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‘There is no brute world, only an elaborated world’: Merleau-Ponty on the intersubjective constitution of the world¹

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In his later works, Merleau-Ponty proposes the notion of ‘the flesh’ (*la chair*) as a new ‘element’, as he put it, in his ontological monism designed to overcome the legacy of Cartesian dualism with its bifurcation of all things into matter or spirit. Most Merleau-Ponty commentators recognise that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘flesh’ is inspired by Edmund Husserl’s conceptions of ‘lived body’ (*Leib*) and ‘vivacity’ or ‘liveliness’ (*Leiblichkeit*). But it is not always recognised that, for Merleau-Ponty, the constitution of the world of perception, the problem of embodiment or incarnation, is at the very same time one with the problem of the experience of others in what Husserl called *Einfühlung* or *Fremderfahrung* and indeed one with the problem of the constitution of the commonly shared world ‘for all’. As Merleau-Ponty put it in his late essay ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’ in *Signs*, ‘the problem of *Einfühlung*, like that of my incarnation, opens on the meditation of sensible being, or, if you prefer, it betakes itself there’. In other words, the problem of the apprehension of the other is part of the overall apprehension of the transcendent world. In this paper I want to meditate on the relations between embodiment, experience of others, and experience of the world in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. I will take particular note, as in the title of this presentation, of the claim made by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible* that ‘there is no brute world, only an elaborated world’ (*il n’y a pas de monde brut, il n’y a qu’un monde élaboré*).

In this paper I shall explicate the relations between embodiment, experience of others, and experience of the world in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. I shall explore the enigmatic claim made by Merleau-Ponty in his *The Visible and the Invisible* that ‘there is no brute world, there is only an elaborated world’ (*il n’y a pas de monde brut, il n’y a qu’un monde élaboré*).² I shall primarily focus on Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible*, published posthumously with a selection of Working Notes in 1964, edited by his long-term friend Claude Lefort (1924–2010), but I shall also argue that much that Merleau-Ponty says there is already foreshadowed and predelineated in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).³ There is not, contrary to appearances, a radical shift between the earlier and the later Merleau-Ponty, although the later Merleau-Ponty made a more sustained effort to develop a new vocabulary to express his developing ontological insights. Merleau-Ponty—partly through the influence of his friend Eugen

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the ‘Phenomenology and its Futures’ conference, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, 29–31 March 2013. I am grateful to Dan Dahlstrom, Lester Embree, Joanna Hodge and Rafael Winkler for their comments. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Sir Walter Murdoch Adjunct Professorship in the Humanities.
- 2 Merleau-Ponty, M., *Le Visible et l’invisible*, texte établi par Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), transl. Lingis, A., *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). Hereafter ‘VI’ followed by the page number of the English translation; and the page number of the French edition. The reference here is VI: p. 48; 72.
- 3 Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), transl. Smith, C., *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962). Hereafter ‘PP’ followed by the page number of the English translation; and the page number of the French edition.

Fink as well as through his reading of the later Heidegger—came more and more to appreciate the importance of the very problem of ‘world’. Thus already in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty interprets the phenomenological reduction as working to slacken ‘the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical’ (PP: p. xiii; viii). This fascination with the transcendence of the world and its peculiar mode of being is carried through into the later work. Thus all of the extant outlines for *The Visible and the Invisible* begin with the subtitle ‘Being and World’ (*Être et Monde*, see VI: p. xxxv; 10–11).

The monism of flesh

In *The Visible and the Invisible* and other related later writings, Maurice Merleau-Ponty introduced the notion of ‘the flesh’ (*la chair*) as the new ‘element’ in the ontological monism he proposes to overcome the Cartesian dualism, with its bifurcation of all things into matter or spirit, a dualism he felt still informed his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Of course, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘flesh’ owes a great debt to Edmund Husserl’s conception of the ‘lived body’ (*Leib*) and ‘embodiment’ or ‘liveliness’ (*Leiblichkeit*), as elaborated especially in *Ideas II*⁴ and the *Crisis of the European Sciences*,⁵ and there must also be, although he does not explicitly acknowledge it, the more subterranean influence of Sartre’s discussion of the body in *Being and Nothingness*, which Merleau-Ponty explicitly invokes in terms of Sartre’s analysis of the caress (PP: p. 186; 216).⁶ While the connection between Husserl’s *Leib* and Merleau-Ponty’s *la chair* is readily acknowledged by commentators,⁷ the larger interconnection between embodiment, empathy, alterity and world constitution is not generally recognised and has not been fully explored by commentators.⁸ In this paper, therefore, I shall show that for Merleau-Ponty the problem of embodiment (also called ‘incorporation’ or ‘incarnation’) and indeed the problem of the constitution of the world of perception have to be understood as one with the problem of the *experience of others* in what Husserl called ‘empathy’ (*Einfühlung*), ‘experience of the foreign’ (*Fremderfahrung*), or, more generally, ‘intersubjectivity’ (*Intersubjektivität*). Furthermore, the problem of empathy is deeply implicated in the larger problem of the constitution of the commonly experienced shared world ‘for all’, a concept that is actually quite elusive within Husserlian phenomenology and its aftermath. As Merleau-Ponty will put it in his late essay ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’ in *Signs* (1960),⁹ ‘the problem of *Einfühlung*, like that of my incarnation, opens on the meditation of sensible being, or, if you prefer, it betakes itself there’ (*Le problème de l’Einfühlung comme celui de mon incarnation débouche donc sur la méditation du sensible, ou, si l’on préfère, il s’y transporte*) (*Signes*: p. 171; 215). In other words, the apprehension of the other is an integral element in the overall constitution of the transcendent sensible world. Elsewhere Merleau-Ponty claims that the ‘I-other’ problem is the same as the ‘I-world’ problem. Indeed, already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he claims that ‘[i]t is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive “things”’ (PP: p. 186; 216). For Merleau-Ponty, as we shall see, the profusion of perspectives produced by plural embodied subjects actually belongs to the very *being* of the world. The world simply has intrinsic plurality built into it, or ‘interwoven’ into it, and therefore the whole notion of ‘world’ has to be understood in a radically new way. Furthermore, the world appears as

4 Husserl, E., *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, hrsg. Marly Biemel, Husserliana IV (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), transl. Rojcewicz, R. & Schuwer, A., *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989). Hereafter ‘*Ideas II*’ followed by the page number of the English edition, Husserliana (hereafter ‘Hua’) volume and the page number of the German edition.

5 Husserl, E., *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, Biemel, W. (ed.), Hua vol. VI (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954). It is substantially translated by David Carr as *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), although some supplements have been left out of the Carr translation. Hereafter cited as ‘*Crisis*’ followed by the page number of the Carr translation (where available) and the Hua volume and page number.

