Interrogation and mute expression: On Merleau-Ponty's method and the role of silence in his philosophy of expression

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Introduction:

A lot of philosophy presupposes a certain ontology. To put forth arguments is to presume a certain state of affairs to be the case, a certain arrangement of being. Meanwhile, the form in which philosophical enquiry is conducted is often linguistic. This raises the question whether language is adequate for a discussion of being. Does language not represent only a small part of being? Are there not many things that transcend language, things that are there but which cannot be named? In this paper I will defend the view that language allows for the expression of being, without reducing the whole of being to language. I will do this through a discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's later ontological writing and his various discussions of language. Some concepts introduced in this paper which will help us understand the relation between language and being are: *interrogation, direct and indirect language, lateral ontology, expression, silence and questioning*. These concepts share an emphasis on openness, and it is this openness present in language which allows it to refer to what it is not. Through understanding this relation of reference, this silence which language carries along with itself, we can account for the fact that there is such a thing as an expression of meaning in language at all, and this in turn, will serve as the basic clue to the way language is able to express being.

For Merleau-Ponty, if we pose the question of the *meaning* of being, the proper mode of philosophizing is to *interrogate* being. This notion of interrogation implies the absence of a pure spectator or pure essences. The latter two imply each other; without the one there is not the other. Instead, there is in interrogation an emphasis on the *actual experience* out of which the ideas of pure vision and essences emerge.[1] This *actuality* is of another order of being than that of essences which is why we cannot rely on a language of essences. The latter has a 'closed' signification in which the signifier-signified relation is fixed. Words are understood as successfully referring to the objects they stand for. Merleau-Ponty argues instead that language is diacritical. Signification is established through the relations of words to each other. Furthermore, language can be seen to have two aspects. There is the direct sense, in which words get their significance through the sedimentation of their relations to other words, their common *usage*. On the other hand there is what Merleau-Ponty calls 'indirect language,' which does not consist of '[...] *the manifest meaning of each word and of each image, but the lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and their exchanges*.'[2] Language, in both of these aspects, is for Merleau-Ponty the '[...] *the most valuable witness to Being,* [...]'[3] and should therefore be the avenue in which we interrogate being. The interrogation of language by itself or *questioning* is not the reduction of the world through language, but rather the recognition that language is *of the world*, that it can tell us something about being.

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[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). English translation: *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 110. All further references of sources will be to their English translations.
[2] Idem, p.125.
[3] Idem, p.126.

My thesis question will be: to what extent can the meaning of being be expressed through language? Of vital importance for the answer to this question is Merleau-Ponty's notion of muteness. This muteness has the character of something like the 'answer' to an open question, such as when someone declares *'what do I know?'*[4] To such a question, there is no definitive answer in a linguistic sense. If the answer to the question of the meaning of being is mute, can we expect the meaning of being to be expressed through language? This would only be possible if muteness is in some shape or form 'present' in language. Therefore, this thesis will contain an examination of the possibility of this 'silent expression' as introduced in Merleau-Ponty's unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*. At the end of its third chapter, Merleau-Ponty interprets Husserl's philosophical project as being '[...] *the reconversion of silence and speech into one another.*'[5] He supports this by quoting Husserl as saying that *'It is the experience . . . still mute which we are concerned with leading to the pure expression of its own meaning.'*[6] Does this Husserl quote mean that we should lend this mute experience a voice? If so, would there not be something lost in the process? If instead we take this muteness seriously, if we really let this muteness be mute, how should we conceive of this 'pure expression of its meaning'? What does mute expression look or sound like?

In the first two chapters, I will give a description of Merleau-Ponty's notion of philosophy as interrogation through a reading of its negative description in the chapter 'Interrogation and Intuition' (Chapter one) and its application in the chapter 'The Intertwining — The Chiasm' from his book *The Visible and the Invisible* (Chapter two). Here I will answer the following question: What is Merleau-Ponty's ontological method? It is important to ask this question, because it will be his method of interrogation which puts forth the demand for an indirect language, one which allows for lateral or silent expression. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy understood as interrogation will be discussed through answering the questions 'What should philosophy as interrogation not be?' (Chapter two) and 'How does philosophy as interrogation proceed?' (Chapter one) to highlight both the critical and constructive tasks of this project.

Merleau-Ponty's critical project can be summarized as an assessment of various methods according to their abilities to give an account of perception that does justice to the way we experience it. In the first chapter, I will go into some detail as to why he refutes science, reflection (or intellectualism), negative intuition and Husserlian phenomenology as adequate accounts of perception. From this discussion of Merleau-Ponty's criticisms I draw a couple of required characteristics that a better account must fulfil. The systems of thought which he criticizes fail to realize the need for a description of perception containing the right amount of spatial and temporal distance between perceiver and perceived, an account for the origin of perception, and its character of an *experience* which exceeds our

[4] *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 128-9.
[5] Idem, p. 129.
[6] Edmund Husserl, *Meditations cartésiennes* (Paris: Vrin, 1947), 33. English translation: *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), pp. 38-9.

sedimented ideation. Our thought is more than just certain static mental images or contents of thought. A description is needed of the way in which our thoughts have the character of an overflow, which leads one thought to call forth ever more thoughts.

In the second chapter I will look at the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's ontology and philosophy of language fulfill these demands. This fulfillment introduces a philosophy of language and perception built around the concept of reflexivity and implication. Through a comparison of the reflexivity of perception and language I will arrive at what I will call Merleau-Ponty's lateral ontology. Language works through implication (its own causes are exhibited within itself), depth is created (through the difference between directness and indirectness), and it is more than just direct language (language sedimented in its use). These similarities between language and perception can only be understood via Merleau-Ponty's lateral ontology, which I claim is a thought of openness and implication.

This lateral ontology is also present in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of language when he argues that silence and speech implicate each other. It is the silence which lines my speech that leaves gaps which allow my words to say more than what they signify when taken in the direct sense. At the end of chapter two, I will focus on a problem that comes with this ontology regarding the way we should conceive of distinct things which cannot be separated from each other. The solution to this problem is to distinguish Merleau-Ponty's idea of reversibility (for example between the visible and the invisible) from the idea of opposition which has been present in much of the history of philosophy (for example between being and non-being). Reversibility accounts for the fact that things can be distinct yet inseparable through their chiasmic structure (their interweaving) and their reversibility through time. Speech and silence are intertwined yet apart, they can revert into each other. The sustained presence of silence in language has as a result that it is never a closed system. Our philosophical questioning will always remain open, posing such a question will not result in definite answers, but will instead result in a hyper-dialectical movement, a dialectic which is in dialogue with itself. This has results for the status of philosophical knowledge: to know is not to know in terms of answers but in terms of questions. In other words, it is a question-knowing.

Because of this essential role of silence in both language and the being of the world, the third chapter will focus on the status of this silence. I will once again pose the thesis question in the context of the lateral ontology discussed in the second chapter: How can the meaning of being be expressed through language if the voice of being is silent? The task of question-knowing demands that we give more attention to dimensions of the thesis question, our assumption as to what questioning, expression and language are. First, I will claim that philosophical questioning leaves a trace, a silent 'presence' of past questioning whenever any question occurs in the present. As interrogations of being, these questions will always remain open; they are a contact with muteness. After this, I will look at the concept of expression through a discussion of Lawrence Hass' writings on this concept in

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.[7] From this discussion I conclude that expression is a reciprocal sublimating communication between me and the world hidden by sedimentation, which makes us believe that the world is ready-made either *for us* or *by us*. Next, I will show language not to be a set of instances of representative speech but as certain mode of expression. The indirect sense of language makes it possible for the meaning of being to be expressed through language even though it cannot be so *directly*. Finally, I will argue that this indirect sense of the expression of being in language is silent. The silence of language relies on what Glen Mazis calls chiasmic or vertical time.[8] This is the idea that the past and the present are intertwined or chiasmic. Silence is the pregnancy of the present with the past and a possible future and should not be understood as nothingness or ontologically void. Instead, I argue that silence is Merleau-Ponty's positive understanding of nothingness.

In conclusion, I will expand upon this positive understanding of nothingness. The intertwining of silence and speech and their resistance to synthesis reveals something about Being, namely that it Being is the ability of things to reveal themselves under different aspects. Language itself can be the vessel for the interrogation of being because it has a 'common nervure' to vision and other modes of perception.[9] Similar to how vision needs to be potentially visible in order to be engaged in the world it sees, a word is not merely a description, but also itself apt to be described. It is this similarity of words to vision and other forms of perception that makes language have a family resemblance to perception. They are all ways in which the body is engaged with being. The fact that language can express silence is why Merleau-Ponty calls language the '*most valuable witness to being*.'[10] However, language on its own cannot be the vessel of the expression of being itself. Instead, '[...] *the question concerning the meaning of the world's being* [...] *reappears within the study of language, which is but a particular form of it*.'[11] Language, being a '*redoubling of the enigma of the world*'[12] can never speak for the world, or its being itself. It is only when language is applied in a certain way, such as in literature, that it can properly retain its distance from directly representing being so that it can make being speak for itself. To summarize; language can make being 'speak' mutely by retaining its distance from being through the interplay between its direct and indirect signification. Language is therefore essential to the interrogation of being, but it is not the way in which being itself speaks. This is why in *Eye and Mind*[13] Merleau-Ponty looks at painting; it is in its muteness that painting

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[7] Lawrence Hass, 'Expression and the Origin of Geometry' in: *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).
[8] Glen A. Mazis, 'Entering the World of Expressive Silence' in: *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination, and Poetic Ontology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).
[9] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 118.
[10] Idem, p. 126.
[11] Idem, p. 96.
[12] Idem, pp. 95-6.
[13] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'Esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). English translation: 'Eye and Mind' in: *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

speaks. Muteness is not merely a lack of speech; it is a presence which gives language and the arts their meaning.

The reading of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy that I propose is philosophically relevant in that it is concerned with ontological method. At least since the arrival of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, one of the leading ontological questions in phenomenology has been that concerning the meaning of being. The inconclusiveness which might follow such a profound philosophical enquiry can leave one to think that it has no solution. But as Merleau-Ponty shows, the silence which answers a question can also 'say' something positive about being. It is this insight which restores philosophy its dignity in the face of its seemingly unanswerable questions. It also shows the importance of a continual questioning; it is only through this questioning that the muteness of being can be expressed, albeit indirectly. Even if my enquiry might repeat a lot of what has been *said* in the literature, perhaps this reiteration can sustain the voice which has been and might always be a *mute* presence in the world. Outside of the context of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concerns, this thesis could be relevant in that it is an attempt to understand a thought that pushes beyond some of philosophy's most entrenched dualities, particularly subject-object opposition. Aside from insight into the limits of these philosophical dualities, this thesis also highlights why it is perhaps impossible to dispense with them entirely. Even when Merleau-Ponty talks about the flesh of things, of the factuality which makes facts *be*, it is always necessary to speak in terms of distinctions. It is exactly this capacity to introduce distinctions that Merleau-Ponty calls being.

