mentioned in introductory courses in psychology, in the chapters on perception. At the beginning of the 20th century, however, they were widely debated as an attempt at transforming positivism and scientific epistemology. They made two major knowledge claims: firstly, that we do not perceive in sums of sensations, but in meaningful, structured and organized wholes, and that the most basic perception is always a figure against a ground. Secondly, they argued that a

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty: *Sens et non-sens*, p. 103

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty: *Humanism and terror*, p. 130

basic tendency in our mental structure is to move towards equilibrium, to strive for wholeness where we perceive a lack, or understanding where we experience something unclear. These few claims could have vast implications, and I will try to show how Merleau-Ponty wanted to make philosophical exploration of these tenets.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, I will point to some differences between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre in light of precisely Gestalt psychology. The point of this undertaking is to show a forgotten, but highly influential source of influence in intellectual history and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy.

### **Merleau-Ponty situated**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty had an extraordinary philosophical career; he became perhaps the foremost academic French philosopher in the post-war period. Born in Rochefort-sur-Mer in 1908, he was an early graduate in philosophy from the prestigious École normale supérieure in Rue d'Ulm, Paris, the élite school that almost like a hatchery produces the upper creed of French philosophers. Here he became friends with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean Hyppolite, among others.

The central position he gained in French philosophy is shown also by his early admittance to a chair in the Collège de France in 1952, the chair once held by Henri Bergson. It was in one sense a natural thing for him to take over Bergson's chair, since it was Bergson who introduced the problem of the body into French philosophy, a theme Merleau-Ponty expanded and vividly elaborated. "Our century," Merleau-Ponty said, "has wiped out [*effacé*] the dividing line between 'body' and 'mind,' and sees human life as through and through mental and corporeal, always based upon the body and always (even in its most carnal modes) interested in the relationship between persons."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Merleau-Ponty: "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man", [*Le sciences de l'homme et la phénoménologie*, Paris 1961] in J.M.Edie(ed.) 1968: *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays* [by Merleau-Ponty].

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty: *Signes*, pp 287. The original text is: "Notre siècle a effacé la ligne de partage du 'corps' et de 'l'esprit' et voit la vie humaine comme spirituelle et corporelle de part en part, toujours appuyée au corps, toujours intéressée, jusque dans ses modes les plus charnels, aux rapports des personnes."

Merleau-Ponty was one of a number of philosophers in the 20th century challenging the traditional dualist distinctions between mind and body; spirit and matter; Man and things. He developed a philosophy that tried to unite these traditionally separated realms of existence in one conceptual whole, thereby trying to break with one of the main philosophical characteristics of modernity. Gestalt psychology was an important part of his endeavour.

### **The primacy of perception**

The major difference between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre and Heidegger lies in the emphasis he puts on perception as the basis of all knowledge, and the body as the basis of perception, and Gestalt psychology forms the framework for his exploration of perception. He holds perception to be the key to the interplay between us and the world, and acknowledges the concept of the gestalt as central to the understanding of perception.

“It is impossible to decompose a perception into a collection of sensations because in perception, the whole is prior to the parts—and this whole is not an ideal whole. (...) The perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion for example; it is rather a totality open to a horizon of indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question. Perception is thus paradoxical. The perceived thing is in itself paradoxical: it exists only insofar as someone can perceive it.”<sup>5</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty, perception is a dialectical relationship between the world and us: it is what makes the world appear to us, and at the same time that which reveals to us that we are in the world. He emphasizes the body to an extent that far surpasses the gestaltists; we perceive with our bodies, the body is the way through which we enter the world.

