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Transcending Normativity

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Transcending Normativity

Thesis for MA Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

Current theories of action-justification rely on pre-established meaning. Thus, we use the known to guide us into the unknown, or what we call the future. As a result, inevitably, we perceive the here and now through a filter of past experiences and understandings. The first casualty of this approach to life is life's mysteriousness. This thesis proposes a novel theory of action-justification. It relies on an active and conscious integration of the unknown or the mysterious on the basis of the reflective understanding of the limits of reflection (logic, knowledge and language). These limits show that we can never reach full certainty regarding the appropriateness of our actions. As such, it makes no more sense to rely on preestablished frameworks of knowledge for action-justification than it does to rely on the uncertainty which lies beyond them. In fact, by actively recognizing this uncertainty, we make room for the unknown as a more valid source for justification of action. However, the mysterious cannot guide us conceptually for it is mysterious; it can only guide us on a felt level of experience. With trust, we can lean into the unknown. When this affirmation is successful, our trust grows, which in effect allows us to lean again and further into the unknown, and so forth. This way, by integrating in our actions the knowledge of not knowing, we strengthen a sense of trust, allowing us to feel instead of reason toward the right course of action – without relying on our or other people's supposed knowledge. Indeed, paradoxically, as our trust grows, so does our perception of the mysteriousness of life. That's because our newly found trust allows us to let go of presupposed knowledge in favour of the mystery. By using the tools of logic, knowledge and language, we will step-by-step build a consistent methodological argument that is both circular and open ended, providing a framework we can adopt to transition into a world of mystery.

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Citations

In this thesis, I use the Chicago style of reference. In the case of the works of Wittgenstein, I refer in footnotes to paragraphs instead of page numbers, as this seems to be a much more practical approach for his writings.

Introduction

It is an exciting time to be alive! We find ourselves at a moment in time where our traditional frameworks for understanding action, meaning and truth seem increasingly fragile. The culture that once promised certainty now seems to succumb from its internal contradictions; our institutions, grounded in Enlightenment ideals, appear hollowed out from within. And as I am writing this, the choppers securing the airspace above The Hague for the NATO-summit appeal to my imagination. Is this the final push of the Western world toward certainty and security?

The movement toward unification becomes increasingly violent as the move toward fragmentation becomes unavoidable. But this fragmentation itself makes the fabric of our culture much more porous, and in that sense, offers the possibility to think about being in the world in new ways. In that sense, this thesis takes the contemporary predicament as an opportunity to think differently – not to establish new foundations, but to question the very impulse toward foundationalism. Can we justify action without certainty? Can we reimagine normativity not as a set of rules grounded in reason, but as a lived and felt relation to the mysterious groundlessness of Being? The central claim of this thesis is that normativity – our sense of what we ought to do – need not be rooted in pre-established meaning, nor in any form of objective certainty. Instead, normativity can be rethought as emerging from a transcending relation between the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown, the reflective and the post-reflective.

Drawing from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and Merleau-Ponty's ontology of *flesh*, I argue that action can be guided by a kind of trust that is not based on knowledge but arises from embodied participation in the world. This unjustified trust, when consciously embraced, makes way for a mode of responsiveness that is not grounded in conceptual justification but in attunement to latent intentionalities: sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle movements of the flesh of Being which can be felt but not grasped.

In order to make this happen, I decided to stick to the impulse of normativity, for it is normativity which views it as its aim to give a framework for action. But it is the impulse which we will maintain, and not the way we think of normativity traditionally. Traditionally, normativity provides *ground* for *direction* – and the concepts are necessarily connected. In this thesis, we look at them separately, in the first two chapters. The insights we gain through this study, will *intertwine* in the final chapter.

In the first chapter, I interrogate the ground of normativity. Drawing on Wittgenstein, I show that the desire for certainty – epistemic or moral – leads us to establish supposedly immovable foundations. Yet these foundations are always already part of a language game, dependent on a form of life, and therefore contingent. Wittgenstein's argument shows that what we take as certain is not justified but rather enacted in our practices. We trust certain things because they form the bedrock of our activity, not because they are provable. This kind of trust is pre-reflective and non-rational. The ground of our normativity, then, is not reason but trust – not an axiom but an affective orientation.

Once we realize the ungroundedness of our believes, we are in need of a system in which our trust nonetheless makes sense. This is where Merleau-Ponty helps us. In his late ontology, particularly in his account of the *flesh*, Merleau-Ponty refigures Being not as substance or idea, but as an intertwining of visibility and invisibility:

the world is always more than what is given. This excess, this mystery, is not an epistemological lack but an ontological feature. To live with this mystery is not to despair over uncertainty but to recognize that trust – unjustified and non-objective – is the only true ground we have.

Having relinquished the search for certain ground, chapter two asks how we might still find direction. If normativity is no longer based on reasoned principles or moral laws, what guides us? Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the *flesh* offers a powerful answer. The *flesh* is not the materiality of the body; it is a paradoxical element in which all beings participate – a medium in which seeing and being seen, touching and being touched, thinking and being thought, are interwoven. In this chiasmic ontology, intentionality no longer belongs to a subject aiming at an object; rather, intentions are *latent* within the flesh of Being itself, hidden behind what we see of being. They unfold not as commands but as invitations – not known in advance, but felt in the act of living.

Direction, then, comes not from conceptual clarity but from sensitivity – from the ability to feel into the thickness of the world. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls empathy (*Einfühlung*): the ability of the flesh to feel itself through the beings it creates. To act ethically is not to apply a rule but to follow a latent intentionality – to respond to a movement of Being that exceeds reflection but touches us nonetheless. Thus, normativity becomes a form of attunement: to sense, from within our partial and perspectival view, a deeper rhythm of what is becoming visible.

If grounding is trust and direction is latent intentionality, the final question is how these two aspects of normativity relate. How does an agent act when both the ground and the direction of action are non-objective, paradoxical, and invisible? Here I propose the concept of *consent* as the *intertwining of ground and direction*. Consent, in this context, does not mean rational agreement or legal permission; it means a *felt yes* to the mysterious – a willingness to act without knowing, to say yes to the latent, to move toward the invisible.

To consent is to recognize that the world is always more than I can comprehend, and yet that I am of it. It is to accept the abyss as the condition of possibility for any direction at all. This kind of consent is neither passive nor irrational. It is an active embrace of uncertainty – a hyper-reflective mode of being in which reflection, aware of its limits, transforms into feeling. In this space, normativity is no longer something to be found *outside* us, in objective laws or principles, but something that arises *through* us, in the embodied act of trusting and feeling into Being.

This rethinking of normativity has both philosophical and existential consequences. Philosophically, it challenges the notion that action must be justified by reference to objective norms. It suggests instead that normativity can be paradoxical, grounded in trust, and directed by felt intentionalities. Existentially, it invites us to inhabit the mystery of life – not to seek security in concepts, but to become participants in the world's unfolding.

We live in a time when the frameworks that once told us what to do are losing their authority. In the face of this breakdown, we have a choice: either cling to increasingly brittle norms, or step into the unknown. This thesis is a call for the latter. By transcending normativity, we do not abandon it; we sublate into something we do not yet know – certainly not as a system of rules, probably as a lived practice of consent to the mystery that surrounds and includes us.

Chapter One: Grounding

Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.¹

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

Introduction

We find ourselves in an existence, in a world, in and of which we find ourselves to be (self-)conscious. We are not like other animals, who are fixed on the world, unmediated. We moderns are fixed on intellectual reflection. This fixation on reflection over experience is our entrance to scepticism, for ‘our capacity to turn our attention onto our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from [our perceptions and desires], to call them into question.’² This is a curious situation. For why would I doubt what I perceive? And why would I doubt what I desire? It seems that I don’t fully trust to, in one stroke, turn my perceptions into beliefs and my desires into acts. That’s because I want to believe what is true, and I want to do what is good. Therefore, my beliefs and my actions should not be guided by my perceptions and desires alone. Rather, they should rest on a solid foundation which tells me what true and good *is*, a foundation I have to establish *a priori*, of which I am more certain than I am of my perceptions and desires, so that I can be sure to believe and do the *right* things.

At the same time, when we take for granted the lessons of phenomenology, namely, that ‘the world is always already there’, that ‘our reflections of the world bear upon an unreflective experience’ and that our theories, models, sciences and linguistic practices should be conceived of as a second-order reality of something that is more primary (*call it* primordial being), of which language can only *speak* and point toward³, it becomes easy to see that the project of normativity – the wish to establish a *comprehensible ground* for knowledge, acting and being – is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. A ground is something that is more basic, more foundational than the thing it grounds. The wish for normativity is not just the wish for grounding of our reflective abilities, it is the wish for grounding of being as such, for life as such. At least since phenomenology, we know that being originates in a pre-reflective experience. Normativity, on the other hand, is the result of a reflective process. Since a ground must be more basic than the thing it grounds, and since the reflective process bears upon an unreflective experience, normativity can never arrive at a comprehensible framework for being because the establishment of supposed normativity is itself the result of a reflective process. This means that since phenomenology, normativity has become unthinkable.

Thus, once we formed the paradoxical thought that our reflections bear upon an unreflective experience (the thought is a paradox because we still *think* it – an epiphany Wittgenstein clearly had too, which is why I treat him as a phenomenologist), we should thereby have given up on the project of normativity insofar as we aim to establish a ground through reflection, in other words, a

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review* 74 no. 1, (1965): 12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183526>.

² Christine M. Korsgaard *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 93.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge, 2002), xi.

rationally comprehensible ground. This is certainly true for all transcendental grounds or norms. But even immanent normativities which claim to be immanent to being itself still suffer this cause insofar as they come as *one fundamental thought*: since the source of being or life is non-reflective, the ground for being or life can never be a reflection, for its form would upset its function.

When Merleau-Ponty, after reading Husserl, made the point that a complete phenomenological reduction is impossible, he essentially had the same thought: it is impossible to arrive at a single thought because that thought is still a reflection of a world that preceded thinking, a pre-reflective world that is always already there. That is why phenomenologists always find themselves at the edge of thinking and the edge of language. That's why, instead, the practice of phenomenology is geared toward reduction: to try to reduce our habitual understanding of the world, our theories and axioms and arrive at something else. What this 'something else' is, isn't yet fully developed. Merleau-Ponty passed away, ahead of his time, thinking about precisely this.⁴ This at least suggests that there is something to think beyond language.

It goes without saying that this is not Wittgenstein's stance, as he is famous for suggesting that we should remain silent in regards to those things about which we cannot speak. But this is precisely why Wittgenstein is so interesting for us phenomenologists, for he keeps us sharp as a tack as he pushes the possibilities of language to its absolute limits. According to Wittgenstein, language can account for facts within a system of speech acts that give each other mutual support – a language game; everything that exceeds this facticity is hopeless. In other words, to overcome the impossibility of the complete reduction i.e., to arrive at a ground or norm which *can* account for being as a whole, would involve overcoming language altogether. This is why, reversely, an "honest" philosophy is a philosophy which is at its core paradoxical and which treats its incompleteness not as a lack but as an insight. This is true for all Western philosophy, for we find ourselves in a tradition in which we value logical consistency and coherency. For us Westerners, enlightenment – the Buddhist's solution to the "problem of being" and adversity (cf. suffering) – isn't so much impossible as it is unthinkable. If a normative framework does not include and embody the paradox between thinking and being in favour of (non-paradoxical) thinking, it necessarily corrupts being. That's why we must tinker toward a normativity which is necessarily incomplete, indirect, paradoxical and thus dynamic: normativity as some kind of movement of overcoming paradox. It is thus, that we ask in this chapter the following question: How can the sublation of a fixed objective ground help us to view being as paradoxical?

Normativity and Certainty

The apparent impossibility of normativity seems not to have held enough sway to prevent us from trying. When we ask the unequivocal normative question – *What to do?* – we seek, with an immediacy as if struck by lightning, to ground ourselves. If it is even a little bit true that our wish for a normative framework springs from our own distrust of our judgements, then it is equally true that an argument which suggests that such a framework is logically impossible to entertain will encounter resistance in being accepted equal to the amount of distrust that pervades. Distrust seeks stability, and an argument against the possibility of stability in favour of instability or pre-stability, does not address the actual motivation behind the

⁴ In his last, half-finished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty anticipates a new type of being which lives integrated with this 'something else'.

normative demand. Sentences like “I want to do good” or “I want to do the right thing” in relation to a normative framework hint toward the wish for reassurance. “To be sure of ourselves” in that sense means not to trust our own judgement or belief *at face value*, but to measure our own judgement or belief *against an externality*. Thus, the motivation behind the demand for normativity is the demand for epistemic certainty: we want to *know* before we *do*. This certainty can be established through another person, an institution, a philosophy, a religion or ideology, judicial rules and regulations, or a set of values which a person herself has grown accustomed to abide by and understands as her own. All these are forms of normativities. And so, the wish for certainty is achieved through crosschecking our beliefs with such pre-established authorities.