6 See Moran (2010, 2011).

7 See Carman (2012) and also Evans and Lawlor (2000).

8 See, however, Lefort (1990) and the reply by Dillon (1990).

9 Merleau-Ponty, M., *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), transl. McCleary, R.C., *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 125. Hereafter ‘*Signs*’ followed by the English translation page number; and the page number in the original French edition.

one complete entity, a purely objective something, only from the point of view of the ‘view from nowhere’ (*la vue de nulle part*) or ‘the oversight thinking’ (*pensée de survol*), which has been developed by humans in their efforts to gain an objective stance.

Overcoming dualism

Merleau-Ponty himself portrays the move to *The Visible and the Invisible* as an attempt to overcome some of the unresolved dualisms that continued to haunt the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Thus in a working note from July 1959, entitled ‘Dualism—Philosophy’, he writes ‘The problems posed in Ph.P. [*Phenomenology of Perception*] are insoluble because I start there from the “consciousness”—“object” distinction’ (VI: p. 200; 250). Dualism, then, is a major target in *The Visible and the Invisible*, even the supposed dualism between the ‘visible’ (sensuously perceived world) and the ‘invisible’ (the ideal world of thought), which are actually entangled with one another; they are the ‘obverse and the reverse of one another’ (see VI: p. 152; 197).

In *The Visible and the Invisible* also, especially in Chapter 2 entitled ‘Interrogation and Dialectic’, Merleau-Ponty also reassesses his intellectual relationship with Sartre whom he accuses of dualism and of rigidifying consciousness and being. In this long discussion, he incisively deconstructs Sartre’s ontology and especially seeking some way to adapt and reinscribe Sartre’s antithetical conceptions of ‘being in itself’ (*l’être-en-soi*) and ‘being for itself’ (*l’être-pour-soi*) into his own more interlaced conception of a ‘hyper-dialectic’ where being and consciousness are interlaced through the participation of embodied subjectivity in the ‘visible’ perceptual and ‘invisible’ world of culture.

In 1952 Merleau-Ponty finally resigned from the editorial board of *Les Temps modernes*, which he had cofounded with Sartre in 1945. He publicly disagreed with Sartre over the latter’s uncritical support of the Soviet Union in the Korean War. He later recorded his disaffection with Soviet-style communism and his support for a new liberalism in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Merleau-Ponty 1955, 1973), which also included his long essay in critique of Sartre, ‘Sartre and Ultrabolshevism’, to which Simone de Beauvoir vigorously responded, defending Sartre and accusing Merleau-Ponty of having invented a strawman, a non-existent philosophy she labels ‘pseudo-Sartreanism’.¹⁰ By Sartre’s ‘ultrabolshevism’, Merleau-Ponty signified Sartre’s placid acceptance of all the doings of the Soviet party in the name of solidarity.

Despite the powerful influence of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943)¹¹ on his own earlier ontology, especially in the final part of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty often criticised the stark oppositional character of Sartre’s account of the clash of *pour-soi* and *en-soi*, whereby consciousness never achieves thinghood and remained always an empty project, and similarly that the object never possesses consciousness and remains mute in itself. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty wants always to emphasise the *dialectical* relation between subject and object in opposition to the frozen character of Sartre’s ontology. As he already wrote concerning Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* in his 1945 essay ‘The Battle Over Existentialism’ (*La querelle de l’existentialisme*):¹²

In our opinion the book [*Being and Nothingness*] remains too exclusively antithetic: the antithesis of my view of myself and another’s view of me and the antithesis of the *for itself* and the *in itself* often seem to be alternatives instead of being described as the living bond [*le lien vivant*] and communication between one term and the other. (SNS: p. 72; 125).

Indeed, Sartre explicitly claimed there was no communication between *en-soi* and *pour-soi* and the relation between one’s point of view and that of the other is usually hostile in Sartre, with

10 For Simone de Beauvoir’s response, see Beauvoir (1998).

11 Sartre, J.-P. *L’Être et le néant. Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), trans. Hazel E. Barnes, *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1995).

12 Merleau-Ponty, M., *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), transl. Dreyfus, H. & Allen Dreyfus, P., *Sense and Nonsense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). Hereafter ‘SNS’ followed by the page number of the English translation; then the page number of the French edition.

one seeking the domination and annihilation of the other. Merleau-Ponty is unhappy that Sartre sees consciousness as nothing but ‘nothingness’ (*néant*). Admittedly, Merleau-Ponty accepts much of Sartre’s analysis of the ‘in-itself’. In his essay ‘Metaphysics and the Novel’ (*Le roman et la métaphysique*), analysing Simone de Beauvoir’s (1943) novel *L’Invitée* (translated as *She Came to Stay*; Beauvoir 1995),¹³ he speaks of the impenetrability of objects surrounded by innumerable horizons that cannot be fleshed out in a manner that fuses Husserl’s discussion of the perceptual object (with its profiles and horizons) and Sartre’s notion of the inert completeness of things. Merleau-Ponty writes in this essay:

Even the things which surround me exceed my comprehension, provided I interrupt my usual intercourse with them and rediscover them, outside of the human or even the living world, in their role as natural things. In the silence of a country house, once the door has been shut against the odors of the shrubbery and the sounds of the birds, an old jacket lying on a chair will be a riddle if I take it just as it offers itself to me. There it is, blind and limited; it does not know what it is; it is content to occupy that bit of space-but it does so in a way I never could. It does not run off in all directions like a consciousness; it remains solidly [*pesamment*] what it is; it is in itself. (‘Metaphysics and the Novel’, SNS: p. 29; 50)

But still Merleau-Ponty emphasises the entanglement between the in-itself and the for-itself. He goes on to say ‘the thing needs me in order to exist’:

It is I who bring into being this world which seemed to exist without me, to surround and surpass me. I am therefore a consciousness, immediately present to the world, and nothing can claim to exist without somehow being caught in the web of my experience. (SNS: p. 29; 51)

Merleau-Ponty simply does not accept the brute alien materiality of the world, so common to Sartre’s experience, e.g. the tree root in *Nausea* that is simply there, *de trop*.¹⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, the world that we experience is specifically the *human* world, the world of commerce and culture, the already formed world of what Heidegger calls ‘publicity’. As he already writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Not only have I a physical world, not only do I live in the midst of earth, air and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, churches, implements, a bell, a spoon, a pipe. Each of these objects is moulded to the human action which it serves. Each one spreads round it an atmosphere of humanity which may be determinate in a low degree, in the case of a few footprints in the sand, or on the other hand highly determinate, if I go into every room from top to bottom of a house recently evacuated. ... The cultural world is then ambiguous but it is already present. I have before me a society to be known. (PP: pp. 347–348; 400)

The experienced surrounding world is a distinctly human environment, an *Umwelt*, a cultural world, a world of tools and cultural artefacts. In other words, it is never just the sensory world, or the world of purely physical entities. Somewhat later in *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the chapter on ‘Freedom’, Merleau-Ponty asserts:

To be born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is constituted but also never completely constituted ... I am never a thing and never a bare consciousness’ (PP: p. 453; 517).

