

Merleau-Ponty, Theology and GOD

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ABSTRACT

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Somewhat surprisingly, a number of scholars have recently claimed to find an implied theology in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. This surprising because the author does not state anywhere in the body of his work that he seeks to align his philosophy with a theology, in fact he states just the opposite, as we shall see. While it is true that Merleau-Ponty does dialogue with certain views of Christianity, and while it is true that he does argue for a religion that treats the divine as "horizontal" rather than "vertical," that is, as part of human life rather than beyond it, the sympathetic goal of his reflection here is to suggest a Christianity that is more humane and less dogmatically hierarchical, that is more centered in human experience rather than an absolute other. His goal here is certainly not to claim this theology as an essential part of his philosophy. As he says, the role of the philosopher should not be to prove or disprove the existence of God but to consider what God means to human beings in the movement of history. A number of Merleau-Ponty's own texts will be consider here in some detail along with a variety of texts that claim that his works harbor a hidden theology.

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Introduction

As some commentators have noted, in the last five to ten years we have witnessed the emergence of a number of studies claiming to find an implicit theology in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (Simpson, 2013; Edgar, 2016; Berman, 2017; Williams, 2020; Allen, 2021). While many readers of Merleau-Ponty's works over the last fifty years have reported that his works appear inspiring and even inspired, this inspiration was generally taken to be human and not divine.¹ It is with this latter interpretation that we must agree. Since there is an abundance of different (and perhaps mis) interpretations of Merleau-Ponty work's regarding this topic, let us begin with a long series of relevant and rather definitive quotes drawn from his conference comments and published writings.

I do not spend my time saying that I am an atheist, because it is not a concern, and because doing so would transform an entirely positive philosophical consciousness into a negation. But if, at the end of the story, someone asks me about it, I say 'yes'. (Merleau-Ponty, 2007: 238)²

In truth, the question for a philosopher is not so much to know *if* God exists or does not exist, if the proposition *God exists* is correct or incorrect, as to know what one understands by God, what one wishes to say in speaking of God. (Merleau-Ponty, 1992: 66)

In short, you are simply saying that *I have no religious philosophy*. I think it is proper to man to think God, *which is not the same thing as to say that God exists*. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 41, my italics)³

I have memories of the religion in which I was raised and that I even continued to practice beyond childhood. This allows us to exchange words that are not devoid of meaning. I say frankly that when I am conversing productively about a moral question, for example, it is with someone *who is an atheist like me*. (Merleau-Ponty, 2007: 238, my italics)

...a true exchange assumes that each person is disposed to receive from the other what can appear true to him in what the other says. It seems to me that we can use this attitude with Christians superficially but not fundamentally, when we are in disagreement on an essential point, like the existence of an infinite thought. (Merleau-Ponty, 2007: 238)

The notion of being an atheist brings with it many historical connotations, which is why I do not talk about it. But all the same, it must be said that philosophy, in my sense, can breathe only when it rejects the infinite thought in order to see the

1. This was frequently mentioned in discussions at the annual conferences of The International Merleau-Ponty Circle.

2. Merleau-Ponty presented these comments at a conference at Rencontres International of Geneva in 1951, in the latter part of his life and career. They thus represent his mature thought. His presentation was entitled "Man and Adversity".

3. Albert Rabil drew my attention to this passage, and many others, in his under-appreciated book (Rabil, 1976: 224).

world in its strangeness. (Merleau-Ponty 2007: 238-239; my underlining; we will see the word “strange” used again below.)

From the moment that I recognize that my experience, precisely insofar as it is my own, makes me accessible to what is not myself, that I am sensitive to the world and to others, all the beings which objective thought placed at a distance draw singularly nearer to me. Or, conversely, I recognize my affinity with them; I am nothing but my ability to echo them, to understand them, to respond to them. My life seems absolutely individual and absolutely universal to me. This recognition of an individual life which animates all past and contemporary lives and receives its entire life from them ... this is metaphysical consciousness ... Metaphysical consciousness has no other objects than those of experience: this world, other people, human history, truth, culture. But instead of taking them as settled ... it rediscovers their fundamental strangeness to me and their miracle of appearance. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 94, my underlining)

Whether there is or is not an absolute thought and an absolute evaluation in each practical problem, my own opinions, which remain capable of error no matter how rigorously I examine them, are still my only equipment for judging. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 95)

Recourse to an absolute foundation ... destroys the very thing it is supposed to support. As a matter of fact, if I believe that I can rejoin the absolute principle of all thought and all evaluation on the basis of evidence, then I have the right to withdraw my judgements from the control of others on the condition that I have my consciousness for myself; my judgments take on a sacred character”--- that escapes responsibility for others. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 96)

Metaphysical and moral consciousness dies upon contact with the absolute because ... this consciousness is itself the living connection between myself and me and myself and others. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 95)

Such a metaphysics cannot be reconciled with the manifest content of religion and with the positing of an absolute thinker of the world. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 96)

At the end of a conference discussion in response to his presentation of “Man and Adversity,” after stating several times that he is an atheist, as we have seen above, the following exchange occurs.

Von Schenck [summary of the German]: Is it possible to deal with the problems within a philosophy without bringing in the term ‘God’?

M-P: If there is a philosophy, it would be just that.

Chair: Then it is possible to do it with others without bringing in the term ‘God.’ Is it possible to discuss other problems with other men, believers or not?

M-P: For me, philosophy consist in giving another name to what has long been long been crystallized under the name of God.

Von Schenk: This is the problem.

End session. (Merleau-Ponty, 2007: 239-40)

Alright, we have a clear statement from the author himself that he is an atheist, that one of the things that troubles him about believers is that they accept the existence of an absolute thought and that they identify their own thought with it. It is not just the case that God is all-knowing but that the believer seems to have access to this absoluteness. (See “internal God” below.) The atheistic philosopher, who accepts his or her ideas as human, as finite, then, has no hope of entering a meaningful discussion, for the believer will never change his or her mind. As we will see below, when Merleau-Ponty discusses what he thinks a true or plausible or mentally healthy Christianity could be, he mentions a Christianity in which genuine discussion can take place, a discussion without absolutes. (See “external God” below.) We also see the author mention that the word “atheism” brings with it lots of historical baggage. Moreover, since this is the case, if a philosophy is identified with atheism, then it can blind some readers to many of its positive attributes. Even more, if a philosophy defines itself as atheist, then it is more theology than philosophy, for it is defining itself relative to a religious belief. Consider Merleau-Ponty’s comment regarding Jacques Maritain’s comments regarding atheism: what Maritain regards as “positive atheism ... comes to appear to him as an ‘active combat against everything that suggests God,’ an ‘antitheism,’ an ‘act of inverted faith,’ a ‘refusal of God,’ a ‘defiance against God,’ but since it is an inverted theology, it is not philosophy, and by focusing the whole discussion on it, one shows perhaps that it holds locked up within itself the very theology it is attacking” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963a: 42-43). Thus, again, Merleau-Ponty does not want to spend time arguing *against* something and by doing so define his own position as a position that is *a negative thought*. It is enough to be vigilant, as he says later in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, as we will see momentarily. However, when he focuses on his effort to develop a positive philosophy, he does so without an appeal to God, even though many of the topics discussed were previously crystalized under that heading.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty states that the role of the philosopher is not to affirm or deny the existence of God but to understand the role of God in human consciousness as it appears in human history. Moreover, as we have also seen, to understand this role does not mean to accept it. Yet, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to approvingly quote Lichtenberg: “it is not necessary that doubt should be anything more than vigilance; otherwise, it can become a source of danger.” Certainly, one of the dangers of doubt is to be too closed-minded. One must remain open to what is unusual, to what is different, to what is “strange,” Merleau-Ponty says quoting Lichtenberg’s use of the word “strange.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963a: 45-46, my underlining) Thus far we see that Merleau-

Ponty is an atheist but that he does not wish to spend time dealing with atheism in his philosophy, for he wants his philosophy to be developed around positive themes and not to be defined by a negative thought. Rather than argue against the existence of the divine, it is enough to be vigilant regarding this topic. It is enough to be carefully on guard about the problems of assenting to the divine, while remaining open to the unusual and unfamiliar, while being on guard about the stubbornness of one's own beliefs, always considering, and reconsidering, the evidence of one's perceptual experience.