I have decided to mostly use Merleau-Ponty's own writings, because of widely differing accounts of role of silence and expression in the secondary literature. Ted Toadvine's account of the role of silence in language[14] comes the closest to my position, especially his reading of Being as 'hinge' between silence and speech. I disagree with him in that for me, language is not '[only signified] *through things left unsaid*.'[15] For me, indirect language requires direct language, they are intertwined. When Merleau-Ponty says '*What we mean is not before us, outside all speech, as sheer signification. It is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said,*'[16] I take this to mean that meaning cannot be this excess without something to exceed, that is without the said.

Steven Bindeman's account of the role of silence in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy[17] is also close to mine in that for him '*the dialogue between speech and silence mirrors the dialogue between man and world, because in dialogue each of the participants connects with the*

[14] Ted Toadvine, 'The Reconversion of Silence and Speech' in: *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 70, no. 3 (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2008), pp. 457-77
[15] Toadvine, p. 462.
[16] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Le langage indirect et les voix du silence' in: *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). English translation: 'Indirect Language and Voices of Silence' in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McLeary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 83.
[17] Steven Bindeman, 'Merleau-Ponty's Embodied Silence' in: *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

other's meanings.'[18] In this thesis I will also point out the similarity between the dialogues (reversibility) of speech and silence and of man and world. I differ from Bindeman in that for him silence *is* the flesh[19] while for me the flesh is the intertwining of silence and speech. Bindeman even calls silence the '*imperative grammar of Being.*'[20] I think speech is just as imperative. Furthermore, his article goes on to focus mostly on the earlier Merleau-Ponty, in which silence takes the form of a tacit cogito, a presentness of ourselves to the world. Because I focus on the later Merleau-Ponty, this presentness takes a more impersonal form in which the subject is secondary. For Bindeman, the body is very active while for me, the body is the place where activity and passivity intertwine. Finally, Bindeman similarly to Hass sees expression as the organizing body.[21] Later on Bindeman talks of the self-organisation of nature when discussing Eye and Mind.[22] It is this latter idea of expression which I will take up in my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's later work.

Then there are also accounts like that of Philip Walsh,[23] that focus more on the importance of silence for cognition, often taking as their sources the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Walsh rightfully critiques readings that construe silence as being something separate from spoken language.[24] But then he goes on to argue that silence is not something spoken.[25] I disagree with this point entirely. In my reading of Merleau-Ponty, silence and speech should be seen as two aspects of the same language. There is not a silence which is expressed later on, silence and speech are always already intertwined.

Because of this focus on primary texts by Merleau-Ponty, I only refer to the secondary literature when it is strictly necessary. The purpose of this thesis is not to give an overview of a debate, but rather to look for a logic in Merleau-Ponty's writings that is never given an explicit formulation (at least not in the works published during his lifetime). Instead, through facing the texts head on I hope to have found out something that I would not have otherwise.

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[18] Bindeman, p. 57.
[19] Idem, p. 58.
[20] Idem, p. 59.
[21] Idem, p. 64.
[22] Idem, p. 70.
[23] Philip Walsh, 'The Sound of Silence: Merleau-Ponty on Conscious Thought' in: *European Journal of Philosophy* 25 no. 2 (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016) pp. 312-35.
[24] Walsh, p. 315.
[25] Ibidem.

Preamble: Why ontology is important for Merleau-Ponty

Since this paper is on the ontology of Merleau-Ponty, it is important to ask beforehand what his reasons for doing ontology were. As the first published working note in the appendix to *The Invisible and the Invisible*[26] shows, Merleau-Ponty diagnosed a crisis in philosophy. This crisis stems from an insufficiency of dialectic thought: it cannot account for the interaction of opposites. Either one resorts to the 'bad dialectic,' which thinks opposites *as* completely opposite, or one thinks in terms of the unity of opposites, which would no longer be dialectical thought. In this note, Merleau-Ponty sees a 'return to ontology' as the necessary step in resolving this crisis. Ontology, understood as *Ursprungsklärung* might reveal the common root of both opposition and identity. This philosophy should be 'center and not [...] construction,' meaning that instead of trying to (re)construct nature in words, it should be the approximation of that from which all constructions start. In the succeeding working note,[27] Merleau-Ponty writes that his ontology should be a '[rediscovery of] the *Lebenswelt* logos' (a *logos* of the life-world), a practice which searches for notions to replace the terms of transcendental subjectivity (like subject, object, meaning) with. These terms would have to reflect the impossibility of describing the life of the human body without it becoming a psycho-physical body, a body with a 'hidden' side, which is what Merleau-Ponty here concludes from the research in his first two books, *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*.[28] In short, it is necessary for Merleau-Ponty to do ontology, because his previous findings on the life of the body required a new theory of being which could explain this other side of the body. The old ontologies of scientism, idealism and even phenomenology did not suffice, since each could not account for reflexivity, they could not account for the fact that we *live in* our bodies, that the physical and the spiritual human body are the same body. They cannot account for the mixture that is the body. Neither can they account for the relation between me and the world, which will have to be described not as two separate existences on either side of my body. Instead he sets out to describe the *involvement* of me in the world and of the spiritual in the physical et vice versa. In this thesis I will show that this relation of sense involvement necessitates Merleau-Ponty's lateral ontology, which in turn demands of us to speak of silence in positive terms i.e. not as ontologically void.

[26] *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 165-6.
[27] Idem, pp. 166-7.
[28] Idem, p. 168.

Chapter one: The study of perception demands a new ontology

Now that the motivation for Merleau-Ponty's ontological project has been outlined, I can proceed to give a broader account of his method. It will be necessary to keep in the back of our minds the motivations for the ontology in order to see whether Merleau-Ponty succeeds or points the way towards success. The recurring theme in the first three chapters of *The Visible and the Invisible* is that of interrogation. I will from now on refer to Merleau-Ponty's method as 'philosophy as interrogation.' My reason for this is that even if Merleau-Ponty never thematized his project explicitly as one of interrogation, I think the mode in which his ontological method asks its questions is what he describes as being interrogation. Language cannot encompass all being, but it is the 'most valuable witness to being,'[29] hence we can *interrogate* it to reveal being in its muteness. Through the interrogation of language as the redoubling of being, Merleau-Ponty tries to use language not to point at something beyond language, but to express what lies mute within language. The technicalities of this approach will follow later in chapter two, where I will further justify this thematization.

In this chapter, I will look at the first three chapters of *The Visible and The Invisible* to see how Merleau-Ponty sketches the outline of philosophy as interrogation through his critique of scientism, idealism, Sartre's idea of 'intuition of the negative,' Husserlian phenomenology and Bergsonian intuition. Of course, one chapter will be too small of a space to go into these critiques in full detail. This is however not the point of the chapter. Rather it is to show the ramifications of previous ontologies/philosophies in their attempts to account for the life of the body. When these critiques have been summarized, chapter two will move on to Merleau-Ponty's application of philosophy as interrogation in the chapter 'The Intertwining — The Chiasm,' which forms the most expansive account of his later ontology.

§ 1.1: *On scientism*

The first critique is on scientism, more specifically the belief that science can fully account for what perception *is*. In the natural sciences we find a view of perceiving as a computational or calculative activity. My perceiving of the world could be equated to the input of perceptual data, which I then translate to the basis of my activities, which would then form an output. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in *Eye and Mind*, '[constructive scientific] *thinking deliberatively reduces itself to a set of data-collecting techniques which it has invented. To think is thus to test out, to operate, to transform – on the condition that this activity is regulated by an experimental control that admits only the most "worked out" phenomena, more likely produced by the apparatus than recorded by it*.'[30] This view of perception as translation or calculation is founded on the scientific belief in empiricism, the idea that the way to find out about objects in the world is through observing them in an

[29] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 126.
[30] 'Eye and Mind,' pp. 159-60.

environment which is as neutral as possible (for example a laboratory). Contemporary to Merleau-Ponty's time, science developed in a way that would give grounds to a falsification of this aspect of empiricism. Studies in theoretical physics showed that the perceiver can never have a purely objective standpoint. The standpoint of the scientific observer and the tools they use are always mediated by their singular perspective.[31]

Meanwhile, the social sciences, which view themselves as alternatives to the natural sciences when it comes to the observation of perception, also seemed to undermine themselves in their recent findings. On the one hand, there is a section of psychology which treats the psychological in a similar manner as the natural sciences, talking about particles of behavior as 'psychisms,' some sort of 'units' of behavior which are approached in a similar manner as matter: '*like a deep-lying geological stratum, an invisible "thing," which is found somewhere behind certain living bodies, and with regard to which one supposes that the only problem is to find the correct angle for observation*.'[32] There is here still a perceptual faith, the fundamental belief that there are observable things, even though it is exactly this belief which Merleau-Ponty wants to interrogate when he asks what the meaning of being is. On the other hand, there were developments in anthropology in which through focusing the otherizing lens on themselves, western anthropologists discovered their own conditioning and the subsequent impossibility of unconditioned anthropological research: '*As the ethnologist in the face of societies called archaic cannot presuppose that, for example, those societies have a lived experience of time like ours— according to the dimensions of a past that is no longer, a future that is not yet, and a present that alone fully is— and must describe a mythical time where certain events "in the beginning" maintain a continued efficacity; so also social psychology, precisely if it wishes to really know our own societies, cannot exclude a priori the hypothesis of mythical time as a component of our personal and public history*.'[33]

These changes in both the natural and the social sciences called for a new approach to the study of perception. This new approach would have to account for its own perspective or conditioning. The empirical tradition cannot achieve this, because one's own perspective cannot be perceived empirically. To observe empirically is already to assume a perspective, so it can never be the study *of* perspective. '*The idea of* [subject and object] *transforms into a cognitive adequation the relationship with the world and with ourselves that we have in the perceptual faith. They do not clarify it; they utilize it tacitly, they draw out its consequences. And since the development of knowledge shows that these consequences are contradictory, it is to that relationship that we must necessarily return, in order to*

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[31] '[…] *la physique de la relativité confirme que l'objectivité absolue et dernière est un rêve, en nous montranta chaque observation strictement liée à la position de l'observateur, inséparable de sa situation,* […].' My translation: '[…] *The theory of relativity has confirmed that an absolute and final objectivity is a dream, showing us that every observation is linked to the position of the observatory, inseparable from its situation;* […].' In: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Cauceries 1948* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 16.
[32] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 19.
[33] Idem, p. 24.

elucidate it.[34] The idea that there is an object separate from a subject is a belief which science cannot prove, since it cannot help but assume it. It is because of this that it can never give a total account for what perception is or what it means.