In other words, the rejection of Sartre’s ontology is already to be found in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Sartre is primarily cited earlier in that work in terms of his writings on imagination.¹⁵

13 de Beauvoir, S., *L’Invitée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), transl. as *She Came to Stay* (London: Flamingo, 1995).

14 Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), transl. Baldick, R., *Nausea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

15 Merleau-Ponty primarily quotes from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *L’Imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l’imagination* (Paris:

It is only towards the end of the book that he begins to quote from *Being and Nothingness* and indeed the whole third section of the book is called ‘Being-for-itself and Being-in-the-world’. Furthermore, it is at the end of the book that Merleau-Ponty says there is a certain truth in Hegel’s synthesis of the for-itself with the in-itself (PP: p. 455; 519). In these latter sections, Merleau-Ponty appeals to Husserl’s notion of passive synthesis (which he had found in Husserl’s *Experience and Judgement* (1938)¹⁶ and of ‘temporalisation’ (*Zeitigung*) to argue that human incarnate existence is always already in a world and its temporalisation ‘as consciousness is always a kind of thrownness into the world. As he writes in the chapter on ‘Temporality’:

What we meant by passive synthesis was that we make our way into multiplicity, but that we do not synthesize it. Now temporalization satisfies by its very nature these two conditions: it is indeed clear that I am not the creator of time any more than of my heart-beats. I am not the initiator of the process of temporalization; I did not choose to come into the world, yet once I am born, time flows through me, whatever I do. (PP: p. 427; 488)

And a little later: ‘There is an autochthonous significance [*un sens autochthone*] of the world which is constituted in the dealings which our incarnate existence [*notre existence incarnée*] has with it, and which provides the ground of every deliberate *Sinngebung*.’ (PP: p. 441; 503).

The intertwining of self and world

Turning now to *The Visible and the Invisible*, I would like to call attention to one long passage that seems to bring together, in the one meditation, Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Sartre, his attempt to express the nature of the intertwining between self and world, and self and other, and, finally, his attempt to introduce this idea of the ‘flesh of the world’ (*la chair du monde*). I will quote the passage in full here:

Whether we are considering my relations with the things or my relations with the other (the two problems are but one, since the insularity of the For Itselfs is spanned only by their openness to the “same” things), the question is whether in the last analysis our life takes place between an absolutely individual and absolutely universal nothingness behind us and an absolutely individual and absolutely universal being before us—in which case we have the incomprehensible and impossible task of restoring to Being, in the form of thoughts and actions, everything we have taken from it, that is, everything that we are—or whether every relation between me and Being, even vision, even speech, is not a carnal relation, with the flesh of the world. In this case “pure” being only shows through at the horizon, at a distance which is not nothing, which is not spread out by me, which is something, which therefore itself belongs to being, which, between the “pure” being and myself, is the thickness of its being for me, of its being for the others—and which finally makes what merits the name of being be not the horizon of “pure” being but the system of perspectives that open into it, makes the integral being be not before me, but at the intersection of my views and at the intersection of my views with those of the others, at the intersection of my acts and at the intersection of my acts with those of the others, makes the sensible world and the historical world be always intermundane spaces [*des intermondes*], since they are what, beyond our views, renders them interdependent among themselves and interdependent with those of the others; they are the instances to which we address ourselves as soon as we live, the registers in which is inscribed what we see, what we do, to become there thing, world, history. Far from opening upon the blinding light of pure Being or of the Object, our life has, in the astronomical sense of the word, an atmosphere: it is constantly enshrouded by those mists we call the sensible world or history, the *one* of the corporeal life and the *one* of the human life, the present

Gallimard, 1940), transl. Webber, J., *The Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2002).

16 Husserl, E., *Erfahrung und Urteil: Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*, redigiert und hrsg. Ludwig Landgrebe (Prague: Academia-Verlagbuchhandlung, 1938; 7. Aufl. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1999), transl. Churchill, J.S. & Ameriks, K., *Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).

and the past, as a pell-mell ensemble of bodies and minds, promiscuity of visages, words, actions, with, between them all, that cohesion which cannot be denied them since they are all differences, extreme divergencies of one same something. Before this inextricable involvement, there are two types of error; one is to deny it—under the pretext that it can be broken up by the accidents of my body, by death, or simply by my freedom. (VI: pp. 83–84; 114–115)

This passage brings together many of the key ideas and terms of the later philosophy. He speaks of the ‘intersection of my views and at the intersection of my views with those of the others’, which forms an inescapable part of our being in the world with others. He also introduces the idea of spaces between humans – what he here calls ‘interworlds’. Merleau-Ponty is here suggesting that these interworlds (Alfonso Lingis translates ‘*intermondes*’ as ‘intermundane spaces’) actually *constitute* our world, with its inbuilt system of perspectives and its inescapable multiplicity that prevents the God’s eye perspective from giving a full account of our lives.

Already in *Phenomenology of Perception* there is a very rich chapter on ‘Other People and the Human World’ (*Autruï et le monde humain*), which acknowledges that we do not constitute everything and in particular we do not constitute what he calls here ‘natural time’: ‘Because I am born into personal existence by a time which I do not constitute, all my perceptions stand out against a background of nature.’ (PP: p. 347; 399)

I experience the world and nature because I experience a part of my own self – my ‘prepersonal’ self – as ‘natural’. The perceptual world is here characterised as ‘prepersonal’ (PP: p. 348; 400), in a way that will continue into Merleau-Ponty’s later thought. Experience of perception is of a ‘thought older than myself’. It is, as it were, *there* before me, before I come across it and attempt to come to terms with it. According to Merleau-Ponty, in this passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*, ‘nature finds its way to the core of my personal life and becomes inextricably linked with it’ (PP: p. 347; 399). The embodied world of perception is that in which I come to find myself and which wraps itself around me. At the very end of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty reiterates that our being in the world presupposes intersubjectivity:

My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity; each one of us must be both anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual, and anonymous in the sense of absolutely general. Our being in the world, is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity. (PP: p. 448; 512)

For Merleau-Ponty, the world that is the perceived world is in many ways an *anonymous* yet plural world. Merleau-Ponty constantly stresses the anonymity of the public cultural world in *Phenomenology of Perception* (see, for instance, PP: p. 348; 400 and p. 450; 514). There is a ‘for everyone and no one’ character in tools, equipment and cultural objects generally. The cultural world is experienced as the world of the anonymous, of the ‘someone’ (*l’on*), the ‘one’, a notion clearly related to Heidegger’s conception of *das Man* in *Being and Time*. In his analysis, Merleau-Ponty raises the question of how the individual ‘I’ can be put into the plural, can become the ‘we’. He goes on to assert that the first cultural object is the body of the other person (PP: p. 348; 401). But the constitution of the other person is not enough for the constitution of society.

