Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and the Alterity of the Other

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Phenomenology has increasingly been charged with ignoring the alterity of the other. One of the most vocal proponents of this claim, despite being a loosely defined phenomenologist himself, is Levinas. Suggesting that phenomenology invariably considers the other only in terms of their effect upon the subject, rather than in their genuine alterity, Levinas initiates a line of thought discerned as well in the writings of such thinkers as Foucault and Derrida. These thinkers all contend that the exclusion of the ethical other is a major problem for phenomenology.\(^1\) Their common suggestion is that in affirming context phenomenology allows the other to disclose only that which the subject has prepared for. Similar claims have been made regarding the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, most notably by Levinas, and more recently by Cornelius Castoriadis, despite the fact that Castoriadis also holds that Merleau-Ponty’s thought avoids many of the faults that have befallen poststructuralist thought since.\(^2\) While it is perhaps true that phenomenology has not paid an inordinate amount of attention to the other taken as irremediably different, Merleau-Ponty manages to avoid many of the pitfalls commonly associated with phenomenology. To a certain extent this also applies to the problem at hand. While he does not valorize the other in their absolute difference as Levinas and (to a lesser extent) Derrida do, Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy is particularly concerned with respecting the alterity of the other. In order to establish this, I shall examine *The Visible and the Invisible* in light of two main criticisms Levinas has made in regard to his conception of alterity.

The first of Levinas’ criticisms of Merleau-Ponty pertains to his general assertion that phenomenology invariably amounts to an “imperialism of the same.”\(^3\) In “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” Levinas contends that by insisting upon the importance of horizons and contexts, phenomenology either precludes the possibility of something being absolutely other or, if it considers the other, it does so only in terms of a derivative otherness that the subject has already prepared for. Phenomenology hence tends toward being an “imperialism of the same” in ensuring that the other can be considered only on condition of surrendering difference and is unable to thematize genuine alterity. While he does not explicitly relate this critique to Merleau-Ponty, Levinas’ frequent reference to Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of alterity leaves little doubt that he regards Merleau-Ponty as vulnerable to the same critique. Indeed, as will soon become apparent, two of Levinas’ more recently translated texts propound a similar argument in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis.

A related problem with Merleau-Ponty’s conception of alterity, according to Levinas, is that it is excessively positive. Similar to Emile Brehier’s critique some years earlier (albeit with more sophistication),\(^4\) Levinas suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the genesis of the represented other presupposes the
non-indifferent constitution of intersubjectivity. Cathryn Vasleau is among those to have examined these suggestions in detail, but for our purposes it needs only to be pointed out that Levinas' criticisms do not revolve simply around the fact that Merleau-Ponty highlights the non-indifferent aspects of our existence. It is difficult to see how one could suggest that we encounter others with genuine indifference, least of all Levinas. Indeed, Levinas argues that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy actually goes one step further than this, his discontent with Merleau-Ponty's conception of intersubjectivity revolving around the claim that it is sustained by what he terms "an unaccountable affection."

In the process of examining Merleau-Ponty's notion of alterity, I shall address these two related claims.

Before turning to consider The Visible and the Invisible, it is worth recognizing that his earlier philosophy does occasionally appear to efface the difference between self and other. He attempts to legitimize this in various ways, including through a quasi-psychological analysis of the behavior of babies. In his essay "The Child's Relations with Others," Merleau-Ponty suggests, following Lacan, that the child does not distinguish between self and external world in any meaningful way prior to the mirror stage. According to Merleau-Ponty, the infant's relations with others are typified by what he terms "transitivism"; the infant cries not because another discrete individual does so, but as if the former actually were the latter. (PrP, 119) The infant identifies with the other as if they were the same, an identification that, according to Merleau-Ponty, resounds throughout adult life, and in such a manner that self and other tend to encroach upon one another. (PrP, 147)

I shall attempt neither to justify nor to question this psychological thesis here, but in the tendency to collapse the other into the self, it does appear that Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon ambiguity is somewhat diluted in regard to his descriptions of relations with the other. Parts of the Phenomenology of Perception also have an inherently positive emphasis, and it cannot be denied that Levinas' claim that Merleau-Ponty's work is sustained by an unaccountable affection is an understandable interpretation of some major aspects of this work. It seems to me, however, that this feeling of affection discerned in Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy is more a flaw of exposition, and of his preoccupation with refuting Sartre and the conflict inherent in the master-slave dialectic, than of the ontology presupposed by and indirectly involved in this earlier text.