§ 1.2: *On intellectualism*

This inability of science to account for perception leads Merleau-Ponty to consider a number of philosophical approaches according to their ability to account for what it means to perceive. The first of these is the doctrine of idealism or as he calls it, intellectualism. This name makes clear what strand of idealism Merleau-Ponty reacts to, namely the thought that perception is wholly an activity of the intellect: The intellect is what structures my perception, I can only perceive that which my intellect allows for. The problem with this minimal account of idealism is that it cannot account for a start to perception. If all perception is due to the intellect, why do I see *that* what I see? What law of the intellect determines that I see three instead of two pigeons on a roof when I look outside my window? It seems absurd that there is a law which regulates these kinds of contingencies in perception. Instead of this, Merleau-Ponty says that the starting point of idealism cannot be the pure presence of self to self. Perception is not just in and of the intellect. Before there is this presence of self to self, we derive our senses of 'self' and of 'presence' from the world around us and our place in it: '*As an effort to found the existing world upon a thought of the world, the reflection at each instant draws its inspiration from the prior presence of the world, of which it is tributary, from which it derives all its energy*.'[35]

Intellectualism on its own cannot give an account for itself, as a study of the intellect it would be incomplete if it could not study itself from the outside: *'the reflection recuperates everything except itself as an effort of recuperation, it clarifies everything except its own role.'*[36] We want to explain perception as an experience, whereas what intellectualism offers us is an instant clarity of the things for me, it cannot account for how things open up for me in time: '*With one stroke the philosophy of reflection metamorphoses the effective world into a transcendental field;* [...] *It only makes me be consciously what I have always been distractedly; it only makes me give its name to a dimension behind myself, a depth whence, in fact, already my vision was formed*.'[37]

This reduction of the effective world into a transcendental field makes of my perception a mere presence of self to self. But even Kant, a philosopher who can be taken as representative of what Merleau-Ponty calls intellectualism,[38] does not argue that in intelligence there is only the self; '*consciousness of my own existence is at the same time*

[34] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 23.
[35] Idem, p. 34.
[36] Idem, p. 33.
[37] Idem, p. 44.
[38] Idem, xl.

an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me.'[39] For Kant, consciousness of self can only occur in time, which on its own is not experienced and therefore has to be presumed as something outside of me. Kant talks in terms of consciousness of self, but as Dina Edmundts puts it, '*it is clear that, for Kant, self-consciousness is a condition for the possibility of knowledge*.'[40] From this, we can see that even Kant, whose thought is taken to be a prime example of intellectualism, argues that thinking is necessarily conditioned by what is outside the self.

Merleau-Ponty stresses this aspect of the philosophy of reflection when he says that '*It is essential to the reflective analysis that it start from a de facto situation*.'[41] It can never be the a complete return of the intellect to its own origin since: '*Precisely because it is reflection, re-turn, re-conquest, or re-covery, it cannot flatter itself that it would simply coincide with a constitutive principle already at work in the spectacle of the world, that, starting with this spectacle, it would travel the very route that the constitutive principle had followed in the opposite direction. But this is what it would have to do if it is really a return, that is, if its point of arrival were also the starting point* [...] *The reflection finds itself therefore in the strange situation of simultaneously requiring and excluding an inverse movement of constitution*.'[42] If intellectualism posits the intellect as the origin of perception, it could by virtue of it being the origin of perception, never perceive this origin. The origin of perception itself cannot be perceived. But if this is so it could not the be self-presence of the intellect which lies at the start of perception. If this were the case it *could* perceive this origin. Therefore, the origin of perception cannot be the presence of the intellect to itself. If we extend this argument even further, we can say that *in general* the origin of perception cannot be a presence of any self to itself.

As we have seen here, the philosophy of reflection or intellectualism cannot conceive of its own origin. It needs to admit to an experience which precedes the intellect, on which the intellect draws its energy. Furthermore, it makes of the world a transcendental field, which would reduce perception to a moment of instant clarity. These two ideas clash with each other; if the origin of perception precedes the intellect, the world cannot be a transcendental field. Instead, we need to take the idea seriously that perception is something which happens over time, and that we are not the sole authors of perception.

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[39] Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch Verlag, 1787), English translation: *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. B276.
[40] Dina Emundts, 'How Does Kant Conceive of Self-Consciousness?', in: Karl Schafer, and Nicholas F. Stang (eds), *The Sensible and Intelligible Worlds: New Essays on Kant's Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 158.
[41] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 44.
[42] Idem, p. 45.

§ 1.3: *On negation*

The next line of thought Merleau-Ponty considers could be seen as an attempt at resolving this problem in thinking perception as intellection (solely an activity of the mind). This philosophy would not see perception as absolute self-presence, but rather reverse it by saying that perception is an absence of self. The perceiver is thought of as a receptacle empty of being, contrasted by the perceived world which is full of being. This thought, in which the perceiver is a kind of non-being or nothingness which in perception is filled with the being of the world is called 'negintuition' or 'the intuition of the negative.' In *The Visible and the Invisible* this view is mostly accredited to Jean-Paul Sartre's book *Being and Nothingness,*[43] which is why I will from now on call this thought the Sartrean view on perception.

By thinking the subject as empty of being, the Sartrean view on perception neatly resolves the problem of intellectualism. The *outside* is no longer inaccessible for the perception, since in this view all that perception *is* is the outside entering into the perceiver. The outside or the perceived world is being, while the inside or perceiver is non-being or nothingness: '*I am absolutely foreign to being and this is what makes me be open to being qua "absolute plenitude and entire positivity"*'.[44] This resolution of the intellectualist problem of origin seems however to merely be the reformulation of the problem in negative terms. This becomes clear when we ask the Sartrean view *what* the inside is. If the perceiver is nothingness, *where* then is the perceiver? What determines that I see these particular pigeons? Intuitively, should it not be that I see *these* pigeons because I am *here*? If I am truly nothingness, nothing 'in' me would determine my place and time, which results in my seeing the specific things I see.

This problem of specificity of perception in the Sartrean view can be explained ontologically. There cannot be specificity in perception in the Sartrean view, because his ontology ends up in a positivism which only allows for Being, such that there is no room for any specificness, such as that of perception. The argument that the Sartrean view ends up in a positivism of Being proceeds as follows: '*A philosophy that really thinks the negation, that is, that thinks it as what is not through and through, is also a philosophy of Being.*'[45] Sartre tells us that Being 'needs' Nothingness in order to be, since it can only exist for Nothingness. Being cannot exist for Being since this would be the very presence of self to self which lead intellectualism into the problem described above: '[If] *this negation is not to vanish into pure exteriority — and along with it all possibility of negation in general — its foundation lies in the necessity for the being that lacks — to be what it lacks. Thus the foundation of the negation is a negation of negation. But this negation-foundation is no more a given than is the lack of which it is an essential moment* [...]. *It is only as a lack to be*

[43] Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Etre et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) English translation: *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).
[44] Idem, p. 15.
[45] *The Visible and the Invisbile*, p. 54.

suppressed that the lack can be an internal lack for the for-itself."[46] Even if we grant that Being 'needs' Nothingness in order to be, if this Nothingness is truly nothing, if it negates itself as well such that there is only being. This 'needing' can only be a real need if being and non-being are not some absolute opposites (for example if non-being is not just negation of being, but as negation itself also the negation of itself). If being and non-being are entirely separate, there is no being in non-being and thus there is only being. If there is only being, the Sartrean view ends up committing to a kind of Parmenidean positivism (the idea that there is only being).

This positivism does not allow for a sort of distance between the perceiver and the perceived since it is all part of the same Being. This lack of distance disqualifies the analytic of Being and Nothingness from being an adequate account of vision: '*Vision is not the immediate relationship of the For Itself with the In Itself,* [...]. *The analytic of Being and Nothingness is the seer who forgets that he has a body and that what he sees is always beneath what he sees, who tries to force the passage toward pure being and pure nothingness by installing himself in pure vision,* [...].'[47] This pure vision is an idea of a vision which is unlimited, which is not embodied, and therefore does not apply to our vision. Our vision is one of opacity and depth, our vision is always limited to a certain focus: '*If we succeed in describing the access to the things themselves, it will only be through this opacity and this depth, which never cease: there is no thing fully observable, no inspection of the thing that would be without gaps and that would be total;* [...].'[48] For an account of *our* vision, Merleau-Ponty needs to '*redefine the seer as well as the world seen*'[49] in different terms from those of Sartre. This can be done if we do not think Being and Nothingness as radically separate as two polarities, but rather as two aspects which are always implied by each other. It is this rejection of nothingness as an ontological void which I will return to in chapter two since it is essential for an understanding of Merleau-Ponty's notion of muteness.

§ 1.4: *On phenomenology and intuition*

Lastly, Merleau-Ponty considers two philosophies which might respect the distance between perceiver and perceived which is required for embodied perception. These philosophies are Husserlian phenomenology and Bergson's thought of intuition. First, I will discuss Edmund Husserl's idea of the phenomenological reduction. The reduction is a philosophical technique in which the philosopher attempts to set aside their philosophical presuppositions in order to let phenomena 'speak for themselves.' If a phenomenologist sees pigeons on a roof, they will attempt to bracket all the philosophical theories on perception they know, in order to get closer to the *essence* of what they perceive. An essence is what is left over of a phenomenon if all presuppositions are successfully

[46] *Being and Nothingness*, p. 198.
[47] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 77.
[48] Idem, p. 77.
[49] Ibidem.

bracketed. Because of this, an essence is only accessible to a hypothetical 'pure observer,' who has no vested interest in the phenomena they perceive, except for the interest in the essences of the observed phenomena.

As Merleau-Ponty argued in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the phenomenological reduction can never be complete: *'The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction.'*[50] One can never perceive without interest, without any specific interest there would be no focus to our perception: '*The pregnancy is what, in the visible, requires of me a correct focusing, defines its correctness*.'[51] The correctness of a visible is determined by the correctness of my focus on it, to see something is to focus on it *in a certain way*. Since there a complete reduction is impossible, Merleau-Ponty proposes we look at the essences of phenomenology in a different light. We should not look at essences as the things which would visible for some pure spectator after a complete reduction.

Instead, Merleau-Ponty proposes that we look for phenomenological essences not in pure facts, but in the *experiences* which make our thinking of pure essences and pure spectators possible: "*The pure spectator in me, which elevates each thing to the essence, which produces its ideas, is assured that it touches Being with them only because it emerges within an actual experience surrounded by actual experiences, by the actual world, by the actual Being, which is the ground of the predicative Being.*"[52] The phenomenological project is now understood as the study of actuality, that by which phenomena are actual. Its essences rely on actual experience in their being. This does not mean that actuality is experience: for Merleau-Ponty, we need to interrogate "*that which works over my experience, opens it to the world and to Being, and which, to be sure, does not find them before itself as facts but animates and organizes their facticity.*"[53] The 'object' of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical interrogation is not experience, but rather that which animates experience or *the life of experience*. In order to interrogate this life of experience, we need to bracket acts of ideation in order to find the actuality which our essences refer to:*"essences do not suffice to themselves, they overtly refer to our acts of ideation which have lifted them from a brute being, wherein we must find again in their wild state what answers to our essences and our significations."*[54] These acts of ideation stand for our tendency to *think* of things in the world in terms of our thoughts about them. In contrast to this tendency, it is necessary for the philosophical interrogation that we look at the things in abstraction of our ideas about them. Understood in this sense the philosophical interrogation continues the project of Husserl's phenomenological reduction's return '*to*

[50] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. x. English translation: *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes. (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. lxxvii
[51] *The Visible and the Invisible*, 209.
[52] Idem, p. 110.
[53] Idem, p. 110.
[54] Idem, p. 110.

the things themselves.'[55] What differentiates Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology from Husserl's reduction is that it brackets the understanding essences as some kind of objects of pure vision through bypassing acts of ideation. By interrogating that which animates experience, we have to look at what animates us, our embodied existence. In subchapter 2.2 I will show how Merleau-Ponty argues that it is our embodiment which makes us reflexive beings. This reflexivity is that which animates our experiences.