The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty has often been described as one of ambiguity.<sup>6</sup> He agrees with Gestalt theory that we always perceive the world as

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<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty: “The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences”, in Edie (1968), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Alquié (1947), Lefebvre (1956), de Waelens (1951).

a figure against a background, and that it is impossible to determine which direction our perception will take. As the ambiguous figures, the gestalt switches, our relationship to the world is equally ambiguous and open. There is always room for multiple interpretations, the world is fundamentally open to us, as we are open to the world. As we enter a field of meaning, we have the possibility to reinterpret or redefine the meaning given at each given instant, both in the world and in ourselves. Meaning, this category so fundamental for the Gestaltists and Merleau-Ponty, is in the hands of the latter always ambiguous. By ‘ambiguous’, it should be noted, he does not intend a pejorative sense like ‘vague’, ‘dubious’, ‘deceptive’ or ‘equivocal’, rather fundamental openness. It is this openness that he finds confirmed in Gestalt psychology, although he complains that they do not draw the philosophical consequences of their findings—this is his attempt to explicate in his work.

In the discussion following Merleau-Ponty’s inaugural speech at the College de France, M. Parodi objected: “I would be tempted to say that the body is more important for sensation than for perception,” to which Merleau-Ponty replied: “Can they be distinguished?” His point, which he shares with the gestaltists, is that they cannot; we perceive in wholes, not in elementary sensations—hence, the body acquires a much more central role in philosophy and epistemology than earlier assumed. In a text published posthumously, he describes his own project thus: “The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind. I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in the body and its world, going against doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness. These philosophies commonly forget—in favour of a pure exteriority or of a pure interiority—the insertion of the mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relation which we entertain with our body and, correlatively, with perceived things.”<sup>7</sup>

Now, at this point, an objection is likely to be made: Is not this position simply a return to a prerational or precognitive world? And is it not therefore a

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<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty: “An unpublished text by Merleau-Ponty: A prospectus of his work,” in Edie, pp. 3–4.

reactionary element in this philosophy? Is not the characteristic trait of any thought process precisely to make distinctions and to divide the world into operational categories, rather than holding on to an all-embracing synthesis? This question was raised in Merleau-Ponty's lecture in connection to the completion of *Phenomenology of Perception*. His answer was that it is not an expression of antirationality to investigate the roots of rationality. "The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence."<sup>8</sup> To make a phenomenological analysis of perception is a gain for rationality, even if it is a precondition for rationality itself. His thesis is not an attack on rationality, but, as he said, "an attempt to bring it down to earth."<sup>9</sup> It is a result of the emergence of phenomenology as a philosophical doctrine, which could not have arisen before the emergence of science, but is a reflection of science itself.

Like Descartes in his philosophical meditations, Merleau-Ponty raises the question of the basis of our knowledge, the firm foundation to build upon, of which there can be no doubt. Descartes found this basis through the principle of doubt, where he deduced *cogito ergo sum*. But Merleau-Ponty states that this principle is presupposing a line of reflective thought at a level that can only be acquired after a long time of *already being in the world*. And the fundamental relationship with our world is not one of "I think" but "I can", a way of experiencing the world as a body—the long phase of getting to grips with the world physically is thus a neglected theme in philosophy; childhood is for instance scarcely mentioned.

The purification of objective thought when applied in the domain of psychology, whether by behaviorists or structuralists, make faulty presuppositions on several points, according to Merleau-Ponty: They presuppose that the objects we see in the world is perceived first and foremost as pure sensations, thereafter as meaningful objects. This viewpoint had Wertheimer opposed some thirty years earlier by claiming that we perceive the

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<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty: "The Primacy of Perception" in Edie, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

world in wholes, and therefore the positivists are really constructing a myth of sensations as our primary source connection to reality.

### **The knowledge of the body**

Like the Gestaltists before him, Merleau-Ponty criticized the Cartesian view of an absolute distinction between subject and object, the classical dichotomy of mind and matter, consciousness and things.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on the Gestaltist work of Gelb and Goldstein on war victims, he analyzes the relationship between our body and the surroundings to express the critique. The body is a whole, with senses, limbs, cognition, freedom; everything is interrelated, like a gestalt. The “phantom limb” that occurs in people having undergone an amputation is in Merleau’s view an expression of the body as our existence and being-in-the-world. If a limb is amputated, the body will not necessarily abandon its way of experiencing the world—it will not give up its way of perceiving the world as full of possibilities for the two arms, even though one is in fact lost. I am conscious of the world via my body and of my body via the world.