Even in his earlier philosophy, Merleau-Ponty regularly speaks of the paradox of immanence and transcendence, (PrP, 18) and insists that far from being mutually exclusive the two concepts require each other. In elaborating upon the paradox that transcendence is always betrothed to immanence, and vice versa, he makes it clear that "transcendence always contains something more than what is actually given." (PrP, 16) It is this something more that escapes or resists assimilation. The other can never be completely divested of otherness since in immanence is always also some form of transcendence, although a moral problem

nevertheless remains regarding nullifying that alterity. According to Merleau-Ponty, this is a problem posed by life itself, rather than a dilemma specific to or exacerbated by the phenomenological milieu. (PrP, 30) Of course, we all frequently encounter this type of aporia in our relations with other people. If we care about someone enough to attempt to get to know them fully, invariably we find something enigmatic about them that eludes us. This phenomenon of lived experience is certainly not one Merleau-Ponty wishes to deny. On the contrary, even in the Phenomenology of Perception he continually emphasizes the ability of the other to surprise us and to reveal aspects of themselves of which we had hitherto been unaware. As Michael Yeo puts it, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes our capacity to "win from the speech of the other something more and perhaps different than one puts into it"; this provides for the possibility of the new (including the disconcerting) emerging from our experience.

As something of a subject-based philosophy (though I disagree with Merleau-Ponty about precisely how subject-based the Phenomenology of Perception is), much of his discussion regarding the other is expressed in terms of their effect upon the "subject." This kind of philosophy of consciousness is phenomenology's most commonly acknowledged domain, and even if one believes that Merleau-Ponty significantly widens its resources, he nevertheless emphasizes that not only can interactions with the other involve us in a renewed appreciation of their alterity (that is, the ways in which they elude us), the other is also that which allows us to surprise ourselves and to move beyond the various horizons and expectations that govern our daily lives. Dialogue with the other, for example, enables us not only to develop more sophisticated ways of thinking, but to "discover" and be astounded by our own thoughts. (PP, 177) This phenomenon of surprise begins to highlight the ways in which Merleau-Ponty avoids conceiving the other as domesticated by the subject's horizons of significance. Surprise and disorientation disrupt these already acquired meanings and revolve around the ineluctable fact that interaction with the other often differs significantly from one's expectations and from the contexts that are brought to bear upon a situation. In this respect at least, there is in no sense an effacement of the otherness of the other precisely because it is the other's alterity that induces change in the subject. Merleau-Ponty considers this overlapping and transformative interaction between self and other to be vitally important to the extent that one could cogently claim that any absolute dichotomy between self and other is rendered untenable. The other encroaches upon the self because identification and community are already presupposed (in childhood, for instance), but also because, for Merleau-Ponty, alterity is that which literally alters.

In explaining this conception of alterity as that which literally alters, Merleau-Ponty enigmatically suggests that "I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts." (S, 159) This formulation may seem somewhat misleading in that it almost reads like a reinvention of an antiquated ideal-
is— which is exactly what phenomenology is sometimes claimed to be. However, this statement is also reversible; the other must similarly borrow themselves from me, create me with their thoughts, and it is this interactive and transformative element of alterity that remains an enduring focus of his philosophy. These aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s earlier philosophy already seem capable of refuting Levinas’ suggestion that he makes the other nothing but the projection of the subject’s own aims and ambitions, and are significantly expanded upon in his later philosophy, in particular in his unfinished text The Visible and the Invisible.

