LAUGHTER AS SENSE: A STUDY OF MEANING

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Graduate Department of Philosophy University of Toronto

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What does our laughter tell us about ourselves?

Merleau-Ponty's theory of meaning can be used to explain how laughter reflects the uniquely human capacity to make the world meaningful.

Laughter reflects the definitive features of our nature as human beings— that every human act is a gesture, an act of meaning, that every human act is at once carnal and mental, that it is carnal as mental and mental as carnal, and that every human act refers at once to many worlds.

In many ways, Merleau-Ponty's career was a conversation with Descartes and Husserl, in which he formed and refined the major themes of his own work: gesture, perception and expression.

Merleau-Ponty points out how human gesture establishes within the world different worlds by commanding relations of the second power, relations between relations. A human being can take any thing and bestow on it a meaning other than the meaning that it had in its immediate concrete surroundings.
The uniquely human ability to command relations between relations has its foundation in perception, in human incarnation as being-in-the-world, the unique way that human beings inhabit the world through their bodies. My senses do not act individually: together they form a constant unity of sensations. Our incarnate way of being is to be always deploying simultaneous, multiple, reversible fields of sense. Once I master a system of meaning, I have it at my disposal in the same immediate, unthinking way that I have my body; it is lived as an extension of myself.

Because the world for us is never just a concrete, physical world but always a field of meaning, a system of relations between relations, our behaviour is always expressive. Expression is not something over and above our everyday activity. Our lower order activities--those we share with living beings that do not gesture symbolically--are subsumed in and re-ordered in the new form of unity that is mind.

In this thesis, examples from the humour of the Marx Brothers are used to show how laughter is testament to the fact that every human act borrows from our biological make-up while, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, it "eludes the simplicity of animal life."

To laugh is human.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Canadian spelling and style are followed throughout the body of this dissertation. Within quotations, however, spelling and style conform to that used in the text quoted.

In the footnotes, the first page references are to the English translations; the second page references are to the original French or German text, as the case may be.
INTRODUCTION

To laugh is human.
That is the central contention of this study.
Laughter may not at first seem to be a serious enough topic for philosophy. Yet it is. For philosophy has always concerned itself with what makes us human.

What does our laughter tell us about ourselves? Nothing and everything. Nothing, in that laughter has no content, and everything, in that laughter, properly understood, reveals what makes us human.

When we laugh, we call into play everything about ourselves and our understanding of the world. The reaches of our laughter might seem more limited than this, but only if we ignore the ways in which our laughter would not be possible but for the new form of carnal unity that is mind.

In the act of laughter we see reflected definitive features of our nature as human beings--that every human act is a gesture, an act of meaning, that every human act is at once carnal and mental, that it is carnal as mental and mental as carnal, and that every human act refers at once to many worlds. Laughter is one of the ways that we make sense of the world.
In the pages that follow, I shall explore these points about laughter, meaning, and human nature by making use of certain ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. My goal is not to set out a theory of laughter and humour but, more modestly, to indicate some contributions to such a theory suggested by Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenological analysis of meaning.

In many ways, laughter is the perfect example to illustrate Merleau-Ponty’s most important insights. Over the course of his career, he worked to formulate a philosophical language that could capture and express the fact that mind and body are a chiasm, that each is what it is in and through the other, and that from that chiasm meaning emerges in an otherwise brute and silent world. I will explore this view by showing that to laugh is human.

To be a human being is not to be a more sophisticated version of some other life form, as though a human being is the next lower primate plus a few additional features. Instead, for better or for worse, we as human beings are wholly different. If in any sense other creatures laugh, they do not laugh as we do. They cannot.

To assert this human difference is not to make any claims one way or another about human superiority or inferiority. The fact of the human difference remains the same, no matter one’s views on such issues. Understanding
this difference is a task we cannot avoid. It is a task to which philosophers, scientists, artists, and theologians ever and again return because, as human beings, they cannot leave it alone.

Consider the views of two philosophers.

For Aristotle, a human being is one thing. The rational animal is a single substance; the soul is the form of the body. The soul and the body are a composite. They cannot exist separately any more than form can exist separately from matter.

Aristotle looks at human being as a naturally occurring phenomenon in the same way that he looks at all other things. Proceeding in this way, he argues that there are three kinds of living things, distinguishable in terms of their level of organic complexity. These are the three levels of soul.

The lowest level of soul Aristotle characterizes as vegetative. Living things of this level of organic complexity have the capacity to absorb matter. Plants can take in matter and transform it into food.

The next level of soul is sensitive soul. This is another level of organic complexity, though anything that has sensitive soul also has vegetative soul. A living thing can be vegetative alone, but nothing can be said to have only sensitive soul. As a new form of unity, sensitive soul
subsumes the lower form into its organization. To say that a living thing has sensitive soul means that it can take in the forms of other things. That is what it means to sense. Those living things that have this level of soul, this form of organic complexity, can do more things, they have more capacities.

The third level of soul, Aristotle argues on the basis of observable evidence, characterizes only human beings. Aristotle calls it rational soul. This is another level of organic complexity, and living things of this level have additional capacities as the result of the way they are put together. What distinguishes this level is the fact that not only can living things of this kind of soul take in matter and convert it, not only can they sense or take in the forms of things, but they can also overcome instinct by reasoning and deliberating. Mind, Aristotle argues, is the form of the body.

According to Aristotle, a human being is an animal in the sense that it has vegetative capacities and sensitive capacities, but it is a very particular kind of animal because of the capacities that its form endows. Human beings have capacities and potentialities that other living things do not have because they have a different form of embodiment, a more complex biological organization than either an animal or a plant.
For Aristotle, a human being is a unitary phenomenon; body and soul form a composite such that neither could be what it is without the other.

By contrast, Descartes takes a different approach because he has a different starting point. Aristotle began with the natural world around him and attempted to make sense of what is found in that world, including human beings. Descartes does the opposite of what Aristotle did. Philosophy is an exercise of reason. The mind turns inward and, using reason alone, it attempts to come to conclusions.

Descartes argues that epistemological questions have to be answered before one can even turn to other questions and hope for any success. Seeking, as he puts it, to establish a firm and permanent foundation in the sciences, Descartes wants to know if there is anything that is certain. Because to say that something is certain is to say that it cannot be doubted, he develops an ingenious technique called methodic doubt. If I want to find something that is certain or beyond doubt, I should try to doubt the different ideas I have in order to find an idea that cannot be doubted.