Conventionally, within the disciplines of ethics and normativity, we think of this authority as having a grounding function. Through grounding, we outsource our demand for certainty. In that sense, grounding is the foundation for certainty, yet grounding leads back to our wish for certainty. This wish for certainty, in effect, is what ultimately drives us toward formulating a sense of direction. And so, grounding and direction are linked through our wish for certainty. However, if we think of grounding and direction conceptually, they seem to be already in conflict: grounding is stable, and direction is dynamic. How come we let this contradiction slip into our ethics? Indeed, if grounding provides certainty, yet grounding is something we came up with because of our need for reassurance (i.e., certainty) for our directions (beliefs, judgements, desires, perceptions), then grounding is not the foundation of our wish for certainty, but its result. In other words, our wish for certainty is the source of grounding. We have now reduced the phenomenon of normativity to its two counterparts, grounding and direction, and we have further reduced grounding to its experiential source: the wish for certainty. Since, as a philosophical project, normativity is the search for a foundation, and since we have now discovered that the wish for certainty is more foundational than grounding, we must focus our attention toward the wish for certainty.

Certainty is always an adjective of something else: certainty of perception; certainty of belief; certainty of judgement. Certainty is the connecting term between grounding and direction and it is the source of our idea of grounding, but it is not the source of our directions. Directions can be perceptions, beliefs, judgements: everything that is directed toward the world. Our perceptions and desires may intertwine with our reflective ability, but the wish for certainty only surfaces when we have a reason to want certainty: this reason is adversity. An adversity is a situation where our way of doing things is under threat. It seems that in a world that is not always on our side, in which we encounter adversities, the wish for certainty of judgement and belief occurs.

What is Certainty, Anyway?

How does the certainty of beliefs come about? When we think of young children, they still lack the reflective ability, yet they do hold beliefs. Wittgenstein says that ‘[t]he child learns to believe a host of things’ and that ‘it learns to act according to these beliefs.’⁵ Even if the child is not yet reflective, it already acts in the world. And it does so according to its beliefs. We could say that beliefs, minimally speaking, require enactment, not reflection. This process of belief enactment establishes a system of beliefs (or rather, assertions, because the belief becomes established in the

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Harper Perrenial, 1972), §140.

act of asserting its content) as we become accustomed to the world. This system, Wittgenstein calls a language game. In this process of becoming accustomed to the world, of forming the language game, we also become accustomed to assertions having different levels of contingency or sedimentation. And so, the language game is a system in which ‘some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift.’⁶ As this system is developed over time and through our interaction with the world, the acts in that system are not ‘intrinsically obvious or convincing,’⁷ instead, they find their stability in relation to each other and the world: ‘What stands fast does so, not because it is; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.’⁸ What lies around a certain act are other acts, and ultimately, what lies around those acts is their experiential source. And this is the case not just for mundane or day-to-day acts, for example, the assertion that “this is my foot,” indeed, this is the case for supposed “foundational” scientific beliefs too. Wittgenstein says that ‘[i]t is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support.’⁹ We gain belief that the content of an assertion is true inductively: they come about by us having had multiple times a similar experience and thus we believe a similar experience to happen again when a similar context is met. In that sense, the momentary assertion is justified, the belief in the content of that assertion as stable, is not justified. Notice how, in my explanation of how beliefs come about, we did not once need to refer to certainty. And this is precisely Wittgenstein’s point: a language game functions without (absolute) certainty because it is rather, as he is famously quoted, the embeddedness of the language game in a *form of life* that makes for the language game to work.¹⁰

Wittgenstein’s argument in *On Certainty* was conceived as an argument against scepticism and is usually summarized by the idea that one has to start somewhere with non-doubting in order to be able to doubt at all. And in that sense, it makes no sense to doubt whether “this is my hand” or whether “the moon exists,” for these sentences are like the hinges of a door which allow us to pick up our glass of water or fly to the moon. Let’s call them basic certainties. Wittgenstein’s analysis is that we start somewhere with not-doubting not because these basic certainties have some kind of intrinsic truth-value or because we are absolutely certain of them, but because we see no reason for doubt. Indeed, they are part of our way of life and they show themselves in how we act.

Even if the premises which we do not doubt are absolutely true, we would not know, for we only encounter them through our embeddedness with them, through our form of life. And this means that we cannot predict that they are universal, that is, that they are valid everywhere, all the time. Instead, when we start with non-doubting behaviour, this is not something we do actively or consciously, precisely because it is part of becoming accustomed to the world. Thus, as an argument against the sceptic, basic certainties are things we have to “accept” for there to be any kind of judgement or reflection possible at all. Wittgenstein says their certainty lies ‘beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.’¹¹ We could say that their embeddedness-in-practice gives us a kind of certainty beyond certainty and uncertainty. It is the matter-of-course foundation, the world-picture,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, §142.

¹⁰ Ibid, §358.

¹¹ Ibid, §359.

not hypothesis.¹² We could say that we rely on basic certainties without being aware of them. But is that not the same as not *relying* on them?

Indeed, when the world works for us, we have no reason to become aware of the basic certainties we use for the proper functioning of our language game, our form-of-life. And so, we rely on them without even being aware that we use them. We do not doubt them. But non-doubting behaviour is not the same as judging that a basic certainty is beyond doubt: the former is pre-judgmental, the latter is judgmental. Indeed, it is a behaviour, not a judgment. It is also not the same as saying that we are absolutely certain of them. We unconsciously “trust” them, because we have no reason not to trust them, but this trust is implicit. We could say that trusting is an aspect of judging or that it is what makes judging possible, ‘and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable, it is part of judging.’¹³ In other words, non-doubting behaviour and trusting are the same thing. And thus, neither have an absolute certainty or a ground behind them. They are simply what makes living in the world possible. We have no reason to not-doubt or to trust, but we do it, automatically, because it is what is required of us to do anything at all. But we also have no reason against it! There is an aphorism in *On Certainty* where Wittgenstein *really wants to say* that a language game is only possible if one trusts *something* but he knows that he cannot. That’s because trust has no defined object. Rather, trust co-arises with speech acts. Trust and acts develop, unmotivated, at the same time. Indeed, we could say that trust is undirected and pre-subjective. Trust is implied as part of the system, and it is not made explicit by it.

And in our lives, there are many such systems. For example, what is considered fitting behaviour within a school can be different from what is fitting on the football field – yet both systems also have overlapping’s with each other. What is clear, however, is that what is essential for a language game to become established and continue is a community. The system relies on the community to uphold a certain form of life. But the inverse is also true: the community relies on the system to uphold that form of life as well. We can also say that the system upholds the community, and the community upholds the system. Because that is what a form of life is: it is a community related through a system, and that system is the language game. As a result, the community is essential for our trust in our form of life to arise. And the most basic assertions in those systems – the ones that seem to not change over time – become the implicit and more or less certain norms of that system.

Trust Made Explicit

But as our reflective abilities establish, and as we encounter a world that does *not* always work for us or with us, some of us search for a stability that is beyond doubt. Now, the wish for another kind of certainty surfaces. What were once basic certainties because we had no-reason-to-doubt them are now turned into foundations, and as we do so, we require of them a certainty that is beyond doubt. And with it, trust, once co-arising with the practice of judging, now becomes trust *in something* – people, ideas, values, even material things like cars, houses, technologies or toilet paper. Under the pressure of adversity, we move from no-reason-to-doubt to a-reason-not-to-doubt and we subvert groundless propositions into grounds – normativities – and we allude ourselves into supposing their stability. This stability is, of course, illusionary.

¹² Ibid, §167.

¹³ Ibid, §150.

As a result, instead of the language game being ‘the system in which arguments have their life,’ we take the aliveness out of the system and turn it into a system of self-referentiality. Now, the basic certainties of our language game; of our form of life, our matter-of-course foundation, become sedimented in a special way: we attribute to them absolute certainty, and it is because of this conscious attribution of absolute certainty, that we decide to trust them. Trust, once the unconscious *modus operandi* of a system that was *always already there* as something elemental, is made explicit and solidifies certainty even further. As a result, the internal structure of basic certainty and trust as co-arising properties of a functioning world, undergo a process of calcification by virtue of our reflectivity. The result of this process is that the language game, so solidified, becomes inert to change.

On the other hand, Wittgenstein suggests that language games change over time, and when this happens, as it supposedly so does continuously, certain or hardened propositions become fluid or uncertain and fluid ones become hardened or certain. This is a process that happens, one could say, organically or unnoticed. In one of his more poetic examples, Wittgenstein says that ‘the bank of the river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.’¹⁴ Again, we cannot tell if the hard rock of the river will effectively change, for we are *in* the river. Yet what we can say is that there is, potentially, a reversibility at play between certainty and uncertainty. We can think of these changes, for example, as paradigm shifts, when new foundational propositions replace old understandings under the pressure of new experiences. Once this happens, supporting propositions might be replaced in one stroke. But this process of unnoticed change becomes increasingly difficult if the propositions that were once certain for us are now reflectively *treated as* absolutely certain. When this is the case, giving way to change involves giving up on the stability those certainties afforded, and this is difficult, for it involves the realization of the *groundlessness* of our believing.¹⁵ In other words, the certainty that was once ‘part of judging’ is made explicit through a demand for normativity, and as a result, the certainty of propositions obscures their potential uncertainty which is their always present reverse.

Certainty and uncertainty are potentially reversible; propositions are never final, yet it makes practical sense to start somewhere, for otherwise nothing makes sense. But that should not mean that we can let the potentiality of the uncertain evaporate as soon as we make the proposition that “this is my hand.” Propositions play a trick on us, they let us forget that we cannot make absolute judgement, and this *is* a problem. It is a problem because Wittgenstein’s argument teaches us that language games can change, but if we are invested in a certain version of our form of life, we lose the ability to go along with that change. As a result, we become locked in the past. How do we solve this problem? You might have noticed something strange in the argument thus far. We have spoken of the implicitness of certainty, of how trust is an element of the language game and not a conscious trusting, and we have suggested how change happens unnoticed. These are all expressions of the rules of the game and these rules are not justified in themselves but become justified by virtue of playing the game. But of course, they are infelicitous expressions, precisely because as we described these processes that go on supposedly unnoticed, unconscious and implicit, we have thereby made them noticeable, conscious and

¹⁴ Ibid, §99.

¹⁵ Ibid, §166.

explicit. And in that way, the philosophy of language games necessarily refutes itself. This is the strangeness or paradoxicality of all of Wittgenstein's philosophy. The point of the matter is that after you have read and digested his philosophy of language games, the world is not the same anymore. But hey, that might have been the goal of his philosophy after all!

For us, this is a saving grace, for now we can move beyond the unnoticed, the implicit and the unconscious. Now, we can understand why the certainty of our acts is without ground. On the basis of that, we can understand why our trust is without ground. And on the basis of that, we can allow for change to happen. This kind of reflection that is aware of itself as a reflection – Merleau-Ponty calls this hyper-reflection or hyper-dialectics – is precisely the kind of reflection we need to build a solid foundation for our normativity: we need a ground that acts as ground, one we recognize and works as ground, that can accommodate our need for reassurance, yet which we *also* recognize as miraculously unstable. *Trust without justification*, that is, an elemental trust that is conscious of itself, is that which we are looking for. And the fact that we now know its ungroundedness only makes it that much more desirable. Indeed, who doesn't want to have or feel elemental trust!? Now, we can also make this trust clearer. It is something which co-arises with the act of living and which makes living in the language game, or in the world, possible. This means that the trust now consciously extends to all the insights we gained from our study of the language game, it includes the ungroundedness of our assertions, it includes trust as co-arising and undirected, and it includes the potential reversibility of certainties and uncertainties as language games change.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked at grounding as a key part of normativity. Normally in ethics, we study grounding in relation to its ability to give us direction. Here, we have separated the two. We've established that the ground for being is pre-reflective, and since finished thoughts are part of our reflective abilities, they can never act as ground. Then, we've suggested that the motivation behind the normative impulse is the wish for reassurance or certainty. As such, the phenomenon of certainty comes first, and it is on the basis of this phenomenon that we seek grounding. Further, we found that the phenomenon of certainty only appears when the world acts against us. Thus, behind the phenomenon of certainty is the phenomenon of adversity. When we encounter an adversity, our naïve embeddedness in the world is fractured. As a reaction, we become invested in our believes, and seek their certainty.