My body and the world are no longer objects co-ordinated together by the kind of functional relationships that physics establishes. The system of experience in which they intercommunicate is not spread out before me and ranged over by a constituting consciousness. I have the world as an incomplete individual, through the agency of my body as the potentiality of this world, and I have the positing of objects through that of my body, or conversely the positing of my body through that of objects, not in any kind of logical implication, as we determine an unknown size through its objective relations to given sizes, but in a real implication, and because my body is a movement towards the world, and the world my body’s point of support. (PP: p. 350; 402)

Objective thought and science do not understand the ‘saturation of my phenomenal body onto the primordial world’ (*la suture de mon corps phénoménal sur le monde primordial*; PP: p. 350; 402). This image of ‘suture’ is extraordinary. Saturation is a kind of sewing or joining together. I experience my incarnation as already sewn into the sensible world. Perception has to be understood, Merleau-Ponty says, as ‘our inherence in things’ (PP: p. 351; 403). Just as I experience myself first in a kind of prepersonal way, so also I grasp the other in a similar way that has both absence and presence:

The other person is never quite a personal being, if I myself am totally one, and if I grasp myself as apodeictically self-evident. But if I find in myself, through reflection, along with the perceiving subject, a pre-personal subject given to itself... (PP: pp. 352–353; 405)

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty insists, in our communications our perspectives slip into one another; they are not separate and independent (PP: p. 353; 405–406). My perspective slips spontaneously into that of the other person. They interpenetrate and build on each other. In dialogue ‘we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity’. There is, for Merleau-Ponty, no complete coincidence with oneself. The *cogito* in this sense has been misunderstood in a misleading manner. The experience of another’s Other is a prolongation of my experience with the world. Just as the parts of my body form a system and so does my body and the other body – this is already described by Merleau-Ponty in 1945.

Self-presence involves self-distantiation

In the ‘*Cogito*’ chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty is explicating the manner in which we experience ourselves not in the full plenitude and immediacy of self-aware subjectivity, as in the dominant reading of the Cartesian tradition, but rather as partial and limited perspectives whose views are intertwined with those of others and which we find ourselves both embedded in the other and reflected back on ourselves through the other. I experience myself just as I experience others, and indeed objects in the world – as transcendences that are never complete. This is the basis for Merleau-Ponty’s later conceptions of ‘intertwining’, ‘intercorporeality’ and the ‘interworld’ (*l’intermonde*) – all concepts that receive much fuller elaboration in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

For Merleau-Ponty ‘self-experience’ (Husserl’s *Selbsterfahrung*) and ‘primary presence’ (*Urpräsenz*) already incorporates a ‘transcendence’ according to which we already are not with ourselves and where we experience a gap or chasm that opens up through our reflection, which is at the same time a self-distantiation. Merleau-Ponty often elaborates on this self-distantiation that we experience in our own selves in terms of a very rare concept found in Husserl’s *Crisis* – the concept of ‘depresentation’ (Husserl’s term is *Ent-Gegenwärtigung*), which Merleau-Ponty invokes in several different places throughout his work. In fact, Husserl uses the term ‘depresentation’ (*Ent-Gegenwärtigung*) just twice in the one passage of the *Crisis* where he discusses ‘self-temporalisation’ (*Crisis*: § 54b, p. 185; VI: p. 189).¹⁷ The passage reads:

Thus the immediate “I” performs an accomplishment through which it constitutes a variational mode of itself as existing (in the mode of having passed). Starting from this we can trace how the immediate “I,” flowingly-statically present, constitutes itself in self-temporalization as enduring through its pasts. In the same way, the immediate “I,” already enduring in the enduring primordial sphere, constitutes in itself another as other. Self-temporalization through derepresentation [*Ent-Gegenwärtigung*], so to speak (through recollection), has its analogue in my self-alienation [*Ent-Fremdung*] (empathy as a derepresentation of a higher level—depresentation [*Ent-Gegenwärtigung*] of my primal presence [*Urpräsenz*] into a merely presentified [*vergegenwärtigte*] primal presence).

17 The term ‘*Ent-Gegenwärtigung*’ does not appear in Husserliana I (*Cartesian Meditations*) or in the Husserliana volumes XIII, XIV and XV on intersubjectivity. I have not been able to find the term in Husserl’s major works. It is typical of Merleau-Ponty’s genius that he identifies the importance of the term for Husserl.

Thus, in me, “another I” achieves ontic validity as copresent [*kompräsent*] with his own ways of being self-evidently verified, which are obviously quite different from those of a “sense”-perception. (*Crisis*: p. 185; VI: p. 189)

Merleau-Ponty invokes this passage in the *Phenomenology of Perception* when he says:

The problem of the existential modality of the social is here at one with all problems of transcendence. Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them ; how the presence to myself [*Urpräsenz*] which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time derepresentation [*Entgegenwärtigung*] and throws me outside myself. (*et me jette hors de moi*; PP: p. 363; 417)

I am always already thrown outside myself. This is where Merleau-Ponty takes up Heidegger’s notion of *ex-stasis*. It is this possibility of self-transcendence that already gives an opening to others and to the world.

Merleau-Ponty expands on this theme in one of his late Working Notes (of February 1959):

One always talks of the problem of “the other,” of “intersubjectivity,” etc. . . .

In fact what has to be understood is, beyond the “persons,” the existentials according to which we comprehend them, and which are the sedimented meaning of all our voluntary and involuntary experiences. This unconscious is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our “consciousness,” but in front of us, as articulations of our field. It is “unconscious” by the fact that it is not an *object*, but it is that through which objects are possible, it is the constellation wherein our future is read — It is between them as the interval of the trees between the trees, or as their common level. It is the *Urgemeinschaftung* of our intentional life, the *Ineinander* of the others in us and of us in them.