Why is the body so important? Because we perceive with our bodies: perception is to inhabit time and space with our bodies. We are bodies-within-the-world. We are not simply in time or space like any other object, we live time, we live space, they are both features of our bodies. That the body inhabits time and space means that we can extend ourselves in these categories, we can outstretch our bodies and transcend the limits of time, and we can change our mode of being-in-the-world, by appropriating and acquire things around us. Thus, the things are no longer simply objects, since they become part of us and we extend ourselves in them:

“The blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it

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<sup>10</sup> This also implied a critique of his friend Sartre’s dualism between the for-itself [*pour-soi*] and the in-itself [*en-soi*] in *L’être et le néant*.



through the position of objects than of the position of objects through it.”<sup>11</sup>

The body creates a surrounding environment of utilities and objects, that is at once no longer simply objects, since they are part of the form we give to our lives. The subject of perception is the body, the body that unfolds in the world and reveals the world to us. And this bodily knowledge that is always tacitly part of any piece of literature or science, means that each construction of a scientific truth will imply a forgetting or tacit assumption of the bodily knowledge that we are. As an example, habits manifest themselves in our bodies as sediments of knowledge, bodily knowledge that cannot be explicated, only lived:

“A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and things which might break it off. She feels where the feather is, just as we feel where our hand is. If I am in the habit of driving a car, I enter a narrow opening and see that I can ‘get through’ without comparing the width of the opening with that of the wings, just as I go through a doorway without checking the width of the doorway with that of my body. The hat and the car have ceased to be objects with a size and a volume which is established by comparison with other objects.”<sup>12</sup>

This perspective on technology links all forms of tools to a bodily experience, every technology is seen as having the possibility of changing and extending our mode of being-in-the-world, increasing the potential of *le corps propre*.<sup>13</sup> A modem-connected computer becomes, following this line of thought, a bodily extension, giving us the possibility *to do things in new ways*— I can pay my bills without going to the bank, I can download articles and books without going to the library, and I can communicate with other people in other parts of the world without travelling. This is a technology that gives us the sense of outstretching our bodies across distances never before realizable in an instant,

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<sup>11</sup> PP, pp. 167 [143]

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s concept which signifies both ‘the body proper’ and ‘the body as my property’, *my* body.

a bodily victory over the limits set by time and space, by the mere pressing of fingertips.

Furthermore, our history and social situation embeds in our bodies and become parts of who we are, this is what makes Merleau-Ponty's concept of a learning body so important to Bourdieu. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is very much in line with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and this passage, from the concluding chapter on freedom in *Phenomenology of perception* anticipates the habitus-concept:

“All explanations of my conduct in terms of my past, my temperament and my environment are therefore true, provided that they be regarded not as separable contributions, but as moments of my total being, the significance of which I am entitled to make in various ways, without it ever being possible to say whether I confer their meaning upon them or receive them from them. I am a psychological and historical structure, and have received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style.”<sup>14</sup>

### Merleau-Ponty and scientific knowledge

The starting point for Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is that any theoretical interpretation of entities in Nature or in psychology based on empiricist, positivist or rationalist principles struggles with the problem of eliminating the writing subject: The objective analyses are written by someone, a perceiving subject. The claim to objectivity is falsely founded as long as the analysis and understanding of perception is inadequate. The basis of all cognition, the matrix of both science and philosophy lies in the world as perceived or experienced, with all its subjective and objective features, therefore the *Phenomenology of Perception* was an attempt at contributing to the fundament of both the sciences of man and philosophy:

“It must be shown that science is possible, that the sciences of man are possible, and that philosophy also is possible. The conflict (*divergence*) between systematic philosophy and progressive knowledge or science must cease.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp 455.

<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty: “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man”, [*Le sciences de l'homme et la phénoménologie*, Paris 1961] in J. M. Edie(ed.) 1968: *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays* [by Merleau-Ponty]p. 44.