We then set out to investigate what believes are. Minimally, they are things we have because they work in a given context. As such, believes or acts support each other in a system, a language game. We could say that our acts are dependent upon our context or environment, which Wittgenstein calls a form of life. And because we are always already embedded in such a form of life, it is impossible to entertain absolute judgement over our believes. Because we are embedded, certainty is always certainty in context, not absolute certainty. They are the norms which work within the context of the given language game. But this is a problem for the normative demand of the ethical agent, for she requires a certainty that is *beyond* doubt. We suggested, with Wittgenstein, that playing a language game involves a kind of trust. This trust is pre-reflective, pre-subjective, implicit and thus undirectional: it is the *modus operandi* of playing a language game. However, under the demand of the normative, this trust becomes reflective, directed and calcified as a subjective absolute believe.

To prevent this from happening and find a way to let life flow again, we suggested that the argument of language games can be taken one step further: once we realize the ungroundedness of trust, we can *choose* this elemental trust precisely because we now understand its necessity. This move does two things. First, it appreciates the insights of the argument thus far. Second, by making these insights explicit, it gives us a chance to answer the normative demand for reassurance. Now, reassurance comes through unjustified elemental trust. As such, through hyper-reflection, the argument of language games is taken one step further and becomes, as it were, a transcending argument: the argument hints toward its own overcoming. This means that the argument is not finished, it can only be made whole by extending it beyond the purely argumentative.

The first result of this transcending argument is that it provides a ground for our normative demand. If before the more or less stable believes of the language game provided normativity; now, by virtue of becoming aware of their reversibility and thus their fundamental uncertainty, their normative power becomes consciously limited to the game within which they are used. They now are certainties reliant upon uncertainty. But this is not a problem for the project of this chapter: the search for grounding. We came to understand that grounding, understood as elemental trust, is in fact the resultant of acting or being in the world, not its foundation. At the same time, trusting something is a requirement for acting at all. That's why we suggested that certainties and trust co-arise. And this is still the case, even if we now understand that certainties are always already certainties in context. In that sense, trust and acting, or acting and trust, build a circle of which the ultimate source remains uncertain, whilst recognizing that this uncertainty shares a relationship of reversibility with contemporaneous believes. It is to this realm of uncertainty, or invisibility, to which we now turn.

Chapter Two: Direction

Ring the bells that still can sing
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in¹⁶

—Leonard Cohen

Introduction

In the last chapter we learned that a kind of trust co-arises with the act of living. This trust is part of the language game and is its ungrounded ground precisely because it is elemental to it. This is a great insight, because it establishes an alternative to the kind of certain ground usually required from normative accounts. But such elemental trust is hard to acquire for the normative agent, since it is a trust which precedes the reflective modus, or indeed any notion of the subject or the object. And if anything, the normative agent is a reflecting thing. Further, the suggestion that elemental trust is established in the act of living may be true, but it is of no use for the ethical subject who is in search for ground *prior* to the act. The consequence is that elemental trust can only be acquired by *previous* acts. As such, the enactment of the language game and the unjustified ground build an immanent system of referentiality: they work by virtue of each other. The trouble with such systems is that they cannot see outside of themselves. They build a closed circle, which is why it was Wittgenstein's contention that living in the world may add to trust, but living within our form of life cannot provide us with even the slightest sense of direction. It is also why subjects cannot actively participate in the changing of the game, as all believes and acts ultimately point toward each other. This is not a problem most of the time, because the language game is big and the elemental trust is there. But it is a problem when we want to know, with absolute certainty, *what to do*. That's because anything normative, as suggested in the quote above, can only lay on the other side of language – outside of the closed circle of trust and acts. Yet the demand of normativity is precisely to become an *active* element in this process. But this seems impossible, for the realm of the uncertain – or that other Wittgensteinian term, the unspeakable – a realm of pure negativity which exists (if at all) outside of our form of life, is *absolutely, perfectly inaccessible* to us. Which is why, classically, normative accounts divide between immanent accounts (for example, working within the language game) or transcendental accounts (for example, a norm disconnected from a form of life, an ideal). If we are not willing to choose either option, the only recourse we have is to see if we can find a way to access the inaccessible realm of uncertainty and draw our direction from there. So that we can establish, as it were, an account of normativity which is in the process of transcending its own form of life within which it is born. The purpose of this chapter is fulfilled if we manage to achieve a sense of direction from the unspeakable.

The first step we have just taken: our own framing of the inaccessibility of the uncertain is the first step in providing us access to it. That's because when reflection becomes aware of its own limitations yet continues nonetheless, we enter what Merleau-Ponty calls hyper-reflection. This kind of reflection beyond reflection is only possible if one accepts that a final reflection is impossible. But that means that it is possible, like Wittgenstein, to divide the world into the reflectible and the

¹⁶ Leonard Cohen – *Anthem*, from the album *The Future*.

unreflectible. Yet, unlike Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty contends that it is possible to say something about the unreflectible *by virtue of its resistance to reflection*. This means that we have to move away from a purely reflective endeavour like the philosophy of normativity, and move toward a theory in which the reflectible and the unreflectible are understood in relation to, and coextensive with, each other. Such a theory is provided by Merleau-Ponty through an ontology: a theory of being. That's why in this chapter we will pause our investigation in normativity in a direct sense, and will first dive into ontology, hoping that it will give us more insight as to where normative direction can be found.

Through his studies of perception, Merleau-Ponty discovered that the visible is *pregnant* with the invisible. For example, we can never see the back side of a cup, but the back side is implied by the front. Similarly, this means that the reflectible is pregnant with the unreflectible. It is, as it were, implied by it. But if both these realms are related to each other, it means that they somehow share an identity. This plain of similarity Merleau-Ponty calls *flesh*, which he describes as an *element of Being*, similar to how the presocratic philosophers conceived of an element. Because the world is 'always already there,' beings perceive Being only from a localized point of view, similar as in Wittgenstein's language games. Beings always find themselves *in* the flesh, just like subjects always find themselves *in* Wittgenstein's river. The only difference is that, in Merleau-Ponty, beings are made up of the same elemental stuff as *Being*. In Merleau-Ponty, we are both *in* the river (like in Wittgenstein) and made up of or participate in the same stuff *as* the river (unlike Wittgenstein).

This means that the *locality* of beings is foundational in two ways: beings both *are* Being and *in* Being. As a result, by virtue of them being Being, they have access to Being. And by virtue of them being in Being, their access is limited by Being. This is because Being as flesh has, as Merleau-Ponty likes to say, *depth and thickness*. As a result, the flesh provides both access and limitation simultaneously. Or rather, there is limitation because there is access, and there is access because there is limitation. As a result, the paradoxes we encountered in reflective philosophy, turn out to be, by virtue of hyper-reflectivity, really a 'paradox of being.' Acting or being in the world precisely is how this paradox exists. And this is nothing special; the paradox of Being exists all the time. The difference with ontology as perceived through hyper-reflectivity, however, is that we bring attention to it.

The fact that all of Being participates *in* flesh also means that reflection upon Being (ontology) and the reflection upon the reflection upon Being (hyper-reflection) is part of Being: 'hyper-reflection (...) takes itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account.'¹⁷ However, precisely by virtue of the resistance of the visible to show itself from all sides, hyper-reflection is the last stage of reflection possible. Instead, from the point of view of hyper-reflection, Merleau-Ponty describes the visible as *pregnant* with the invisible, as a kind of *latency* of the flesh. This means that the visible, the certain, the speakable, the reflectible implies the invisible, the uncertain, the unspeakable, the unreflectible – but the whole of Being, the whole of flesh, is never what beings see of it or what the flesh sees of itself through the beings it creates. And indeed, it is precisely because beings can see something that beings cannot see everything, and vice versa. This means that beings, like Wittgenstein's subjects, cannot step outside of their form of life or their localized existence within the flesh. But unlike in Wittgenstein, this limitation is what brings possibility: it is the possibility to perceive the pregnancy or latency of the flesh.

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The trouble with pregnancies or latencies is that what they entail is not available to our immediate perception. They are, as it were, anticipated by the visible, they are on the horizon, but not yet visible. At the same time, because both the visible and the invisible are flesh, they are made of the same stuff and are thus fundamentally related. This means that we, too, as subjects, have access to them by virtue of our fleshliness. This is why Merleau-Ponty perceives of the human body in his mature ontology not as one side of a dualism, (that is, as opposed to mind), but simply as ‘a very remarkable variant’¹⁸ of the flesh, indeed, as a variant of the flesh which has come to visibility. He also calls this the *body-as-sentient*, and it can *feel* before it can *intellectually grasp*, which is simply another implication of the idea that reflection has limits. As a result, the body-as-sentient cannot know what to do, but it can feel what to do. In a working note, Merleau-Ponty calls this feeling-into the flesh, or *empathy*.

‘*Flesh of the world*, described (apropos of time, space, movement) as segregation, dimensionality, continuation, latency, encroachment — Then interrogate once again these phenomena questions: they refer us to the perceiving-perceived *Einfühlung*, for they mean that we are already in the being thus described, that we are of it, that between it and us there is *Einfühlung*’¹⁹

Because empathy is a localized activity, this involves two things. It involves recognition of place, which is given by the limits of the visible; and it involves feeling possibilities, which is given by the access to the flesh. These possibilities can be described as latent intentionalities. Latent intentions of the flesh become more apparent as they slowly change the visible, precisely like a pregnancy. As a result, latent intentions become, as they mature into visibility, ever easier to follow simply because they become ever more obvious. But this can be a problem too, for their apparentness can also turn into subjective idealizations. That’s why it is important to remember, by virtue of hyper-reflectivity, that the visible is always pregnant with *more*. Thus, Being remains on a distance, never fully disclosed – at least from the point of view of the reflective philosopher. As a result, the flesh can be described as a process of the constant sensing of its own direction without (subjective) explanation why.

This is important for our project of normativity. Conventionally, normativity says ‘do this’ *because of* ‘this’. But in hyper-normativity, the latent intention and the act which may act toward it is self-grounding precisely because it is perceived by the flesh as a pregnancy of itself. We could say that acts become their own reason or that they are self-sufficient because the flesh is self-sufficient, and that acts are simply an expression of the flesh expressing itself. Indeed, the latent intention can be felt, but it is expressed by the act because it cannot be expressed otherwise, for any attempt at expressing it reflectively would lead to paradox and ultimately contradiction. And precisely this is prevented by the act as a way of expressing latencies. By acting out the latency without reflective mediation is to stay in a realm that can best be described as pre-paradoxical.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible* (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 136.

¹⁹ Ibid, 248.

Normativity is a special case for hyper-reflectivity: it necessitates the conscious bringing together of the visible and the invisible. Normativity is concerned with direction and direction exceeds the reflectible. The hyper-reflectivity normative agent knows that it cannot exceed its reflective limits reflectively because this would make it self-referential (or tautological) and thus mute. That's because as soon as the agent returns to reflection as ultimate ground for action or decision, he recycles the language game from which he tries to emancipate himself. And because the hyper-reflective agent wants direction more than it wants knowledge, it cannot risk to rest in itself, and so must, with logical necessity, transfers its intellectual energy to *feeling into Being*, or what we can call empathy. Thus, feeling into the flesh involves a renunciation of reflective subjectivity which is yet not a negation of the subject because the reflective subject is what made hyper-reflectivity possible. Indeed, it is a sublation. This then, is how latent intentionalities can provide direction. Since latent intentions provide direction and thus afford action, they, as a result, extend the limits of the visible, which in turn relocates the visibility of the flesh. As a result, hyper-reflectivity, through empathy, leads to an infinite regress as more parts of Being are felt. But this is an infinite regress of feeling, not of reflection. The hyper-reflective moment is the last reflective stage, as least as far as we can predict from our current point of view. After hyper-reflectivity comes feeling, and according to Merleau-Ponty, this process can continue infinitely.