Let us turn momentarily to Merleau-Ponty's short essay "Faith and Good Faith," for in this essay he seeks to understand why Christianity took the form it did throughout Western history. Writing about the then-current state of events, he comments about the conservative political orientation of Catholicism and states this was why the working class did not turn to it for help, even though the Church claimed concern for working people (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b:173). In order to understand the roots of this contradiction in the Church, Merleau-Ponty thinks that Catholicism must be understood as maintaining "a belief in both an interior and an exterior God" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 173). The "interior God" is characterized as follows: "'Turn inward,' said St. Augustine. 'Truth dwells within the inner man.' [God] is fully that light which I am at my best moments.' What is evident for me cannot be less so for Him, since it is precisely upon my inner experience of the truth that I base my affirmation of an absolute truth and of an absolute spirit that thinks it ... God is worthy of our adoration no matter what. Let us find our rest in Him. Quietism." The "exterior God" takes the following form: "The Incarnation changes everything. Since the Incarnation, God has been externalized," and for the last 2000 years in the West. God is no longer about internal meditation but about *interpretation* of external messages bequeathed to humanity. Here, God must be recognized by humans in order to be fully God. Christianity, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to claim, tends to sit between these opposing viewpoints, adhering to both the conservative interior and the innovative exterior (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 173-175). This helps us understand Christianity and its contradictory manifestation in mid-20th century France.

Even though Merleau-Ponty is here clearly providing a commentary on the history of the Catholic Church, on what others believe and have believed, and not simply saying what he believes, he does here place greater value on the God of Incarnation, for it is a human God, a God that must be seen in relationship to human beings. As we have seen further above, he has little patience for a transcendent God and the revelation of an infinite thought to a passive human mind, and yet because he thinks the God of Incarnation makes more sense for Christianity, since it makes more sense of what Christians have believed since Christ, and since it should be a Christianity that is politically open to the working class (for this is the context in which he is here writing), does not mean that he accepts the belief himself, as we have seen him say above. In fact, he thinks that the *value of humanity* consists in the ability "to determine the moment when it is reasonable to take things on trust and the moment when questioning is in order ... and to accept his [political] party

or his group with open eyes, seeing them for what they are” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 179-80). Somewhat surprisingly (although perhaps not, given the political context in which he is writing this piece), he here clearly draws a comparison between religion and the political ideas of V.I. Lenin, suggesting that the former should be more like the latter. He means this in the following sense. According to Lenin, the party should guide the workers but it must ultimately follow the working majority. If the party offers a plan that is rejected by the majority, then the plan must be withdrawn. Yet if the majority decides in favor of a particular plan, the individual who voted differently should remain true to the majority, for the sake of the overall good of the party. Merleau-Ponty seems to be suggesting here that the relationship of the Church to its parishioners should be similar to the relationship of the party to the working rank-and-file (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b:180-181). Moreover, this suggestion makes sense if we recall how he opens this brief essay: with a consideration of the relationship between the Church and the working class. Thus, his discussion here is more concerned with the historical and political than the theological. Or, we might say, he was suggesting to the Church a theology that would be less hierarchical and more participatory.¹ Yet this is not a theology that he embraces.

In another context, Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that philosophical criticism, doubt, and independent thought based on our concrete experiences of the world can play a positive role within religion, or, to say this differently, the religious spirit *can* make use of philosophical criticism and doubt. For example, Jacques Maritain insisted that Christianity should continuously criticize its own idols. According to Merleau-Ponty, Maritain even says that “the saint is a ‘complete atheist’ with respect to a God ... who would consecrate not only all the world’s goodness but all the world’s evil as well, who would justify slavery, injustice, the tears of children, the agony of the innocent by sacred necessities, who would finally sacrifice man to the cosmos as ‘the absurd Emperor of the world.’ The Christian God who redeems the world and is accessible to prayer, according to Maritain, is the active negation of all this. Here, indeed,” Merleau-Ponty says, “we are close to the

1. This is perhaps not the most reliable source of evidence, but it is relevant and significant. With the advent of the computer and internet in the mid-1990s, and after teaching philosophy for many years, I decided to pursue a master’s degree in Library and Information Science, mostly as a way to improve and expand my research abilities in the humanities and social sciences. I began, as most students did, with the program’s most philosophical course, the Foundations Course, which discussed the history and basic principles of library and information science. I had many interesting conversations with the brilliant young professor who taught the course, for she had a genuine interest in philosophy, and I had a developing interest in information science. During our many conversations, I would often mention my interest in the works of Merleau-Ponty. After a holiday break, she returned to campus and reported to me that she had mentioned Merleau-Ponty’s name to a high-ranking Catholic Church official at a social event and that, upon hearing his name, he immediately responded: “Ah, Vatican II,” and proceeded to mention that he thought that Merleau-Ponty’s works had significantly influenced the Vatican II Council. Vatican II was well-known for pronouncing a number of “liberalizations” of the Catholic Church, and here is how a National Public Radio (NPR) piece expressed this liberalization: “As a result of Vatican II, the Catholic Church opened its windows onto the modern world, updated the liturgy, gave a larger role to laypeople, introduced the concept of religious freedom and started a dialogue with other religions.” Apparently, the Church official was suggesting he believed Merleau-Ponty’s work had something to do with this liberalization. We can question to what extent this is true, but we can certainly see that the changes mentioned by NPR are consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as a whole and with his specific comments regarding religion. Thus, instead of arguing that Merleau-Ponty was influenced by theology, it might well be more appropriate to say that he had an impact upon it, and this was, in fact, his intent when he wrote about and discussed religion.

essence of Christianity” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963a: 47). As Albert Rabil insightfully says, commenting on the extended paragraph that includes the above passage, even though Merleau-Ponty states that Maritain’s idea of the persistent criticism of idols within Christianity is close to what he thinks would be a more acceptable Christianity, this sense of Christianity is not reconcilable with “a rational concept of God as a necessary being.” Rabil continues his characterization of Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

“So long as the latter [i. e., God as a necessary being] is retained, philosophy and theology cannot come into contact with one another. But if it is placed in abeyance, and if theology will concern itself with the criticism of false idols, then it makes contact with philosophy, for this is precisely the task of philosophy. This, however, raises a problem for theology, for if one chooses this alternative, then it henceforth becomes impossible to say exactly *where* God resides, to say that he is ‘possessed’ by a church. Merleau-Ponty[’s] ... remarks raise the question of whether he has not presented the theologian with an alternative impossible to accept without abandoning his institutional allegiance as well--which would be tantamount to abandoning theology, since all theology takes on meaning only within a church.” (Rabil, 1967: 227, my bracket addition)

Yet, as Rabil seems to be aware, this seems to be Merleau-Ponty’s point: that the Church should very carefully consider what might be its own idols. In other words, the Church should not be so dogmatic, that it should not adhere to an infinite thought, that it should be open to philosophical reflection, which seeks evidence obtained by finite human minds in interaction with the world and one another. In fact, he says as much in *Signs*, one of his last publications.