Descartes finds one can doubt everything except one’s own existence. It is impossible for any one of us to doubt our own existence. Therefore, for each one of us there is something of which we are absolutely certain.
"I exist" is a statement, as Descartes puts it, necessarily true every time I pronounce it or think it.

Having doubted the existence of the world, the existence of God, even the existence of his body, Descartes goes on, starting from the indubitable first premise of his own existence, to try to reconstruct all of his former ideas by showing how they follow necessarily from this first premise.

In contrast to Aristotle’s position that soul and body are one unitary substance of form and matter, Descartes’ view is that mind and body are two fundamentally different kinds of substances. Modelling his approach on the clear and distinct ideas of mathematics, in particular analytic geometry which he discovered, Descartes argues that, since the clear and distinct idea of mind is different from the clear and distinct idea of body, mind and body are two different substances, two different kinds of things. Mind Descartes calls res cogitans, or "thinking thing"; body he calls res extensa, or "extended thing," meaning something that takes up space.

Body occupies space, while mind does not. You can look at a body, you can see a body, you can measure a body, you can weigh a body, you can divide a body in half.

The mind is something different, Descartes argues. Mind is not divisible, mind is not measurable, mind does not
have a certain weight. Thus, he propounds a radical form of dualism according to which every human being is two separate substances, two separate and distinct kinds of things, one of them a mind, the other a body.

Merleau-Ponty, like Aristotle, looks at human beings alongside other living things. His view of human being is not the same as Aristotle's, but he does argue that the capacities that human beings uniquely possess have their foundation in the new form of carnal unity that is mind. Given what the mind is, it could not be what it is without the body, and given what the body is, it could not be what it is without the mind. Mind, he contends, is a new form of carnal unity.

Merleau-Ponty identifies his own position as existential phenomenology. Existential phenomenology proceeds from the assertion that the study of human existence must recognize the uniqueness of human existence, the fact that being a human being is definitively different from being a thing. This is the point of Heidegger's notion of Dasein and of Sartre's distinction between the for-itself and the in-itself. So too Merleau-Ponty's work proceeds from the basic existential phenomenological contention that human being is a being-in-the-world.

As his corpus unfolds, for Merleau-Ponty phenomenology is ever more explicitly the study of those
distinctive humanly instituted relations that make for meaning. What is distinctive about human behaviour for Merleau-Ponty is its command of these relations.

For existential phenomenology, traditional approaches to the problem of knowledge are caught up in the opposition between the mind and the world to the point of losing sight of something more fundamental—the human way of being-in-the-world that is the pre-condition and pre-requisite of any knowledge and of any methodological separating of mind and world for the purpose of understanding their interaction. Also, notably absent from such traditional accounts of knowledge is any consideration of the nature and role of language.

Challenging the traditional starting point of an opposition between mind and world, existential phenomenology takes as its starting point being-in-the-world. A concern with the role and character of language emerges out of the doctrine of being-in-the-world as an essential feature of existential phenomenology. Whereas the model of the traditional approach, especially after Descartes, had been the knowing subject, the model for existential phenomenology becomes speaking being-in-the-world.

In the study that follows, we will examine three central notions in the work of Merleau-Ponty. The first is gesture; the second is perception, to which he gives a
particular meaning; and the third is expression, including language.

At the centre of this reading of Merleau-Ponty is the notion of relations. To understand his view of meaning, we will trace throughout his writings what he has to say about the human ability to command, as he calls them, relations of the second power or relations between relations.

In unfolding his view of gesture, Merleau-Ponty starts in a very straightforward way, by observing human behaviour in contrast to the behaviour of other animals and, in particular, in contrast to the behaviour of other primates. He points to certain differences between what human beings can do and what chimpanzees and apes can do. Non-human primates gesture in certain ways, but there is a limit to such behaviour even in the highest non-human primates, and it is a limit that human beings can go beyond. It is that limit that is interesting to Merleau-Ponty.

Consider the distinction Merleau-Ponty draws between signal and symbol. Chimpanzees and other animals use signals. They signal one another in the course of their activities, but an animal’s signal has only one meaning. It is univocal. A given cry means the same thing every time it is uttered.
By contrast, any human word, if said in different ways, with a different emphasis or in a different setting, can mean different things. It is possible to say “I love you” in a way that means “I love you,” but it is also possible to say “I love you” in a way that means “I hate you.” An animal signal can be used in only one way; a human symbol can have unlimited meanings.

Animals make tools. Tool-making can be observed at different levels of the animal world. A chimpanzee will grab a stick, use it to get something, and then throw it away. The stick does not become what a stick becomes once it is used as a tool by a human being. For the human being, the stick that is used as a tool now has a different meaning. It has taken its place in a humanly instituted framework.

This is the human capacity that Merleau-Ponty explores throughout his work: the capacity to take something and bestow on it a meaning other than the meaning that it had in one’s immediate, concrete surroundings. And to do this in an open-ended way, endlessly.

While even the most sophisticated primates live in a single world, a single environment, a single set of circumstances and relations, human gesture exhibits the ability to create within the world different worlds, different milieus of meaning.
We see the instituting of new meaning at every level of human behaviour. We see it in using the word “love” ironically. We also see it in building cities, in the inherently and endlessly creative use of language, in cultures, and in other systems of meaning. This, Merleau-Ponty argues, is what is distinctive about us, the capacity to institute in the world systems of meaning.

What is the foundation of this capacity? The answer is provided by Merleau-Ponty’s notion of perception, by which he means the way that human beings live their bodies.

To understand what a human being is, what a human mind is, one must understand the way in which a human body inserts one into the world as a network of significations, connects one to the world, connects one to one’s surroundings as a field, a system of meanings.

In his study of human perception, Merleau-Ponty states explicitly that he is not concerned with any distinction between perception and sensation. For him they can be equated with embodiment, our way of being inserted into the world as a network of relations that is available to us as an extension of our body and as such is the foundation of our ability to gesture.

Perception then is first and foremost the living of the relations with the world around us that we enjoy as embodied. It is these relations that provide the foundation
for all the ways that we make sense of the world. The relations that we live as embodied are the foundation of all the gestures that we are able to make.