The job of normativity thus conceived is nothing more than to bring attention to this process. When we do this, at a certain point and increasingly so, Being is felt as an abyss of possibilities. That's because the possibilities which gain actuality by virtue of empathy and as a result of the hyper-reflective move, resist to become part of the perceptual faith because the reflective subject knows that their ground originates in the negative. As a result, we do no longer view them as part of the objective world, instead, they become part of the surface of perception which provides our access to the depth behind it, the depth of Being, the abyss. But this is not a problem, for, by virtue of hyper-reflectivity, this process is now intentional. As a result, this confrontation with abyss co-arises with a being's ability to confront it. In that sense, we come back to Wittgenstein, who already anticipated that living in the world involves unjustified trust precisely because there is no ground to believe. Except now, this 'new type of being' will resist to turn perception into faith, for he has habituated himself to view the world in terms of its possibilities. In that way, with Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein's view is radicalized, as, step by step, the uncertain gains primacy over the certainty of a given language game up until the point that what we perceive of the world is only its pregnancy, which Merleau-Ponty equates with the abyss, because it is an abyss of latent possibilities: we view them as that which is behind what is there, and since reflection does not reach them, the only way to approach them is by falling into them through feeling into them. This means, indeed, that the language game in Wittgenstein's sense, will cease to exist. It will have overcome itself. The abyss, then, can be equated with the absolute, for an abyss is an absolute negativity – but it is the negativity of Being and is coextensive with what we see of Being, it is not nothingness.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves, since the interaction between direction and its ground is the subject matter of the next chapter. In this chapter, we solely focus on direction, and ask: *How can latent intentionalities provide direction for our actions?*

From Normativity to Ontology

In the last chapter it became apparent that a conventional approach to normativity leads to unsurmountable contradictions because it seeks normative direction within the realm of the certain. Instead, normative directives can only come from the uncertain, like a language game slowly turning uncertainties into certainties. If normativity wants to succeed nonetheless, it must draw from a theory which incorporates the uncertain. The only kind of theory which can account for the uncertain is a theory of Being because a theory of Being is a theory of everything.

The study of Being is called ontology. But why is this so different from psychology, which is the study of the mind? Or from philosophy, which is the study of wisdom? Or from ethics, which is the study of the good? Psychology presupposes that the mind is a subject matter which can be studied. And philosophy suggests the love for wisdom, and as such, that wisdom *is* something. Similarly, ethics presupposes that the good is something which can be theorized. And all of them presuppose the reflective subject as the starting point for enquiry and an objective world which is there for our reflection. The point of Being is that it does not presuppose anything, not even certainty and uncertainty, precisely because it *is* everything. But this also means that its subject of enquiry isn't fully determined, except that it involves everything. And so, this means that from the start, Being is the ground for the study of Being. Being, in the Merleau-Pontean sense, is not the study of Being as human, and neither the study of the beings, in the sense of the study of the status of plants, animals and objects. Rather, Being is the term that underlies all of the above.

The only thing the phenomenologist who studies Being presupposes, is that there 'is something.' This means, in the context of phenomenology, that 'what there is,' is studied on basis of 'that there is.' The trouble with what there is, is that it alludes us to believe that it is stable – the illusionary or habitual believe in the objective world – the language game which we have no agency in changing. This is why, initially, phenomenology and especially Husserl came back time and again to the idea of reduction: if we can reduce the believes we have about reality, we might end up with reality plain and simple. Similarly, we can view Wittgenstein's project of defining the borders of language on the basis of his intuition that all philosophical problems find their origin in a misuse of language.²⁰ Both projects, however, failed. Husserl's phenomenological reduction failed because the reduction could not reduce itself. And Wittgenstein's project was meant to fail: he suggested that the one who understands his thoughts, will ultimately understand them as nonsensical.²¹ This is of course well established in the *Tractatus*, but in *On Certainty* too, Wittgenstein manages to show that our believes have no grounding. However, that last sentence is a believe too, and so, ultimately, his sentences cancel each other out – they become nonsensical. What is important for us foregoing, is that this suggests that Being is more than what can be described (Husserl) or reflected (Wittgenstein).

Now, instead of reducing the habitual understanding of the world or disallowing the unspeakable, ontology includes them from the start. Indeed, if the 'something' that is there includes non-reducible believes and nonsensical sentences, then this is what ontology must account for too. And so, right from the start, ontology includes both truths and illusions. This jibes very well with our project: normativity is premised on the illusionary believe of the possibility of certainty for the attainment of what is true, good, or right. And so, using the phenomenological method to

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 23.

²¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), §6.54.

account for the illusion of certainty tries to study what Being is on the basis of questioning why it produces the illusion of certainty, and in so doing, it redirects the energy invested in the illusion of certainty into a project of the recuperation of truth. But this is only possible if we find a way to talk about their interaction, that is, of truth and of illusions, of that ‘something’ which we call the world and its description, of the speakable and the unspeakable. This is why ethics does not just need ontology, it needs an ontology which can account for itself as a reflection upon Being too. This way, we are then able to surpass Husserl and Wittgenstein, because our ontology will not contain contradictions (Husserl) or be ultimately self-refuting or non-sensical (Wittgenstein).

That’s why Merleau-Ponty introduces the idea of hyper-reflection. Hyper-reflection is the kind of reflection that is aware of itself as a reflection and thus of its limits. What remains to do for philosophy after the insight of hyper-reflectivity is not to establish any positive notion of life and world but instead to build a framework, a language, which understands as its essence its own transcendence. This is why Merleau-Ponty suggests a concept which is *new* in philosophy and thus provides a clear break from what came before. It is a concept which founds the dichotomies by making them. Merleau-Ponty conceives of it as an element which partakes in everything, but which itself is general. It is, as phrased succinctly by Chouraqui ‘an element whose essence is its pregnancy, (...) a unique element of the multiple.’²² As we said in the introduction, this concept is called *flesh*. We must understand that we use this concept and the ontological structure it provides *formally*. A formal argument is an argument which does not try to prove a point precisely because it works from the understanding that proving points is a futile business. Indeed, we cannot conceive of the flesh and its surrounding concepts in any other way, since its positivity lies in its potentiality and as such, resists any final definition. In that way, Merleau-Ponty manages to turn the limitation of reflection as appreciated by hyper-reflection into its opposite as well. The flesh is both limitation (or actuality) and possibility. And they are united through potentiality or pregnancy, through Being as flesh.

Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Flesh

The flesh is an ontology of pre-reflective or brute being, of a deeper truth behind or before dichotomies. And the ‘trick’ Merleau-Ponty proposes to overcome the beforementioned difficulties in Husserl and Wittgenstein, is to make the central concept of this ontology inherently paradoxical, and thereby foreclosing any risk of philosophy turning contradictory or non-sensical, for it shows that those problems are only the result of a failing to perceive being as inherently paradoxical. The ontology of flesh is tentatively set out primarily in the third chapter of his last book, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Just like Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, both books are brought together from an unfinished manuscript and published posthumously. Indeed, both authors died in the process of writing their last work. And it is a mere statement of fact that, retrospectively, their ability to withstand paradox and uncover a ‘something’ before reflection coincided with their closeness to their own death. It is a coincidence that makes me wonder; it is also a coincidence that cannot be explained. But what it means for us in the case of Merleau-Ponty, is that we are dealing with one (almost) finished chapter which is concerned with flesh, and a lot of notes, which I will draw on specifically concerning his idea of ‘latent

²² Frank Chouraqui “*Circulus Vitiosus Deus: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Ontology*,” *Studia Phenomenologica* XVI (2016), 474.

intentionality.’ These notes are like the skeleton of a philosophy yet to be developed, which means that in order to use them, I need to do a lot of interpretation.

There are many ways to arrive at an understanding of flesh, pre-reflective, brute or wild being, but minimally it is simply Merleau-Ponty’s answer to the fact that whichever experience he tried to describe, he always ended up with a paradox. Merleau-Ponty suggests seeing, speaking and touching as inherently paradoxical experiences.²³ Let’s focus on vision. In his introductory lines to *The Intertwining–The Chiasm*, Merleau-Ponty writes that:

‘It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible.’²⁴

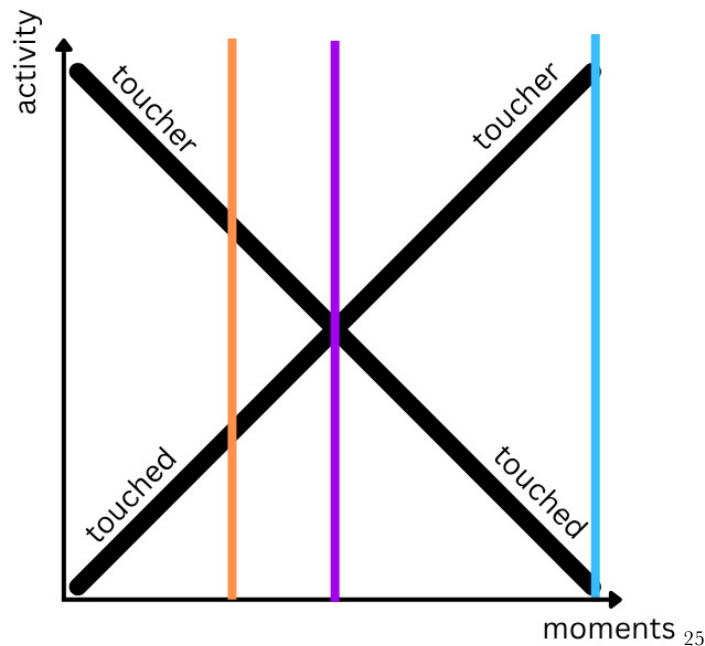
The question is very straightforward: how can it be that there is vision? For if we perceive something, the seer and the visible must somehow interact on the same plain of existence, or share a certain intimacy, otherwise they could not ‘meet’. Yet the intimacy cannot be so great that it becomes impossible to distinguish between the seer and the visible, for then they would cancel each other out. The answer is as straightforward as it is genius: they both participate in Being as inherently paradoxical. His name for this paradoxical understanding of Being is *flesh*. Flesh is a paradox because it is a generality (it allows for the seer and the visible to meet) which yet creates multiplicities (it prevents the seer and the visible to turn into each other and become one). As such, it is a general principle of multiplicity, which is a paradox. This means that the seer as a consequence of the generality of the flesh, must be part of what he sees, and vice versa. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty says that ‘he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*.’ This reversibility between the seer and the seen becomes more apparent with touch. For example, if I touch your hand, my hand is touching and your hand is being touched. But this direction can reverse, when my hand becomes passive and yours active. And indeed, we can think of many variations in which our hands are partly passive and partly active. But what is important is that my hand can only be active to the extent that your hand is passive, and vice versa. And what is also important is that your hand must be there for me to be able to touch it. This means that even if I am touching and you are touched, a certain activity on your part must remain for there to be touch possible at all. Now, Merleau-Ponty’s contention is that this is true for all experiences, even those where a sense of agency is not so apparent. In his essay *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty quotes the painter Andre Marchand who feels that some days when he is painting a forest, he feels like the trees are looking at him, speaking to him, and that he is there listening to what they have to say. Instead of explaining such experiences away in favour of a materialist or idealist notion of reality, Merleau-Ponty places these paradoxes at the heart of Being.

Since language is necessarily dualistic, Merleau-Ponty seeks tools to overcome these limitations without philosophy collapsing into silence. One of his conceptual tools is the chiasm. The relationship between the toucher and the touched, the seer and the seen, can be best described as a *chiasmic relationship*. The move to the chiasm is where what I call Merleau-Ponty’s *formalism* becomes most apparent: if

²³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible* (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130.

²⁴ Ibid, 131

experiences are paradoxical, how can we best describe this in the most succinct, clean way? A *chiasm* is best described by the figure X. The figure X consists of two lines crossing each other. In the example of the toucher-touched, one line of the X represents the one hand, the other line represents the other hand.