Will there ever be a real exchange between philosopher and Christian...? In our view this would be possible only if the Christian ... were to accept without qualification the task of mediation which philosophy cannot abandon without eliminating itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 146).

Merleau-Ponty is definitely not suggesting that philosophy should eliminate itself, for this is tantamount to eliminating an independent thought that is grounded in the evidence of experience, that is tested against the world and the experiences lived through by others, in short, it is the elimination of what he regards as reasonable thought, which is philosophy itself. Yet, he seems to hold out hope that the Church would open up its thought to philosophy, and if it doesn’t, then there is little hope for meaningful dialogue between them. Perhaps one way for the Church to do this is to say to its parishioners: pray, read and listen to the teachings of God, but then enter the community and dialogue with others (even non-Christians), to attempt to rest upon some common truths and values. After all, even if God is infinite thought, even if God is absolute, the human mind is not, and at best is an imperfect approximation of the divine, if this is possible at all, for the human mind is primarily formed by worldly experience along with others. Although, as Merleau-Ponty seems to recognize, there seems to be little hope of this. (However, see endnote 5 above.)

We should point out here that Merleau-Ponty regards both the relationship between the interpretation of a text and the text itself *and* the relationship between perception and what is perceived as a *Fundierung* relationship (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 127, 394).¹ *Fundierung* is a phenomenological term meaning founding in a broad and open sense. It means that a text or an object of perception *suggests* or *motivates* certain interpretations but that the interpretations are needed to fold back upon the still ambiguous primary terms to help articulate them more clearly. Several interpretations always remain possible, but some interpretations tend to be more clarifying than others, and it is these that we should accept. Yet, again, none is definitive. None is absolute. It is this philosophical view of interpretation that Merleau-Ponty would like to see incorporated into Christianity, into the so-called Incarnate Christianity, yet which he thinks is unlikely to take place.

Jack Williams (2020) makes a very plausible effort to develop what he reads as Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of religion. He does not argue that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy harbors an implied theology, but that his works suggest how an embodied human freedom may be related to religion. This is a valuable and productive way to view the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and religion, especially relative to those who claim to find a theology in his works, for it is more productive in what it suggests for humanity and is more in line with what Merleau-Ponty actually says. Along these same lines, Rollo May (1953, reprint edition 2009) in his popular paperback book, *Man's Search for Himself*, states that religion needs to develop toward treating its adherents as responsible adults, who are able to exercise their own power to think and value, and not as dependents who are simply told what to believe and do. While May does not here cite Merleau-Ponty, what he does say is consistent with what Merleau-Ponty is attempting to do.²

It should also be mentioned here that Merleau-Ponty's idea of Being is not that of God (Rabil, 1967: 234). He makes no mention of this in his work, and what he says above makes it extremely unlikely that he would make such a claim. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's late lectures on Heidegger reveal that Merleau-Ponty rejects Heidegger's *mystical call of Being* and argues that Being is revealed only through the sensing body, and in three senses: as the Being of particular objects, i.e., as the *existence* of particular objects as they reveal themselves to a perceiver; as the *typical* or *general meaning* of what is *perceived* (the rose reveals its rosiness); and as the horizon of that which is specifically revealed to a perceiver. Being is revealed as a quality of our perceptual world, a quality that is not "other worldly" (Low, 2021a: 123–147, see especially 131, 140–141).

Furthermore, as Rabil points out, there is additional textual evidence that Merleau-Ponty does not appeal to God as a part of his philosophy (Rabil, 1967: 234). In what must be one of his very last written passages, Merleau-Ponty states the following in the posthumously published *The*

1. See also the Donald Landes translation (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 128, 414).

2. See especially the section entitled "Religion---Source of Strength or Weakness?" May does not reference Merleau-Ponty in this text but does so in other texts in other contexts.

Visible and the Invisible: “My plan: I. The Visible, II. Nature, III. Logos must be presented without any compromise with *humanism*, nor moreover with *naturalism*, nor finally with *theology*” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 274). When Merleau-Ponty claims here that he will present his position without compromise with humanism, naturalism, or theology part of what he is claiming is that he will not look to them for explanatory principles. Formally speaking, he is not looking for first principles from which he can derive his position. Here we see his adherence to an existentialism, if you will. He will begin with our lived through experience of the world, with our lived through embodied experience in the moment, with our lived through experience as it opens upon the world as a public field. This experience is not to be derived from anything else. It just is. We should recall here what Merleau-Ponty says in *Nature* regarding developing a philosophy of nature.

We are looking for the primordial, non-lexical meaning,” he says, “always intended by people who speak of ‘nature’ ... Nature is the primordial—that is, the non-constructed, the non-instituted; hence the idea of an eternity of nature (the eternal return), of a solidity ... It is our soil—not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 3-4).

Merleau-Ponty proceeds:

What is called nature is certainly not a spirit at work in things whose aim is to resolve problems by ‘the most simple means’ - but neither is it simply the projection of a power of [our] thought...It is *that which makes there be*, simply, and at a single stroke such a coherent structure of a being, which we then laboriously express in speaking of a ‘space-time continuum’... Nature is that which establishes privileged states, the ‘dominant traits’... which we try to comprehend through the combination of concepts - nature is an ontological derivation, a pure ‘passage,’ which is neither the only nor the best one possible, which stands at the horizon of our thought as a fact which there can be no question of deducing. (Merleau-Ponty, 1970: 93)

Nature simply *is*; it is always already there before us perceptually; it does not need to be explained by something else (say, for example, as a manifestation of God, as some have claimed, which we will see momentarily.)

Within this general experience of nature, Merleau-Ponty identifies three qualitatively different types of more specific yet still general structures: physical, vital, and human. Structure in physics is identified “as an ensemble of forces in a state of equilibrium” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963b: 137), with this ensemble or form identified as a meaningful perceptual whole, to which both the embodied perceiver and the world contribute, with the world doing so more primarily (Merleau-Ponty, 1963b:143). Merleau-Ponty proceeds to distinguish vital forms from physical forms by recognizing that living beings “present the particularity of having behavior, which is to say that their actions are not comprehensible as functions of the physical milieu and that, on the contrary, the parts of

the world to which they re-act are delimited for them by an internal norm,” a norm that “is simply an observation of a preferred attitude, statistically more frequent, which gives a new kind of unity to behavior” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963b:159-160). Following divisions in the biological sciences, he proceeds to identify three general types of behavioral structure: syncretic (Merleau-Ponty, 1963b 104-105), amovable (Merleau-Ponty, 1963b:105-120), and symbolic (Merleau-Ponty, 1963b:120-124). Syncretic form is recognizable as a structure of behavior that is completely pre-programmed by the biological make-up of the species. Amovable form is identifiable as a species behavior that begins to move away from pre-programmed responses to the environment but that still remains closely tied to a practical engagement with its field. And finally, symbolic form is readily observable in human behavior and in the human ability to take up multiple perspectives, to be able to more or less freely vary these perspectives, and, subsequently, to treat signs not simply as signals for a specific response but as bearers of general meaning.