The body as lived is a system of relations that one has command of, sometimes unthinking, sometimes conscious, at all times. At any time I can call into play the system of relations that is my body. More importantly, every act I perform reflects the fact that I have command of these relations, yet most of the time I am unaware of the system of relations that is my body as lived. Even when I use this system of relations, I am not necessarily, indeed not most of the time, aware of it as a system.

Merleau-Ponty argues that one’s body as lived inserts one into the world in a very particular way so that the world is there as an extension of oneself. The relations that make up one’s world and that go to constituting the way in which one thinks and conceptualizes are rooted in the way in which one's body is lived, in the relations which comprise one’s body as lived.

In this way, Merleau-Ponty wants to get at the unity of mind and body. Mind and body form a chiasm, each what it is only in and through the other. You can, in a certain sense, distinguish mind from body, but neither one can be what it is without the other. Everything we do is at once
both carnal and mental or 'esthesio-logical', as Merleau-Ponty puts it.

That brings us to the third notion, expression, including language.

How do we first use language? We speak. Speech is using our bodies to do what we often think of as the work of the mind. One cannot imagine the mind without language. Using language creates, gives rise to, and makes available to ourselves as well as to others thoughts and ideas. What is it that makes it possible for us to use language? Merleau-Ponty argues that the answer is the very body that we are. Moving about in a language is like moving about in space. Speech accomplishes thought. Thought and language are intertwined, and language has its foundation in the way in which we live our incarnation.

Merleau-Ponty examines how language is lived, to show the role that the body plays in the very way that the mind works. He argues that mind and body really cannot be pulled apart in the way that Descartes attempted to do, if we are going to understand what mind and body are and understand our own experience. Language reflects the chiasm or intertwining of mind and body.

Our mental life would not be possible without our bodily life. The character of our mental life has its foundation in the character of our bodily life. Rather than
being separate or even separable, mind and body are intertwined with one another. Language is the purest expression of mind as body and body as mind, of the chiasm that is mind and body, of the esthesio-logical character of everything we do and are.

When you want to shift in your chair, you do not have to stop and think about it and then do it. You just do it. The doing is the thinking. And once you get used to a machine, you can use that machine almost like an extension of your body because of the kind of embodiment that we are. We make use of language in almost exactly the same way that we make use of our body.

Even if one learns another language, one thinks first in one’s first language. My wife grew up speaking German. Often when she is thinking of certain things, they come naturally to her in that language rather than English. This is especially true of things that are most meaningful; things that are closer to her heart come to her in German. Our first language, however many languages we learn, is the one we are always at home in.

Language, Merleau-Ponty argues, is thought’s body. Our relationship to language is a lot like our relationship to our bodies. Speech is an extension of ourselves, something that we have and that we use but, at the same time, something that we are.
Running through the essays from the period between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* as a central theme is the notion of expression. In these essays, we see Merleau-Ponty develop further the notion of meaning as relation found in *The Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*. The writings of this period develop the notion of relations of the second power by showing how the full range of human activities involves the command and manipulation of such relations. Merleau-Ponty applies this idea to concrete examples of expression from language to painting; in this way, he builds up a view of how these relations transform the world in fundamental ways.

Expression is a manipulation of the world that takes into account the world as it is, as it has been, and as it can be. It encompasses all the ways in which the human capacity for gesture changes the world. All human activity is expression in that every human act is addressed not to the immediate relations of the physical world alone but at the same time to one or another of various contexts or systems of relations that human beings have instituted within the world. Expression encompasses the many ways that we act in the world to give it meaning.

Painting in particular interests Merleau-Ponty because, more clearly than some other forms of expression,
it is a bodily expressive activity. Yet Merleau-Ponty’s task is to show that all expressive acts by nature have their roots in our carnal way of being in the world. All forms of expression are gestural, that is, they all involve instituting and using relations of the second power.

Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on the nature of meaning reach their most original form in his effort to understand in a new way the depth and dimensionality of the world as transformed by traditions of human meaning. Since this depth or dimensionality is in his view the most fundamental and important feature of the world, he comes to refer to it as Being.

His effort is intended to draw attention to the relations that form the foundation of all human activity. Beyond drawing attention to them, he seeks to begin to work out a language and method for studying them.

A world in which all human acts are gestural has as its framework the products of past gestures that have established the dimensions of that world. That framework as a system of relations calls forth and points to further developments that are inherent in it. Each gesture, each act of instituting relations, makes possible further such acts by providing the foundation for them. By arguing that Being is that which requires expression of us for us to experience it, Merleau-Ponty seeks to call attention to the
framework of the human world and to its character and nature.

Expressive forms all involve the instituting of new relations beginning from a set of established relations. We are able to do this because we are embodied in the way that also makes us able to speak. In this sense, all forms of expression are like language.

Your body is an object that you use, but it is not like any other object. It is an object that is also you, it is an object that you live.

That is why the way in which you carry yourself when walking to the store, for example, can communicate to others. Long before they can see your face, others can see, in the way that you are walking, who is coming towards them. The mental and the bodily are intertwined. Every human act is an act of meaning, an act of expression. And that includes laughter, as we shall see.

How is laughter an example of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of meaning? How does laughter reveal what makes us human? How is laughter an example of the uniquely human capacity to command relations of the second power, to institute meaning? These are the questions this study will explore after setting out Merleau-Ponty’s theory of meaning.
CHAPTER I

DESCARTES AND HUSSERL

In many ways, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophic career was a conversation with Descartes and Husserl. Reflections upon the work of these two thinkers are found throughout his corpus. In his dialogue with each of them, Merleau-Ponty formed and refined many of his central ideas about the character of human incarnation and its role in establishing the relations that make for meaning. What Merleau-Ponty learned from these encounters helped shape and temper his reflections on the major themes of his own work: gesture, perception, and expression.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the fateful step in the Cartesian approach was to confuse perception with the thought of perception. He observes that, for Descartes “the body is the body thought by the soul as its own.” And in projecting plans for a work in progress, he sees the necessity for a “confrontation with the Cartesian
ontology . . . directed by this idea: Descartes = no Weltlichkeit of the mind."

In the move from perception to the thought of perceiving, the body as incarnate intentionality, as the means of our being-in-the-world, is lost sight of, while perception is transformed into a mental operation.

To reduce perception to the thought of perceiving, under the pretext that immanence alone is sure is to take out an insurance against doubt whose premiums are more onerous than the loss for which it is to indemnify us for it is to forego comprehending the effective world and move to a type of certitude that will never restore to us the 'there is' of the world. As Merleau-Ponty sees it, this shift from perception to thought about perception affects all of Descartes' reflections.