It is worth noting that in an essay unpublished during his lifetime, Merleau-Ponty describes his philosophical career as falling into two distinct phases: he tells us that the first phase of his work—up to and including the Phenomenology of Perception—involved an attempt to restore the world of perception and to affirm the primacy of the prereflective cogito. In other words, in this period of his work he was intent upon emphasizing an inherence in the world that is more fundamental than our thinking/reflective capacities. The second phase of his work, referring primarily to The Visible and the Invisible as well as the abandoned Prose of the World, is characterized as an attempt “to show how communication with others, and thought, take up and go beyond the realm of perception.” This is important for several reasons, not least that it suggests a major change in direction. The idea that communication with others goes beyond the realm of perception is sufficiently radical to put him at odds with at least a certain definition of phenomenology.

Ostensibly in opposition to this characterization, Martin Dillon has emphasized that these two major periods of Merleau-Ponty’s career are in fact intimately connected. Dillon downplays the significance of statements from Merleau-Ponty such as that just cited, and instead insists that The Visible and the Invisible is primarily concerned with bringing the results of the earlier work, which are often primarily psychological, to their ontological explication. Merleau-Ponty at times suggests the same, (see VI, 176) and according to this type of account, the ontology of his later philosophy was already implied in his earlier works.

While I would agree with the broad outlines of Dillon’s position, there are problems with such a characterization, suggesting that the truth of this matter might lie somewhere between these respective accounts. Indeed, in comparing Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the Sartrean other in his two major philosophical texts, (PP and VI) one detects a significant difference in focus, partially validating the conclusion that his career is indeed characterized by two significantly different periods. In the Phenomenology of Perception he continually stresses that the Sartrean master-slave conflict must always presuppose something shared, and this largely explains the “unaccountable affectation” that Levinas discerns in his work. In The Visible and the Invisible, however, it is no longer the conflict with the other that bothers him about Sartre’s depiction; it is what he takes to be Sartre’s paradoxical refusal to respect alterity that most concerns him. According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre’s “agnosticism in regard to the other’s being for himself, which appeared to guarantee his alterity, suddenly appears as the worst of infringements upon it.” (VI, 79) The suggestion is that far from safeguarding the other’s alterity, the description of the other as forever inaccessible and incomprehensible (as nothing more than a “freedom which transcends my freedom”) actually trivializes it, one consequence of which is that it also artificially renders the other as nothing but a threat. Far from being a merely negative thing, the alterity of the other is too complicated and multifarious to be posited as that which forever eludes us. Such a description also ignores the important ways in which individuals must borrow themselves from the other while being created by the other—that is, the ways in which self and other are partially intertwined.

The Visible and the Invisible, then, contains a tacit claim regarding what a responsible treatment of the alterity of the other consists in, even if Merleau-Ponty rarely considers notions like responsibility in an explicit fashion. His final ontology insists that the other should not be conceived only in terms of its inaccessibility and how it resists understanding. Rather, alterity can be appreciated only in being encountered and in the recognition that there can be no absolute alterity. If absolute alterity is but a synonym of death and inconceivable to humanity, then what needs to be considered, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the paradoxical way in which self and other are intertwined while simultaneously divergent.

Indeed, in The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty is also careful not to fall prey to what has been termed, sometimes disparagingly, the horizonality of phenomenology. He devotes an entire chapter (“Interrogation and Intuition”) to distancing himself from this tendency of phenomenology—which he variously traces to Hegel, Husserl, and Bergson—to subsume all else under the concept of context or background. Engendering a coincidence between self and world (or self and other) is no less antithetical to his philosophical purposes than advocating a vast abyssal difference. Merleau-Ponty asserts that when we are excessively sure—or excessively unsure—of the other, an inadequate apprehension of human relations beckons. For Merleau-Ponty, alterity cannot be reduced to the logic of an either/or. While rejecting a Sartrean view of human relations wherein the other is so transcendent that it can never be genuinely understood, nor does his philosophy reductively ignore this alterity. He suggests: “this infinite distance, this absolute proximity express in two ways—as a soaring over or as fusion—the same relationship with the thing itself. They are two positivisms...” (VI, 127)—neither of which he wishes to associate with his new ontology.