It is these existentials that make up the (substitutable) *meaning* of what we say and of what we understand. They are the armature of that “invisible world” which, with speech, begins to impregnate all the things we see — as the “other” space, for the schizophrenic, takes possession of the sensorial and visible space — Not that it becomes a visible space in its turn: in the visible there is never anything but ruins of the spirit, the world will always resemble the Forum, at least before the gaze of the philosopher, who does not completely inhabit it — Our “interior life”: a world in the world, a region within it, a “place from which we speak” (Heidegger) and into which we introduce the others by true speech. The “invisible world”: it is given originally as *non-Urpräsentierbar*; as the other is in his body *given originally as absent* — as a divergence, as a transcendence (*Ideen II*). (VI: p. 180; 231–232)

The genuine experience of the other – as in Sartre – is a kind of original absence, a peculiar kind of non-givenness that is familiar because it is with the same kind of non-givenness that we experience ourselves. In ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’ – a text from this same period of 1959 – Merleau-Ponty writes:

No doubt this is why Husserl does not seem to be too astonished at the circularities he is led into in the course of his analysis. There is the circularity of the thing and the experience of other people. For the fully objective thing is based upon the experience of others, and the latter upon the experience of the body, which in a way is a thing itself. There is another circularity between Nature and persons. For Nature in the sense of the natural sciences (but also in the sense of the *Urpräsentierbare*, which for Husserl is the truth of the first [*la vérité du premier*]) is the whole of the world (*Weltall*) to begin with, and as such it encompasses persons who, in another connection in which they are expressly made

explicit, encompass Nature as the object they constitute in common. No doubt this is also why Husserl, in a prophetic text in 1912, did not hesitate to speak of a reciprocal relation between Nature, body, and soul; and, as it has been well put, of their “simultaneity.” (*Signs*: pp. 176–177; 222–223)

The world confronts our bodies as flesh meeting with flesh. Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, even speaks of the fabric of the visible and sensory world as ‘the flesh of the world’ (*la chair du monde*; VI: p. 248; 302). In his final decade he was working on developing a new ontology of *flesh* (*la chair*).¹⁸ He spoke of seeking to ‘draw up the picture of wild being’ (*l’être sauvage*; VI: p. 165; 217) with its ‘doubling’ (*dédoublement*) and ‘gap’ (*écart*) as a way of resolving this consciousness/object split and removing it altogether from the horizon of discussion. In the associated Working Notes he speaks of ‘chiasm-reversibility’ (*Chiasme – Réversibilité*) and of the ‘chiasm I-world and I-other’ (*Chiasme moi-le monde moi-autrui*; VI: p. 263; 311). Flesh, in Merleau-Ponty’s account, is essentially characterised by ‘reversibility’ (*réversibilité*), ‘the finger of the glove that is turned inside out’ (VI: p. 263; 311) and ‘doubling’ – ‘the doubling up of my body into inside and outside’ (VI: p. 264; 311). Indeed, he identifies ‘chiasme’ with ‘reversibility’ (see VI: p. 264; 312). For Merleau-Ponty, ‘chiasme’, ‘intertwining’ or ‘interlacing’ (*l’interlacs*) are various metaphors to express the various ways in which my bodily awareness is both drawn together into a single unity (in my ‘healthy’ sense of myself) and also ‘doubled’ and even ‘reversed’, e.g. when one hand touches the other, or when a sore finger obtrudes into my touching consciousness, and so on. There is, for Merleau-Ponty, a general ‘duplicity’ (*duplicité*) and, as he puts it in ‘Eye and Mind’ a ‘reflexivity of the sensible’.¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty speaks of the ‘insertion of the world between the two leaves of my body’ and ‘the insertion of my body between the two leaves of each thing and of the world’ (VI: p. 264; 312).

Elsewhere I have explored in some depth the relation between Merleau-Ponty’s conceptions of chiasm and reversibility and Husserl’s conception of ‘intertwining’ (*Verflechtung*) (see Moran in press). Here I want to explore how this develops in Merleau-Ponty’s account of the ‘I-other’ experience, a relationship that Merleau-Ponty finds to be unsatisfactorily described in the history of philosophy. Flesh not just doubles over and enfolds in the case of the individual *Leib*. There is something similar occurring at the level of the social and the communal. There is an intertwined ‘intercorporeality’, which begins before birth in the foetal experience in the womb, but which continues not just in sexual coupling but in many forms of embodied social encounters with others. There are caresses, kisses, handshakes,²⁰ and grappings of all kinds, be they in sport or in combat.

Exploring the interworld

The ‘interworld’ is Merleau-Ponty’s term for the world ‘between’ people. It is a dialectical term and it is meant to overcome the idea that the subject is opposed to objects and other subjects. Rather we live in an interweaving, a chiasm. The term ‘interworld’ (*intermonde*) already appears in *Phenomenology of Perception* (PP: p. 357; 409) but it resurfaces and is used more frequently in *The Visible and the Invisible*. It does not occur in *Signs* but it does appear once in his essay on ‘Sartre and Ultrasocialism’ in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Merleau-Ponty 1955, 1973). There Merleau-Ponty writes ‘The question is to know whether, as Sartre says, there are only men and things or whether there is also an interworld, which we call history, symbolism, truth-to-be-made.’

18 Merleau-Ponty’s account of flesh has been criticised from various points of view; see, for instance, ‘The Invisible of the Flesh’ in Irigaray (1993). This critique has generated a large scholarly literature, see Grosz (1993), Vasseleu (1998) and Chanter (2000).

19 Merleau-Ponty speaks of ‘une réflexivité’, see Merleau-Ponty, M., *L’Oeil et l’esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964; reprinted edn. Lambert Dousson, Paris: Folio Plus, 2006), transl. Dallery, C., ‘Eye and Mind’, in Merleau-Ponty, M., *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 159–190. Hereafter ‘EM’ followed by the page number of the English translation; then the page number of the French edition of 2006. The reference here is EM: p. 168; 24.

20 Emmanuel Lévinas discusses what he takes to be the mistaken phenomenological approach to the handshake, which sees it (and all encounters with the other) under the paradigm of knowledge (*connaissance*) rather than as a kind of openness, transcendence and essentially a kind of gift; see Lévinas, E., ‘De l’intersubjectivité, notes sur Merleau-Ponty’, in *Hors Sujet* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1987), transl. Smith, M.P., ‘Intersubjectivity: notes on Merleau-Ponty’, in Johnson, G. & Smith, M.P. (eds), *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p. 59.

(*La question est de savoir si, comme le dit Sartre, il n'y a que des hommes ou des choses, ou bien aussi cet intermonde que nous appelons histoire, symbolisme, vérité à faire, Adventures of the Dialectic*: p. 200; 198).

Merleau-Ponty possibly appropriates the term 'interworld' which has a classical lineage in ancient Greek thought and later in astronomy, in order to articulate a conception from Husserl. The 'inter-' has a certain resonance with 'intersubjectivity' (*Intersubjektivität*). I have not been able to find any version of the term *Zwischenwelt* in Husserl. It is certainly not in any of the key texts (*Crisis* or *Ideas* II) or in the intersubjectivity volumes (Hua XIII to XV) that were so carefully studied by Merleau-Ponty. The French term '*intermonde*' derives from the Latin *intermundus* (plural: *intermundia*), an astronomical term that refers to spaces between worlds. The Latin term translates the Greek μετακόσμια, as used by Epicurus.

The *interworld*, in Merleau-Ponty designates a structure that comes to be between agents constituting both the agents themselves and the event in which they participate. The notion of world has to be construed in a broad sense – it is the experienced world, the world of culture, and includes the domains of the symbolic and the imaginary. The operation of language is a good example of the nature of the interworld.