In discussing a passage from Descartes' Meditations, Merleau-Ponty writes:

If I say I see men, it is because I apprehend 'through an inspection of the mind what I thought I beheld with my eyes.' I am convinced that objects continue to exist when I no longer see them (behind my back, for example). But it is obvious that, for classical thought, these invisible objects subsist for me only because my judgement keeps them present.

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2Ibid., p. 36; pp. 58-59.
Even the objects right in front of me are not truly seen but merely thought.¹

According to the logic of this view, Merleau-Ponty points out, I never see a cube. Instead, what I see is a perspective figure with distorted lateral surfaces and a completely hidden back surface. Only because an operation of my mind then puts all this right, am I able to speak of a cube. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty argues that I grasp the cube as four-sided because of the way my body dwells in the world and the relations that constitute that dwelling.

Requiring that the body's perception be confirmed by the mind's judgment sets up an untenable situation that demands an endless series of confirmations. The answer, Merleau-Ponty argues, is not to give to judgement the role of confirming perception but to recognize that this view of the mind-body relationship is flawed, that the traditional view of perception must give way to a more accurate one.

The Cartesian step away from perception to thought about perception, the step away from the primacy of perception, blocks the way to certain crucial insights into the relations that are the key to understanding meaning.

Because Descartes saw the body only as an object, he misunderstood the nature of language. For Merleau-Ponty, language is fundamentally gesture, it is bodily, it is lived as a field onto which I open by virtue of the fact that I am a speaker who is in the world as a carnal field (that is, as a lived body). I am in language as I am in the world, inserted into a network of significations, a network of relations.

Merleau-Ponty notes that in dealing with the *cogito*, Descartes never discusses language. Yet, Merleau-Ponty argues, Cartesian subjectivity is possible only at a certain stage in the development of language. The reflection that the *cogito* involves and requires is possible only through language, and the development of language is itself an intersubjective achievement. Whereas for Descartes intersubjectivity is founded on subjectivity, for Merleau-Ponty subjectivity is possible only on the foundation of those relations that constitute intersubjectivity, especially language.

Descartes’ overlooking the role of language in the *cogito* reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of language. Cartesianism misunderstood language because it misunderstood incarnation, of which language as gesture is an extension and development. According to Merleau-Ponty,
the Cartesian view of consciousness prevents a proper understanding of language.

Spoken or written, words are physical phenomena that give rise to an accidental, fortuitous, and conventional link between the sense of the word and its physical aspect. . . . The word does not have any power of its own. Thus the best language would be the most neutral, and the best of all would be a scientific language, that is, the algorithm, where there is no possibility of equivocation . . .

From this perspective, one ends up by devaluing language. One considers it only as a piece of clothing for consciousness, an accoutrement of thought.

The power, the fecundity, the suggestiveness, the openness-endedness of language as a gesture that establishes meaning as relation, are all lost to this Cartesian view and to the larger tradition of which it is a part. For Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenon of language is destined to be misunderstood in a philosophical situation that treats language "as an object."

In "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty's examination of the role of the painter's embodiment or incarnation in painting provides the background for his discussion of Descartes.

The painter 'takes his body with him,' says Valery. Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a

bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement . . . 1

It is this very sense in which the painter takes his body with him and what it reveals about vision, space, and the body that Cartesianism is incapable of grasping.

In reading Descartes' *Dioptics*, Merleau-Ponty finds a desire "no longer to abide in the visible," a lack of any "concern to cling to vision." Again, it is not perception that is Descartes' focus but thought about perception. By means of two or three comparisons (for example, the blind see with their hands), the light of vision becomes an action by contact. The model for the Cartesian concept of vision is the sense of touch. The result, Merleau-Ponty argues, is that vision is mistaken for a passive faculty rather than an active one. 2

This approach overlooks the peculiar character and virtue of vision--that vision is an action at a distance, as Merleau-Ponty puts it. (This view of vision is an elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's view of human gesture as the ability to command systems of reversible relations, to

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2Ibid., p. 169; p. 36.
fashion in the world virtual arrangements, invisible contexts, and thereby to extend one's carnal horizons.)

In his analysis of pictures, Merleau-Ponty points out, Descartes treats line drawings as typical precisely because they preserve an object’s form, its outside, its "envelope," as Merleau-Ponty says. As a result, Descartes’ analysis overlooks secondary qualities, yet these, especially colour, are the key to perspectivism. For Descartes, painting’s true power lies in design, whose power in turn rests upon the ordered relationship existing between it and space-in-itself as taught to us by perspective-projection. . . . [For Descartes] design, or line drawing, alone makes painting possible by making the representation of extension possible. Thus painting is only an artifice which presents to our eyes a projection similar to that which the things themselves in ordinary perception would and do inscribe in our eyes.¹

According to Merleau-Ponty, the problem with this view of painting is the view of space that it assumes and rests upon. And the problem with that view of space is that it takes account only of space-in-itself.

[Descartes’] space is in-itself; rather, it is the in-itself par excellence. Its definition is to be in itself. Every point of space is and is thought to be right where it is--one here, another there . . . Space remains absolutely in itself, everywhere equal to itself, homogeneous; its dimensions, for example, are interchangeable.²

¹Ibid., p. 172; p. 44.

²Ibid., p. 173; p. 47.
As with language, so too with space: Descartes' approach to the definition and description of space obscures and hides its lived character. For Descartes, space is a container or thing rather than an "exterior distance," as Merleau-Ponty puts it. This again is a consequence of the fundamental confusion in Descartes' view, the confusing of perception with thought about perception.

According to Merleau-Ponty, space for Descartes is a thing to which vision gives us access. It is "without hiding places," in that Descartes treats it as though it is viewed from above rather than from within, perspectively. He treats it ideally rather than as lived. He treats it as though viewed from a position of "God-like survey." This view has its value. The problem is, and Descartes' mistake was, to take this treatment of space as definitive.

Descartes' "mistake was to erect [space] into a positive being, outside all points of view, beyond all latency and all depth, having no true thickness." In this way, space as lived, so central and important to understanding the relations that make for meaning, is never considered. Merleau-Ponty argues that it is lived space that the painter is most familiar with, the space that "escapes our attempts to look at it from above." In

\*Ibid., p. 174; p. 48.\*
overlooking the lived, Descartes overlooks what is presupposed by all reflection and activity, in Merleau-Ponty's view.