Before we do this, there remains one more philosophy to be discussed. Merleau-Ponty discusses Henri Bergson's thought about perception as a coincidence of subject and object. When the subject perceives the object, it is moved towards the world of objects, becoming one of the objects, what Merleau-Ponty describes as '*effective fusion with the existent*.'[56] This coincidence is understood as the return of a lost immediacy between me and existent (the objects), but '*A lost immediate* [...] *will* [...] *bear within itself the sediment of the critical procedures through which we will have found it anew; it will therefore not be the immediate.*'[57] As Merleau-Ponty understands it, the Bergsonian return to the lost immediate cannot occur for the same reasons why the intellectual reflection cannot return to its origin: By being movements of return they will always contain something more as that which they want to return to. In the case of coincidence it is the state of non-coincidence necessary for us to speak of a subsequent return which is not precent in that to which the coincidence wants to return. The non-coincidence or the non-immediacy of the things and me therefore have to be taken seriously; they cannot be bracketed. Here again we see Merleau-Ponty stressing the necessity of a distance between me and the things.

In a way, the Bergsonian coincidence is a similar motion to the Sartrean view, except that here the subject is an outwardness which is projected into the world, instead of the other way around. Where the Sartrean view ended up in a puzzling equivocation of Being and Nothingness which did not allow for any of distance required for perception, in Bergson the coincidence of subject and object would also remove any of this required distance: '*by saying that the things are in their place and that we fuse with them, I immediately make the experience itself impossible: for in the measure that the thing is approached, I cease to be; in the measure that I am, there is no thing, but only a double of it in my "camera obscura"*.'[58] It is by distinguishing me from the things that I have to reunite with that Bergson makes a sharp distinction between object and subject, just like Sartre and Husserl do. If we want to know what it is like to perceive, we do not necessarily have to reject this distinction. Instead we need to investigate what animates that which underlies it, we need to investigate the *life of experience*.

We have now seen the ways in which Merleau-Ponty critiques other philosophies' attempts to account for the perceptual faith, which is what characterizes our being in the world for

[55] Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen* (M. Niemeyer, Halle: 1913). English translation: *Logical Investigations, vol.1*, trans. John N. Findlay. (New York: Routledge, 1970), 168.
[56] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 122.
[57] Idem, p. 122.
[58] Ibidem.

Merleau-Ponty. He describes the perceptual faith as '*our experience, prior to every opinion of inhabiting the world by our body, of inhabiting the truth by our whole selves, without there being a need to choose nor even to distinguish between the assurance of seeing and the assurance of seeing the true.*'[59] In what follows I will try to articulate the way in which Merleau-Ponty tries to account for this faith. But first, I will discuss in short one alternative to the philosophies described above, namely the idea that we can interrogate being solely through conceptual analysis. Since all questioning is sustained by language, it makes sense that one would suggest conceptual analysis to resolve questions like that of the meaning of being. But, as Merleau-Ponty puts it; '*the question concerning the meaning of the world's being is so little solvable by a definition of words — which would be drawn from the study of language, its powers, and the effective conditions for its functioning — that on the contrary it reappears within the study of language, which is but a particular form of it.*'[60] Even if the question of the meaning of being is a fact of language, this is only so because language itself draws its signification from the world. To answer through a definition of words is therefore not a definitive answer. Instead, one needs to discover the way in which language acquires its significative power. This will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

[59] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 28.
[60] Idem, p. 96.

Chapter 2: The philosophy of perception should be a philosophy of interrogation

Now that we have set out the ways in which Merleau-Ponty criticizes some received ways of thought concerning their ability to account for perception, we can start by looking at how he thinks philosophy *should* go about its questioning. As my source material I will mostly use the chapter 'The Intertwining — The Chiasm' from *The Visible and the Invisible*, since it forms the most cohesive account of his mature ontology. As we have seen at the end the last chapter, conceptual analysis does not suffice in understanding the question to the meaning of being. This does not mean that the study of language has no relevance in philosophy understood as interrogation. Conversely, it is *through* language that the meaning of being might be elucidated. More specifically, it is the way that language is a redoubling of the world which lends it its significative power. Instead of a conceptual analysis, which would look at the signification of each word, Merleau-Ponty proposes that we research the way in which language has a family resemblance with the being of which it is a redoubling. Just like there can only be a body if it is both an *in itself* and a *for itself*, words only have meaning if they can both describe and be described. If the meaning of being is something about the world, language as a redoubling of the world means that a general understanding of how signification works in language plays a key role in our questioning.

Therefore, this chapter will mostly deal with Merleau-Ponty's findings on signification, both within and outside of language. With regards to the signification within language, subchapter 2.1 will deal with the chapter 'Indirect Language and Voices of Silence' from *Signs*. In this text Merleau-Ponty introduces the bifurcation of language into its direct and indirect sense. These two aspects of language will help us understand in what way we should understand it as being 'the most valuable witness to being.' In subchapter 2.2 I will introduce Merleau-Ponty's theory of the reflexivity of being as introduced in 'The Intertwining — The Chiasm.' In subchapter 2.3 I will apply this theory of reflexivity to language in its two aspects. I will argue here that it is because of this twofold character of language that it is able to be reflexive, and thus redouble the reflexivity of being. It is this which makes language such a valuable witness to being. In the course of this chapter, it will become clear that language is a valuable witness to being in both its expressive and its mute sense. Subchapter 2.4 will reintroduce the question posed in the introduction regarding how we can conceive of this mute being of which language is a witness.

I will conclude this chapter by laying out the way in which we should understand Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as interrogation. It is a philosophical operation in which we utilize the worldliness of language or its status as valuable witness to being to learn more about the being of the world and language in general. On the other hand, it is also a continual questioning which doesn't admit of definite answers. Instead the objective of interrogation is to understand being through the questions which come to us in our confrontation with the world. The result of this *question-knowing* is what one could say is the equivalent of philosophical knowledge for Merleau-Ponty. It is the understanding that philosophical

questions have no conclusive answers, because they constitute an openness in the fabric of the world.

§ 2.1: *Direct and indirect language*

The chapter 'Indirect Language and Voices of Silence' from *Signs* is an investigation into the phenomenon of speech in literary language and painting. For the purposes of this subchapter, I will focus on Merleau-Ponty's treatment of language in this text. Merleau-Ponty's motivation for writing this article stems from Saussure's claim that language receives its meaning diacritically, that is; instead of the idea that the meanings of words are somehow contained within the specific signified of the sign, words receive their meaning through their *difference* from each other. The question he puts to Saussure is: How is it possible for word A and word B to be different from each other, if they are only meaningful because of their relative difference? Should there not be some prior meaning which makes it so that these words have their relative difference? His answer to this question comes in the form of the proposal that it is speech which overcomes this problem. Speech is Merleau-Ponty's account of the circularity of diacritical signification which the question points out; how the relative difference of A and B both *precedes* and *proceeds from* their respective meaning.[61]

The circularity of language is explained through speech in the following way: When I speak to someone, it does not have the form of translation. I do not translate my thought to a word, which then gets translated to a sound, which the interlocutor then translates to the meaning of the sound I utter: '*To understand* [speech]*, we do not have to consult some inner lexicon which gives us the pure thoughts covered up by the words or forms we are perceiving; we only have to lend ourselves to its life, to its movement of differentiation and articulation, and to its eloquent gestures*.'[62] What happens instead is that my words have meaning *because* they are *spoken*: '*Because meaning is the total movement of speech, our thought crawls along in language. Yet for some reason, our thought moves through language as a gesture goes beyond the individual points of its passage.*'[63] When I hear speech, my thoughts about this speech do not just stop after the words are spoken. Speech has a certain *afterlife* which continues after my interlocutor falls to silence. There is thus a difference between the spoken language (*langue parlée*) and speaking language (*langue parlante*), or put differently, between direct and indirect language. The spoken language are the literal words my interlocutor speaks, whereas the speaking language is the totality of what is *implied* by the speech of the interlocutor.

Merleau-Ponty claims that it is the fact that there is an indirect use of language which gives meaning to the direct use. As an example, he describes the origin of meaning during the writing process in literature: '[…] *the author himself has no text to which he can compare*

[61] 'Indirect Language and Voices of Silence,' p. 39.
[62] Idem, p. 42.
[63] Idem, p. 43.

his writing, and no language prior to language. His speech satisfies him only because it reaches an equilibrium whose conditions his speech itself defines, and attains a state of perfection which has no model."[64] An author does not get their text from somewhere else. It is through their *use* of speech that his text gets its meaning. Again, it is not the translation of thought to words, but rather the way in which words are transcendent which lends words their expressive power or meaning. It is only through what signs imply beyond their direct relation to their signified that they get meaning. This does not mean that the direct language has no role to play in the establishment of meaning. Merleau-Ponty stresses the point that the signification of speech is always double; both direct and indirect. If there was no direct relation to the signified, there would be nothing to go beyond for indirect language. A word can only be transcendent if it is bounded by its direct sense. It is this twofold nature of speech as both direct and indirect which lends speech its meaning.

The affirmation of the direct sense of language does not mean that there is such a thing as non-diacritical meaning for Merleau-Ponty; the direct sense of language is never separate from its indirect sense. The directness which sustains the indirectness is not the same as the possibility of a direct link from signifier to signified. This would mean that the direct sense of language would be separable from its indirect sense, which it cannot. Instead, what I mean is that there is a *degree* in which words can have a direct sense. My word for red does not stand for its associations alone, this association is only possible because of the position of words in relation to one another. These positions are not stable, but they are something which my *red* refers to alongside the associations. The whole of language is the interconnectedness of its direct and indirect sense, of these positions and associations.

§ 2.2: *Reflexivity and flesh*

Further ahead I will claim that language has a reflexive quality similar to that of the body. It is in this similarity that I will situate Being. I will argue that Being cannot be described by language itself, but only through the family resemblance of reflexivity in language to that of the body. It is this family resemblance which shows us the structure of being which they have in common. Therefore, I can only proceed in showing the relation between language and being by looking at the reflexivity of the body.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* the reflexivity of the body is first described in terms of vision. Vision figures as 'paradigm' for a reflexivity which will have its similarity in other fields of perception, such as feeling and hearing. I call vision the paradigm for reflexivity not because it is somehow the 'most reflexive' field of perception, but merely because it is the field most frequently used as an example by Merleau-Ponty. From the resemblances of the reflexivity in different fields of perception Merleau-Ponty will abstract his theory of the *flesh*, the element which sustains these resemblances. To understand this resemblance, this theory of the flesh, it will therefore be helpful to consider the 'paradigm case' of reflexivity, vision.