Seeking to avoid the dualistic tendency to conceive of the other either as forever beyond the comprehension of a subject or as entirely domesticated by the subject and its horizons of significance, the final chapter of The Visible and the Invisible proposes an ontology that emphasizes the chiasmatic intertwining of various notions. More important, it describes a chiasmatic relationship between self and
other. Before considering how this chiasm might be envisaged to characterize the
relation between self and other, it is necessary to outline Merleau-Ponty’s general
use of this term and his associated theory of reversibility.

Rather than defending a traditional dualism of mind and body, subject and
object, self and other, Merleau-Ponty argues that there is an important sense in
which such pairs are associated. He does not dispute that there is a divergence or
dehiscence in our embodied situation evident in the difference between touching
and being touched, looking and being looked at, or between the sentient and the
sensible in his own vocabulary. On the contrary, this divergence (ecart) is
considered a necessary and constitutive factor in allowing subjectivity to be
possible at all. However, he suggests that rather than involving a simple dualism,
this divergence between the sentient and the sensible also allows for the possibility
of overlapping and encroachment between these two terms. For example, Merleau-
Ponty has somewhat famously suggested that the experience of touching cannot be
understood without reference to the tacit potential for this act to be reversed. The
reversibility thesis has been explicated elsewhere, however it suffices to point out
that the experience of being touched supervenes upon the experience of touching,
and vice versa, in such a way that we can never contend that we are simply
touching, or being touched, since there is always an embodied awareness of
imminent reversibility. (VI, 147) In other words, we can experience ourselves as
touching only if we also have a recognition of our own tangibility and capacity to
be touched by others. Our embodied subjectivity is purely located neither in our
tangibility nor in our touching, but at their intersection or where the two lines of a
chiasm intertwine. The chiasm, then, is an image describing how this overlapping
and encroachment takes place between a pair that nevertheless retains a
divergence—touching and being touched being plainly nonidentical.

According to Merleau-Ponty, however, these observations apply well
beyond the relation between touching and being touched. He contends as well that
mind and body, (VI, 247) the perceptual faith and its articulation, (VI, 93) subject
and object, self and world, (VI, 123) and many similar dualisms are all associated
chiasmically. He terms this interdependence of various notions the flesh. (VI,
248–51) The radical consequences of this intertwining become obvious in Merleau-
Ponty’s description of the interactions of this embodied flesh. At one stage in The
Visible and the Invisible, he suggests that the realization that the world is not
simply an object “does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with
it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two,
and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched
and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say
that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things.” (VI, 123)

According to Merleau-Ponty, then, this non-dualistic divergence between
touching and being touched, which necessitates some form of encroachment
between the two terms, also means that the world is capable of encroaching upon
and altering us, just as we are capable of altering it. Such an ontology rejects an
absolute antimony between self and world, as well as any notion of subjectivity that
prioritizes a rational, autonomous individual capable of imposing its choice upon
a situation that is entirely external to them (though this is not to rule out the
possibility of responsibility). To put the problem in Sartrean terms, while it may
sometimes prove efficacious to distinguish between transcendence and facticity, or
Being-for-itself and Being-in-itself, Merleau-Ponty thinks that such notions also
overlap in a way that undermines any absolute difference between these terms. In
consequence, Sartre’s conception of absolute freedom in regard to a situation is
also rendered untenable by the recognition of the ways in which self and world are
chiasmatically intertwined—yet without suggesting that the world can be reduced
to us. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty explicitly asserts that what remains unconsidered is
this paradoxical fact that while we are of the world, we are nevertheless not the
world. (VI, 127) In affirming the interdependence of humanity and the “things” of
the world in a way that permits neither fusion nor absolute distance, he advocates
an embodied inherence of a different type. Given that he rarely makes any
distinction between the structure of our relations with others and the structure of
our relations with the world, his descriptions also pertain directly to the problem
of the alterity of the other.