In his discussion that follows the above remarks, Merleau-Ponty draws out the contrast between analytical space and lived space and suggests how, for human being, lived space is primary, comes first. The question that inevitably emerges in considering the case of the painter is the following:

[How does the soul know this space, its own body’s, which it extends toward things, this primary here from which all the there’s will come? This space is not, like them, just another mode or specimen of the extended; it is the place of the body the soul calls ‘mine,’ a place the soul inhabits. The body it animates is not, for it, an object among objects, and it does not derive from the body all the rest of space as an implied premise.]

We live space as a network or system of reversible relations, and the painter is simply a good or helpful, rather than a unique, example of this. Painting is gesture, it founds meaning. And in the painter we have a striking example of that dwelling in space that is the way of being of human being, the incarnate being who gestures and speaks, commanding relations between relations.

The limitations of Descartes’ views of language and space reflect his failure to understand human being-in-the-

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*Ibid., pp. 175-76; pp. 52-53.*
world as incarnation, to understand the lived body which is the foundation of the relations that constitute meaning.

Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty suggests that Descartes, in his efforts to think through the problematic of the mind and the body, came very close to an insight similar to that of being-in-the-world as incarnation.

For example, he remarks, "[as] Descartes once said profoundly, the soul is not merely in the body like a pilot in his ship, it is wholly intermingled with the body."¹ Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty writes of "that dimension of the compound of soul and body, that dimension of the existent world, of the abyssal Being that Descartes opened up and so quickly closed again."²

And in a working note, written shortly before his death, Merleau-Ponty observes:

The Cartesian idea of the human body as human non-
closed, open inasmuch as governed by thought--is
perhaps the most profound idea of the union of the soul
and the body. It is the soul intervening in a body
that is not of the in-itself, (if it were, it would be
closed like an animal body), that can be a body and
living--human only by reaching completion in a 'view of
itself' which is thought . . .³

¹The Primacy of Perception, p. 5; Maurice Merleau-
Ponty, "Revue de métaphysique et de morale" no. 4, 1962, p. 403.

²The Primacy of Perception, p. 177; L'œil et l'esprit, pp. 57-58.

³The Visible and the Invisible, p. 235; Le visible et l'invisible, p. 288.
Why was Descartes unable to pursue fully the insight into incarnation, into the body as lived, and what were the consequences of his failure to do so?

In discussing Descartes in the closing pages of The Structure of Behavior, Merleau-Ponty points out that one of "the permanent difficulties of any causal explanation applied to perception" is that the lived body, incarnation as being-in-the-world, will not be understood. Perception and incarnation cannot be completely nor even adequately accounted for by causal explanation. Instead, in the course of such causal explanation, "[t]he body becomes one of the objects which is constituted vis-à-vis consciousness; it is integrated into the objective world." Consistent with the whole Cartesian ontology of res cogitans and res extensa, of linear causal explanation, the body is a thing, it "rejoins the extension whose action it undergoes and of which it is only a part."¹

There was a tension, then, between some of Descartes' insights and his methodology. The body as lived holds the key to a whole problematic that cannot be explained in terms of subjects and objects.

Experience of one's own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality.

Descartes was well aware of this, since a famous letter of his to Elizabeth draws the distinction between the body as it is conceived through use in living and the body as it is conceived by the understanding. But in Descartes this peculiar knowledge of our body, which we enjoy from the mere fact that we are a body, remains subordinated to our knowledge of it through the medium of ideas . . .

What escapes this kind of thinking finally is the order of meaning. The subject is a thing, res cogitans, and the object is a thing, res extensa, but the order of meaning is not explainable in terms of the interaction of things.

With gesture, speech, language, all founded in the lived body, a new order is instituted.

Merleau-Ponty learned much from his lifelong debate with Descartes. The same is true of his encounter with Husserl.

For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is a method with an unfulfilled promise. Husserl’s work points the way beyond its own limitations and those of the tradition of which it is a part. It does so through its discovery that the body or incarnation is the key to meaning.

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To appreciate this, Merleau-Ponty argues, we must understand two points about phenomenology as founded by Husserl.

The first of these points has to do with Husserl's famous phenomenological reduction. The second point has to do with Merleau-Ponty's contention that the late thought of Husserl opens onto a series of insights which, while never formulated explicitly by Husserl, are his own in the sense of being a direct development of his thought. The two points are related.

In discussing the phenomenological reduction, Merleau-Ponty argues that paradoxically its principal success lies in its failure to achieve completeness. Modelled on Descartes' methodic doubt, Husserl's phenomenological reduction sought to suspend the question of the existence of the world in an effort to study the structure and character of our pure experience. The elaboration by Husserl of this project encountered increasing difficulty and ended in frustration. Merleau-Ponty attributes Husserl's failure to the fact that the "whole Husserlian analysis is blocked by the framework of acts which imposes upon it the philosophy of consciousness."  

However, in the process of reaching the frustration of this failure, Husserl had, according to Merleau-Ponty, made two important discoveries which, given his own orientation and specific objectives, he was unable to appreciate or develop. Both discoveries contribute significantly to making phenomenology the proper method for studying human incarnation and thus for understanding the nature of meaning.

First, the world cannot be reduced away. The phenomenological reduction revealed that the idea of a worldless ego is nonsensical. It is impossible to posit an ego without a world of some kind.

The second discovery is equally important. Not only can we not make sense of our experience if we attempt to do so in terms of a worldless ego, but in the final analysis, the human mind can only be understood as incarnate, as the mind of a body.

The discovery of the body as a previously unexplored "layer" of the "subject" requires a re-casting of our thinking. Things are no longer to be thought of as given to a mind but as encountered by a body or, more accurately yet, by a body-mind. They are encountered by the flesh in the flesh. They are encountered within a carnal context, framework, or matrix.
Phenomenology provides the best method for exploring, studying, and understanding incarnation, in a new way, wholly different than in any traditional investigation. "[T]here is neither absolute mind nor the immanence of intentional objects in that mind, but only incarnate minds which through their bodies 'belong . . . to the same world'."