[64] 'Indirect Language and Voices of Silence,' p. 43.

In chapter one we saw how Merleau-Ponty's critiques demanded a theory of reflexivity. Vision requires a distance, but not an infinite distance like the one between Being and Nothingness. Vision needs to account for its own causes, which the idealist notion of vision as pure intellectual activity and Bergson's notion of perception as the reunion with a lost existent cannot do. Vision needs to be looked at as an *experience* which precedes the sedimentation of notions such as 'essence' and 'spectator,' something which phenomenology thus far has not been able to describe. From these criticisms we can deduce three positive requirements for vision to be what it is; (1) it needs to have the right amount of distance between viewer and visible, (2) it needs to account for its own cause, and (3) it needs to be an *experience* apart from our sedimented ideation. A little further ahead I will explain what sedimentation means in this context.

This description of vision will meet these three demands: Vision, if it is to be vision, needs to be visible. Vision needs to be *of the same kind* as what it sees.[65] This affinity is a relation of reflexivity. I will give some examples of the reflexivity of vision. Looking at a mirror, I become aware of my visibility. When afterwards I walk through the street this visibility of mine does not disappear, though I cannot see it for myself anymore. Through the gaze of others that I am still aware of my visibility. We do not need to see our visibility in order to know that we are visible, the look of the other suffices. Merleau-Ponty argues that this awareness of my visibility makes me recognize visible things out there: '*The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.*'[66] Because I sense that I am made up of visibility I can sense the being 'behind' visible things in general, a sort of empathy of the seer with all visible things.

The example of a camera could perhaps make this point clearer. A camera is something which 'sees' things around it through its lens but not itself. It cannot sense its own visibility, it has no 'real' vision like we have. I can only be certain of my vision if I am certain of things being visible, which is proved by my visibility. The other way around, I can only be certain of my own visibility through my sense of being seen by others, or even to be seen by the things: '*That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the "other side" of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing;* [...] *It is a* [...] *a self by confusion, narcissism, inherence of the see-er in the seen, the toucher in the touched, the feeler in the* [...]'[67] This self-awareness of vision is not the presence of self to self in intellectualism. The inherence of the seer in the seen, this self by narcissism allows me to have a certain familiarity with the world of things seen. The visibility of things imply my visibility *et vice versa*. If we accept this, we can see the reflexivity of vision: I see by right of being visible and I am visible by right of being a seer. In what follows I will show how this reflexivity of vision meets the three demands that were introduced in the previous paragraph.

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[65] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 137.
[66] Idem, p. 135.
[67] 'Eye and Mind,' pp. 162-3.

The reflexivity of vision allows for (1) a distance between the things it sees and itself, because it is not a coincidence of vision and visibility: looking in the mirror, the mirror-me reproduces my visibility instead of being my 'actual' visible body. In fact, a seer can never see itself entirely in the same instance. There is no complete coincidence of vision and visible, but because of the reproduction of the mirror and my awareness of other seers seeing me when I walk down the street I sense that my visibility is *out there*. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of my back, which I cannot see, but which is '*visible by right, it falls under a vision* [...] *both ineluctable and deferred*.'[68] It is also not the case that this reflexivity of vision puts the seen too far from the seer, since it allows for hiddenness. If an object is too far away or if my vision of the object is obstructed, I do not see the object. I am aware of hiddenness because of the hiddenness of large parts of my visible body for myself, for example my back. I am not the author of my vision, it is something in which I partake as both subject and object, both active and passive: '*fundamentally* [the body] *is neither thing seen only nor seer only, it is Visibility sometimes wandering and sometimes reassembled*.'[69] The body allows me to be both a seer and a visible: I partake in vision by having a visible outside and through seeing the visible outsides of others.

The reflexivity of vision also allows for (2) an account for its own cause. Unlike the notion of vision as a pure intellectual activity (as well as the notion of vision as negation), the reflexivity of vision does not have a radical break between inside and outside. Every vision shares its visibility with the things it sees, occupying the same perceptual field. Contrary to intellectualism, there is no question here of how my thoughts of seeing are informed by what I see, these thoughts are posterior to my vision. The cause of vision is its visibility, but the reflexivity also requires the opposite: Visibility only *is* for a vision. This circularity within the reflexivity of vision is its cause. There is never one clear starting point, but the causes of something being a vision or a visible are always clear in this view: The cause of something being a vision is always its visibility and the cause of something being visible is always a vision. Since a seer can never at once be a thing seen *et vice versa*, there is at every moment a definite origin to my seeing or my being seen: I am seeing or being seen because a previous or a next moment allows for a reversal. In subchapter 2.4 I will expand upon this necessity for a certain philosophy of time for the reversibility in perception.

Lastly, the reflexivity of vision allows for (3) its existence as experience apart from the sedimentation of such notions as 'essence' or 'spectator.' Sedimentation is a technical term in Merleau-Ponty which refers to the way our body gets used to experience. Merleau-Ponty's sees consciousness as an act of separating subject from objects: '*"consciousness," or (as we prefer to say) the segregation of the "within" and the "without"*.'[70] In separating the within from the without, consciousness makes a sedimentation of the flow of impressions possible by conceiving them as a world

[68] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 137.
[69] Idem, pp. 137-8.
[70] *The Visible and the Invisible,* p 118.

consisting of stable objects. If an object is separate from me, who is actively seeing the object, I can conceive of it as being passively seen. It is inevitable that this sedimentation takes place as long as we are conscious beings. The reflexivity of vision is a description of the alternation between the *activity* of my consciousness to posit objects which I imagine to be *passively* perceiving; I imagine that I am not the author of my vision, that the vision comes only from the side of the things. Only through consciousness can seers discern themselves from the things they see. This description should not necessarily be thought of chronologically, but rather as an ontological ordering: before the seer is separated from the visible, they are of the same *flesh*.

We have seen that the reflexivity of vision allows for (1) sufficient difference between perceiver and perceived, (2) an account for its own cause and (3) its existence outside of sedimentation. Now we can get into more detail on what it is which sustains the reflexivity of my body so that we can see whether it has the same structure as the reflexivity of language. I will now expand upon Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh, that which sustains the reflexivity of the body. In the next subchapter I will argue that the reflexivity of language is similarly structured. This similarity allows me to make the argument that language can express something about the meaning of being.

In 'The Intertwining — The Chiasm,' there is not one clear definition of flesh. The flesh is described on pages 139 and 140 as a '*visibility in itself*, [...] *belonging neither to the body proper nor the world qua fact,* [...] *an anonymity innate to myself*, [...] *not a material or spiritual fact,* [...] *not matter nor mind nor substance but an element (a general thing)'* and finally as the '*incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being* [and] *the facticity which is the possibility of facts*.'[71] These descriptions make a couple of things clear about the flesh. It is not a fact of the world, but what sustains it, in other words, the facticity of the facts of the world: '[that] *what makes the fact be a fact*.'[72] Flesh makes it possible for me to both see and be seen, to act and be acted upon. Note the similarity to the experience which precedes and sustains sedimentation which I described in subchapter 1.4.

The flesh is what makes an ebb and flow possible: its ontology gives us *'a world and a Being, not a sum of facts or a system of ideas, but the impossibility of meaninglessness or ontological void, since space and time are not the sum of local and temporal individuals, but the presence and latency behind each of all the others, and behind those of still others — and what they are we do not know, but we do know at least that they are determinable in principle. This world, this Being, facticity and ideality undividedly, is not one in the sense that being one applies to the individuals it contains, and still less is it two or several in that sense. Yet it is nothing mysterious: it is, whatever we may say, this world, this Being that our life, our science, and our philosophy inhabit.'*[73] The flesh sustains facticity, that *experience*

[71] *The Visible and the Invisible,* pp. 139-40.
[72] Idem, p 140.
[73] Idem, p 117.

which makes facts be facts, while it also sustains ideality, the fact of sedimentation which makes us experience a world of things. The undividedness of facticity and ideality, their shared belonging to the world, makes the world a place where novelty can occur. The possibility of constant reinterpretation makes the world not something which can be counted. The world is not one, because facticity is the lack of objects to be recognized, while the world is also not two or several, since ideality 'shows' us a unified world.

The description of the flesh as an incarnate principle, makes clear that this facticity could be understood as a certain proportionality of things; a certain structuring of perception. This proportion is not like the triangular one which Plato's demiurge has to obey when creating the world in the *Timaeus*:[74] Merleau-Ponty never gives a positive description to this required proportionality of things in the way Plato does (through giving a list of the triangular shapes which fit the proportions). This is because by definition the flesh not a fact, and as such it cannot be described positively, but only through allusion. In chapter three I will focus on this characteristic of the flesh.

This element of the flesh underlies not just the reflexivity of vision, but that of all perception: '*these visions, these touches, these little subjectivities, these "consciousnesses of . . . ," could be assembled like flowers into a bouquet, when each being "consciousness of," being For Itself, reduces the others into objects.*'[75] It is only through the synergy of these 'consciousnesses of' that I have the sense of perceiving something whole. It is this shared sustenance by flesh in all perception which is the closest Merleau-Ponty gets to a principle of Being. To say it is exactly that is however an oversimplification of the notion of flesh, because it is also that which underlies non-being: it is the undividedness of facticity and ideality. Non-being and being can only be separated out from each other because they have their root in the same non-fact that is the flesh. Nevertheless, since the flesh is the closest that Merleau-Ponty comes to a 'principle of being,' that I will proceed to conceive of reflexivity as a 'sign' of being (and non-being). The project of this thesis can be reformulated as the attempt at answering the question: How can the flesh be expressed if it is not a fact about the world? I will now look at the degree of reflexivity in language to find out if the flesh can be expressed through language.

§ 2.3: *Lateral ontology and the reflexivity of language*

Merleau-Ponty works out this idea of reflexivity in a working note for *The Visible and the Invisible* on depth.[76] Here, depth is understood as that which constitutes my vision of an object by lending it an interest which attracts my focus. The thing I focus on seems to be deeper than what is on the edges of my focus. I cannot focus on multiple objects at once. Because perception works through focus, my center of attention continually shifts. This

[74] Richard D. Archer-Hind*, Platōnos Timaios. The Timaeus of Plato* (London: Macmillan, 1888)*,* 97: '*The best of bonds is that which makes itself and those which it binds as complete a unity as possible; and the nature of proportion is to accomplish this most perfectly.*'
[75] *The Visible and the Invisible,* p 141.
[76] Idem, p. 219.

shifting implies that no object has a privileged position. The lack of hierarchy in perception is what Merleau-Ponty the calls laterality of being. The focused object is focused on by virtue of the other objects' obfuscation. It is this obfuscation of that which is the *beyond* of my vision which gives my vision its depth: '[the] *implication* [of different visions] *in one another are the reality, exactly: that the reality is their common inner framework (membrure)*.'[77] Compare this to Merleau-Ponty's quote mentioned earlier: '*Because meaning is the total movement of speech, our thought crawls along in language. Yet for some reason, our thought moves through language as a gesture goes beyond the individual points of its passage.'*[78] Just as with perception, language acquires its signification by virtue of what lies beyond it, namely in that which is implicated. It is this indirect, implicated aspect of language which is what makes it speak.