This chiasmatic relationship ensures that in some sense the other is always
intertwined with the subject; Merleau-Ponty explicitly suggests that self and non-
self are but the obverse and reverse of each other. (VI, 83, 160) To present
Merleau-Ponty’s position a little schematically, his later philosophy reinforces that
self and other are also relationally constituted via their potential reversibility. One
example of this might be the way in which looking at another person—or even a
painter looking at trees, according to Merleau-Ponty’s controversial example in
“The Eye and Mind” (PrP, 167)—always also involves the tacit recognition that we too
can be looked at. However, rather than simply oscillating between these two modes
of being, looker and looked upon, as Sartrean philosophy would have it, for
Merleau-Ponty each experience is betrothed to the other in such a way that we are
never simply a disembodied looker or a transcendental consciousness. The alterity
of the other’s look is always already involved in us, and rather than unduly exalting
alterity by positing it as forever elusive, or as recognizable only as freedom that
transcends my freedom, he instead affirms an independence of self and other that
involves these categories overlapping and intertwining with one another, but
without ever being reduced to each other.

However, it is precisely this emphasis upon a self-other reversibility with
which Levinas disagrees. In this connection, it is worth considering two of Levinas’
later essays on Merleau-Ponty. In both “Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty”
and “Sensibility,” Levinas repeats the criticisms of Merleau-Ponty that have already
been ascribed to him, i.e., an imperialism of the same and an accountable
affection. He also imbues them with more concrete content, particularly in relation
to Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis upon reversibility. While Levinas accepts Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of reversibility as they pertain to an individual touching themselves while touching another object—he describes it as a “remarkable analysis”—he is less sure about extending this reversibility to the alterity of another person, as Merleau-Ponty does.18 For example, at one point Merleau-Ponty asks:

Why would this generality [the sentient-sensible divergence] which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies? The handshake too is reversible.... Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly. (VI, 142)

In “Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty,” Levinas considers Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that the handshake is reversible. He asks: “One may especially wonder, then, whether such a relation, the ethical relation, is not imposed across a radical separation between the two hands.”17 Levinas argues that even if the touching-touched relationship between one’s own hands is as Merleau-Ponty describes it, to presume that this also applies between the hands of two people is to make something of a logical leap, and tacitly to reintroduce an imperialism of the same. After all, it seems that the apparent “immanence” of the touching-touched relationship is superimposed upon that which is ostensibly transcendent, i.e., alterity. This is also what Claude Lefort’s critique of Merleau-Ponty amounts to when he argues that the body’s internal divergence between the sentient and the sensible is projected upon the relation with the other.19 According to Levinas and Lefort alike, Merleau-Ponty superimposes the experience of the body upon the structure of our relations with the other, and without due consideration of the differences between them.

Without digressing unduly, these criticisms miss their target. In the touching-touched dynamic that Merleau-Ponty describes, the world clearly encroaches upon the body and vice versa. To characterize this reversibility as immanent is simply incorrect, as the world and others are always already encroaching upon the body. In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty concludes with the words inscribed on Paul Klee’s tomb—“I cannot be caught in immanence” (PrP, 188)—and it is not the case that there is a self-contained experience of the body that can afterwards be imposed upon the problem of others. On the contrary, the alterity of the other and our own alterity, i.e., the touching-touched divergence, are mutually encroaching, without ever being reduced to the other, and also without an ontological priority being accorded to either of them.

Moreover, it is worth noting that Merleau-Ponty does not consider the various instances of reversibility that he delineates—for instance, an individual touching their own hand and shaking the hand of another person—to be exactly the same, as both Levinas and Lefort imply. The various reversible structures he describes cannot simply be conflated, as this would be tantamount to propounding a Hegelian dialectic rather than the “hyper-dialectic” that avoids any final synthesis. (VI, 95) Indeed, Merleau-Ponty explicitly argues that there is a difference between the reflexivity involved in hearing one’s own voice and hearing the voice of another. As he says, “I am always on the side of my body.” (VI, 148) This means that the reversibility involved in touching one’s own hand is not identical to what occurs when I shake another’s hand.19 There is, nevertheless, an isomorphism of function that allows me to encroach upon and perceptually interact with the other when I shake his or her hand.