In Merleau-Ponty the descriptive character of phenomenology remains much the same as in Husserl but the objective does not. Merleau-Ponty does not see in phenomenology a method that can provide philosophy with the rigour and precision of mathematics. Rather, he sees in phenomenology's commitment to proceed by unprejudiced, pure description a method perfectly suited for the exploration of the previously uncharted terrain of the lived body, and for the tracing out of the implications of the discovery of the lived body.

Merleau-Ponty argues that Husserl's later thought is marked by the insight that we know far more about things in the natural attitude than the theoretical attitude can tell us--and we know it in a different way.

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In our natural life, before all reflection, Husserl argues, things are for us "our surroundings." He asserts that the natural attitude involves "syntheses which dwell this side of any thesis." The natural attitude is a Weltthesis prior to all theses, a primordial faith, a fundamental and original opinion which is in principle not even translatable in terms of clear and distinct knowledge. It gives us not a representation of the world but the world itself. Perhaps most importantly, reflection can go beyond this opening to the world only by using the powers that it owes to the opening itself, to incarnation.

Pre-theoretical experience gives us a certitude of the world unshaken by the distinctions between subject and object, mind and body. It has the convincingness that it does, precisely because of the bodily character of the mind. My lived body is by its very structure a network of significations, and my mind is bodily first and prior to all intellectual operations or reductions.

We start from concrete experience. Our accomplishments of rationality have their starting point in our carnal insertion in the world. Quoting a passage in which Husserl argues that "[t]he soul's reality is based upon corporeal matter, not the latter upon the soul... [A] real mind, according to its essence, can only exist tied to materiality as the real mind of a body,"
Merleau-Ponty contends that Husserl saw that my body is a thing that I am, that it is "the field within which my perceptive powers are localized." It is the seat of a unique relationship and a unique power: "Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes 'a sort of reflection'."¹

Merleau-Ponty, then, finds in Husserl's reflections one of the key principles of this own thought--mind as a new form of carnal unity.

The counterpart of the notion of carnal reflection is a notion of carnal intentionality which Merleau-Ponty explains as the transition that I bring about as a carnal subject from one phase of movement to another. Such transition is possible for me, he argues, because I am an animal of perceptions and movements, I am a body.

In other words, my very incarnation has the structure of reflection. The experience of intersubjectivity illustrates this fact. In encountering another, I have a carnal experience of reversible, carnally founded networks.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl saw one's experience of others as being first of all esthesio-logical. Things and others are caught up in the context that is one's

¹Ibid., pp. 164-66; pp. 208-209.
body as lived. My lived body and that of the other are networks that mirror each other.

The reason why I have evidence of the other man’s being-there when I shake his hand is that his hand is substituted for my left hand, and my body annexes the body of another person in that ‘sort of reflection’ it is paradoxically the seat of.¹

Husserl’s insight, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that in the encounter with the other, first I perceive a different “sensibility” and then later on a different person and a different thought or mind, that by means of the “singular eloquence” of the visible body, “there is not the constituting of a mind for a mind but of a man for a man.”²

Husserl is emphatic that this intuition would not be possible for a mind without a body. This carnal knowing does not involve the interlocking of two propositions (as in “I think that he or she thinks”). Instead, through the articulation of a different corporeality in my world there is the mutual unfocussing of a “main” and a “subordinate” viewing, the co-ordinating of one network or field with another. The unique character of the lived body as a network of significations makes all this explainable. The other and the world are situated within a field that is an extension of my body.

¹Ibid., p. 168; p. 212.
²Ibid., p. 169; p. 213.
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. . . . It is never a matter of anything but co-perception. I see that this man over there sees, as I touch my left hand while it is touching my right.¹

Husserl has uncovered a pre-theoretical, pre-thetic, or pre-objective "layer" in which the traditional distinctions between the mental and the corporeal do not hold.

Inspired by his reading of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty will give a particular meaning to the word 'esthesio-logical': there are no purely mental nor purely bodily human acts. Every human act is esthesio-logical, requiring the command of relations between relations that is possible only for the chiasm that is the intertwining of mind and body, the chiasm that is mind as a new form of unity. This carnally founded structure of reflexivity, of reversible relations between relations, is at work in everything I do.

Husserl's thought, according to Merleau-Ponty, shows that there is a side of things that we have not constituted. This point reconfirms the insight of the reduction, the irreducibility of the world.

The great merit of Husserl's late works, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that

¹Ibid., p. 170; p. 215.
and which has simply become in his eyes our sole recourse in the impasse into which these objectifications have led Western knowledge.\(^1\)

Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl finds its justification in its purpose, to go beyond Husserl’s thought in a way that is faithful to that thought so as to get at what he regards as the most profound things that Husserl has to say.

His reservation about Husserl’s work is that it is subject to the same limitations as that of Descartes. He notes that the philosophy of reflection, that tradition of which Husserl and Descartes are both parts, is true “in what it denies, that is, the exterior relation between a world in itself and myself, conceived as a process of the same type as those that unfold within the world . . .”\(^2\)

Merleau-Ponty sees Husserl’s work as providing insights that open the way to doing philosophy in a different way from the philosophic tradition, including Husserl himself. Most important to Merleau-Ponty are certain implications of our incarnation.

Echoing Heidegger’s discussion of the unsaid in Plato’s thought, he writes of what he calls the unthought-of element in Husserl’s work.

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 180; p. 226.

\(^2\)The Visible and the Invisible, p. 32; Le visible et l’invisible, p. 53.
Just as the perceived world endures only through the reflections, shadows, levels, and horizons between things (which are not things and are not nothing, but on the contrary mark out by themselves the fields of possible variations in the same thing and the same world), so the works and thought of a philosopher are also made of certain articulations between things said.¹

This quotation points ahead to Merleau-Ponty’s views of gesture, perception, and expression, and of meaning as relation. Through this technique of looking at the “reflections, shadows, levels and horizons between things,” Merleau-Ponty examines Husserl’s thought as an open-ended field of relations, a network of meaning: he seeks the invisible of what is visible in Husserl’s thought. He seeks that to which Husserl’s thought points.

Husserl could not follow through on his insight into human incarnation because he failed to realize that this insight overturns such traditional notions as subject and consciousness. He tried to conform his thought to the reigning metaphysical orthodoxy. In this he was like Descartes.

The major insight of Merleau-Ponty’s work, the insight into the role of human incarnation in the founding of meaning as relation, Merleau-Ponty finds in Husserl even as he argues that this insight, if properly understood,

requires moving beyond the limitations of Husserl's own formulations.