Merleau-Ponty insists that we are always *already* in the world, before any reflection begins. Our-being-in-the-world is the starting point for all knowledge, including the scientific. The ‘view from nowhere’ or the objective gaze from the observer from Mars that is the ideal in positivist science, is thus a construct, made by someone already in the world—a construct that tacitly involves the notion of an all-encompassing consciousness; the objective look is a look from above us all:

“Scientific points of view, according to which my existence is a moment of the world’s, are always both naïve and at the same time dishonest, because they take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me. To return to the things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learned beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.”<sup>16</sup>

All knowledge, including the scientific, is rooted in Man’s entering into a dialogue with the world. Our existence is like a question the world replies to. In the scientific discourse, this dialogue is of a special kind, since the scientist keeps a distance from the subject matter, in order to purify the subject from the fullness of the world. The scientist is, however, the same who was fused with the world before becoming a scientist, and who becomes again fused with the world when not doing science. What is the relationship between those two modes of being? The purification and correction of the everyday experience and the regular and precise behaviour is necessary in order to get a clear and undisturbed picture of the subject matter—it is, as the Gestaltists said, an

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<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. ix. This might seem as rather slogan-type anti-scientific rhetoric, but it is important to keep in mind that Merleau-Ponty’s attitude towards science was itself ambiguous: his references are in fact mostly to ‘scientific’ experimental-psychological literature, not pure philosophy, and he himself display the familiarity of this discourse on nearly every page. His image is therefore that he is making a contribution to science; he wants to further the psychological science in the right direction by pointing to the insufficiencies in the theoretical and ontological basis—the basis of all science, perception.

organization, in order to perceive the relevant parts of the whole structure involved. However, this might lead to the illusion that only the scientific view is 'real', that reality only is really known through science. This is the view of *scientism*, that Merleau-Ponty opposes. He is thus not criticizing science *per se*, but only science as ideology, and especially when this enters the science of psychology, which is his main subject.

When we want to make psychology scientific, can we forget the diverse layers of meaning in each given situation, the codes of significance that make people act? Behaviorism tried to solve this problem by only referring to the behavior, not the mind or inner immeasurable entities—by objectivizing behavior, psychology could be an objective science, and also a causal science, given Pavlov and Watson's stimulus-response conditioning theory. Merleau-Ponty is not completely unsympathetic towards this theory, since he himself holds that there is a unity between the mind and behavior—since he regards Man as a whole, the notion of studying corporal behavior in psychology is not in itself a bad idea. The critique that Merleau-Ponty explicates in *La structure de la conduite* is that there is no way of purifying elements of behavior without its embeddedness in meaning. He follows the Gestalt critique of this position, that behaviorism does not solve the problem of intention. Like in the figure-ground perception, where it was shown that there is no way of determining what will be perceived as figure or ground, the same thing goes for behavior. What stimuli we respond to is determined by the direction of our mode of being-in-the-world, we perceive with our whole bodies and direct our response to the certain forms of stimuli that are appropriate for us. The body is a *Gestalt*, as Merleau-Ponty concludes. But can a study which includes a notion of meaning be scientific? Is not this category one that can never be objectivized, always full of immeasurable subjectivity? Yes it is, according to Merleau-Ponty, but this is precisely the character of all human enterprises—the indeterminateness and openness.

### **Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in light of Gestalt theory**

There are many differences between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and that of Sartre, perhaps chiefly in style and temperament, but also in content and

intentions, and I will investigate some of them here, in the light of Gestalt theory. How can the problem of Gestalt shed light on the differences of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre?

Sartre too made extensive use of Gestalt psychology and the principle of form and background in his philosophy, a good example is one of the most well-known paragraphs of *Being and Nothingness*, the absent Pierre. In an elegant way, Sartre here shows how *a lack* can be organized as a form, against the background of the existing perceptual field. I have an appointment with Pierre at four o'clock. I am a quarter of an hour late, Pierre is always punctual. But he is not there.