These three general structures (physical, vital, and human) should not be taken as three totally distinct types, since the properties of each structure are not totally exclusive to just that structure, even though they may be that structure’s dominant characteristic. The properties that are characteristic of each structure can be found in the others as well, even if to a lesser degree. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it: “Quantity, order and value or signification, which pass respectively for the properties of matter, life, and mind, would no longer be but the dominant characteristics in the order considered and would become universally applicable categories.” Thus, there is overlapping of boundaries and no clear break between these levels of being. “The advent of higher orders, to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963b: 180), eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders but do not eliminate them, do not completely eliminate their influence. New properties emerge, but as they emerge, they do not simply or completely leave the old structures behind. As the new properties emerge, the preceding conditions are sublimated and integrated into the new structure. There is thus a reciprocal influence up and down the hierarchal scale, with lower and higher structures influencing each other simultaneously, with the physical originally giving rise to new structures, yet with these new structures folding back upon their predecessors and integrating them in new ways.

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy must thus be characterized as a sort of emergent materialism, with life and mind emerging from matter and mind emerging from more complex forms of life. Mind or human consciousness is a sort of global phenomenon that emerges from and remains intertwined with the living body and matter. It certainly must not be regarded as a separate spirit that enters the body from the outside or from above, and, as we have seen, his philosophy of nature makes no appeal to the divine or a spiritual incarnation of the divine in nature or the human body. (Low, 2012: 59-77).¹

1. The above three paragraphs have been drawn from a previously published essay.

As Merleau-Ponty argues, while it is true that living organisms are only physicochemical, and that, subsequently, we cannot appeal to another form of causality, as vitalism does, for example, the understanding of animal life, and of the development and repair of specific forms of life, cannot be fully framed in physico-chemical terms. True, everything that happens with the development and repair of an organism occurs at the physico-chemical level, but it is the global functioning of the organism (with the whole possessing properties greater than the mere sum of its parts), which in humans includes perceptual consciousness, that guides development and repair, not physico-chemistry alone (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 202-207). For example, we see, for certain larvae at least, that casing repairs are variable and also made according to the demands of global functioning (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 178-183), and we see, for certain injuries to the human eye, that the eye shifts to maintain the clearest vision in the center of its visual field, again indicating the demands of the global functioning of the human organism, a functioning that must include a reference to the organism perceptual field, to the organism's perceptual consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1963b: 40-1). This global functioning, Merleau-Ponty believes, is better understood as a property that emerged with the evolutionary development of the human body than by an appeal to the manifestation of the divine or to a spiritual incarnation. As he says in *Nature*, "There is no descent of a soul into a body, but rather the emergence of a life in its cradle, a provoked vision. That is because there is an interiority of the body, an 'other side,' invisible for us, of this visible. It is not the eye that sees. But it is not the soul. It is the body as open totality" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 218; Low, 2021b: 6).¹

Merleau-Ponty does remind us here that this experiential whole remains to be more thoroughly discussed with respect to evolution, for the global functioning of the organism must be more completely understood as emergent, as attached to the physicochemical, yet without being reduced to it. He explicitly states that his study of nature was intended to lead to the study of animality, which in turn was intended to lead to the study of the human body and human life. The human being is a natural being and as such *emerges* from nature. The human being cannot be understood as possessing an animal body plus reason, or as a purely mechanical body coupled with a pure consciousness, but rather as manifesting another kind of body, as "another corporeity." We should understand the human being and its emergence from the animal body just as we have understood the emergence of life from the physicochemical, for in each case we witness a global functioning that is attached but not reducible to other elements. Just as we must understand the physicochemical and life as crossing or flowing into one another (*Ineinander*), so also, we must understand the human body and human life as crossing or flowing into one another. So also, we cannot understand the one without reference to the other. We observe in the human body the emergence of a new type of corporeal functioning, a new way of being embodied; we observe an embodiment that is aware of its surroundings and aware of itself (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 208). More generally, Merleau-Ponty

1. Much of the above paragraph has been drawn from an unpublished essay.

has argued that nature, life, and mind cannot be understood as “three orders of events which are external to each other,” as the Western tradition typically attempted to do, but must be grasped as “three inseparable terms bound together in the living unity of an experience” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963b: 190). Due to his creative and herculean efforts, he has developed an existential theory of nature (nature just *is* and reveals itself via the lived through perceptions of embodied perceivers) that leaves behind the typically exclusive classical categories of nature, life, animal life, the human mind. For Merleau-Ponty, nature, life, and mind are inseparable terms that are bound together in a living whole that must be understood without appeal to naturalism, humanism or theology. (Low, 2009: 284; Low, 2004: 421).¹

Transcendence

There is some disagreement about what Merleau-Ponty means by transcendence, with some claiming that he is referring to a connection with God, and others claiming that he simply means that the world runs beyond our human experience of it. The former interpretation will be addressed below, but we should first consider in some detail what he actually says about transcendence.

Merleau-Ponty discusses transcendence in three primary contexts, one dealing with ontology and temporality, one dealing with temporality and the possibility of a transcendental ego, and one dealing with the relationship between philosophy and theology. The contexts are related, for his discussion of ontology and temporality informs what he says about the self and theology. Let us turn first to the discussion of ontology and temporality.

1. Merleau-Ponty’s ontological discussion of transcendence must be related to his use of Heidegger’s term *ek-stase*, defined as an “active transcendence of the subject in relation to the world.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 70).² When Merleau-Ponty here speaks of *ek-stase* or, if you will, transcendence within immanence, he is speaking about the world running beyond the individual’s experience of it. Even though we must begin with our *lived through* embodied perceptual experience (and not this experience constructed using the concepts of rationalism or the bits of data of empiricism), what is experienced runs beyond this experience both spatially and temporally

1. The above paragraph has been drawn from previously published essays.

2. See also the Donald Landes translation (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 512, translator’s note 3).

See also the original French below, with an English translation provided here.

« C’est cette extase de l’expérience qui fait que toute perception est perception de quelque chose. » (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 103) English translation: “It is this ecstasy experience which makes all perception a perception of something.”

« Au creux du sujet lui-même, nous découvrons donc la présence du monde, de sorte que le sujet ne devait plus être compris comme activité synthétique, mais comme *ek-stase*, et que toute opération active de signification ou de *Sinn-gebung* apparaissait comme dérivée et secondaire par rapport à cette prégnance de la signification dans les signes qui pourrait définir le monde. » (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 504-505) English translation: “At the hollow of the subject himself, we therefore discovered the presence of the world, so that the subject was no longer to be understood as synthetic activity, but as *ek-stasis*, and that any active operation of meaning or *Sinn-gebung* appeared to be derivative and secondary in relation to this pervasiveness of meaning in signs which could define the world.”

« ...et nous sommes ainsi toujours amenés à une conception du sujet comme *ek-stase* et à un rapport de transcendance active entre le sujet et le monde. » (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 506) English translation: “...and we are thus always led to a conception of the subject as *ek-stasis* and to a relationship of active transcendence between the subject and the world.”