Merleau-Ponty says that his philosophical notion of implication should be taken similarly to how in Descartes' theory the unity of body and soul is implied. An example of this can be found in his correspondence with Elizabeth of Bohemia: '*since your Highness notices that it is easier to attribute matter and extension to the soul than to attribute to it the capacity to move a body and to be moved by one without having matter, I beg her to feel free to attribute this matter and this extension to the soul, for to do so is to do nothing but conceive it as united with the body.'*[79] Descartes sees the soul's capacity to move a body as conditioned by its union with a body. The nature of this condition is for him not able to be explained philosophically, but it is nevertheless affirmed when one observes that in daily life souls and bodies seem to interact. Merleau-Ponty notes that Descartes' body and soul cannot be '*justified together by a continuous movement of thought. They can be affirmed together only if one takes them with their implication*.'[80] Looking at Merleau-Ponty's understanding of implication we see that similarly to Descartes this implication transcends a continuous line of thought. The relation of implication goes beyond our focus, beyond anything which can be coherent for us. I am not aware of everything implicated in my existence, which is why I can experience a sense of discovery. My horizon is not only determined by what lies inside, but just as much by what is out of view. The function of implication introduces distinction in being yet also stresses the laterality of being. It causes a separation between the focus of my perception and that what my perception implies, while also showing that objects never exist purely *in themselves*: they always exist through their implication of other objects and the other objects' implication of it. All being is lateral, all being *is* through its implication in other focuses, none of which have a hierarchical priority above the others.

The implicative power of language is possible due to the twofold character of indirect and direct language. Through their indirectness signs are capable of referring beyond its

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[77] Idem, p. 226.
[78] 'Indirect Language and Voices of Silence,' p. 43.
[79] Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1897-1913). English translation: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3:694.
[80] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 199.

signified; the meaning of the sign spreads out. In 'The Chiasm — The Intertwining,' Merleau-Ponty mentions the allocutary power of speech: '*no locutor speaks without making himself in advance allocutary.*'[81] One cannot speak without becoming someone who can be talked to. Reflexivity shows up once more; speech is that which has no clear inside or outside, it is not mine *or* of the others. Instead it is both; *'with one sole gesture* [the speaker] *closes the circuit of his relation to himself and that of his relation to the others and, with the same stroke, also sets himself up as delocutary, speech of which one speaks: he offers himself and offers every word to a universal Word.'*[82] This universal Word is like vision, of which I said that I am not the author, but rather a partaker able to be both subject and object. Just as I see and can be seen, I can talk and be talked about. This is the way in which I am *involved* with the others, how I cannot be seen apart from but also not as coinciding with the other.

§ 2.4: *Reconversion of silence and speech*

With his theory of lateral being Merleau-Ponty overcomes the problems which had motivated him to do ontology: the inability of previous philosophies to account for the *involvement* of me and the world with each other. Because objects are implicated by the look, since the things on the edges of vision can attract my attention at any given time, there is no sharp distinction between objects of attention. In applying this theory to the relation of me and the world, the solution becomes visible; I am always implicated when I focus on the world, et vice versa. My focus is always sustained by what lies outside it, by what is implicated: '*The invisible is there without being an object, it is pure transcendence, without an ontic mask. And the "visibles" themselves, in the last analysis, they too are only centered on a nucleus of absence.*'[83] The invisible is whatever transcends vision while still being implicated by it. It is not a thing, but it is that *against which* or *for which* things can show up. In terms of speech, whatever I say (the focus of what I mean) is always sustained by what I do not say (that which is implied). This explains how my speech can flow out of silence, like the example of the author in subchapter 2.1 whose speech has no example of prior speech. Instead of a reproduction of prior speech, speech is an opening in which meaning can appear. It is the silence which lines my speech that leaves gaps which allow my words to say more than merely their direct sense.

The theory of lateral being can account for the appearance of things from where once nothing was (at least within my perceptual field). It is this transition (or rather the co-implication) from invisible to visible and from muteness to speech, this new discovery that also comes with a problem; the ontological status of the invisible or muteness. When we say that the visible is sustained by the invisible, the visible must be distinct from the invisible. However, the latter is exactly what this theory argues against. The visible and invisible always imply each other to the point that we cannot separate them from each

[81] Idem, p. 154.
[82] Ibidem
[83] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 229.

other; they are always co-existent and co-implicative. How can we speak of a transition from the muteness of the world to its speech? How can we conceive of this action at a distance? Merleau-Ponty suggests that '*one can speak neither of a destruction nor of a conservation of silence (and still less of a destruction that conserves or of a realization that destroys — which is not to solve but to pose the problem).*'[84] This can be understood as a critique of Husserl's philosophy portrayed as a '*reconversion of silence and speech into one another'*.[85] The challenge is to think silence and speech or the visible and the invisible at once, to think of things distinct but not separate.

We should not think in terms of a *transition* of muteness to speech. Instead, I propose we distinguish Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *reversible* visible and invisible (and muteness and speech) from the ontological *opposition* between being and non-being. Merleau-Ponty writes his ontology in terms of vision, speech, sensation: those processes of reversibility forming my engagement with the world. This can be contrasted to an ontology of opposition between being and non-being, which presupposes that there exists radical difference between the two. By rejecting this presupposition of radical difference in favor of looking at being as engagement, the *simultaneity* of activity and passivity, it makes no sense to talk in terms of a transition.

Have we not merely moved the goalpost? Instead of the task of thinking a transition from non-being to being we are left with the problem of thinking passivity and activity at once. But perhaps this new 'problem' is not so impossible. It is easier to think of a passive thing becoming active than to think of non-being becoming being. Our place as a point of exchange between passivity and activity is described by Merleau-Ponty when he says of Proust that in his writing '[Being] *appears as containing everything that will ever be said, and yet leaving us to create it*.'[86] This is the simultaneity of activity of passivity; we *are left* to *be active*. We are passive to the degree that we cannot help but actively make meaning.

We can now make sense of what Merleau-Ponty's remark at the very end of *The Visible and The Invisible* that "*In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests.* [There] *is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other; we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth.*"[87] As we have seen, the philosophy of Husserl understood as the restoring a power to signify runs into the problem of a transition between non-being and being. This problem is resolved when we think of the power to signify as an act of engagement with the world by being already engaged in the

[84] Idem, p. 154.
[85] Idem, p. 129.
[86] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 170.
[87] Idem, p. 155.

world, instead of the sudden appearance of being out of non-being (sudden, because between these a gradual movement seems to be impossible). Valéry's idea on the other hand is already quite close to an ontology of lateral being. The voice of '*the things, the waves, and the forests*' is present when we talk of them. The voice of no one is always *present by implication* in every voice. The ideas of Husserl and Valéry are no dialectical reversals since they can both be approached as theories of implication. This does not mean they are the same; these ideas lie *next to* each other like the things lie next to each other in our field of vision, always laterally co-implicative. These ideas are never able to be thought together in a continuous thought, like Descartes' body and soul. Like the laterality described by these theories, their interrelation is also one of laterality; one always implies the other.

We started this chapter with the question: Why and how should we understand Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as interrogation? The answer works on multiple levels. On the level of language, Merleau-Ponty interrogates its affinity with vision and other modes of perceiving, namely its reflexivity. This leads him to his idea of lateral ontology, in which what implies is itself always implied, excluding higher or lower orders of being: to be is to be implied. Being is not interpreted 'vertically' but 'horizontally.' Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is also an interrogation in that instead of expecting a clear-cut answer to its questioning, it is rather the awareness that what- or whoever questions is always implied by the question. Philosophical interrogation is a hyper-dialectic, a dialectic which tries to account for itself. It is not *'the simple expectation of a signification that would come to fill it.*[88] Instead, *'it is characteristic of the philosophical questioning that it return upon itself, that it ask itself also what to question is and what to respond is.*[89] The mode of questioning in philosophical interrogation is the radicalization of questioning. Questioning becomes radicalized when one says "what do I know?" in the course of a phrase.[90] This question does not have an answer, since an answer would be some form of knowledge, which is exactly what lies in question here. Instead, the interrogative question deepens itself constantly, as hyper-dialectic it is always reflecting on itself ad infinitum. This type of questioning does not expect answers. Instead, philosophy as interrogation is a *question-knowing*,[91] it is an understanding of the nature of questioning. The muteness which will always follow the question "what do I know?" is what Merleau-Ponty calls '[perhaps] *the proper mode of our relationship with Being, as though it were the mute or reticent interlocutor of our questions*.'[92] Muteness lines and sustains our questioning.

[88] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 119.
[89] Idem, p. 120.
[90] Idem, p. 128.
[91] Idem, p. 129.
[92] Ibidem.

Chapter 3: Philosophy as interrogation requires a concept of silent expression

The main question of my thesis is: 'to what extent can the meaning of being be expressed through language?' Since silence lines our questioning, my thesis can never be answered satisfactorily through the use of direct language, but it can show what all questions share; muteness. An 'answer' to the question could not be a conventional answer, but rather a *question-knowing*, which is the aim philosophy as interrogation.

If we want to *know* the thesis question, we must first know what questioning, expression and language are. I cannot expect the answers to these three questions to come to me directly. Nevertheless, I might make the *dimensions* of the thesis question apparent through interrogation. With dimensions I mean the presuppositions present in a question that show us where it might lead us. In the first sections of this chapter, I will find that my thesis question requires a new understanding of expressive silence, which will be the main topic of the latter half of this chapter. The conclusion of this thesis will show the positive relation of this expressive silence to our question.

§ 3.1: What is questioning?

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty sees philosophical questioning as an interrogation of being in which definite answers cannot be expected. Instead, philosophical interrogation questions itself, it is *hyper-dialectic*. What makes philosophical questioning not a futile attempt at getting clarity is that these questions leave a trace, a silent 'presence' of past questioning whenever we question in the now. As Merleau-Ponty states in his essay 'Everywhere and Nowhere,'[93] the history of philosophical questioning cannot be seen as one big dialectic. The history of philosophy is not a concerted effort towards a goal through 'trial and error.' Rather, '*there is not a philosophy which contains all philosophies; philosophy as a whole is at certain moments in each philosophy.* [...] *Philosophy's center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.*'[94] The sum of individual moments in the history of philosophy do not form coherent whole. Conversely, the whole is present in the particular. A philosophical question cannot later be subsumed in a synthesis. As interrogations of being, these questions will always remain open. I understand this openness of the question as that which Merleau-Ponty calls philosophy's center. For him, the history of philosophy is the contact with or exposure to muteness which all philosophies share in their questioning. The wholeness of philosophy in each of its moments implies that previous questions are always implicated in our questioning. This is a temporal expression of the lateral implicative ontology as discussed in section 2.4. This implication of the past in the present will be discussed in section 3.4.