“It is certain that the café by itself with its patrons, its tables, its booths, its mirrors, its light, its smoky atmosphere, and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers, and footsteps that fill it—the café is a fullness of being. And all the intuitions of detail that I can have were filled by these odors, these sounds, these colours, all phenomena that have a transphenomenal being. We seem to have found fullness everywhere. But we must observe that in perception, there is always the construction of a figure on a ground. No one object, no group of objects is especially designed to be organized as specifically either ground or figure; all depends on the direction of my attention. When I enter this café to search for Pierre, there is formed a syncretic organization of all the objects in the café, on the ground of which Pierre is given as about to appear. This organization of the café as the ground is an original nihilation. Each element of the setting, a person, a table, a chair, attempts to isolate itself, to lift itself upon the ground constituted by the totality of the other objects, only to fall back again into the undifferentiation of this ground; it melts into the ground. For the ground is that what is seen only in addition, that what is the object of a purely marginal attention. Thus the original nihilation of all the figures that appear and are swallowed up in the total neutrality of a *ground* is the necessary condition for the appearance of the principal figure, which is here the person of Pierre.”<sup>17</sup>

There are no lacks in perception—nothingness *is not*, apart from on the ground of our expectations. This excerpt also shows Sartre's use of the Gestalt theory on perception on several levels: even a non-presence, a lack, can be perceived

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<sup>17</sup> EN, p. 43, BN, pp. 9–10.

as a figure on a ground. The café becomes the background for a lack. Even though we objectively see things, we are concerned with finding Pierre as a figure, and indeed he becomes one: the lack of Pierre stands out from the background of the café's fullness, the things in the café become a grey mass of non-Pierres background. The figure-ground principle is for Sartre a fundamental feature of our perception, which means that it is an essential way of our apprehending and being in the world. It is a basic characteristic of our existence, and is a theme that runs throughout his work of the phenomenological ontology. By using this metaphor, he makes the negation emanate as something substantial, we can almost feel the absence as a presence. But Sartre uses these examples to stake a more radical claim: negation is not only a linguistic category, it emanates from *consciousness as nothingness* and "haunts being."<sup>18</sup> Negativity arises with the human consciousness, because consciousness is itself a nothing. It is directed towards things, as if seeking the stability it lacks. The act of negation becomes the foremost feature of consciousness for Sartre; consciousness is an actively negating no-thingness, that through this negating act gives birth to a world.

Against Sartre's claim that Being-in-itself and for-itself never could unite, Merleau-Ponty argued quite the contrary: we see this unification in our daily lives, every day. In order to explain this, he often referred to the 'hybrid' situations that Bruno Latour recently also describes, where the distinction between Man and Thing is blurred. The example of the blind man and his white cane shows that this device, for the blind man a technology for orientation in the world, becomes an extension of his own body. It becomes a part of his bodily experience, part of his abilities, and his way of mobility, in short: the blind man and the cane becomes a gestalt; he extends himself in the cane and the cane becomes an extension of him. As a manifestation of their differences on the point of the ontological dualism, Merleau-Ponty attached a foreword to his second edition of *La structure du comportement*, written by Alphonse de Waelhens, where Sartre is criticized for not only upholding the cartesian distinction between *res extensa* og *res cogitans*, but in fact aggravating it: Descartes' two substances at least had the thing in common that

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<sup>18</sup> EN, p. 46, BN, p. 16

they were both substances. Sartre's model, on the other hand, makes consciousness into a complete nothingness.<sup>19</sup> Sartre would not agree that this corresponded to the mind-body dualism of Descartes, however, as we can see in what he writes about the body:

“The body is nothing other than the for-itself; it is not an in-itself *in* the for-itself, because that would solidify everything. But it is the fact that the for-itself is not its own foundation, and this is expressed by the necessity of existing as an engaged, contingent being among other contingent beings. As such the body is not distinct from the *situation* of the for-itself, to exist and to be situated are one and the same; on the other hand, the body is identified with the whole world inasmuch as the world is the total situation of the for-itself and the measure of its existence.”<sup>20</sup>