Through his sustained reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the philosophies of Descartes and Husserl, Merleau-Ponty opened the way to a new understanding of human incarnation. That new understanding is the key to the central concepts of Merleau-Ponty's theory of meaning: gesture, perception, and expression.

Each of these concepts will in turn be the subject of the next three chapters. And after examining them, we will be able to appreciate the sense of laughter.
CHAPTER II

GESTURE

What defines man is not the capacity to create a second nature—economic, social or cultural—beyond biological nature; it is rather the capacity of going beyond created structures in order to create others. And this movement is already visible in each of the particular products of human work . . . .

In the introduction to The Structure of Behavior, Merleau-Ponty explains that because it is neutral with respect to the classical distinctions between the "mental" and the "physiological," the notion of behaviour can provide the starting point for an effort to go beyond traditional formulations. That effort will focus on relations, rather than entities, and thus shed new light on a host of issues.

Merleau-Ponty cites three examples of prevailing views that he challenges, found respectively in physics, biology, and psychology. In each case, he argues, science has carried over, unexamined and perhaps unaware, certain ontological assumptions that are open to challenge.

Making use of mechanical, dynamic, and even psychological models, physics proceeds as though "there is

'The Structure of Behavior, p. 175; La structure du comportement, pp. 189-90.
nothing foreign to the mind. The world is the ensemble of objective relations borne by consciousness." Biology's "picture of the organism is still for the most part that of a material mass partes extra partes." Psychology has tended to "discover judgment present everywhere," while at the same time looking for "certain bodily mechanisms." The result, Merleau-Ponty writes, is that

there exist side by side a philosophy, on the one hand, which makes of every nature an objective unity constituted vis-à-vis consciousness and, on the other, sciences which treat the organism and consciousness as two orders of reality and, in their reciprocal relations, as 'effects' and 'causes'.

As we live, our behaviour seems to have both intention and meaning. Yet science seems to require that such intention and meaning must be dismissed as appearances.

For example, a spot of light on the wall of a dark room seems to "attract" my attention and to "pull" my vision along as it moves. For science the light is but an event in the physical universe. Merleau-Ponty calls this the real light in distinguishing it from the "phenomenal light" which would be said to be "only in us."

If light is considered as a physical stimulus acting on the retina, we cannot attribute to it the characteristics that we readily attribute to phenomenal light. Instead, scientific analysis will decompose the light as a physical

'Ibid., pp. 3-4; pp. 1-2.
agent into a number of partial processes corresponding to the distinct anatomical elements on the retina. So too, the continuing action of the light on the eyes is seen as an indefinite series of physical facts. Excitants act by their punctual qualities. Science sees the light's action in terms of excitation and reaction, each of which is to be decomposed into a number of partial processes that are external to each other.

Such an analysis, Merleau-Ponty argues, can provide no account of the intention or value of my actions. In addition, it cannot account for how a physical agent can affect an organism by means of movement, rhythm, and spatial arrangement.

The scientific object is defined by the mutual exteriority of its parts and processes. This requires that the study of behaviour treat as subjective any idea of intention, value, or utility. If behaviour seems intentional, the argument goes, the reason is that certain pre-established nerve pathways determine my actions in a way that achieves satisfaction.

The scientific standard set out above is reflected in the theory of the reflex. The strange thing, argues Merleau-Ponty, is that the reflex as defined by science is rarely observable. We do not find reactions determined by the place of excitation nor do we find that a stimulus acts
by those of its properties that can modify individually the anatomical elements. Yet, if the classical view of the reflex is accurate, this is exactly what we should find.

What do we find instead? Relations play a definitive role. The global properties of the excitant, such as spatial arrangement, rhythm, and intensity, determine its effect. Furthermore, the effects of a complex stimulant are not predictable simply on the basis of the elements that make it up. This should be the case if the form of the stimulant plays no role. There should be a direct correspondence between each part of the stimulus and a part of the reaction.

Merleau-Ponty argues that we must therefore look within the organism to explain what “makes a complex stimulus something other than the sum of its elements.” The organism, he argues, creates the form of the stimulus by the distinctive manner in which it offers itself to external actions. Through “the proper nature of its receptors, the thresholds of its nerve centers and the movements of the organs,” the organism determines the stimuli in the surrounding world to which it will be sensitive. Via this process, the organism fashions for itself a milieu to assure its survival.¹

¹Ibid., pp. 12-13; pp. 9-11.
Arguing "that the relations between the organism and its milieu are not relations of linear causality but of circular causality," Merleau-Ponty turns to consider the idea of the location of the excitant. Given the classical view of the reflex, each excitant should be localized. Because it is not possible to make this view accord with the facts, various auxiliary hypotheses are formulated in an effort to salvage classical reflex theory.

For example, in the case of the eye, the position of a given excitant on the retina has been shown not to be determinative. There is not—as one would expect, given the theory of the reflex—"an anatomically circumscribed receptor field for each excitant." Instead, "the excitation of one receptor can evoke different reflexes and the excitation of two distinct points can give rise to the same reflex."¹

What was the response of classical reflex theory to this sort of realization? Having posited "private pathways" or pre-established connections tying each receptor with the motor device it supposedly controls, reflex theory simply argued for a greater number of them—a more complex version of the same idea. Since the orders for a given motor response had been shown to come from the most diverse points

of the organism, the number of pathways had to be considerable indeed.

The ready answer was to posit a "final common segment" in which the same nerve substrate is said to release reactions that are "qualitatively different." But this convenient solution effectively deserts the classical view that explains order in terms of the solidarity of a specialized receptor and a specialized effector.

The traditional view of the reflex circuit, Merleau-Ponty concludes, cannot withstand scrutiny. The reflex apparatus cannot be isolated either anatomically or functionally.

Any given reflex, Merleau-Ponty points out, requires the existence of a number of concurrent conditions in the organism external to the reflex arc. The relation between the reflex and these conditions is crucial, yet it is these relations that are ignored by reflex theory.

Instead of yielding to the evidence, reflex theory attempts to salvage its central idea, but in doing so, "is led by the force of things to burden itself with auxiliary hypotheses which are almost in contradiction with it."

What are we to make of the difference between my behaviour as I live it and what the reflex theory tells me

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1Ibid., p. 16; p. 15.
that behaviour really is, between phenomenal behaviour and real behaviour? Is not the answer, Merleau-Ponty asks, to abandon an approach that cannot account for value and signification as intrinsic determinations of the organism, in favour of an approach that can do so?