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[93] Merleau-Ponty, 'Partout et nulle part' in: *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). English translation: 'Everywhere and Nowhere' in: *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McLeary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
[94] Merleau-Ponty, 'Everywhere and Nowhere,' p. 128.

§ 3.2: What is Expression?

If we want to know what expression means for Merleau-Ponty, we can remain with the previous example taken from 'Everywhere and Nowhere.' Even when one disagrees with a previous philosopher, the philosopher's *expression* will remain true. Expression is not to be understood as representation or externalization of a thought, but as an *advent* instead of an event. An advent is like an *opening* in time through which novelty arises, while an event is a moment within a predictable sequence. In the example mentioned above, I can disagree with what a philosopher said, but not with the fact that something is said. This 'saying' which is unretractable is a contribution to the history of philosophy which will not disappear or resolve through (dis)agreement, it cannot be synthesized or sublated. From now on I will name this 'saying' expression, since this phenomenon is not restricted to speech.

Speech always has truth-conditions (it can communicate unsuccessfully) while expression is the appearance of meaning; it is the condition for truth conditions. In the example of speech, it is the expression, the occurrence of speech that makes it possible for this speech to be deemed true or false according to its success in communicating whatever it says. Speech is but one occurrence of expression, namely the specific sense of expression which is truth-apt. Expression spans much wider range, extending to every appearance of meaning in the world, be it in art, nature, or even in the work of a mathematician, a case which I will examine below.

In his book *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, which was written primarily as an introduction to Merleau-Ponty's thought,[95] Lawrence Hass sees expression as one of the core concepts of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project. Hass is interested in Merleau-Ponty's notion of expression because it '*offers dramatic possibilities for re-conceiving human cognition*,'[96] by providing an alternative to the idea that thinking, language, and knowing are processes of representation. His book wants to show that for Merleau-Ponty these processes of representation presuppose their expression.

Hass makes his case by using examples in. For him, Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the performance of mathematical proof is the clearest example of the phenomenon of expression and its worth to scientific disciplines.[97] His reading of expression in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is that '[...] *All acts of expres*sion [...]: *(1) they are rooted in the living body and its relations to the world, (2) they involve intellectual-imaginative insight that transcends and transforms some open, initial data into a new, powerful form, and (3) they bear a powerful sense of necessity. In short, expression is an embodied, creative way of arriving at truths and communicating with others; it is a way of*

[95] Hass, p. 2.
[96] Hass, p. 3.
[97] Idem, p. 147.

knowing that is consonant with our lives as natural beings in the world.'[98] Hass contrasts this notion of expression to transcendental philosophies, which see it as *mimesis* or the representation of a certain thought.

As part of his argument for the interest of Merleau-Ponty's account of expression for scientific disciplines, Hass contrasts Merleau-Ponty's expression to mathematical doctrines which try to establish a non-transcendental origin of geometry.[99] In contrast to these doctrines, Hass sees Merleau-Ponty's position to be stressing the *process* of finding a mathematical proof. At first, a mathematician stands before a problem without immediately knowing how to solve it, and through an ardous process informed by their historical and cultural situation is able to come to a proof which in hindsight seems to be the only possible one. Hindsight makes us think that *established* theorems are objectively true, losing sight of their contingent historical *establishment*. This mirrors Merleau-Ponty's statement in an unpublished text which says that '*the structure of the world is buried under the sedimentations of later knowledge*.'[100]

Hass' reading is a view of expression which is a way of reacting to a Gestalt or perceived organized whole. Instead of merely reproducing this Gestalt, expression is a way of sublimating it: '[Expressions are] *ways of taking up the world and transforming it ("sublimating it") into new, knowledge-bearing formations*.'[101] A Gestalt means more than the sum of its parts because of this sublimation. For Merleau-Ponty, '*knowledge and communication sublimate rather than suppress our incarnation*.'[102] Expression is a reciprocal sublimating communication between me and the world hidden by sedimentation, which makes us believe that the world is ready-made either *for us* or *by us*.

Hass' interpretation of expression is helpful in tracing the origins of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical interest in expression since its traces its initial theorization in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Because Hass uses this earlier work as his source, the account of expression is still described from the point of view of the subject: In Hass' story it is *through* the subject that a triangle comes to expression. I focus on the later thought of Merleau-Ponty, which signaled a shift of focus away from the subject-position towards the impersonal conditions which make a subject-position possible. When we want to appropriate Hass' interpretation in our reading of the later Merleau-Ponty, we should take this shift of focus into account. Hass sees '*Merleau-Ponty's account of expressive cognition is an extension of his perceptual ontology*'[103] but we need to be critical of the use of the word 'cognition' here. We need to be sure that cognition here does not presuppose a cogito. It is only when we understand Hass' 'expressive cognition' as an embodied

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[98] Idem, p. 155.
[99] Idem, p. 156-9.
[100] Merleau-Ponty, 'An Unpublished text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work' in: *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 5.
[101] Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, p. 159.
[102] 'Unpublished text,' p. 7.
[103] Hass, p. 4.

cognition, a cognition which does not arise from an 'I think' but from the point of my partaking in a world, that we can use his account for our present purposes.

My thesis question presupposes that expression is not just a process which occurs in the subject's perception of the world. The being which may or may not be able to express itself through language is just as much the being of others and of the world. Still, I can make use of Hass' reading of expression as a process of sublimation. It could be seen as the enrichment of one field of perception through its *bind* with other fields, a mutual inter-pretation of the different senses, which gives us our position in the world. The subject-position is the result of this inter-pretation, not its precondition. The body is present when '*between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit.*'[104] Because there is no emphasis here on the difference between my eye and that of the other or the things, it can be the expression of others and of the world alongside 'my own' expression which condition my position. This embodied sense of expression gives rise to and flows out of my position which for now will suffice when we want to *know the question* of expression. Furthermore, when Merleau-Ponty mentions in *Eye and Mind* that '*quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them*'[105] this could be read as a continuation of the philosophy of expression as presented by Hass. The echo awakened in our bodies can be understood as a less subject-centered continuation of the notion of expression as sublimation.

§ 3.3: What is Language?

We have seen that to question philosophically is to inaugurate an openness which leaves a trace. We have seen that expression is the sublimation of the world into our perception of it, our active participation in the world which creates openings in it through which meaning can arise. When we ask ourselves to what extent being can be expressed through language, we should ask whether this process of sublimation can occur through language.

We have seen in section 2.1 that for Merleau-Ponty language contains direct and indirect aspects. When a word is uttered, it is at once a representation and an opening, an invitation to interpretation. Through its utterance, the word enters the world of speech. This world cannot be understood as the sum of all speech because speech is always still ongoing. We cannot grasp its totality, though we have direct access to it whenever we speak: we can talk about this ungraspable world of speech through the delocutary aspect of language in which uttered speech becomes '*speech of which one speaks*.'[106]

[104] 'Eye and Mind', p. 163.
[105] Idem, p. 164.
[106] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 154.

Like expression, spoken language seems to inaugurate meaning through this reflexive delocutary aspect. Still, expression covers a much wider range of activity than speech. Expression does not just limit itself to *our* inauguration of sense into the world, it is also the way in which the world inaugurates meaning through us. It is like a unity of passivity and activity: what is before us is there because of the awakening of an *echo* in our bodies. The body does not only passively reverberate the world, but it also actively welcomes what it reverberates.

What differentiates speech from expression is the specificity of speech. Expression can be understood as an 'impersonal' affair, the echo of world and body which is both active and passive. Speech is still linked to a specific moment and a specific body: The words I speak are *these* and *my* words. Speech is a particular instance of expression, and its limitation to this instance is what makes it apt to be true or false. *My* words can be true or false depending on whether they are true or false under the conditions in which they are uttered. When I say that there is a tree before me even though this is not the case, my words are false. Expression has a wider scope: when I use an expression in the proverbial sense, what I am saying can be true no matter if they apply *directly* to my situation.

With the help of these last few sections we can now reformulate the thesis question. We now ask: to what extent can being be expressed (or to what extent can the things echo in our bodies) through language (understood as a mode of expression)? The distinction between speech and expression made in this subchapter shows us that expression has a particular quality: it is able to say something without referring to any particular thing. This is possible through the meaning expression acquires through time. The echo of expression requires a thinking of a present in which the past is implicated, a rethinking of time which I will cover in the next section.

§ 3.4: Silence and Vertical Time

In *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World*, Glen Mazis makes an argument for an ethical reading of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy. For Mazis, it is of ethical import that one hearkens to the silence of the world: '*When we follow Merleau-Ponty's thought into this second step of following silence and gesture into its ethical import of the power of the face-to-face, this perceptual encounter is revealed as being at the heart of an ethics of felt solidarity.*'[107] Regardless of whether I agree with this point, the first section of Mazis' book offers an extensive treatment on the topic of silence in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. This makes it a valuable source for this thesis. Consequently, this section will be a reading of Mazis' account of silence. After that, I will provide my own account of silence in section 2.2.

[107] Mazis, p. xi.

Mazis argues that the interweaving of the flesh (what I have called reflexivity) is sustained by a sense of time which is itself chiasmatic: '*Silence happens only in time's unfolding*.'[108] The ebb and flow or the play of things can only happen in time, just like the indirect sense of language can only be noticed in time. Speech is delocutary because it is uttered at a certain time, which can be referred to from there on out. Mazis argues that chiasmic time cannot be viewed as a series of instants: '*There is no gesture in the frozen instant in which the tracing and trajectory are lost*.'[109] Every 'moment' is always both a tracing and a trace, it is both *occurring* and filled with what has *occurred*. This presence of a gap between past and present in the current moment enables the interweaving of present and past speech: '*Time itself must be such that it manifests the clashing of opposing forces and has gaps through which unexpected senses enter the interplay and come into interconnection*.'[110] For Mazis, Merleau-Ponty's 'proof' for chiasmic time is the inability to overcome the gap between touching and touched when thouching ones own hand. He quotes Merleau-Ponty writing that '*To begin with, we spoke summarily of a reversibility of the seeing and the visible, of the touching and the touched. It is time to emphasize that it is reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact*.'[111] The imminence of reversibility points towards a chiasmic time: in the moment of touching the hand, its reverse (the same hand being touched) is always imminent. Past, present and future moments imply each other through being *distinctly related* or *intertwined*. In regards to language, the delocutary sense of an uttered word is implied by future speech not through 'reaching back' from a 'literal' distance in time (as series of instants), but through the interconnectedness of past and present. Because the present bears gaps which the past can hold on to, past speech can be implied by present speech.