The body is my facticity, that which binds me to the world as a concrete, contingent being. But I never feel the body as a constraint of my freedom, apart from exceptional situations which reminds me of my facticity, i.e. when I am exhausted or ill—but these are situations that reveal to us our usual sense of transcendence and nihilation of the body. The for-itself is thus both consciousness and body, and the problem of the body must be viewed in a dialectic of utility and facticity. Still, Merleau-Ponty thought the whole dialectic of in-itself and for-itself was too exaggerated. Already in his review of *L'être et le néant* in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945, he expressed scepticism towards Sartre's “too antithetical” views,<sup>21</sup> and he largely repeated this critique in his later works *Signes* and *L'Aventures de la dialectique*. In the preface to *Signes*, he writes about his view on Sartre's opposition between the terms “being and nothingness”:

“As a matter of principle, fundamental thought is bottomless. It is, if you wish, an abyss. This means that it is never *with* itself, that we find it next to or setting out from things thought, that it is an opening out—the other invisible extremity of the axis which connects us to ideas and things.

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<sup>19</sup> Alphonse de Waelhens: “Une philosophie de l'ambiguïté”, preface to Merleau-Ponty: *La structure du comportement*, p.vi.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre: *L'être et le néant*, p. 356 [BN, p.309.]

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “La querelle de l'existentialisme”, in *Sens et non-sens*, pp.89—90. Originally published in *Les Temps Modernes*, 1re année, no.2, nov.45.

Must we say that this extremity is *nothing*? If it were “nothing”, the differences between the nearby and the far (the contour lines of all existence) would be effaced before it. Dimensionality and opening would no longer make sense. The absolutely open would be applied completely to an unrestricted being; and through the lack of another dimension from which it would have to be distinguished, what we call “verticality”—the present—would no longer mean anything. It would be better to speak of “the visible and the invisible,” pointing out that they are not contradictory, than to speak of “being and nothingness.”<sup>22</sup>

These alternative terms, the visible and the invisible, became the title of the work Merleau-Ponty left unfinished by his death, and shows how perception remained a central theme throughout his authorship, as a mediation between consciousness and things, subject and object.

There are few examples of Sartre answering direct criticisms like those coming from Merleau-Ponty. In Sartre’s memorial article on Merleau-Ponty in the special number of *Les Temps Modernes*,<sup>23</sup> he says that Merleau-Ponty sought a philosophical “anchorage” [*ancrage*], and found it in the category of perception. Sartre, however, did not want any anchorage, he wanted precisely to show that our only anchorage is nothingness, and hence, freedom. I am not the thing, but I reveal the thing, as my consciousness project itself towards it, as a project and projectile. To reveal is to negate, and to choose.

Gestalt theory becomes important for Sartre through the principle that it is the direction of our consciousness that determine what will be figure and what will be ground; the things we choose are thus the things we have chosen to be our figures—our tastes, manners, our commodities are all determinations that manifest our particular choice of the world, negating the other possibles as background for the particular *this*. How we perceive the world, what we choose, is dependent on what our project is: this stone is an obstacle or a challenge, depending on my project. I perceive this trip to the mountains as tiring or inspiring, depending on my project—if my project is to keep fit, the exercise will seem good and rewarding, if I want to get to the cabin as fast as possible, the trip might seem monotonous and fatiguing. Similarly, I choose in

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<sup>22</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Introduction to *Signs*, in O’Neill(ed), p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre: “Merleau-Ponty,” in *Situations IV*, Gallimard, Paris 1964, p.195. originally published in *Les Temps Modernes*, numéro spécial, octobre 1961.



the world of things for particular reasons, reasons that can be read and interpreted afterwards as signs. All such signs are for Sartre expressions of a more profound *ontological* choice, clues to understand our *projet fondamental*. The one who seeks fame and fortune, or the one who has chosen to work for a change of structures in society, or the one who wants to create a major work of art, all perceive the world differently from one another. The Gestalt principle is in this way the key to understand the concrete freedom of the other or myself: my surrounding qualities are figures to be seen on the ground of my original choice and project. My tastes, clothes and things are comprehensible by being *my* things, as symbolic qualities and expressions of meaning and choice; thus I reveal the thing through my project, and the thing reveals my project. In this particular way, he continues the Gestalt project of perception and meaningfulness.