See also (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 503) where Merleau-Ponty relates Heidegger’s *ek-stase* to the French *extase*.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 427). In fact, transcendence is part of the very structure of temporality, which, in turn, is a manifestation of a dimension of the world, time. The *ek-stase* or openness upon the world necessarily involves a presence (in the wide sense of a field, with the present remaining centered and closest to us as it fans out and remains in contact with both the past and future and elsewhere) and, subsequently, necessarily involves a time/space moment and place through which the opening occurs. We must understand the experience of presence, then, as a *now* and a *here* opening upon other *nows* and other *heres*, and upon the world and other people. If there is a transcendence within immanence in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, it is this: we must begin with the experience of embodied subjects, but this interior embodied experience is primarily an opening out upon a world that runs beyond it, is primarily a relationship to a transcendent world, with transcendence here meaning that the world is given within the subject's embodied experience but is also experienced as running *beyond* this experience, both temporally and spatially. Within the context of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, transcendence within immanence does not mean that human experience opens out to a transcendent domain, to a domain beyond the physical or to a transcendent God, to a God that is in contact with us and yet beyond us. Merleau-Ponty makes no such reference.

2. Merleau-Ponty also discusses temporality and its relationship to human subjectivity.¹ In fact, in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states that time is the model for subjectivity. As we have already witnessed, time, as *ek-stase*, is a reaching out of itself that maintains a contact with itself, since the present opens to a past and future that are away from it but that still remain in contact with it. The present must therefore be thought of as a gestalt field. The present is a foreground in the context of a past and future, in the natural dimension of time. In the same way, the subject experiences itself as a leaping out of itself toward *the other*, while, nevertheless, remaining in contact with itself. The subject experiences itself as leaping out of itself toward *the other*, as, Merleau-Ponty says, the past and future, other people, and the world. He makes no reference to God as other (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 363-364). In fact, it is because the subject opens to the other, to the world, and to time as a dimension of the world, that the subject's experiences can be synthesized. Since the moments of time, with which the subject's experiences blend, are not experienced as discrete, as sharply breaking off from one another, but as gradually shading into or overlapping with one another, there is no need to speak of reflective synthesis on the part of the subject. Time itself is a field whose moments hold together on their own. True, the subject's experience is needed to more fully be aware of this blending of moments, but it is an overlapping that is a part of nature itself. Or, more accurately, the synthesis of the subject's experience occurs because the subject's lived-through experience opens to and partially blends with a dimension of the world (time) that nevertheless runs beyond it. The subject's awareness is needed to articulate

1. This section is from my "Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of the Self" at https://www.douglaslow.net/pdf.js/web/viewer.html?file=../documents/Merleau-Pontys_Philosophy_of_the_Self.pdf

this more precisely, but the blending would not occur without temporality as a stable dimension of the world. Without the stable world and the stable dimension of temporality that is a part of it, the subject's "moments" of experience would simply appear as flashes of awareness with no connection to one another.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, and in opposition to the modernist notion of a transcendental ego in full possession of itself, of an ego that somehow remains independent of the world, of time, and even of its own embodiment, the continuity of the subject's experience can be accounted for by the embodied subject's openness upon a stable world and a time that is a stable dimension of it. Thus, it is not abstract thought, formed in isolation by a reflective transcendental ego, that creates time and the unity of experience. Rather, it is the cohesion of the moments of time themselves, and the subject's parasitic blending with them, that helps us account for the formation of abstract concepts and essences. In addition, the use of abstract concepts, with the assistance of the language that is necessarily a part of this use, requires this continuity of experience over time. This is how Merleau-Ponty expresses this point in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

...the true act of counting requires of the subject that his operations, as they develop and cease to occupy the center of his consciousness, shall not cease to be there for him and shall constitute, for subsequent operations, a ground on which they may be established. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 134)

And this is how he expresses it in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

Every ideation, because it is an ideation, is formed in a space of existence, under the guarantee of my duration, which must turn back into itself in order to find there again the same idea I thought an instant ago and must pass into the others in order to rejoin it also in them. Every ideation is borne of this tree of my duration and other durations, this unknown sap nourishes the transparency of the idea; behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of the real and possible durations, the cohesion of one sole Being from one end to the other. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 111)

Here again, we see that it is the stable, natural dimension of time (with which the subject's experience blends but upon which it rests) that helps account for the continuity of experience over time and even the possibility of a consistent development of ideas and their stable expression in language. Language must rest upon this continuity, otherwise there would be nothing to connect one expression to another—including even the deferring of one expression to another, since the deferring must occur in time, and must occur in a time that we are aware of and live.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, with respect to temporality, transcendence is part of the natural dimension of the world, for the moments of the past and future transcend the present, run beyond it while simultaneously remaining in contact with it. Even though a reflexive human awareness (which is not lost in the moment) is needed to see beyond just the present moment to the

overlapping past and future, there is no need for a transcendental ego to synthesize the moments of experience.

3. The above characterization of transcendence obviously influences Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the relationship between philosophy and religion. We have seen that he discusses both the vertical ("internal God") and horizontal ("external God" of the Incarnation) senses of transcendence as used in Christianity, and while he thinks that vertical transcendence has not been practiced in Christianity for 2000 years (and that it is also unacceptable within the context of his philosophy) and that horizontal transcendence also makes more sense for Christianity because humans are placed in relationship to God in the world, to a God that must be *interpreted* and that is *not absolute*, he does not hold this belief himself, as we have seen.¹ In fact, the heart of his discussion of vertical and horizontal transcendence in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 39-83) is devoted to history, for his purpose here is to draw a parallel between our human relationship to God and our relationship to history, neither of which, he claims, makes sense as vertical.

Whether it be to worship it or to hate it, we conceive of history and the dialectic of history today as an external Power. Consequently, we are forced to choose between this power and ourselves. To choose history means to devote ourselves body and soul to the advent of a future man not even outlined in our present life. For the sake of that future, we are asked to renounce all judgment upon the means of attaining it; and for efficaciousness' sake, all judgment of value and all 'self-consent to ourselves.' This history-idol secularizes a rudimentary conception of God, and it is not by accident that contemporary discussions return so willingly to a parallel between what is called the 'horizontal transcendence' of history and the 'vertical transcendence' of God. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 70; see also Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 83)

Merleau-Ponty proceeds

The fact is that we doubly misstate the problem when we draw such a parallel. The finest encyclicals in the world are powerless against the fact that for at least twenty centuries Europe and a good part of the world have renounced so-called vertical transcendence. And it is a little too much to forget that Christianity is, among other things, the recognition of a mystery in the relations of man and God, which stems precisely from the fact that the Christian God wants nothing to do

1. On the first page of this essay above, we have seen Merleau-Ponty state the following: "... I have no religious philosophy. I think it is proper to man to think God, which is not the same thing as to say that God exists" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 41). And, he states in another location: "I have memories of the religion in which I was raised and that I even continued to practice beyond childhood. This allows us to exchange words that are not devoid of meaning. I say frankly that when I am conversing productively about a moral question, for example, it is with someone who is an atheist like me" (Merleau-Ponty, 2007: 238).

with a vertical relation of subordination. He is not simply a principle of which we are the consequence, a will whose instruments we are, or even a model of which human values are only the reflection. There is a sort of impotence of God without us, and Christ attests that God would not be fully God without becoming fully man. Claude goes so far as to say that God is not above but beneath us—meaning that we do not find Him as a suprasensible idea, but as another *ourselves* which dwells in and authenticates our darkness. Transcendence no longer hangs over man: he becomes, strangely, its privileged bearer. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 70-71)