Dillon and Gary Madison also point out this problem with Lefort’s interpretation of the reversibility thesis, but there is another important aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s account that resists such an interpretation, and which Dillon and Madison do not discuss at any length.20 Lefort’s and Levinas’ criticisms of Merleau-Ponty are also misplaced since they ignore his tacit ethical import. In order to establish this, it is necessary to recall an important passage from Merleau-Ponty’s essay “The Philosopher and His Shadow.” He contends that “I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts. This is no failure to perceive others, it is the perception of others.” (S, 159) Merleau-Ponty argues that the fact that I encroach upon the other in perception—by tacitly putting myself in the place of that which is seen, or by lending the other something of my own tangibility when I touch them—is not necessarily a failure to perceive their genuine alterity.

Levinas explicitly considers this passage and the essay from which it derives. In “Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty,” Levinas suggests “one must wonder whether this way of affirming a positivity in a phenomenon that, at first sight, and from a certain point of view, appears as privation does not require the indication of a new dimension that would accredit that positivity.”21 I shall soon illustrate why Merleau-Ponty considers this borrowing from others to be a positive phenomenon, but it is clear that Levinas cannot understand why the way that we borrow ourselves from others, and create others from our own thoughts, should not be understood as a failure of perception. For him, it indicates that perception cannot get us to the genuine alterity of the other, but on the contrary, remains ensnared in epistemological concerns. Indeed, in “Sensibility,” Levinas again explicitly asks “how can a knowledge in which the perceived is neither grasped nor found in its object, but only lent to it, mean anything but the failure of perception’s very intentions?”22

This reference to epistemology is important and is a persistent theme of Levinas’ writings on Merleau-Ponty. Levinas even argues that in Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the touching-touched relationship, “the order of consciousness is not broken by sociality any differently from the way it is by knowledge, which, joining the known, immediately coincides with what may have been foreign to it.”23
In response to this, it needs to be reaffirmed that precisely what Merleau-Ponty’s touching-touched relationship cannot achieve is coincidence, (VI, 147) nor for that matter can his epistemology. (VI, 121–2) Moreover, Levinas also presumes that Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the handshake remain on an epistemological level, but is this fair? After all, it is not simply an epistemological proof of the other that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy provides, but an onto-phenomenological one which also has an ethical relevance. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty considers this lending-borrowing situation where self and other encroach upon one another to be positive precisely because he is not making a purely epistemological point. Without the perceptual encroachment between self and other that he delineates, an absolute alterity is fetishized (the other is that which resists perception as well as every attempt to thematize it), and the problem of solipsism seems to have entered through the back door. As Dorothea Olkowski has observed, “if there is to be room in the world for others as others, there must be some connection between self and other that exceeds purely psychic life.” Merleau-Ponty envisages this as an ontological necessity, rather than as an attempt to propound a thesis that restores us to the primordial affection that we have for the other.

That said, Levinas is right to be wary of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, at least as far as it contests aspects of his own thought. Indeed, one consequence of Merleau-Ponty’s position is that questions regarding the otherness of the other are rendered something of an abstraction, at least if we conceive of that alterity without reference to the subjectivity with which it is always chiasmically intertwined. For Merleau-Ponty, a responsible treatment of alterity consists in recognizing that alterity is always already intertwined within subjectivity, rather than by obscuring this fact by projecting a self-present individual who is confronted by an alterity that is inaccessible and beyond comprehension. These observations suggest that his thought is misrepresented as indifferent to the alterity of the other, and also where it is criticized for unjustifiably presupposing an affectionate bond with that alterity.

There is, of course, a minimal sense in which Merleau-Ponty’s work does ensure that the other is a part of our system of reference. He emphasizes that the other is always already encroaching upon us (though they are not reducible to us), and in this respect cannot remain a pure other as Levinas seems to desire. But Merleau-Ponty’s distaste for such absolute conceptions of alterity has already been illustrated in relation to Sartre, and for Merleau-Ponty the risk of this overlapping with the other can and should always be there. (VI, 123) His philosophy consistently alludes to the manner in which this encroachment is not simply a bad thing, something to be avoided at all costs. For Merleau-Ponty, interacting with and influencing the other (even contributing to permanently changing them) does not necessarily constitute a denial of their alterity. On the contrary, if done properly it in fact attests to it, because we are open to the possibility of being influenced and changed by the difference that they bring to bear in our interaction with them. This}