Mazis argues that when we view time as chiasmic, when we understand present and past to be intertwined, we can hearken to silence. Chiasmic time also allows us to see how institution or meaning-inauguration occurs: '*The gap between the sensing and the sensed, or between the silence of the primordial world of perception and language*, *which has the same chiasmatic relationship, is essential to the way sense evolves and unfolds within time*.'[112] The lack of overlap between touching and touched gives me the sense of there being something beyond the direct, a silent sense that there is a reverse to my touching. This lack or gap in my sensations allows for a sort of 'filling in.' This 'filling in' is called institution, which Mazis describes as the "*characteristic of the human gesture to signify beyond its simple existence in fact, to inaugurate a meaning*."[113]

Through this 'ebb and flow' of moments in time, the sensible attains a '*movement by vibration*' as described in *Eye and Mind*.[114] Merleau-Ponty explains this movement by

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[108] Idem, p. 59.
[109] Ibidem.
[110] Mazis, p. 60.
[111] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 147.
[112] Mazis, p. 61.
[113] Idem, p. 70.
[114] 'Eye and Mind,' p. 184

vibration through a description of the use of line in modern painting. Modern painting can suggest a movement where there is none through this vibration in its use of line. In the paintings Merleau-Ponty describes, line is not *representative* of the limits of a certain object, but rather the '*a certain process of gouging within the in-itself, a certain constitutive emptiness*.'[115] The lines of Klee's holly leaves or Cezanne's apples are not their edge, but the non-place between the leaves' appearance in and out of focus. Similarly to the eye's vision, there are no clear borders between things, but rather certain axes which flow out of the objects. The line is therefore an invisible rendered visible by the things: '[the line is] *always between or behind whatever we fix our eyes upon; they are indicated, implicated, and even very imperiously demanded by the things, but they themselves are not things*.'[116] Through seeing a line, I sense power of implication at work between the things. This suggestive power of line is another example of institution: a gesture which signifies beyond itself.

According to Mazis, this process in which the 'memories' of 'previous' perceptions speak to me is silent. This allusive silence in meaning-inauguration demands of philosophy that it is described accordingly: As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "*One cannot make a direct ontology. My 'indirect' method (being in the beings) is alone conformed with being*."[117] Silence is the emergent linguistic sense in things, a 'wanting to say' where there is not yet something said: '*there must be a linguistic sense already emergent in the silent sensible*.'[118] This allusion is a form of suggestion, in the way that the color red of a red dress is '[a] *punctuation in the field of red things, which includes, the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers, and of the Revolution* [...].'[119] The perception of red summons associations neither absent or present in the thing. This suggestive power is its silence. It is not pronounced yet still present, like the way in which we cannot say that (literal) silence is somewhere out there, though we say we perceive it whenever we (seem to) hear nothing.

Taken as such, silence is not the contrary of language, which is what Merleau-Ponty looks for when he problematizes the ability of language to describe the silence of human body and the world: '*The taking possession of the world of silence, such as the description of the human body effects it, is no longer this world of silence, it is the world articulated, elevated to the Wesen, spoken*. [...] *Can this rending characteristic of reflection (which, wishing to return to itself, leaves itself) come to an end? There would be needed a silence that envelops the speech anew, after one has come to recognize that speech enveloped the alleged silence of the psychological coincidence*. [...]'[120] His answer lies in the affirmation of a silence which '*will not be the contrary of language*.'[121] This absence of radical distance between silence and language fits with the line of reasoning in his critique of Sartre's

[115] 'Eye and Mind,' p. 184.
[116] 'Eye and Mind,' p. 183.
[117] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 179.
[118] Mazis, p. 47.
[119] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 132.
[120] Idem, p. 179.
[121] Ibidem.

ontology from section 1.3. For Merleau-Ponty, an ontology of a radical separation between being and nothingness is impossible. Consequently, there is no such thing as an ontologically void sense of nothingness. Such a radical nothingness would be a total lack of being and therefore of no relation to being at all: '*How would this nothing be active, efficacious?*'[122]

This lack of radical nothingness results in an ontology in which whatever a thing *is not* is never entirely removed from the thing. Speech is not entirely removed from silence et vice versa. This ever-present implication of difference in identity is what Merleau-Ponty calls the chiasm: '*the idea that every perception is doubled with a counter-perception […], an act with two faces, one no longer knows who speaks and who listens*.'[123] Things only make sense for us in contrast to what it is not: '*Speaking-listening, seeing-being seen, perceiving-being perceived circularity (it is because of it that it seems to us that perception forms itself in the things themselves)*.'[124]

This insight allows us to answer (or rather *know*) the thesis question. When one asks to what extent the meaning of being can be expressed by language, a response could be that it is through a silence which is not the contrary to speech that being speaks. This silence is a power of implication present in all expression as the power of signs to transcend themselves. We should not understand this silence as a radical lack of sound, since it would be ontologically impossible to account for a sound which arises from this radical lack. Instead, this silence is always present in expression. Mazis gives an the way in which a piece of music can evoke silence: '*In his Eighth Symphony, Mahler employs a massive orchestra and chorus to achieve what sounds like a thousand voices* […] *of varying timbres and musical parts. Yet, at a crescendo of the voices of the choruses and orchestra,* […] *the hearer may have the uncanny sense that through all these voices one has penetrated to the heart of silence.*'[125] The largest orchestra can still be able to *evoke* silence. This evocative power would not be possible when sound and silence are understood as radically separate. We could not even call them expressions,[126] since there would be no place from where the sound comes or goes to. An expression of sound by sound would not have any movement to it, which is why we need to ascribe a positive role to silence in language.

[122] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 265.
[123] *The Visible and the Invisible*.
[124] Ibidem.
[125] Mazis, pp. 27-8.
[126] Expression: 1a '*an act, process, or instance of representing in a medium (such as words)*, 1b(1) '*something that manifests, embodies, or symbolizes something else*' in: Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/expression. Accessed 3 May. 2024.

Conclusion: The expression of silence.

It is through its indirect or silent aspect that language can express the meaning of being. This expression or resonance is not in silence itself as some absolute negation of utterance, but rather the being *ineinander* (interwoven) of silence and utterances or the impossibility of absolute negations. It is this interwovenness of two different aspects of language which mirrors the passive and active attitudes towards the world described at the end of *The Visible and the Invisible*: '*In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests.*'[127] Husserl's sense of philosophy is an *activity*, namely the act of restoring the power to signify. Merleau-Ponty refers to Valéry in a more *passive* sense; for him 'the things, the waves, and the forests' already have a voice, the voice of no one. Because we have seen that for him there is no such thing as absolute activity or passivity, we can start to understand what Merleau-Ponty means when he continues: '*we have to understand that there is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other; we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth.*'[128] It is the ultimate truth that language is both active and passive, that it is both an expression-of-itself but also a being-expressed by the things. It is the impossibility of a synthesis between these active and passive forms of expression which is ultimate.

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty stresses in a late working note that he is not a 'finalist': '*because the interiority of the body (= the conformity of the internal leaf with the external leaf, their folding back on one another) is not something made, fabricated, by the assemblage of the two leaves: they have never been apart.'*[129] The ultimate truth of the non-synthesis between active and passive expression is not an *end-product*, but rather that which has always been the case. Instead, Merleau-Ponty views '[…] *distinctions* [as] *integrated into a universal dimensionality which is Being (Heidegger).*'[130] Distinctions are the expression of being insofar as being is *universal dimensionality*, that which allows there to be different dimensions. It is in this way that the silence in language, along with its direct 'counterpart' express Being: through their inseparability they reveal something about Being: Being is the ability of things to reveal themselves in different aspects. This is why one cannot synthesize the views of Husserl and Valéry into a greater whole; they express Being through their *ever-separate co-implication*. This line described by Merleau-Ponty has this suggestive power which is another example of institution: a gesture which signifies beyond itself.

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[127] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 155.
[128] Ibidem.
[129] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 265.
[130] Ibidem.

Because of the impossibility of an ultimate synthesis, we cannot speak of a dialectic here in the sense that there is a progression. This denial of philosophy as a construction goes back to an earlier working note were Merleau-Ponty proclaims his project as having '*philosophy as center and not as construction.*'[131] Instead of constructing a metaphysics, it needs to discover it through an interrogation of perception, through a *"'negative philosophy" like "negative theology."'*[132] The silent aspect of being demands of Merleau-Ponty's method that it does not *affirm everything*, which is why most of *The Visible and the Invisible* consists of a critique of previous philosophies' inability to account for a silence which is not a pure nothingness.

Despite this negative aspect of Merleau-Ponty's method, I would like to end by sketching ways in which we can understand this interplay of silence and speech in somewhat positive terms. To me, this seems to be the challenge that Merleau-Ponty leaves us with. This interplay is noticeable in the relation between the familiar and the unfamiliar, for example when one experiences a piece of art for the first time. Here, one can have the experience of a *déjà vu*, the sense of familiarity in the unfamiliar, for example when one seems to recognize a melody which they have never heard before. Another example is when one recognizes a face of someone on the street without ever having seen this person before. On the other hand, there is also a way in which one can sense the unfamiliar in the familiar. For example, when a child has night terrors, thoughts of unknown intruders in the house with which the child is most familiar. The uncertainties of the future are another example; in the familiarity of our present there is always a gap, namely the possibility of surprise. In these examples, it is the existence of coincidence and uncertainty which shows us the way in which one can experience the interwovenness of the familiar and the unfamiliar. There is no absolute calculability of experience, but there are also moments in which the world seems to *make sense* in the common usage of the word, namely that in these moments experience seems to follow certain strict rules. I think part of Merleau-Ponty's interest in art comes from its ability to suggest whatever it is not, for example the suggestion of movement on a still canvas. This power of suggestion is what shows the connectedness between what something is and what it is not, and this connectedness is the proof of Being as universal dimensionality.

In Eye and Mind, the line in modern painting is that which we see because the things *demand* them to be seen. Similarly, in his philosophy of language, words demand silence which allows them to be distinct and not just a series of vocalizations: '*it can be said that beginning with the first phonemic oppositions the child speaks*'[133] The introduction phonemic oppositions requires a certain distance between phonemes. Like the space between keys on a keyboard, these distances are no sounds. Instead, they are the constitutive silences which make distinctions possible. Without this silence, these intervals, a child's vocalizations could never be meaningful for us. This is the positive role

[131] *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 166.
[132] Idem, p. 179.
[133] 'Indirect Language and Voices of Silence,' p. 40.

that silence plays in the creation of meaning in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. If we merely think of silence as absence,[134] we could not make sense of the inauguration of meaning.

[134] I notice traces of this more Sartrean understanding of silence (negation as 'pure' nothingness) in Mazis' account of silence. For Mazis, the orchestra can *evoke* silence yet never fully be silent in the way which I have made use of this term. The silence I talk about is the silence present in every expression, the intervals and distances necessary for depth to arise in our dealings with the world. For Mazis, the fact that silence remains a metaphoric possibility for something sonorous like music seems to be an indication that his sense of silence retains something 'pure,' something which cannot be mixed with sound. The intertwining of direct and indirect language as described by Merleau-Ponty in 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' to me seem to point to the impossibility of non-mixture of signs and their meaning. Taken even further, the working notes on lateral ontology (For example: *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 226.) seem to imply that Merleau-Ponty does not allow for non-mixture anywhere in his ontology.

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