Notice that the last sentence (“Transcendence no longer hangs over man ...”) is a reference to Claudel’s thought, although it is clear that Merleau-Ponty prefers a horizontal transcendence over a vertical one, for this is the point he is trying to make with respect to history. History is not properly conceived as a power above or outside of human events and the individuals that compose them. It is clear that he rejects a conception of history that unfolds independently of individual human subjects and that sacrifices individuals for some indefinite future, and he likewise rejects a conception of God that does the same thing. Or, rather, he thinks that this idea of a “vertical transcendence,” of an absolute spirit outside of human experience that is nevertheless experienced internally, has been rejected in Western history for the last 2000 years, as we have seen above. As we have also seen, this does not mean that he accepts what he describes as “horizontal transcendence.” He accepts a history that is horizontal, a history that is made by the individuals that are subject to it but that live it and by doing so take it up and move it in a different direction. And he thinks that a horizontal transcendence would be a truer Christianity, but he does not here embrace this Christianity as a part of his philosophy.

Now, to take up the discussion/debate of Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to teleology more specifically, we see that Blake Allen makes the following statement about Galen Johnson.

[Johnson] argues that the ‘primary meaning of “transcendence”’ in Merleau-Ponty’s thought ‘is horizontal and refers to our reach toward the outside [...] a beyond, therefore, that does not necessarily invoke an otherworldly “above,” but is the thrust of life itself’ (2010: 131). The problem with such statements is that an ‘otherworldly “above”’ is something of a bogeyman and not what is at stake in a theological understanding of transcendence. This false dilemma excludes what is central to Merleau-Ponty, such as his view that: ‘The Incarnation changes everything’ (1964a: 174). Here, he uses the word ‘Incarnation’ in a specifically Catholic sense. At this point, one could note Kearney’s convincing argument that, ‘[l]ike St. Francis, Merleau-Ponty expands the range of natural objects that

can represent God manifest in *this* world (2010: 161, emphasis in original).
(Allen, 2021: 84)¹

First of all, we have seen above that Merleau-Ponty mentions that “the Incarnation changes everything” in the context of a discussion of the change that the Incarnation introduces in history of Christianity, from a vertically transcendent God that is experienced as an “internal God” to a horizontal God that is experienced as an “external God.” He is not stating that this changes everything for him, as is implied by Allen’s statement. Secondly, Kearney’s *argument* is cited by Allen here but not revealed or discussed, nor is the “convincing” nature of the argument. If we look at Kearney’s argument, we see that he mentions that Merleau-Ponty critically points out that “Descartes alienated God from the world and from Nature from the incarnation ... In overturning the Cartesian ontology Merleau-Ponty effectively returns God to this world, a transcendence within immanence” (Kearney, 2010: 161). Given what Allen and Kearney say here, here is what seems to be implied as the false dilemma: either accept Descartes’ ontology (which alienated God from the world and Nature from the incarnation) *or* return to God’s incarnation (immanence) and a meaningful and not merely “dead,” mechanical world. Obviously, rejecting Descartes’ ontology (as Merleau-Ponty does) does not mean that we must accept God’s incarnation (immanence) in nature (and Merleau-Ponty does not). There are, after all, other alternatives—and Merleau-Ponty develops one of them—which reaches its apex in his later works, which states that nature is *alive* with a *meaning* that is not the incarnation or manifestation of God in nature (to be discussed below in detail). Yet, Allen persists in claiming that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical “stance” has a “theological analogue” and that “this would be – approximately – ‘the transcendence-in-immanence’ of the Catholic tradition, as reflected by his conception of divine incarnation” (Allen, 2021: 85). True, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty writes about the Incarnation of the Catholic church, and when discussing the theology of the Church, he does say that the Incarnation, or an “exterior God,” is preferable to the absoluteness of what he refers to an “interior God.” Yet, as we have also witnessed above, this does not mean that he accepts this Incarnation as a component of his philosophy. Again, he is commenting on the history of Christianity, and he does say that the “external God” is more acceptable than an “internal God,” but this view is not claimed as his own. He does not argue that God, through Christ’s Incarnation, is a transcendent given to humans in the immanence of human experience. However, Allen still persists in claiming that Merleau-Ponty’s “stance on the body could be seen as the paradigm for his understanding of transcendence and immanence in other domains. This would include his configuration of the relationships between divinity and nature, and theology and philosophy” (Allen, 2021: 73). First, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of transcendence and immanence (*ek-stace*) does not act as a model for other “domains” because he does not accept the existence of other domains. *Ek-stace*, the

1. Allen here cites (Johnson, 2010) and what we cite here as (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b).

body's opening out to a world that runs beyond the perceiver, the contact that remains at a distance, can be found in other human *experiences*, such as the experience of *temporality*, the experience of *other human subjects*, and the experience of one's own *body* (for one's reflection on one's lived through bodily experiences is connected to them but also separated from them by the spread of time) --- but again these are all *worldly* experiences. Merleau-Ponty does not use the *ek-stace* experience to describe access to a transcendent domain (or a transcendental ego or spirit). He certainly does not accept a divine or spiritual domain, and the only theology we have seen that he would accept is one that is philosophical, and this means for him a philosophy that is grounded in our experience of the world, not in transcendent or "infinite thought." For Merleau-Ponty transcendence within immanence (a phrase that he does not use, for he uses *ek-stace*, defined as we have seen, as an active transcendence toward the world, which is accurately reflected in Johnson's definition above) is about human perceptual experience thrown out into the world. I experience the transcendence of the world as it runs beyond me spatially and temporally. The world's existence is given to me within my concrete embodied perceptual experience in a way that the supposed existence of God is not. The invisible *is* the invisible of the visible. It is the back of the building as I perceive it from the front. It is the horizon of the visible, a horizon whose boundaries edges cannot be fixed or even located. It is an open atmosphere that my experience exists within. It is the orientation of this visual field around the perceiver as the perceptual field and perceiver come together, with the field as the more primary term. My only access to the field of the world is through my own embodied perceptual experience, but my experience opens to a world that I experience as greater than me, as including my experience. Merleau-Ponty does not compare these experiences of transcendence to the supposed experience of a transcendent God or, as others have claimed, to God as a manifestation of a meaningful spiritual orientation in nature (Edgar, 2012: 158, 241).¹

Also, Allen mentions that Dominique Janicaud (2000) draws the distinction between phenomenology and theology by appealing to three principles: presuppositionless, universality, and manifestation. He also mentions that Janicaud used Merleau-Ponty's work as a prime example of phenomenology. Allen goes on to argue that Janicaud creates a false dilemma "between the unconditional affirmation of transcendence and the patient interrogation of the invisible...", a false dilemma between theology and phenomenology. Allen agrees that Merleau-Ponty adheres to the three principles but that his position allows for "porous" boundaries (Allen, 2021, 75). He thus believes that he disrupts Janicaud's false dilemma of either theology or phenomenology, for Merleau-Ponty's work allows for another alternative, for a phenomenology with a religious transcendence, for a phenomenological immanence that reveals a spiritual transcendence, quoting a Merleau-Ponty text as evidence: "Transcendence no longer hangs over humanity: we become its