Placed in the diagram, I hope this idea becomes clear, namely, that each instance of experience (a moment) between two hands finds itself somewhere on a vertical line between left and right (orange, purple, blue). In each vertical line, the passivity of one of the hands is an inverse of the activity of the other, and vice versa. As a result, every experience can be described as a chiasmic relationship, for they are traceable on the diagram of the chiasm. In the moment of the orange line, one hand is somewhat more active than the other, and so we can describe the active hand as the toucher, and the other hand as the touched, even if the touched hand also has some activity toward the toucher and thus is also a toucher. And this is also the case for the blue line. Our dualistic habituations might want to say that at the extremities of the X, one hand has become fully active and the other fully passive, but the opposite is the case. For Merleau-Ponty, this is impossible, for this would mean that the passive hand ceases to exist, is merged into the other hand. The fact that the passive hand is still a hand means that it keeps enough activity to be distinguishable as the hand being touched. The purple line is another special case, and I refer to it as chiasmic coincidence, which is when both hands are equally passive and active. We will come back to chiasmic coincidence later. What is true for touch is true for all the things we call senses. And indeed, for all positive concepts. For example, subjectivity and objectivity, or visible and invisible. Dualistic terms always depend on each other, and so should be understood in coextensivity with each other, and the best way to think that coextensivity or conjunctivity is by way of the chiasm. The best thing to remember is that every moment always implies an intertwining of a positive concept with its opposite.

The uncovering of the chiasmic paradoxes of the senses, and indeed, of being, point toward the flesh as a substructure (which is a badly chosen term) that make these chiasms possible. Vision, touch, and other experiences are only possible if the

²⁵ My thanks goes out to Zsófia Szalavári for helping me out with the diagram.

flesh provides both *access* and *limitation* – which can be viewed as the formal chiasmic relation of the flesh and of which all other chiasmic relations are a variant. The seer and the visible meet because they have, by virtue of the flesh, both access to each other and are limited by each other. But this tells us something else about the flesh. If vision requires access and limitation, then this means that Being only discloses itself partially, as that which is visible from our perspective or locality in the flesh. This visible, Merleau-Ponty suggests, comes as ‘a quality pregnant with a texture, the surface of a depth, a cross section upon a massive being.’²⁶ ‘We’ remain in contact with that being of depth because we, as a body, are as much ‘the sensible mass [we] are and the mass of the sensible wherein [we] were born by segregation and upon which, as seer, [we] remain open.’ But this openness to more than we can see precisely is beyond vision, beyond touch, and beyond all the other senses because the limit which decides between the here and the yonder is what makes the experience possible. We are open to it in principle, or formally, because we are made up of the same stuff as it and because as a result whatever we see, touch, or even say, always suggests more than what is immediately apparent. This is not some magic trick, but is precisely because the visible, the sensible or the articulated have a surface, and a surface is always a surface behind which a depth hides. And this indeed includes language and thus philosophy. This is why we do a philosophy of flesh, for the flesh is hyper-reflectivity put into a concept: a concept which resists full definition. The generality of the flesh is always on a distance, for it is perceived only through the pregnancy of the visible, through the multiplicities that it produces and which provide, by virtue of their surfaces, both access and limitation.

This also means that our access to flesh will be an experience that is ‘wholly outside of itself,’²⁷ for we have to penetrate beyond the surfaces which our locality affords us, and this includes the surfaces of our own subjectivity. Because limitation and access are chiasmic, the more access is granted, the less the experience is limited by its locality. As a result, the ontology of flesh is a denunciation of the subject as a fully positive idea, of consciousness, and of the Cartesian *Cogito*. Let’s examine this last claim. Intentionality, the way of intending or the prospective activity of consciousness, was, traditionally in phenomenology, still located in a ‘consciousness’, even if that consciousness was always consciousness of something. Merleau-Ponty suggests that we should think that ‘consciousness is intentionality without acts,’²⁸ which he calls *Fungierende* intentionality. Intentionality within the framework of the flesh simply becomes the connecting concept between the generality of the flesh and its multiplicities, which is why Merleau-Ponty describes intentionality as an intentional encroachment of the flesh upon itself, of sides of chiasms encroaching upon each other. It is not intentionality of a consciousness, and neither is it directed toward a something. This means that it cannot be located in the world, not because it is not of the world, it is, but because it is the invisible of the visible. In that sense, Merleau-Ponty calls this intentionality *latent*, as it always hides behind what it has brought to visibility.

Let’s take a step back. What we have done so far is, on the basis of the analyses of the visible and with as little conceptual tools as possible and using simple language, achieved the insight of the flesh. The flesh is an extrapolation of our analysis: if vision is possible, and if vision requires both similarity and difference, then there must be something which incorporates both similarity and difference.

²⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible* (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 136.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 239.

And if it contains both similarity and difference, then there must be a movement from a similarity (or a generality) to a difference (and thus multiplicity). This move is granted by latent intentionality. Note how we haven't made any wild hypothesis into the blue, but we stayed *formal* or logical. This is important in finding direction for normativity, for our formalism prevents us from making assumptions that are colored culturally. In that sense, doing ontology is the natural next step after the failing of the eidetic reduction. After the eidetic reduction, there was still a positivity left, namely the *Cogito*. Now, by taking experiences themselves as the starting point for philosophy, we arrive at an ontology which can account for the subject as an instantiation of the flesh. And through the flesh too, we learn to appreciate "our own" bodies differently too. Our bodies too have limits because they have a surface. And their surface is the surface of a depth too. This is important, for it suggests that we can relate to ourselves and the world differently, namely through the understanding of the body and the world as flesh. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty says that

"The thickness of the body, far from rivalling 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."²⁹

It is therefore that we return to the body-subject. We return to the body-subject *not* because we are reminiscent of Cartesianism or because we fetishize the body as a relic of idealism, but simply because the body-subject is a '*very remarkable variant*' of the flesh. The body is remarkable because...

'It is the body and it alone, because it is a two-dimensional being, that can bring us to the things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that, if it be possible, would coexist with them in the same world.'³⁰

Beings can, as it were, vibe with the things themselves (the beings) precisely because we too, as body-subjects, are beings and as such are participatory in flesh. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls feeling-into (*Einfühlen*), and it is synonymous with the English empathy, as long as it is understood formally – that is, *not* as a virtue. Through empathy, "we" can feel the intentionalities of the beings and, through them, of Being, as *latent* intentionalities. This latency is latent in two senses. It is latent in the simple sense, namely, because the intentionality is hiding behind the visible and can only be approached through the flesh, reflection must make way for feeling. And so, the intentionality is latent in regard to reflection. But it is also latent in a complex sense, namely, the intention is latent to itself because the flesh is not completely apparent too itself. A being without reflection is of the flesh, but is always also in the flesh. And because the flesh is not transparent, the intentions of the environment are always mediated by the flesh. In other words, the flesh is the medium through which intentionalities must travel to become apparent to the beings of the flesh, which themselves are instantiations of the flesh. As a result, the flesh isn't fully disclosed to itself either, but always on a distance, latent.

Let's exemplify this with a surfer in the ocean. What Merleau-Ponty has in mind is not that we are the surfer and the ocean is the flesh, and the next wave is the part

²⁹ Ibid, 135.

³⁰ Ibid, 136.

of being which the flesh brings to visibility. Rather, we too open up toward the ocean, for we are also flesh. The anticipation of the surfer subject (peddling, laying down, speed peddling, standing up) in relation to the wave object (coming to shore, building height, having a flat surface, breaking, having a white surface) can only come partially from knowledge, for the wave is not fully visible to the surfer, and neither is the surfer fully visible to the wave. If access is granted to the whole of the wave, this can only happen through the flesh as mediating element, through empathy, for both surfer and wave participate in flesh. Empathy, properly conceived, is an experience that is ‘outside of itself,’ in other words, outside of the body-subject for the body-subject and outside of the wave object for the wave object, for both only have a frontal view of each other. And so, as a result, their intentions are latent, partly hidden, from each other. This means that both their freedom is limited, but this limitation is their precondition for existence. When they meet, both are changed in relation to each other precisely because existence is always coexistence. But how do these latencies help our current project of finding direction for normativity?

Direction Through Empathy

The beauty of the ontology of the flesh is that it gives us another language to talk about experience. And on the basis of this new understanding of experience we may also adopt another language to talk about normativity. There are two key insights we can draw from the ontology of flesh which are relevant for normative direction. The first key insight is that *Being is inherently paradoxical*. This means that the experience of being can be best described in terms of chiasmic relations and that every instance of being is *in retrospect a coincidentia oppositorum*: a union of opposites. If we want our normativity to be aligned with the insights of the flesh, then our normativity cannot limit itself to one single positivity, for that positivity exists by virtue of its chiasmic relation to its opposite. The second key insight is that Being has depth and thickness, which means that *whatever comes next* is hiding behind the visibles. As a result, by virtue of the chiasmic relation between the visible and the invisible, normative direction is always a direction of transcendence between the visible and the invisible. And because the invisible hides behind the visible, only one side of this transcendence can be known, namely, its point of departure, the here and now. But its direction, or where it is going, cannot be known, remains always *on a distance*. This means that any positive notion of direction is ontologically flawed, for by virtue of the thickness of flesh such a notion is unattainable.

This means that the location of direction is on the opposite side of reflection, of certainty, of the visible and of the reflective. But here, again, the flesh offers a double bind in the most genius of ways: whilst the location of direction is absolutely on the side of the invisible and thus absolutely unapproachable by the senses, by the intellect and by reflection, it is still a part of the flesh just as much as the visible world *because* it hides behind it. As a result, the visible world is the access to the invisible world, and this access is granted by means of empathy. As such, empathy can access latent intentions of the flesh through a felt *being with*. But this means that whatever it is that is brought to visibility, because it is *felt* as a latency, has no reason behind it. Instead, when a latency is brought to visibility because the flesh is sensing itself through the beings it creates, it is perfectly obvious to the sensing beings that a latency will come to visibility. In the ontology of the flesh, the normative direction is simply the extension of what is.

All in all, we have now established normative direction as independent of ground by establishing a sense of indirect (i.e., latent) direction. This can only be done if we understand “ourselves” (i.e., locality) as always at the threshold between visible and invisible, or certainty and uncertainty, and when we describe normativity as a kind of transcendence from the visible to the invisible *and* by bringing the invisible to visibility by means of empathy. The fact that we start in the visible of subjectivity and move toward the invisible is only so because we find ourselves in a form of life in which subjectivity is part of the visible and because, consequently, the normative demand is premised on the subject who does the demanding. The subject is not given because it is a given; the subject is given because it is given. And this is precisely why the complications of the flesh and intentionality are normativity’s saving grace: because we haven’t pre-established a ground for our normativity, neither in the subject nor in any other axiom, ‘we’ are now able to forge into the invisible: the flesh can only be approached without knowing what it is or what it will provide; instead, a normativity that takes a ground as basis always prefigures what it will find. The direction of being is hidden in Being, and as a result, becomes clear to the extent that the searching being dares to *not* know.

‘The question comes from one who does not know, and it is addressed to a vision, a seeing, which knows everything and which we do not make, for it makes itself in us.’³¹

This quote, coming from the late essay *Eye and Mind*, is Merleau-Ponty at it’s most platonic. But we must remember that the ‘vision which know everything’ is *not* a postulated positivity, it is not a God or a world of ideas. Instead, it is still and simply the formal consequence of his interrogation of vision, touch, and the like: these experiences are paradoxical as they imply both generality and separation. And as a result, they require the flesh as common source, *not* as a distinguishable positivity but as a necessary paradoxical formality. But since the flesh is a general concept, it follows that it ‘knows’ everything. It knows everything because it is everything, since ontology is the study of everything and in an ontology of flesh everything is flesh. As a result, asking the vision (Being/flesh) is, by virtue of the thickness of the flesh, possible through empathy. This also means that there is an infinite regress of empathy: because the flesh has thickness, unveiling something means veiling something else. Empathy has no end because being is always being on a distance. But being engaged in this process of inquiry has a meta-ontological effect. Namely, it leads the beings to consider Being increasingly as an abyss.

‘The progress of the inquiry toward the *center* is not the movement from the conditioned unto the condition, from the founded unto the *Grund*: the so-called *Grund* is *Abgrund*. But the abyss one thus discovers is not such by lack of ground, it is upsurge of a *Hoheit* which supports from above (*tient par le haut*) (cf. Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* 82), that is, of a negativity that comes to the world.’³²

In other words, taking guidance from Being-on-a-distance means recognizing that Being *is* on a distance, and increasingly so. Through an infinite regress of empathy,

³¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty “Eye and Mind,” in *The Primacy of Perception* (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 167.

³² Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible* (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 250.

the location of normative direction becomes ever more enigmatic until Being is perceived as abyss. As such, the abyss, ultimately, is the answer to the location of normative direction. What ought to happen really, what ought to happen deeply, can only be felt by those who dare to stare the abyss in the eyes, or rather, who dare to fall into it by means of empathy. This traverses back to the previous chapter, which was about unjustified trust as ground for our form of life. Stepping outside that form of life is only possible by facing the abyss that lies outside of it. As such, the abyss as portrayed by Merleau-Ponty is simply another form of an unjustified ground. But it is a ground nonetheless. And more importantly, it answers normativity's need for absolute certainty, albeit by providing its opposite: absolute uncertainty.

Conclusion

The beauty of the flesh is that by providing a general principle of multiplicity, we were able to conceive of a normativity of transcendence. And on the basis of this, we were able to suggest that the ultimate "knowing" is only for those who dare to let themselves fall into the abyss, which means giving way to empathy. I speak for myself when I say that I am nowhere near that point, as I find myself time and again habituated to the visible. But precisely this is the beauty of the flesh and hyper-reflectivity. We cannot know what we cannot know. But those limits can be shown. As a result, we *can* know that we cannot know what we cannot know. And it is on the basis of this insight that we are able to locate normative direction in the abyss, even if one has not yet fallen into it. As a result, the next chapter is dedicated to finding out how the abyss can come closer, how we can let ourselves fall into it, without disintegrating to such an extent that we risk our own lives doing it.

Chapter Three: Intertwining

“The hold is held in all orders – now elaborate a philosophy!”³³

–Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Introduction

Thus far, we have deconstructed normativity as a need for grounding and a need for direction, which both were premised on a need for certainty. In the first chapter, we have suggested that this need for certain ground is untenable, because even our most stubborn facts are ungrounded. In the second chapter, we have suggested that the need for certain direction is also untenable, because intentions hide behind the surface of the visible. Both ground (as unjustified trust or abyss) and direction (as latencies) can, through empathy, be accessed through the thickness of Being to which we, as body-subjects, have access. As a result, despite their lack of certainty or justification, trust or abyss can be used as ground and latent intentions can be used as direction. However, because both are conceived to the reflective subject as negativities, they cannot be grasped nor *interact* with each other in any sensible or logical manner. Because both are enigmatic, so too is their interaction. Trust and the abyss, and latencies are for Merleau-Ponty hiding in the invisible. Unjustified trust is, in Merleau-Ponty’s language, the abyss which supports from above. And latent intentions, because they are latent, always involve a leap of faith, of which it is unclear whether they will contribute to elemental trust. But for normativity to work, their interaction must be given. There is a necessary gap between me and Being, and it seems to be this gap of uncertainty that conventional accounts of normativity try to fill and make not exist. But a normativity which is grounded in an ontology of flesh, which is what I try to formulate, is no such normativity. From the point of view of the multiplicity of the flesh, it only makes sense that Being is an abyss of possibilities, and that its intentions are only visible indirectly, latent. As such, it is only from the perspective of hyper-reflection that we can conceive of an interaction of enigmatic ground and enigmatic direction. This intertwining of enigmas I will refer to as consent. Consent is *saying yes* to something whilst knowing that what is being said yes to cannot really be said yes to because it cannot be defined. It relies on the conscious or subjective awareness that Being can never be fully grasped, and that therefore, saying yes is always saying yes to mystery – both to the abyss and its latencies.

Precisely this is the point of empathy: latencies can be felt. And we should not make the mistake to assume that once something is felt, the feeling can be explained, for that would be to repeat the same mistake all over again. The trouble is that once the feeling is explained, Being has changed, and so the explanation is already old the moment of its inception. Such are the paradoxes and aporias to which we commit ourselves when we commit ourselves to Merleau-Ponty and his ontology of flesh. And so, the question becomes really: how much do we allow ourselves to think and reflect? How can an ontology of flesh, instead of paralyzing us as reflective subjects, become productive of a new type of being? It is this question which had me almost go insane the last year, but I believe to have found a solution. Merleau-Ponty does not provide a clear method as to how this *new type of being* (his description)

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible* (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 266. (paraphrased)

can be inaugurated. And so, it is up to me to see what we can do with the little descriptions of the ontology of flesh that we do have.

The job should be understood as follows: if being and its intentions are mysterious, and if it is through the beings (you and me) that we can access being precisely because we *are* being, then the job of normativity must be to bring a normative subject *step-by-step* closer to this mystery. This step-by-step approach is necessitated by the fact of the normative agent. The hold which habituations or sedimentations have on it, on us, must be slowly exchanged by the perception of the mystery of being as mystery. Luckily, hyper-reflectivity gives a place for the reflective subject in relation to the mystery in such a way that the reflective subject must not presuppose itself, but can understand itself as a sedimentation too, as an illusion, but as an illusion that can become productive of recuperating the truth of being, namely, its mystery. And in that sense, the hyper-reflective agent can become productive in overcoming itself. But these reductions are made not directly, but indirectly, by giving way to a new understanding of being which makes an old understanding of being obsolete. That's why this approach circumvents the classical problem of the phenomenological reduction: we do not need to know what stays and what remains beforehand. Rather, this becomes obvious as the abyss becomes present. As said, this normativity is only possible by virtue of the ontology of the flesh, for it requires reflective work which is itself not very mysterious, but which can, because of the thickness of flesh, make an argument *from a distance*.

As we discovered in the last chapter, the ontology of flesh led us to thickness, and thickness led to the body as the immediate and eternal here and now of being. But if all there is, is the eternal here and now which is an experience of surfaces pregnant with possibility, then all there is, is infinite encroaching potential. What we witness and of which we are a part is, as it were, a continuous birthing process which we happen to call the world. In a birthing process, it is pretty obvious what has to happen. One way of explaining this obviousness is that when the visible and the tangible lose their separateness because they become perceived as two aspects of the thickness of Being, it becomes much harder to turn the perceived into an idea. That's because the tangible has a depth which resists idealization precisely because it hides behind the perceived. As a result, the integration of vision and touch makes idealizations look like a bad habit because they are always only idealizations of the visible, disconnected, as it were, from their tangible depth.

Once this insight is integrated the world of perception is no longer ambiguous or robotic in the sense that possibilities of the invisible must first presuppose a recognition of the visible. Instead, the reflective ability to assume the visible and the tangible *as same* can lead to the habituation of perception to view the world as possibilities *not* by further mental intervention but because it becomes *obvious*. The visible world becomes perceived as a moment of the mystery of flesh or of being and the distinction between the visible and the invisible ceases to be of any use. A tree, for example, is no longer the mental representation of which one can make other mental representations, like a table or a chair, but a sudden horizontal statue with a surface, growing from the surface of the earth, drinking the same water and breathing the same air as me and you, and yet with a skin that is rough unlike ours and with less mobility. The introduction of thickness reintroduces the co-extensivity

between me and the world, which makes the world a mysterious place resistant to idealizations.

In that sense, hyper-reflectivity's ability to reach beyond itself – concretized in its ability to propose the existence of latencies – gives way to the experience of the world as abyss with a support 'from above'. And this support 'from above,' which is Merleau-Ponty's phrase, I concretize with the practice of consent as the habit of the affirmation of the unknown. When this habit becomes integrated, the ambiguity of the perceived is replaced by the *obviousness of the perceived as potentiality*. When hyper-reflection of being manages to establish a habitual relationship between the seen and the touched, the world as flesh becomes obvious because the perceived gains thickness. When this thickness is integrated, what were once chiasms now are experienced as tautologies. Or, alternatively, we could say that because we habituate ourselves to view the negativity of the world as a coextensivity of the visible, we train ourselves to be in the space before the chiasm, in the pre-paradoxical space where actuality and possibility are perceived in the same moment of vision. There is no longer a need to distinguish between the visible and the invisible, the certain and the uncertain, and, importantly for our project, between being and doing, because the abyss is the experience of a paradox, of 'a negativity coming to the world.'³⁴ As a result, when the potential of the flesh reaches obviousness and turns chiasms into tautologies, there is no longer any need for normativity: normativity transcends itself.

But this does not mean that normativity will reach determinacy. The potential for self-transcendence, enabled by the incorporation of the negative as a depth of the positive, means that we can posit that self-transcendence is possible, but that we cannot know how it looks like. Precisely this is the lesson of the flesh and of hyper-reflectivity and a normativity which is cognizant of this is by default a hyper-normativity. And so, we have to devise a normativity which is aware of its own limits and which understands these limits not as a limitation but as an invitation of the possible. It must anticipate the possibility for an identity between the norm and the world in its structure or form and yet it must not show how that identity looks like in content precisely because it cannot grasp what that identity entails or how that identity is lived. We can anticipate that a new type of being is on the horizon, but it is still beyond our grasp.

How can we devise a normativity in such a way that it picks up those who have the wish for normativity and bring them to a place where that normativity transcends itself? And so, this transcending normativity is transcendent in two ways. First, it is transcendent in the sense that it keeps reinventing itself (a normativity of transcendence), and it is transcendent in the sense that by reinventing itself, it transcends itself (transcending normativity). Whatever we build is both a normativity of transcendence and transcending normativity. But we have to devise the former by an understanding of the latter even if the former is the precondition for the latter, and precisely this is the job of this chapter. Which means that we have to reach beyond ourselves, we have to extrapolate into the blue and doing that knowingly, in order to anticipate where the bridge is leading that we aim to build.

That's why we start, in the first section, our investigation into the abyss. The abyss is perceived when being becomes aware of itself as a mystery. We could also say that at this moment, the flesh has reached self-obviousness. This is the moment where reflection is absolved in being, and so can only be described as tautological, self-evident, absolute, dogmatic, pre-paradoxical, or terms of that manner. In any

³⁴ Ibid, 250.

case, it will be the ultimate ground, precisely because that ground has no objective justification, just like Wittgenstein's trust. Because it is a place beyond reflection, it can only be anticipated, never grasped. But our anticipation might give us some insights into how to get there.

The second section describes the activity of how beings can relate to being, which is the activity of infinite feeling-into or empathy. When we speak of empathy, it is clear that we have already taken a step back from the abyss which makes this infinite activity of empathy possible. In the *new way of being* as flesh, empathy as the mode of being has become fully self-evident, and no longer requires conceptualization. But the separation which empathy establishes is of a special kind: it is chiasmic separation which describes how multiplicities relate to their common generality. As a result, empathy is the relationship of feeling between the world in concepts and the world as flesh, upon which transcendence is premised.

Starting from the foundational chiasm between the generality of the flesh and the multiplicity of the flesh, the (longer) third section will suggest a circularity between the self-obviousness of the flesh as described in the first section (which refers to the generality of the flesh) and the infinite activity of empathy as the mode of being of flesh as described in the second section (which is premised on the multiplicity of the flesh). It is *here* that we introduce a circularity, and not between the visible and the invisible or any of its variations, because we want to refer to multiplicity only insofar as it is an expression of the one and because we can never establish a circularity to the invisible directly precisely because it is invisible. Instead, we have to formally assume the visible and the invisible as part of the one, and, as it were, establish our circularity within the one *on a distance*.

In order to do this, we will focus on habituation. Habituation, in the minimal sense, refers to the way of anticipating the visible on the basis of previous perceptions of the visible. Merleau-Ponty also calls this perceptual faith. As a result, habit leads to self-referentiality of the visible to itself – of which conventional normativity is an example *par excellence*. Short of negating habit in favour of vision – which is, after all, the strategy of the phenomenological reduction – we will affirm its structure by bringing habit into connection with its chiasmic counterpart: spontaneity. By reintroducing spontaneity through consent, we establish a habit of spontaneity which resists idealization because it is aware of itself as spontaneity. In other words, we habituate ourselves into viewing the world with fresh eyes every moment of our existence. We could call this *the habit of dishabituating* and it functions through *the affirmation of the negative* as a pregnancy of the visible. In other words, it is the conscious repetition of the foundational relationship of the flesh to itself. It is the recuperating of the relationship between the visible moments of the abyss to the abyss. Affirming the negative means saying *Yes* to that which cannot be said yes to because the negative is on a distance, yet the affirmation is made regardless and consciously by virtue of the insights of hyper-reflectivity. This is my definition of consent.