Merleau-Ponty did not use the category of a *projet fondamental*, and he did not assign such a grand importance to the category of negativity and nothingness—therefore, he did not hold that we always negate and choose when we perceive. His task was more to understand the puzzle it is that the world as perceived is *meaningful*— we are not condemned to freedom, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, but condemned to *meaning*, and to always *express* something.<sup>24</sup> We are not thrown out in a perpetual state of anxiety, choosing the world from top to bottom, we are in the midst of a world of meaningful wholes. We are *not* free to perceive, choose or interpret the world as we like:

“Hence, as Gestalt psychology has shown, there are for me certain shapes which are particularly favoured, as they are for other men, and which are capable of giving rise to a psychological science and rigorous laws. The grouping of dots

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is always perceived as six pairs of dots with two millimetres between each pair, while one figure is always perceived as a cube, and another as a plane mosaic. It is as if, on the hither side of our judgement and our freedom, someone were assigning such and such a given grouping.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phénoménologie de la percéption*, p. xiv, p.516.

<sup>25</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Ibid*, p.502—503.  
[Ph.P., p. 440.]

The ambiguous figures of gestalt psychology does not imply a complete perceptual relativism, they are rather the exceptions that confirm the rule. The puzzle is not what meaning we choose or confer onto the world, but the fact that the meaning of perception is always already there [*déjà là*], a fact that the intellectualists and realists commonly forget. Merleau-Ponty was more occupied with how we perceive structures around us that insert themselves in us as institutions—and conversely, how we extend ourselves in the things. This was a point that Sartre later acknowledged as a downplayed point in his first work—he had not been sufficiently aware of *la force des choses*.<sup>26</sup> Still, he did not discard the principle of unconditional freedom, he only made deeper investigations into the situational aspect of our freedom in the practical-inert field [*le champ pratico-inert*], society and history. For Sartre, there is no contradiction between being free and existing in a situation with restraints—our situation is the contingency necessary for the freedom to emanate at all, for it to be our concrete freedom, and not just an idea—it is the background that makes freedom appear.

In the aforementioned memorial article on Merleau-Ponty, Sartre stated that the main difference between the two was Merleau-Ponty's much happier childhood. Implying the romantic and more harmonious outlook of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre asked: "What was Merleau-Ponty, if not paradise lost?"<sup>27</sup> This seems to be a characteristic that was not completely alien to Merleau-Ponty either, since he also interpreted the differences between Sartre and himself in light of their childhood experiences.

“(..)there are two ways of being young, which are not easily comprehensible to one another. Some are fascinated by their childhood; it possesses them, holding them enchanted in a realm of privileged possibilities. Others, it cast out toward adult life; they believe that they have no past and are equally near to all possibilities. Sartre was of the second type. Thus it was not always easy to be his friend. The distance

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<sup>26</sup> In the memorial article on Merleau-Ponty, Sartre writes that it was the the book *Humanisme et terreur* that made him jump the most: “En un mot, ce fut Merleau qui me convertit.” Sartre: “Merleau-Ponty,” *Situations IV*, Gallimard, Paris 1964, pp. 215—217

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre: *Ibid*, p. 190.

he put between himself and the conditions of his existence also separated him from what others had to live.”<sup>28</sup>

The one who rejects his childhood and transcends into the future will necessarily be cherishing freedom, while the one who has had an enchanted youth is more oriented towards our roots, and our inherence in things, structures and history.

An important similarity between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, however, is that they both tried to elaborate on one important aspect from the gestaltists: the strict separation of perception and cognition in philosophy *should* be blurred: there is more of perception “in” cognition and more of cognition “in” perception than traditional philosophical tales hitherto have presumed.

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<sup>28</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Introduction to *Signs*, in O’Neill(ed.), p.25.