The term 'interworld', translated as 'intermundane space', appears in *The Visible and the Invisible* in the first section, 'Reflection and Interrogation', in the very passage where he also says that the world is always an elaborated world:

I am forever subjected to the centrifugal movement that makes an object of thought be for a thought, and there is no question of my quitting this position and examining what Being can indeed be before it be thought by me or (what amounts to the same thing) by another, what indeed can be the intermundane space [*l'intermonde*] where our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap : there is no brute world, there is only an elaborated world [*il n'y a pas de monde brut, il n'y a qu'un monde élaboré*]; there is no intermundane space, there is only a signification "world". . . . And here too the reflective attitude would be inexpugnable if it did not belie in the hypothesis and as reflection what it affirms in the thesis about what is reflected on... (VI: p. 48; 72)²¹

There is no raw or brute world, only an elaborated world. There is only the world *as we experience it*. There is strictly speaking no 'interworld' in the sense of there being a real but empty space *between* people, rather the world is already an entangled world. There is only what Husserl calls 'the *we-world*' (*die Wir-Welt*). The naturalistic attitude, as Husserl puts it, is an abstract attitude, and only through it are we capable of thinking of a purely objective world. To think of a world of 'being in itself' is precisely to abstract from all human predicates. Subjects touch each other in a handshake (an example of intercorporeality, *intercorporealité*; VI: p. 142; 184) and this reversibility is already prefigured in the single subject. The world is actually an 'intercorporeal being'; my body 'couples' with the 'flesh of the world' (VI: p. 144; 187). Merleau-Ponty concludes that the world is 'universal flesh' (VI: p. 137; 179), 'a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself' (VI: p. 146; 190).

Merleau-Ponty returns to the concept of the interworld in the second section of *The Visible and the Invisible* entitled 'Interrogation and Dialectic'. Here he writes:

All told, therefore, a rigorous philosophy of negintuition accounts for the private worlds without shutting us up in them: strictly speaking there is no intermundane space [*d'intermonde*]; each one inhabits only his own, sees only according to his own point of view, enters into being only through his situation. But because he is nothing and because his relationship with his situation and with his body is a relation of being, his situation, his

21 The French reads '*A jamais je suis assujetti au mouvement centrifuge qui fait être un objet de pensée pour une pensée, et il n'est pas question que je quitte cette position et m'interroge sur ce que peut bien être l'Être avant qu'il soit pensé par moi, ou, ce qui revient au même, par un autre, sur ce que peut bien être l'intermonde où se croisent nos regards et se recoupent nos perceptions: il n'y a pas de monde brut, il n'y a qu'un monde élaboré, il n'y a pas d'intermonde, il n'y a qu'une signification «monde»*'.

body, his thoughts do not form a screen [écran] between him and the world; on the contrary they are the vehicle of a relation to Being in which third parties, witnesses, can intervene. (VI: p. 62; 88–89)

Merleau-Ponty is here returning to reflect on a central problem bequeathed by Husserlian phenomenology – the relation of the singular to the plural. How can I be a self-experiencing flow of individual consciousness and also someone who experiences others? We are returning here to the problem to which Husserl gave the name ‘empathy’.

The experience of the primal I (*Ur-Ich*)

Just as he invokes the notion of *Entgegenwärtigung*, Merleau-Ponty is often troubled by the notorious and obscure passage in Husserl’s *Crisis* (which appears in the same section 54b) concerning the ‘primal-I’ (*Ur-Ich*), a rare invocation of this concept that occasionally appears in Husserl’s late manuscripts. I am always astonished by how well Merleau-Ponty was able to identify the hesitations and ambiguities in Husserl, where others saw a rigorous science. When Merleau-Ponty wants to articulate his most difficult and deepest insights he reaches in the first instance for Husserl. Thus he invokes Husserl’s own complex terms – especially the notions of *Urpräsenz*, *Urstiftung*, *Ur-Arche*, *Urempfindung*, *das Urpräsentierbare*, *Endstiftung*, *Ent-Gegenwärtigung* and *Verflechtung*. It is worth quoting the passage from the *Crisis* where the *Ur-Ich* appears. Husserl sets it down as a challenge:

But it was wrong, methodically, to jump immediately into transcendental intersubjectivity and to leap over the primal “I,” the ego of my epoche, which can never lose its uniqueness and personal indeclinability [*personliche Undeklinierbarkeit*]. It is only an apparent contradiction to this that the ego—through a particular constitutive accomplishment of its own—makes itself declinable, for itself, transcendently; that, starting from itself and in itself, it constitutes transcendental intersubjectivity, to which it then adds itself as a merely privileged member, namely, as “I” among the transcendental others. This is what philosophical self-exposition [*Selbst-Auslegung*] in the epochē actually teaches us. (*Crisis*: p. 185; Hua VI: pp. 188–189)

In fact, Merleau-Ponty more than anyone else emphasised this aspect of Husserl: transcendental subjectivity is always already transcendental intersubjectivity. Thus, as is well known, in his famous Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty claims that ‘the *Cogito* must reveal me in a situation, and it is on this condition alone that transcendental subjectivity can, as Husserl puts it, be an intersubjectivity’ (PP: p. xiii; vii). Merleau-Ponty frequently invokes this claim, citing the then unpublished *Crisis*. However, no exact statement of this form can be found in Husserl’s text; the nearest remark is the statement that subjectivity is what it is, namely an ego functioning constitutively only within intersubjectivity (*Crisis*: §50, p. 172; Hua VI: 175).²² Merleau-Ponty is preoccupied with this transcendental intersubjectivity and he is keen to defend Husserl against all charges of solipsism. Thus in his essay written to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of Husserl’s birth, ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’, Merleau-Ponty correctly points out (quoting from Husserl’s *Ideas* II, which had recently been published in the Husserliana edition by Mary Biemel):

For the “solipsist” thing is not *primary* for Husserl, nor is the *solus ipse*. Solipsism is a “thought-experiment” [*Gedankenexperiment* Hua IV: 81]; the *solus ipse* is a “constructed subject” [Hua IV: 81]. (*Signs*: p. 173; 219)

Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty argues against the possibility of even conceiving aloneness without reference to others. A true *solus ipse* would be ignorant of itself. To posit oneself is to posit *one* self – a self among selves. Thus Merleau-Ponty writes:

22 See Spiegelberg (1994, pp. 580–581, n. 2). See also Moran (2012, pp. 245–254).

True, transcendental solitude [*La vraie et transcendental solitude*] takes place *only* if the other person is not even conceivable, and this requires that there be no self to claim solitude either. We are truly alone only on the condition that we do not know we are; it is this very ignorance which is our solitude. The “layer” or “sphere” which is called solipsist is without ego and without *ipse*. The solitude from which we emerge to intersubjective life is not that of the monad. It is only the haze of an anonymous life [*la brume d'une vie anonyme*] that separates us from being; and the barrier between us and others is impalpable. If there is a break, it is not between me and the other person; it is between a primordial generality [*une généralité primordiale*] we are intermingled in and the precise system, myself-the others. (*Signs*: p. 174; 220)

This is a point that Merleau-Ponty already labours in *Phenomenology of Perception*. There can never be a genuinely solipsistic Robinson Crusoe experience. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty is in agreement with Max Scheler, who, in *The Nature of Sympathy* (a work familiar to Merleau-Ponty in its French translation)²³ had also invoked the image of Robinson Crusoe in order to argue that the other is always present – even for a solitary person: ‘Even Robinson Crusoe experiences the other as an absence because he experiences social feelings such as loneliness, desire, which demand a response from the other.’ (Scheler 1973: p. 235)

The self is always implicated with others, even if they are factually absent. We are always already in an intersubjective being-with-one-another, what Husserl and Scheler call *Ineinandersein*. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty attests ‘...the sensible world and the historical world be always intermundane spaces [*des intermondes*], since they are what, beyond our views, renders them interdependent [*solidaires*] among themselves and interdependent with those of the others; they are the instances to which we address ourselves as soon as we live, the registers in which is inscribed what we see, what we do, to become there thing, world, history.’ (VI: p. 84; 114–115)²⁴

Finally, in the Working Notes edited by Claude Lefort we have an entry:

The other is no longer so much a freedom seen *from without* as destiny and fatality, a rival subject for a subject, but he is caught up in a circuit that connects him to the world, as we ourselves are, and consequently also in a circuit that connects him to us... And this world is *common* to us, is intermundane space [*intermonde*]... And there is transitivity by way of generality... And even freedom has its generality, is understood as generality: activity is no longer *the contrary* of passivity. Whence carnal relations, from below, no less than from above and the fine point Entwining (VI: p. 269; 317)²⁵

Here we see the notion that the interworld is connected to chiasm, the intertwining, Husserl’s *Verflechtung*. Merleau-Ponty speaks of intersubjectivity and dialectic in his 1955/1956 course on *Dialectic*:

It is intrinsically and principally that it is open to others, and the worldhood of the world is not the result of intersubjectivity. They are engendered together and their emergence is the very upsurge of Being. (*C’est intrinsèquement et principiellement qu’il est ouvert aux autres, et la Weltlichkeit du Welt n’est pas le résultat de l’intersubjectivité. Elles s’engendrent ensemble et leur émergence est même surgissement de l’être.*)

23 See Scheler (1928). This work is cited in the bibliography of *Phenomenology of Perception* (PP: p. 461; 525).

24 The French reads ‘...le monde sensible et le monde historique sont toujours des intermondes, puisqu’ils sont ce qui, par-delà nos vues, les rend solidaires entre elles et solidaires de celles des autres, les instances auxquelles nous nous adressons dès que nous vivons, les registres où s’inscrit ce que nous voyons, ce que nous faisons, pour y devenir chose, monde, histoire’.

25 The French reads ‘Notes de travail Autrui n’est plus tellement une liberté vue du dehors comme destinée et fatality, un sujet rival d’un sujet, mais il est pris dans circuit qui le relie au monde, comme nous-mêmes, et par là aussi dans circuit qui le relie à nous - Et ce monde nous est commun, est intermonde - Et il y a transitivity par généralité - Et même la liberté a sa généralité, est comprise comme généralité: activité n’est plus le contraire de passivité. De là rapports charnels, par le bas, non moins que par le haut et la fine pointe Enlacer.’

In ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’ in *Signs* Merleau-Ponty suggests that interpersonal experience must not be thought of primarily as a communication that takes place at the level of thought (and language). Linguistic communication builds on and assumes a much deeper layer of corporeality:

If the other person is to exist for me, he must do so to begin with in an order beneath the order of thought. On this level, his existence for me is possible. For my perceptual opening to the world, which is more dispossession than possession, claims no monopoly of *being* and institutes no death struggle of consciousness. My perceived world and the half-disclosed things before me have in their thickness what it takes to supply more than one sensible subject with “states of consciousness”: they have the right to many other witnesses besides me. When a comportment is sketched out in this world which already goes beyond me, this is only one more dimension in primordial being, which comprises them all. So from the “solipsist” layer on, the other person is not impossible because the sensible thing is open. The other person becomes actual when a different comportment and a different gaze take possession of my things. And this articulation of a different corporeality in my world is itself effected without introjection; because my sensible existents – through their aspect, configuration, and carnal texture – were already bringing about the miracle of things which are things by the fact that they are offered to a body, and were already making my corporeality a proof of being. Man can create the alter ego which “thought” cannot create, because he is outside himself in the world and because one ek-stasis is compossible with other ek-stases. And that possibility is fulfilled in perception as *vinculum* of brute being and a body. The whole riddle of *Einfühlung* lies in its initial “esthesiological” phase; and it is solved there because it is a perception. (*Signs*: pp. 170–171; 214–216).²⁶

For Merleau-Ponty the riddle of *Einfühlung* is solved because it is an embodied *perception* not a thought construction. We encounter each other in the ‘thickness’ of being.

The thickness of being

One way Merleau-Ponty seeks to address this question of the between-world (this genuinely real world that is not, however, completely objective but constituted as a world between subjective and objective) is to emphasise what he claims is the ‘thickness’ (*l'épaisseur*) of being and its ‘opacity’ and resistance to complete penetration by transparent self-reflective thought and by any kind of ‘totalising’ thought. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty regularly invokes the idea of the ‘thickness’ (*l'épaisseur*) or ‘opacity’ (*l'opacité*) of experience, of sensation (PP: p. 45; 56), of temporal duration (PP: p. 40; 50), of the perceived object. Merleau-Ponty’s idea, as he puts it in *Phenomenology of Perception*, quoting Ernst Cassirer, is that empiricism mutilates perception from above and below. Intellectualism absorbs perception into thought. Both approaches ignore the separate field of the perceptual world, its associations, passivity, its connections (PP: p. 53; 65). Perception has to be understood as ‘our inherence in things’ (PP: p. 351; 403). Or as he puts it in the essay ‘Bergson in the Making’ in *Signs*, ‘absolute knowledge is not a view from above; it is inherence’ (*Le savoir absolu n'est pas survol, il est inherence*; *Signs*: p. 184, translation