Through this affirmation, being changes, as negatives become positives, and positives become negatives. But the positives that arise are of a new kind: they are now perceived as instantiations of the abyss, and therefore resist idealization not because they have thickness (they do), but because the normative subject perceives them in their relation to the abyss which is their origin story. That's because the subject, by affirming the abyss and seeing a result, habituates himself to perceive the world as a mystery, becomes accustomed to the mystery, or in Wittgensteinian terminology, starts to trust the world whilst realizing that his trust is objectively unfounded. Through this process, step-by-step, a new type of being is born. The

mode of being of perceptual faith gives way to the mode of being of the flesh, which is the experience of life as a miracle, always on the surface of the abyss. This mode of being I call consensual but with a new meaning: it is the mode of *constant sensing*. As a result, to consent, then, means to say yes to whatever consensuality affords.

Abyss as Ground

Phenomenology starts with an inaugural *there is* – the minimal assumption that there is something. *This* is the minimal that we can agree on. That there *is* a world. That there *is something*. *This, is, something*. If phenomenology is true to itself for starting in experience, then the abyss as ground must be already implied in the inaugural *there is*. Wittgenstein showed that this something, insofar as it is not chaos, always already implies a system of elements relating to each other, and that for this non-chaos to work, one must *trust* something. But if one must trust something anyway, then it makes sense to trust precisely that something that there is! We could say that to trust is the mode of being of being, it is the being that rests in itself. It's the world that is there as an unquestioned ground, Husserl's *Lebenswelt*, albeit not grounded in transcendental subjectivity, but as seen as the starting point for ontology.

‘The decisive step is to recognize that in fact a consciousness is intentionality without acts, *fungierende*, that the “objects” of consciousness themselves are not something positive in front of us, but nuclei of signification about which the transcendental life pivots, specified voids (...) — that the chiasm, the intentional “encroachment” are irreducible, which leads to the rejecting of the notion of subject, or to the defining of the subject as a field, as a hierarchized system of structures opened by an inaugural *there is*.’³⁵

And so, ontology starts with a perceptual trust, or a perceptual faith in the world of which the how's and the why's remain unknown. They remain unknown because the inaugural *there is*, the language game, is there as a surface. The interrogation of that surface provides us with the insight that for that surface to be perceivable, it must be existing on the same plain as the perceiver, yet must be different enough to be perceived. But if the perceiver and the perceived exist on the same plain of existence, then the surfaces where the perceptibles begin, start at the moment where the sameness of the plain is broken and the difference starts. The perceiver and the perceptibles stand out, they are the somethings that make up the inaugural *there is*. They are moments of concretizations standing out from the plain of unity. But how they came to be and why, and in what way they relate to the plain of unity from which they arose, those are questions whose answers precisely hide behind their surface.

The things we perceive have no grounding, or none that can be grasped because that grounding hides behind the surface of the perceptibles. And yet, we must trust something because we must start somewhere. Since we understand the world as flesh, we came to realize that the ungroundedness of our trust parallels the ungroundedness of vision. And in this way, the abyss, the mystery, is something that is already present in every vision, in every moment of trusting the world. Vision relies on an enigma, and it is only by virtue of the incorporation of what vision relies on that we can see. And it is because this enigma provides vision, that we are willing to accept the enigma. The central question of the flesh – ‘How can something that

³⁵ Ibis, 239.

is general and unitary produce multiplicities which can perceive each other?’ – is a question without a final answer because in order to answer it, one must see behind the perceptibles and become one with them. The only problem is that at the moment of unity, the difference between the perceiver and the perceived implodes, which makes the question obsolete, for the question relies on difference in order to be asked. Therefore, in order to become one with the things themselves, we must, as it were, approach them from behind, through the unitary plain of existence which is their and our source. In this moment of intimacy, the questions once asked by the subject become irrelevant as the subject becomes accustomed to the many possibles of the actual. In that sense, interrogating vision leads to the perception of the world not just as an enigma, but as an abyss of possibilities. The abyss is a ‘negativity coming to the world,’ which means that it is not an absolute negativity, rather, it is a negativity that is accessible through the positivities that make up the world. They are the latent possibilities of the actual.

The abyss is the inverse of the absolute: we cannot know what we don’t know, but we *can* know that we cannot know what we don’t know – and that knowledge is final. It is final because knowledge itself depends on the difference between knowing and not-knowing, and so knowledge is always knowledge against the background of a mystery. This is the only way of defining the abyss in philosophical terms. It is a truth that is self-evident because it relies on a definition of what knowledge is (knowledge as difference) and it is a truth that is experiential because anyone who has come to see the abyss recognizes its existence beyond doubt. This ‘beyond doubt’ is the trust Wittgenstein spoke about, and it is the support from a *Hoheit* which Merleau-Ponty spoke about. The mystery, the abyss or the enigma are special words in philosophy because their signification has no clear delineation, precisely because they refer to something which cannot be delineated. Because that’s what a mystery is. It’s the only concept in philosophy which resists sedimentation definitionally, which is why it is an excellent candidate as a ground for a normativity of transcendence.

The abyss is the moment where the potential is viewed through the actual, and the actual is viewed through the potential. I call this moment of chiasmic coincidence, for at that moment, we see the world to the extent that we see its pregnancy. At this moment of chiasmic coincidence, the separation between the now and the future drops and the temporal tunnel of subjective limitation shifts to become an eternal horizon of possibilities. And so, the abyss is a ground not for a reason outside of itself, it is a ground because it shows the world as possibilities, and because those possibilities that are most willing to be actualized show themselves most potently. When this is the case, what we conventionally call the world now simply is an infinite set of possibilities. This means that the need for a ground becomes superfluous, since the possibles must no longer compete with sedimented perceptions. As a result, the questioning subject ceases to be a questioning subject because he can now feel what wants to happen immediately from the plain of unity that is the flesh and of which both he and the things are a moment. The abyss provides ground because for the subject to perceive the abyss, he must understand himself as part of it since he feels it through himself, and so must feel embedded in it, supported by it. In the flesh, embeddedness and supportiveness merge.

When potency is obvious, the flesh makes itself. This means that there is no doing of the subject. Doing already implies separation between the doer and the being done to. The point of the flesh is to see the being in all doing and the doing in all being, i.e., to see the generality in all multiplicity. However, and this is, again,

the hyperreflective move: because being is always on a distance, the doing is the negativity coming to the world, being as transcendence. The abyss is a positive concept, but it comes in the form of negativities. As a result, the kind of doing the abyss entices is of another kind as the doing we conventionally think of when we think of doing, but it is a doing nonetheless. It is the doing of the flesh, the act without the aim, it is the doing of Being.

I believe this is the return to the abyss Merleau-Ponty had in mind, it is the kind of abyss that is on a hyperreflective distance, one which we can only approach through the negative. And it is precisely for this reason, that we can risk to be agnostic about the abyss' ability to turn into full determinacy. Readers of Merleau-Ponty know all too well that full determinacy is the death of consciousness. But the death of consciousness relies precisely on consciousness, a relic from Husserlean transcendentalism, which, in *The Visible and The Invisible*, becomes absolved in the flesh. Instead, within the ontology of flesh, we can remain agnostic about full determinacy because what it entails is absolutely unknowable. We can anticipate it by saying that things can become tautological or self-evident, transparent even. But those expressions are only formal descriptions about what living according to the insights of hyper-reflectivity (which presupposes the flesh) might structurally amount to from the perspective of the hyper-reflective bubble, from *our* point of view. They are structural expressions, not so much positive notions in the sense that they bring us any closer to how living as that kind of being feels like.

Empathy as Infinity

What is empathy? Empathy is how a being relates to the abyss. But as a concept, it also implies a separation from the abyss. Because empathy is what is required to overcome the separation between the empath and its object. Once the object is felt by the being, empathy loses its meaning, for the object and the being are as one. Hence it shows us, me writing this argument and you reading it, that we are still looking at Being from above, through the glasses of the ontology of the flesh. We are in our hyper-reflective bubble.

Empathy, above all, describes a formal relationship from the visible to beyond the visible, of which the visible is always only a moment in its existence. Will we keep needing empathy? The question itself relies on a misunderstanding of the ontology. Because we can now understand the visible as a moment, we also understand that empathy is infinite. Not because being is infinite (who knows?!), but because for those who live in moments there is always more to feel.

'Infinity of *Offenheit* and not *Unendlichkeit*; infinity of the *Lebenswelt* and not infinity of idealization.'³⁶

This is Merleau-Ponty's inverse of ontology. By showing being in the beings and through empathy, the abyss is found in every inaugural there is. Indeed, the distinction between the visible and the invisible, even if only meant chiasmatic, already relies on an unjustified sedimentation of moments of being, but so does the expression that the world is one. We should therefore neither assume that sedimentations are inevitable or evitable (for example, the sedimentation of "empathy"), for the idea of a sedimentation is a sedimentation too. Similarly, we would contradict the insight of the abyss if we were to say that full determinacy or

³⁶ Ibid, 169.

self-identity of being – the end of empathy – is impossible. The whole point of the abyss is that it has infinite possibles and that there is no point in speculating what being in being feels like when existences become absolved in it through the infinite here and now of empathy. The infinity of empathy is what exceeds us, end that is the real lesson for the philosopher. Because empathy is empathy for that which cannot be grasped (*Begreifen*), the kind of being it entices us into can also not be fully understood.

Consent as Circle

When a being or an existence arrives at the abyss, they have fully departed from sedimented reality. The world is a miracle at every instance, in every moment. We could say, from the perspective of hyper-reflectivity, that the existence who lives according to the abyss lives in the abyss, is the abyss. The “decisions” this existence makes, the “actions” they undertake, come with ease and effortlessness, as they are perfectly attuned to themselves and their *Lebenswelt*. They live in a permanently renewed state of chiasmic coincidence, between the multiple and the general; between the visible and the invisible. In a word, for this existence, the world has become *transparent*. Conventional perception is now only a fractal companion of constant sensing: consensuality. The existences’ or beings’ abilities of sensing has become so great, that their lives are about following latent intentions, which for them are no longer latent, rather obvious. Indeed, there was a time when the argument of hyper-normativity, rooted in hyper-reflectivity and the ontology of the flesh, was still an argument which was referred to every now and then at a campfire conversation in order to give *meaning* to a difficult situation. But now, difficult situations have not shown themselves anymore, as the existences and their *Lebenswelt* live in an inexplicable pre-paradoxical harmony. As a result, that argument, after the passing of generations, has more and more become an argument *at a distance* – as the existences now wholeheartedly live *in being* – until it vanished from the consciousness that is the abyss, absolved in the practice that it inspired. Normativity has been forgotten, and empathy is no longer thematized as nothing outside of it seems to exist: empathy is simply what perceiving the world has come to *be*, empathy and the abyss have become indistinguishable – they are like the two halves of an orange.

Yet, from the contemporaneous point of view of hyper-reflectivity, from *my* point of view, empathy and the abyss can be apprehended as constituting a circle. This circle I call the circle of consent. The circle of consent is premised on a praxis of consent, and precisely the description of the praxis of consent, is that argument that has, for them, retreated into the distance. Conversely, for the argument of consent, for *us*, what we argue for – the abyss and its latencies – are *on a distance* from us. It is because we make an argument at a distance, that our argument cannot fully understand itself. The most consequential effect of this, is that the argument cannot proof itself. In that sense, it is not an argument at all. Instead, the proof of the argument is in the praxis. And the praxis is that which exceeds the argument, and is, as such, on a distance *from* the argument. But this distance is a *required* distance, for we want to make an argument who’s lived experience absolves the argument, and this it can only do if the argument is not foundational to it, but rather, that the lived praxis finds foundation in itself. In other words, we are doing philosophy into the blue for a very good reason.