1. I here cite Edgar's 2012 dissertation because of its availability. His dissertation was published under the same title in 2016. Edgar's comments will be considered in some more detail below.

privileged bearer. (MP 1993b:108)” (Allen, 2021: 75).¹ Allen proceeds to argue that “a rejection of this false dilemma, which wrongly construes Merleau-Ponty’s ‘invisible of this world’ as a pure natural immanence, allows the noteworthy correlation between his phenomenology and a medieval theological aesthetics to come into view” (Allen, 2021: 76). First, as already mentioned, the statement quoted is Merleau-Ponty’s reference to Claudel’s thought. Second, it is clear that when Merleau-Ponty agrees with Claudel that “transcendence no longer hangs over humanity...”, he is doing so in the context of a consideration of what might be more favorable, an “internal God” that is transcendent, or the “external God” of the Incarnation that places God in contact with humanity, even though still transcendent. As we have seen, he favors the latter over the former, but he does not accept this position as his own. In fact, we have seen that he mentions that the latter has been favored in the West for 2000 years, that it is this view that has been at the heart of Christianity for that time, not that this is his view. It is a view that he believes makes Christianity more acceptable (because it is more worldly), but it is not a belief that he personally accepts. Third, when he speaks ontologically (not theologically) about the ‘invisible of this world’ as the invisible of the visible world, this is precisely what he means. He speaks of it as the meaningful orientation or dimensionality of our perceived world, a dimensionality that is the product of coming together of the sensing human body and the patterns of the world. This sense of the invisible “is the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 151). Or, as he goes on to say, “the perceived world (like painting) is the ensemble of my body’s routes and not a multitude of spatio-temporal individuals ----The invisible of the visible. It is its belongingness to a ray of the world...” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968; 247) Again, as we have seen above, and will see in more detail momentarily, this coming together of the sensing body and the surface of the world is why the world is alive and infused with meaning, not because it is a manifestation of the divine.

Let us return to a brief consideration of the above mentioned three phenomenological principles discussed by Janicaud and Allen, and how Merleau-Ponty is a supposed representative of them. First of all, it must be recognized that Merleau-Ponty does not argue for a presuppositionless philosophy. True, he does argue that we must begin with our perceptual experience of the world and not some first principles given to us by humanism, naturalism, or theology. He does argue that we should *describe* as clearly as possible but also that description involves the phenomenological *Fundierung* relationship. Perception suggests specific interpretations but these interpretations must fold back upon the perceived in order to articulate it more precisely. A number of interpretations are always possible but some, or one, may be more clarifying than the others, and this is the interpretation that we should accept. Yet, there is no definitively correct interpretation, for others always remain possible. Moreover, the act of perception reveals a foreground in the context of an

1. Allen here cites Merleau-Ponty’s “Eye and Mind” (Merleau-Ponty, 1993: 108)

open horizon, a horizon always with open future possibilities, a horizon whose boundaries cannot be fixed---and much of the same thing can be said of language. Words occur in sentences and sentences occur in the context of a linguistic and social horizon. This horizon is implied and can never be fully fixed or even fully observed, for when we reflect on it, we can only do so from another point of view within it. Merleau-Ponty subsequently claims that truth always involves the possibility of error, that this is part of its very nature. This means that what we experience as veridical is also experienced as something which includes the possibility of doubt, the possibility that the future may be more accurate, as well as the possibility of “the correction of any possible error.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 295) Secondly, he does not argue for universal truths, for these universals are too abstract. Rather, he argues for a “lateral universal,” grounded in perceptual experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 120, 139). It is as if perceiving individuals were like searchlights that open upon a common field before them. There is something there (the common field of the world) that is shared, but it is illuminated from different angles and perspectives, perspectives that overlap but that are also individuated. There is presence and commonality, but in the context of absence and difference. Thirdly, Merleau-Ponty does not argue for anything like the manifestation of God in perceptual objects. What is manifested in perception is nature. Merleau-Ponty is not a phenomenalist. We do not just perceive phenomena. We perceive natural objects whose existence is made manifest in perception, whose existence is manifested sensually, i.e., with a human, not divine, meaning.

Now, if we consider Janicaud’s false dilemma, as Allen characterizes it, of either phenomenology (as characterized by the three listed principles) *or* theology, it is true that there are alternatives other than the two listed. Allen’s alternative is what he claims to be Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, a *phenomenology* that opens us to the *transcendence* of God, yet for many students of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, for those who genuinely seek to understand Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as a whole, and do so on its *own terms*, it is an existential phenomenology, not a phenomenological theology. Merleau-Ponty’s cautious and provisional phenomenology opens upon (and is bodily intertwined with) a world, not with a spiritual domain. Let us briefly pursue this existential phenomenology as Merleau-Ponty expresses it in both his great middle work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, and the posthumously published masterpiece, *The Visible and the Invisible*, for in both texts he finds an *enchantment* in nature that comes from nowhere but nature, as the natural human body perpetually and sensually couples with it. The meaning of the object, Merleau-Ponty says, depends in large part on how it meets the body and interacts with it. Yet, as we have seen, even though the object exists at the end of my gaze, and its meaning is partially dependent upon the body’s encounter with it, the object also runs beyond my gaze and presents itself as existing in-itself. This means that the thing is present before me, not like the modernist object posited according to abstract principles, but, rather, as “a ‘unity of value’ which is present to me only practically” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 321). “Natural perception is not a science, it does

not posit the things with which science deals, it does not hold them at arm's length in order to observe them, but lives with them; it is the 'opinion' or the 'primary faith' which binds us to a world as to our native land, and the being of what is perceived is the antepredicative being towards which our whole existence is polarized" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 321-22). Natural perception lives in a world of objects that display an independent existence but that also radiate a patina of practical and aesthetic value, and this is because of their interaction with the sensuous, perceiving human body, not because of the incarnation of the divine.

Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, again asks the question that we have seen him ask repeatedly throughout his philosophical works, including the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*: how is it that the object exists at the end of my gaze and thus through the avenues of my body, but also independently, in its own right? His answer to this question in his later work is similar to the answer given here, though deepened and expressed in a new language, the ontology of the Flesh. In the later work, he proclaims that it is because the human body is a two-dimensional being that both perceives the thing where it rests and sees it as an extension of its own flesh---which, in turn, is an extension of the world's embodiment and the world's "flesh," for in lived-through perceptual experience the body's flesh blends with the surface of the world, with its quality and value as embodied. The body is aware of the world and thus touches it from the inside, yet the only way it can touch is through a body that opens to a world that includes it, is to be touched from the outside. The body as perceiving and the body as perceived cross into one another. At this intersection, they partially blend, with the body picking up a greater sense of embodiment from the world and the world taking on the property of sensuousness, almost as if it possessed something like human flesh.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he proclaims much the same thing about the experiencing embodied subject's relationship to the world, for the thing is perceived as transcendent within the "wake of one's subjectivity."

To have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual unfolding...A thing is, therefore, not actually given in perception, it is internally taken up by us, reconstituted and experienced by us insofar as it is bound up with a world, the basic structures of which we carry with us, and of which it is merely one of many possible concrete forms. Although a part of our living experience, it is nevertheless transcendent in relation to our life because the human body, with its habits which weave round it a human environment, has running through it a movement towards the world itself. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 326)

Returning to *The Visible and Invisible*, he states the following.