26 *Mon monde perçue, les choses entr'ouvertes devant moi, ont, dans leur épaisseur, de quoi fournir d'« états de conscience » plus d'un sujet sensible, ils ont droit à bien d'autres témoins que moi. Qu'un comportement se dessine dans ce monde qui me dépasse déjà, ce n'est là qu'une dimension de plus dans l'être primordial, qui les comporte toutes. Dès la couche « solipsiste » donc, autrui n'est pas impossible, parce que la chose sensible est ouverte. Il devient actuel quand un autre comportement et un autre regard prennent possession de mes choses, et cela même se fait, cette articulation sur mon monde d'une autre corporéité s'effectue sans introjection, parce que mes sensibles, par leur aspect, leur configuration, leur texture charnelle, réalisaient déjà le miracle de choses qui sont choses du fait qu'elles sont offertes à un corps, faisaient de ma corporéité une épreuve de l'être. L'homme peut faire l'alter ego que ne peut faire la « pensée » parce qu'il est hors de soi dans le monde et qu'une ek-stase est compossible avec d'autres. Et cette possibilité s'accomplit dans la perception comme vinculum de l'être brut et d'un corps. Toute l'énigme de l'Einfühlung est dans sa phase initiale, « esthésiologi-que », et elle y est résolue parce que c'est une perception. Celui qui « pose » l'au-tre homme est sujet percevant, le corps de l'autre est chose perçue, l'autre lui-même est « posé » comme « perçevant ». Il ne s'agit jamais que de co-perception. Je vois que cet homme là-bas voit, comme je touche ma main gauche en train de toucher ma main droite. Le problème de l'Einfühlung comme celui de mon incarnation débouche donc sur la méditation du sensible, ou, si l'on préfère, il s'y transporte.*

modified; 231–232). Here, commenting on Bergson, he speaks of understanding the self as not only coming into integration with itself but also as ‘tearing away from self’ (*Signs*: p. 184; 232). In another essay, ‘The Philosopher and his Shadow’, collected in the same volume *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty again refers to the thickness of the perceptual world and sees it as ‘primordial being’:

For my perceptual opening to the world, which is more dispossession than possession, claim no monopoly of being and institutes no death struggle of consciousness. My perceived world and the half-disclosed things before me have in their thickness [*l'épaisseur*] what it takes to supply more than one sensible subject with “states of consciousness”: they have the right to many other witnesses besides me. When a comportment is sketched out in this world which already goes beyond me, this is only one more dimension in primordial being [*l'être primordial*], which comprises them all. (*Signs*: p. 170; 215)

In *The Visible and the Invisible* he talks about this thickness as a ‘thickness of the flesh’ and alludes to its intersubjective character.

That the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh, that I “am of the world” and that I am not it, this is what is no sooner said than forgotten: metaphysics remains coincidence. That there is this thickness of flesh between us and the “hard core” of Being, this does not figure in the definition: this thickness is ascribed to me, it is the sheath of non-being [*manchon de non-être*] that the subjectivity always carries about itself. (VI: p. 127; 167)

This notion of a ‘sheath’ or ‘mantle’ (*manchon*) is crucial. What comes to mind for me is the mantle of gauze that encases the gas in the gas-lamp. The mantle in a gas lamp, for instance, is a flimsy layer of cotton (soaked in metal nitrates) that captures the flame of the burning gas sufficiently that it can burn and at the same time the metal nitrates are solidified into oxides that emit light.²⁷

The thickness of experience is something that must be immediately recognised and which Merleau-Ponty believes is a tremendous discovery of Husserl. In the ‘Primacy of Perception’ he speaks of the peculiar manner in which the absent sides of the perceived object are somehow co-present and emptily intended in what Husserl calls *Leermeinen*.

As we have emphasised, Merleau-Ponty has great hopes to overcome entirely the methodological solipsism that is often associated with Husserl’s approach – especially in the latter’s *Cartesian Meditations*. In November 1959 Merleau-Ponty has a very interesting note on the inadequacy of the ‘I-other’ formulation. He writes that ‘I-other’ is an inadequate formula:

The I-other relation to be conceived (like the intersexual with its indefinite substitutions cf. Schilder, *Image and Appearance*, pp. 234–61)²⁸ as complementary roles one of which cannot be occupied without the other being also: masculinity implies femininity, etc. Fundamental polymorphism by reason of which I do not have to constitute the other in *face of* the Ego: he is already there, and the Ego is conquered from him. Describe the pre-egology, the “syncretism,” indivision or transitivity. What is it that *there is* at this level? There is the vertical or carnal universe and its polymorphic matrix. Absurdity of the *tabula rasa* on which *cognitions* would be arranged : not that there be cognitions before cognitions, but because there is the *field*. The I-other problem—a *Western* problem. (VI: pp. 220–221; Fr. 270)

27 The idea that the body is encased in a sheath or mantle of non-being invokes the idea of horizon in Husserl. For an interesting and entertaining speculative exploration of the kinds of horizons, bubbles or spheres that humans occupy and create as living spaces, see Sloterdijk (2011).

28 See Schilder, P. *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body: Studies in the Constructive Energies of the Psyche* (originally 1935, reprinted London: Routledge, 1999). Merleau-Ponty refers to Schilder’s earlier book *Das Körperschema* (Berlin: Springer, 1923) in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. For a discussion, see Gallagher (2005).

This is an extraordinarily rich and provocative meditation. He is suggesting that the ‘I-other’ problem is itself entirely misconceived in Western thought and presumably he means post-Cartesian modern philosophy. Instead, he is appealing to a ‘pre-egological’ intersubjective space, an interworld, one that is – in Freud’s terminology – ‘polymorphous’. Let me conclude by quoting one of the unpublished notes made by Merleau-Ponty in one of his late *Notes de Cours*:

I freely admit a logos and a philosophical dialectic which are not a simple reflection of the dialectic truth-certitude: my theory of language and of negativity is completely beyond the philosophy of “consciousness” – but, all the same, I retain from *phenomenology* the idea that being appears only at a distance and from a perspective, that the absolute, which is not this being, but the *double* movement of externalisation and internalisation of the kind that there is just as little absolute Self as absolute Being, that a subjective absolute is just as little as an objective absolute.²⁹

For Merleau-Ponty, the world has always to be understood as including this dialectical double movement between inside and outside, between what Sartre called ‘*pour-soi*’ and ‘*en-soi*’. We live in the interworld.

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29 The French reads ‘J’admets bien un logos et une dialectique philosophique qui ne sont pas simple reflet de la dialectique vérité-certitude : ma théorie du langage et de la négativité est tout à fait par delà la philosophie de la « conscience » - Mais je garde tout de même de la *phénoménologie* l’idée que l’être n’apparaît qu’à distance et vu d’une perspective, que l’absolu, ce n’est pas cet Être, mais le *double* mouvement d’extériorisation et d’intériorisation de sorte qu’il y a aussi peu le *Soi* absolu que l’Être absolu, qu’un absolu subjectif est aussi peu qu’un absolu objectif.’ [Note 127, 23(b)].

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