We have said many times that we find ourselves in the hyper-reflective mode. This mode is a special mode of the reflective subject, and the reflective subject, one

could say, is a special mode of the habitual subject. Indeed, whether we think in terms of language games or sedimentations, the way existences exist in those modes is habitual. The trust or faith that persist in these modes of being make the world come to visibility. Yet, our insistence on them also stagnates the moving of the world. What is important is to realize that it is unclear how deep habituation runs. We can say that the mountains entice habituation because they keep being there, but is that not to presuppose precisely that which we try to question? Do we habituate ourselves to the mountains because they are or do the mountains persevere because of us? Short of making a decision on such matter, the abyss teaches us that a final answer is impossible. The point is that we want to keep those parts of habituation that make the world come to visibility, but we want to get rid of the fixating tendencies habituation comes with. We do not want to throw away the baby with the bathwater. But the problem is that we do not quite know where the bathwater stops and the baby starts. Here, we can introduce a distinction between the reduction and the praxis of consent. The reduction tries to reduce until something which resists reducing remains. But the problem is that that which resists reducing cannot be identified. How do we know when we have reduced enough? Instead, the practice of consent's goal is not a reduced world, but a world which functions according to a different kind of habituation. The point of the praxis of consent is not to reduce habits, it is to change their ontological status. The language game; the *Weltthesis*; perceptual faith, these all are expressions of our habitual lives. And their ontological status is such that we rely on them for the world to make sense. We turn the positivities of the visible into positivities for us, and thereby forget that they are moments of the flesh. And precisely this is the problem. A habit is simply something one is used to, and this is in itself not a problem. As such, the point is not to overcome habits, the point is to overcome our reliance on habits for certainty. Indeed, if we were to understand how deep habits run, we would be able to identify habits as habits. But precisely because we do not know how deep they run, are we unable to tell what is habitual and what is not.

Thus, the situation is that we cannot overcome habits because we are embedded in them, and we have no means of identifying them since we do not exist outside of them. At the same time, we know that the certainty they portray is a problem, for it is unjustified. The solution, therefore, can only lay in intentionally introducing a habit which resist idealization. This is the habit which introduces uncertainty: it is the habit of affirming the negative. The negative can never be intellectually affirmed, because it cannot be defined. It can only be said yes to on a distance. As a result, it cannot be idealized, simply because there is nothing to idealize. Merleau-Ponty calls these negativities latencies, as they are hiding behind the moment. But precisely because there is nothing to idealize, there is also nothing to habituate ourselves into. In that sense, the habit of affirming the negative is a habit which is not a habit. We could say that it is a hyper-habit, or a habit which constantly requires an active engagement of the hyper-reflective subject. Affirming the negative is the first step in the circle of consent, which is on a distance from the immediately comprehensible.

Following latencies, or stepping into the unknown, is for many not an easy endeavour. It requires courage, for precisely the habitual nature of our lives is challenged. But precisely therefore it is good that we think of affirming the negative as a habit. If affirming the negative is a new habit, it is something we can get used to *step-by-step*. We can habituate ourselves into affirming something which we cannot yet fully grasp. When this affirmation is made, the world reacts: the latency shows

itself, it becomes actual. This is the second step in the circle of consent, and it has a double function. First, it shows that affirming the negative has an effect, and as such, it builds trust in affirming the negative. But the trust it builds is of a special kind, and this is the second function of the result of the affirmation: because affirming the negative has no objective justification, whatever is instituted on the basis of it, is immediately understood as ungrounded too, for its source already is ungrounded. This means that the world instituted on the basis of the affirmation of the negative is a world which resists idealization. This is the second step in the circle of consent.

As a consequence, the kind of trust it builds understands itself as a trust not in a positivity, but in the affirmation of the negative, or, indeed, in the world as a mystery or abyss of possibilities. This ungrounded trust is the third and last step in the circle of consent. This ungrounded trust, then, is what allows a hyper-reflective subject to affirm more or greater unknowns, in order to expand the circle. But it is not just the trust in the world as a mystery which increases, it is the perception of the world as a mystery as well. And this is the critical point which allows the circle to become self-moving or auto-poietic: when the world is perceived as a mystery, it becomes increasingly easy to perceive latencies, for they carry no longer a lesser ontological status compared to their actual counterparts. Because the affirmation of the negative institutes ungrounded visibilities, these visibilities resist idealization as well and as a result, are much more transparent in comparison to positivities which were instituted on the basis of other positives. By virtue of their transparency, then, further latencies are less hard to access, as the visible does no longer obstruct out access to them.

This is when the habit of affirming the negative starts to carry itself. For when an existence (now no longer a hyper-reflective subject) habituates itself into affirming latencies and creates a world which is viewed in terms of its latencies, the latencies themselves start to work through the existence. In other words, if first the hyper-reflective subject had to actively practice empathy to access the things themselves and their latent character, now, by virtue of transparent institutions, the latencies become the only sensical thing to follow, for all the rest of the world is simply a very big ungrounded institution. We could say that for such an existence, the visible is only a thin and transparent layer around the invisible, which for them is immediately accessible. This also means that the existence ceases to be a hyper-reflective subject, for the praxis now carries itself.

Conclusion

As a result, we started in a double modus: both as a hyper-reflective subject and as a habitual being. By using habit in terms of hyper-reflectivity, a new kind of habit arose, which is the habit of affirming the negative. The praxis this habit inspired was able to absolve both the hyper-reflective subject as well as the habitual being, for it introduced a habit which resists habituation. This paradox of habit precisely works wonders because, since it is a paradox, it reflects the paradoxical nature of Being, and as such, is what allows beings to come closer to Being. As a result, Being as abyss comes closer, but not without support. Instead, because habits are only overcome by a new habit of affirmation of the negative *and* by recognizing its result, the habitual subject becomes increasingly accustomed to view Being as an enigma, without wholly disintegrating when the world ceases to make sense after reduction. In that way, the practice of consent slowly allows for a mode of being of constant sensing, consensuality, since empathy is the first step in recognizing a latency. In that way, consent leads to consensuality. Since the circle becomes at a certain point,

and increasingly so, self-grounding or self-constituting (which is only possible because the argument was on a distance from the practice it inspired), I can be confident to say that whatever appears can properly be called a *new type of being*.

“(...) a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included within it. His body and the distances participate in one same corporeity or visibility in general, which reigns between them and it, and even beyond the horizon, beneath his skin, unto the depths of being.”³⁷

In summary, the circle of consent constitutes a circle which departs in infinite empathy, which either departs in a hyper-reflective subject, a habitual being or in a new type of being. This infinite openness to the *Lebenswelt* builds a circle between the infinity of empathy and, through the institution of ungrounded positivities, the abyss. This indirect normativity mirrors Merleau-Ponty's indirect ontology. Through the reversal of habits, *not* through reduction, an infinite circle is established indirectly, on a distance from the hyper-reflective subject. This distance is what enables the circle to become self-grounding, it is an infinite circle of empathy or consensuality which, as it keeps turning, returns us to the abyss: *circulus vitiosus deus*.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid, 149.

³⁸ The expression is used both in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* and Merleau-Ponty's *Working Notes* (179); see also (for a slightly different interpretation) Chouraqui F. – *Circulus Vitiosus Deus: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of Ontology*.

Conclusion

The only true voyage of discovery, the only fountain of Eternal Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is.³⁹

—Marcel Proust

This thesis began with a paradox: normativity, as it has traditionally been conceived, demands a ground – a fixed point from which to draw direction. Yet any attempt to establish such a ground collapses under the weight of its own assumptions. Norms that claim certainty disavow the finitude and contingency from which they arise. In reflecting deeply on the *impulse* to justify our actions, we encountered not a rational foundation, but the groundlessness of our beliefs – a space where the need for certainty gives way to the possibility of trust.

The central question throughout this project has been: how can we act – and how can we know how to act – without relying on pre-established frameworks of meaning? The answer has not been to replace one normative system with another, nor to retreat into relativism or nihilism. Rather, by carefully following the insights of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, we have come to understand normativity as a paradoxical gesture⁴⁰ rather than a system: an embodied, felt relation to Being that acknowledges uncertainty not as a failure, but as the condition of possibility for meaning itself.

In chapter one, we dismantled the idea that normativity could be grounded in anything other than practice itself. With Wittgenstein's notion of *language games* and *basic certainties*, we discovered that what we take as foundational is neither argued nor chosen but inherited through use. Trust is not a conclusion but a starting point – a kind of animalic certainty embedded in the way we live. Yet this trust becomes distorted when it is made explicit and turned into doctrine. Once the implicit becomes reflective, it hardens into ideology and habituation, and the organic reversibility between certainty and uncertainty is lost.

To move forward, we had to embrace the paradox that trust – as the ungrounded ground – is most alive when it is consciously recognized *as* groundless. This is where we move beyond Wittgenstein, and what he leaves implicit, Merleau-Ponty helps us bring to light. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is not something we know or not know, but something we are in and of. We are not observers who reflect on the world from the outside, but beings of *flesh*, immersed in a world that exceeds us. The “ground” of our being is not a concept but a participation – not a justification, but a trust that arises from the intertwining of self and world.

In chapter two, we turned from ground to direction. Even if we accept trust as a groundless ground, the normative question remains: how do we know which way to move? Here, Merleau-Ponty's concept of *latency* became crucial. The flesh, as an elemental structure of Being, is not static but generative. It hides more than it reveals behind what it reveals. What is visible always implies an invisible – a depth that cannot be fully grasped, but which can be *felt* because we are of it. Normative direction, then, is not given in advance, nor deducible from rules. It must be sensed – *felt into* – through what Merleau-Ponty calls *empathy*.

³⁹ Marcel Proust, *The captive* (Chatto and Windus, 1957), 160.

⁴⁰ ‘The flesh = this fact that my body is passive-active (visible-seeing), mass in itself *and* gesture’ in Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible* (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 271.

This mode of sensing direction challenges the subject-object divide. It also disrupts any fantasy of mastery. There is no view from nowhere, no God's-eye perspective from which to derive the good. Rather, direction arises within the chiasmic relation between self and world. It emerges as a gesture, not as a command or aim. To act ethically is not to apply a formula, but to respond – with sensitivity, with courage – to a latency that cannot be fully named, only inhabited.

In chapter three, we brought ground and direction together through the concept of consent. Here, consent is not rational agreement nor moral approval, but an existential *yes*: a consent to the ambiguity of Being itself. It is an affirmation of the mystery, grounded in the hyper-reflective understanding that being resists full comprehension. To consent is to act without guarantee. It is to acknowledge that the abyss is not a void but a depth; not a lack of meaning, but a fecund negativity from which meaning can emerge.

This leads to a reorientation of ethics. Normativity, as reconceived here, is not a system but a practice of infinite openness of empathy. It does not provide rules for action but cultivates the conditions for responsiveness. Its structure is not deductive, but *chiasmic* – a continual negotiation between visible acts and invisible depths, between what is given and what is felt. This is an ethics of paradox, of participation, and of trust in the unknowable. But this trust is not naïve. It is not the trust of the child who does not yet reflect. It is the trust that emerges after reflection has undone itself — what Merleau-Ponty calls *hyper-reflection*. It is the trust that arises when the need for certainty has been seen through, and one continues anyway. This is not the end of thinking, but its transmutation into something else – a mode of being, or a type of being, that feels its way forward.

Crucially, this way of orienting or being – of sensing and responding to what cannot be fully known – does not remain a perpetual conscious effort. It may begin in hyper-reflection, where the structures of meaning collapse and the need for certainty is seen through. But then, as this gesture is repeated – as one continues to feel into what is not-yet-actual – a circle begins to form. One starts to notice that responsiveness to negativity itself begins to work as latencies coalesce into form. Latent intentionalities not only reveal themselves but generate real consequences. And here, the real transformation occurs. The repetition of the act of consent – the affirmation of the negative – begins to generate its own momentum. Each moment of feeling-into reinforces the possibility of doing so again. Each successful emergence – each time the invisible becomes tangible without being reduced to the objective world – affirms the viability of the movement. The gesture becomes self-sustaining and auto-poietic.

This is not habit in the sense of routine precisely because the negative cannot be grasped. Rather, it is a habit of dishabitation, born from repetition yet never reducible to it precisely because it is a habit of openness. We can never repeat because we would not know what to repeat. What begins in a singular rupture becomes a circular process – not static, but dynamic. A flywheel of ontological unfolding takes shape, one in which trust is no longer the precondition for movement, but its result and its fuel. The more one moves in this way, the more the process validates itself. Not by proving anything, but by working: by *bearing fruit* in the lived field.

And as this process continues, something even more radical happens: the very ontological status of actuality changes. What is brought into presence through this circularity – acts, forms, relations – are no longer grounded in pre-existing structures of meaning, not instituted in the conventional sense. They do no longer

belong to perceptual faith or a language game. Our actuality gains a new ontological status: they are actualities grounded in their own depth, anchored in negativity, and as a result perceived as the surface of the mystery.

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