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**Ethic of mutual transformation is not an “imperialism of the same” as it explicitly requires that the sanctity of the self must also be breached in any meaningful interaction with alterity.**

While the specificities of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of responsibility toward the alterity of the other remain somewhat unclear, he also explores these ideas in relation to the alterity of a text. In this respect it is worth briefly considering his ultimately abandoned book, *The Prose of the World*. Thus far, I have considered alterity in a fairly restricted and even humanistic sense, the other referring generally to the encounter with another person. Broadening this treatment of the other, however, is a task fully congruent with Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophical project, which at least according to Merleau-Ponty himself involves an ontology that would be presented “without compromise with humanism, nor moreover with naturalism, nor finally with theology.” (VI, 274)

In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty argues that for us truly to encounter the alterity that a text makes possible for us (this applies equally to the difference of another person), we must appropriate—hopefully in not too insidious a way—the annuls of that text. He writes:

> My relation to a book begins with the easy familiarity of the words of our language, of ideas that are part of our make up, in the same way that my perception of the other is at first sight perception of the gestures and behaviors belonging to the “human species”. But if the book really teaches me something, if the other person is really another, at a certain stage I must be surprised, disoriented. If we are to meet not just through what we have in common, but in what is different between us—which presupposes a transformation of myself and of the other as well—then our differences can no longer be opaque qualities. They must become meaning. (PW, 142)

This intriguing and important passage expresses an enduring concern of Merleau-Ponty’s. He suggests that if we are to experience difference, and by implication alterity, these differences must cease to be opaque. The experience of difference as simply a deviation, or something that cannot be addressed within the subject’s frame of reference, is for Merleau-Ponty not yet a genuine experience of the text/other. These differences must first become meaningful, something that “presupposes a transformation of myself and the other as well.” The following passage from the same text makes his meaning clearer:

> In the perception of the other, this happens [i.e., the transformation of self and other that makes difference meaningful], when the other organism, instead of “behaving” like me, engages with
the things in my world in a style that is at first mysterious to me, but which at least seems to me a coherent style because it responds to certain possibilities which fringed the things in my world. Similarly, when I am reading, there must be a moment when the author’s intention escapes me, where he withdraws himself. Then I catch up from behind, fall into step, or else I turn over a few pages and, a bit later, a happy phrase brings me back and leads me to the core of the new significations, and I find access to it, through one of its “aspects”, which was already part of my experience. (PW, 142–3)

This significant passage repeats the suggestion that “the book really teaches me something,” “the other person is really other,” only when difference is reintegrated as meaningful difference. What is the distinction here, one might well ask, and how is difference to become meaningful? It seems to describe the simultaneous apprehension of what is mysterious as nevertheless a coherent and conceivable mode of existence and, more significantly, it is in the very disruption of the effort to comprehend that meaning resides. The meaning of the other ceases to be opaque in surprise and disorientation. This paradoxical sentiment reinforces that Merleau-Ponty clearly wants to encourage that which resists preconceived expectations.

At the same time, however, he wishes to avoid making the other forever inaccessible. It might therefore be asked in what sense his other is genuinely other. If we take the notion of the other to imply being entirely independent and separate, it seems that Merleau-Ponty does not affirm this otherness and does not accord this absolute alterity the respect that it warrants. But is this really the way that we encounter otherness? Arguably, Merleau-Ponty replaces this notion of the independence of the other with the idea of their interdependence. The question is whether Merleau-Ponty’s definition of the other is closer to the mark than some more recent conceptions of alterity, including those of Levinas and Derrida. For Merleau-Ponty, the other is not entirely separate from us and fetishized in its externality, yet nor is it constituted by us in any respect. The other retains its difference as well as its capacity to shock and break open the horizons of the same. There is, however, an enduring insistence that this difference can and should be encountered by (paradoxically) the actual transformation of this difference—that is, not the ceasing to be different, but the ceasing to be absolutely different, and the breaching of the conception of self and other as discrete and unrelated entities.