The flesh of the world is not *self-sensing* (*se sentir*) as is my flesh—It is sensible and not sentient—I call it flesh nevertheless ... in order to say that it is a

pregnancy of possibles, *Weltmöglichkeit* (the possible ... variants of this world, the world beneath the singular and the plural) that it is therefore absolutely not an ob-ject ... This is not hylozoism [the belief that all matter is alive] ... It is by the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body (*corps propre*)—The flesh of the world is of the Being-seen, i.e. is a being that is eminently *percipi* [a being whose primary character is to be perceived], and it is by it that we can understand the *percipere* [the act of perception]: this perceived that we call my body applying itself to the rest of the perceived, i.e., treating itself as a perceived by itself and hence as a perceiving, all this is finally possible and means something only because there is Being, not being in itself, identical to itself ... but the Being that also contains its negation, its *percipi* [its being perceived] ... (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 250-51)

The perceiving human body and the world are so intertwined that they define each other, yet, we see here, with the world as more primary. We understand the world as Being-seen, and this means that we understand the world as Being-*seen*, as perceived through the human body and not as purely in itself, and as a *Being* that is seen, since its primary characteristic is to possess an existence that is capable of being perceived. Now, when considering the human body, we only fully understand the perceiving body when we are aware of its being perceived (its being-*seen*), which is Being's primary characteristic. The *perceiving body* (not a detached *consciousness*) is aware of its *existence* (i.e., that it is in the world and a part of it) because it can be perceived like the *being/existence* of the world is perceived. Thus, embodied *perceptual consciousness* borrows its sense of existence from the world (which is nevertheless brought more fully to light by its being perceived by way of the human body). We are aware that the perceiving body exists in the world because the perceiving body opens upon or experiences the world as a public field that reflects back upon it, almost, Merleau-Ponty says, as if the world perceives the perceiving body as existing from its (i.e., the world's) point of view. Moreover, this can occur because other perspectives are always implied as the body opens upon the world as a horizontal field, a pre-existent field that includes it and is thus capable (possibly, not actually) of looking back at it, a horizontal field as a sort of flesh like that of the human body (but not self-sensing) that possesses a wide variety of possibilities and possible perspectives, and, as we have seen, the world takes on the quality of flesh because in the lived through act of perception there is a partial blending of the perceiving sensuous body with the surface of the world. In our lived through perceptual interaction with the world, perceptual consciousness gets its sense of stable worldly existence from the world, just as the world takes on the quality of being sensuous (like the human body, i.e., of possessing flesh sort of like the flesh of the human body, but not completely, for while the world is sensible, it is not sensing or self-sensing.) Again, we see that the human body and the world are so intertwined that they define one another, yet with the world as a pre-existing spatial and temporal horizon remaining the

primary term, that within which the perceiving body always already exists. Thus, the sensuous quality of the world, its appearance as “sad” or “lively” or “elegant” or “coarse,” etc. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 23), its enchantment or animation, if you will, is neither a primitive animism (that physical nature itself is alive) nor some sort of spiritual vitalism (enlivened, from the outside, by some sort of non-physical force or principle). Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, nature is enlivened because of its symbiotic relationship with one of its own, the human body, which lives in it and is sustained by it from within nature itself, i.e., from that which is always already there in perception.

In addition, to re-quote what Merleau-Ponty said above: “Quantity, order and value or signification, which pass respectively for the properties of matter, life, and mind, would no longer be but the dominant characteristics in the order considered and would become universally applicable categories.” Nature, life, and mind display overlapping boundaries, with no clear break between them, which means that each, even while remaining distinct, can display qualities that are also displayed by the others, which means that nature can appear to have flesh, even though this flesh is not self-sensing. Thus nature, life, and humanity intertwine but not completely, for we must recognize regional differences. Merleau-Ponty’s entire professional life, the entire body of his work, is devoted to creating this new philosophy “without any compromise with *humanism*, nor moreover with *naturalism*, nor finally with *theology*.” Thus, claiming that his philosophy has a theological component *does a disservice to his efforts*, to an enormous body of creative work that sought to escape the misleading solutions of the past, including those with theological claims. Given Merleau-Ponty’s last statement at the conference cited above, we see that he wants his philosophy to deal with topics that used to be “crystalized under the term God.” If we look at this claim in the context of his work, then we see that part of what he wants to develop is a philosophy that recognizes a *meaningful* and *enlivened* nature, and not a nature reduced to a commodity, to a mechanical *thing in itself*, to a “dead” unit of matter, but also wants to develop that philosophy without appealing to God, theology or the incarnation of God in nature, even if this God, as Orion Edgar argues, is already in nature and emerges from it from below---instead of being inserted into it from above (Edgar, 2016: 151, 242-243). While Edgar seems to admit that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy certainly does not need to be interpreted along the lines of Christian theology, he does go on to state that “the field of Christian life and sacramental practice is the one we have seen most clearly implied in his thought ...” (Edgar, 2016: 6-7). Fair enough, Edgar does realize that he is offering one interpretation and that others are possible, yet what he then proceeds to claim is the he will focus on the one that is “most clearly implied in his thought.” The latter part of this statement must be challenged, for what Edgar claims is implied in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, namely, that there is an incarnate “logos in things, a God ‘on the other side of things ...’” (Edgar, 2016: 151). is simply not there, as the above exposition of his works has attempted to demonstrate. Edgar’s argument would be more acceptable if he claimed that by *adding* certain ideas to Merleau-Ponty’s thought, ideas not originally intended by the author, that a certain theology could be

developed. Like the contributions of Jack Williams and Rollo May mentioned above, Edgar would thus be contributing to what many might regard as the positive development of theology and could do so without violating Merleau-Ponty's original intent and undermining the enormous creative effort he made to develop an original philosophy that did not appeal to naturalism, humanism, or *teleology*. Or, since Merleau-Ponty does seem to be suggesting, in a few of his writings (treated above), what he believed to be a more positive theology, but that he does not incorporate into his own philosophy, we could say, as Williams seems to do, that while some of Merleau-Ponty's writings cautiously suggest what would improve theology, his own philosophical position, quite by design, contains no theological themes.

As we have seen Merleau-Ponty use the *fundierung* relationship, certain terms exist in a dialectical relationship to one another. Perception, for example, suggests specific interpretations, while these interpretations fold back on the perceived to help express and articulate it more precisely. A variety of interpretations is always possible, and there is no definitively correct interpretation, yet some may well provide more clarity than others. It is the clearest interpretation, the one that best brings to light what is there, that we should accept. Merleau-Ponty says the same thing about interpreting a text. We should accept the interpretation that most clarifies what is present in the original text. This is what has been attempted here, to bring to light what Merleau-Ponty actually says about theology, to interpret his text in the way that is the most clarifying, based on what is actually there in the text, and, yes, based on the author's actual intentions (of course, within social, historical, and linguistic context). Now, if scholars wish to read Merleau-Ponty's works and *add* something to them that makes them more sympathetic to theology, this, of course, should be regarded as perfectly acceptable (even if it is inconsistent with his original position and intent.). Yet, to claim to have *the* correct interpretation when other interpretations appear to be more enlightening, or to claim that there is something in his philosophy that is not there, should not be accepted. To say that Merleau-Ponty's inspires you or even inspires how you might add to the development of theology is one thing, to which no one should object, yet to say you find a theology in his philosophy (something that is not supported by his texts), is something else, to which we should all object.

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