Merleau-Ponty’s implication that responsibility toward the other consists in maximizing these transformational opportunities is genuinely insightful. We are now in a position to see why his conception of alterity does not succumb to Levinas’ critique. An imperialism of the same would be any totalizing system of judgment (be it personal, philosophical, or political) that ensures that the other may gain entry into a particular world perspective only on condition of surrendering its difference. What I have endeavored to illustrate is that for Merleau-Ponty the other is truly other only if it gains entry into this world perspective by altering this totalizing system precisely on account of its difference. This is the ethics that his ontology of the flesh tacitly presupposes, a position importantly different from those of Sartre, Levinas, and Derrida. Difference is not encountered by preserving it untouched, like a specimen in a jar. Rather, difference and alterity are truly experienced only by an openness that recognizes that despite all of the undoubted differences that we encounter, there is always something shared that allows difference to be conceivable at all. This is an effort not to reintegrate difference into sameness, but to transform the notions of self and other in any attempt to behave responsibly toward the alterity of the other.

Texts of Merleau-Ponty and abbreviations:


Notes

1. This essay will consider Levinas’ criticisms of phenomenology as they are expressed in his essays “Meaning and Sense” and “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” in Collected Philosophical Papers (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977). Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, Michel Foucault’s The Order of Things also expresses a reasonably similar discontent with phenomenology’s treatment of alterity. See Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human


4. In The Primacy of Perception, Merleau-Ponty discusses Brehier’s criticism that his phenomenology can speak of the other only in terms of its relations with us (that is ethically), and not as “this person who suffices to himself.” Without digressing unduly, Merleau-Ponty’s response is essentially that we never encounter this other who suffices to himself, but always an ethical other. (PrP, 28)


6. Ibid., 64.


8. In The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty rejects his earlier philosophy for presupposing a subjective, or philosophy of consciousness type base, (VI, 183) but it is also worth bearing in mind his suggestion in the Phenomenology of Perception that “if the perceiving I is genuinely an I, it cannot perceive a different one; if the perceiving I is anonymous, the other which it perceives is equally so.” (PP, 356) While phrased in a negative manner, Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest that the ambiguity of human perception requires a subject that cannot be identical with itself (self-present). It is a philosophy whose “subjective orientation” is already in the process of being problematized. It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty is often overly harsh in his retrospective accounts of his earlier work.

9. This quotation, as well as Merleau-Ponty’s more general claim regarding these two distinct periods of his work, can be found in an essay unpublished during his lifetime and subsequently titled “An Unpublished Text by Merleau-Ponty.” It is included in Fisher’s collection of Merleau-Ponty’s work. See Fisher, ed. The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty (New York: Harcourt, 1969), 367–8.


11. While deserving of consideration, Dillon is rather selective in his choice of material; he ignores the more radical aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s “Working Notes.”


13. Of course, Merleau-Ponty’s Humanism and Terror and Adventures of the Dialectic imply what political responsibility might entail in their rather merciless criticisms of Sartrean politics. Claude Lefort also uses Merleau-Ponty in order to explicate some key aspects of his own politics of responsibility. (See Lefort, Democracy and Political Theory, trans. Macey [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988]) The point, however, is that while Merleau-Ponty does have this significance in regards to issues of responsibility, he rarely makes them explicit himself.

14. Merleau-Ponty’s less absolute conception of freedom is also evident in the final chapter of the Phenomenology of Perception.


19. As well as problematizing the claims of Lefort, this also challenges the position of James Phillips, who argues that Merleau-Ponty very rarely makes any distinction between the structure of our relations with others and the structure of our relations with the world. See Phillips, “From the Unseen to the Invisible,” 80.

20. Madison and Dillon both argue that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of reversibility is not simply about the immanent projection of the touching-touched divergence upon the rest of the world (as they rightly suggest Lefort is committed to arguing). See Madison, “Flesh as Otherness,” and Dillon, “Ecart: A Reply to Lefort’s ‘Flesh and Otherness’” in Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty, 21, 28.