The Structure of Behavior is filled with discussions about structures and wholes intended to show that relations are not neutral, that relations make a difference, that the world is not merely a container of things, so to speak. It is not necessary here to recapitulate the detailed analyses and closely argued critiques that constitute much of the book. The point is to understand how the critiques, on the one hand, and Merleau-Ponty’s own view of behaviour, on the other, attempt to move discussion and analysis away from a focus on entities and things and toward a new understanding of relations.

Whatever the fate of the various particular critiques presented by Merleau-Ponty, the basic point made by him remains for our consideration. Human behaviour is distinctive in its ability to direct gestures toward a milieu of virtual relations, rather than to the relations of the immediate, concrete, physical situation. The distinctive powers of human behaviour explain how such behaviour can build within the world new worlds of meaning.
These distinctive powers can be seen in the differences between animal and human behaviour.

Chimpanzees have been observed using tools. However, there is a clear limit to this kind of behaviour in chimpanzees, as opposed to human beings, and this difference is illustrative of the difference between the human ability to manipulate relations and the chimpanzees' effective imprisonment within the immediate, concrete relations of their physical surroundings.

To get at a piece of fruit, such as a banana, a chimpanzee will readily make use of a stick. The chimpanzee then discards the stick after using it. In effect, the stick has melted back into the surroundings. Each time it uses a stick as a tool, the chimpanzee is discovering it as such yet again. The chimpanzee does not, for example, collect such sticks as are useful in one way or another and assemble them together into a set or store them in a tool box.

When the chimpanzee uses the stick as a tool, the stick does not take its place in a system of tools, in a context or instituted system of relations over and above the relations of the chimpanzee's physical surroundings. (This is what happens when a human being uses the stick as a tool.) There is always only one context or set of relations for the chimpanzee and that is the set of relations of its
immediate surroundings. Once the chimpanzee puts it aside, the stick ceases to be a stick-as-tool and becomes again simply an object in the surroundings. It ceases to have its meaning as a tool. Each time it is used as a tool it has to be rediscovered as such.

Animal activity . . . loses itself in the real transformations which it accomplishes and cannot repeat them. For man, on the contrary, the tree branch which has become a stick will remain precisely a tree-branch-which-has-become-a-stick, the same thing in two different functions and visible for him under a plurality of aspects.¹

The chimpanzee is incapable of the thing-structure, of establishing a system of relations in which an entity is defined as a particular thing. All animal problem-solving reflects this deficiency, which Merleau-Ponty also calls a lack of orientation toward the virtual, the possible.

This power of choosing and varying points of view permits man to create instruments not under the pressure of a de facto situation, but for a virtual use and especially in order to fabricate others. The meaning of human work therefore is the recognition, beyond the present milieu, of a world of things visible for each 'I' under a plurality of aspects, the taking possession of an indefinite time and space; and one could easily show that the significance of speech or that of suicide and of the revolutionary act is the same. These acts of the human dialectic all reveal the same essence: the capacity of orienting oneself in relation to the possible, to the mediate, and not in relation to a limited milieu; they all reveal what we call above, with Goldstein, the categorial attitude.²

¹Ibid., p. 175; pp. 169-90.

²Ibid., pp. 175-76; p. 190. See also Kurt Goldstein, The Organism, a Holistic Approach to Biology
In seeking a goal, an animal can never consider the situation from the point of view of the goal in order to devise a new or better strategy. Such an effort requires a manipulation of relations that is beyond even an animal of the chimpanzee's relative sophistication. It requires an ability to institute in the world new relations, not just between things, but between existing relations. Such relations are beyond the command of animal behaviour, which is restricted to the existing relations of the animal's concrete surroundings.¹

A relation between two other relations is called a structure or intention of the second power by Merleau-Ponty. In this study I refer to such relations as relations between relations or relations of the second power.

The difference between tool-use and problem-solving by human beings and tool-use and problem-solving by animals is the difference in kind between all human behaviour and all animal behaviour. All human behaviour reflects an ability to institute and manipulate new relations between existing relations; all animal behaviour reflects a deficiency in this regard. All human behaviour reflects an

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¹Derived from Pathological Data in Man. (New York: American Book Company, 1939.)

orientation toward the virtual, the possible; all animal behaviour lacks such an orientation.

The implications of this difference are profound and far-reaching. The contrasts that Merleau-Ponty draws between human and animal behaviour underscore the central fact that only human gesture is capable of tracing out in the world, and establishing for later individual and collective use, vectors, dimensions, and systems of related meanings that did not previously exist.

Thus, the human dialectic is ambiguous: it is first manifested by the social or cultural structures, the appearance of which it brings about and in which it imprisons itself. But its use-objects and its cultural objects would not be what they are if the activity which brings about their appearance did not also have as its meaning to reject them and to surpass them.¹

While there is a difference between human and animal behaviour, there is also a continuum. It is not as though the animal or lower organism is simply at the mercy of forces in its environment while human beings are capable of commanding their surroundings. Every organism fashions from its surroundings an environment that is conducive to its survival. This involves certain transformations of the surroundings in the process of carving out a niche. And, of course, there are degrees of complexity to this activity. At the highest level of such complexity in animals we find

¹Ibid., p. 176; p. 190.
tool use, and all along the continuum we see various sorts of animal problem-solving.

All of this is reflected in the chimpanzee's solution to other problems. In experiments, a chimpanzee will use an already assembled structure of boxes to get at bananas beyond its reach, but will not, when confronted with the same boxes spread randomly about, assemble them into a ladder to reach its goal. For a human being, a wooden box that can be used either as, say, a seat or as part of a structure of boxes to reach an elevated object is one and the same object with two aspects. For a chimpanzee, the box-as-seat and the box-as-ladder are two separate objects.

The chimpanzee will not assemble the loose boxes into a ladder, even if the bananas remain on high as a potential incentive to action. For the chimpanzee, the boxes assembled as a ladder and the boxes strewn about are wholly different objects, just as the stick on the ground and the stick as tool are for the chimpanzee different things altogether, not one thing with two possibilities, not one object with two aspects.¹

Human tool-use involves the command of a set of relations over and above those of the immediate physical surroundings. In using a stick as a tool, a human being in

¹Ibid., pp. 112-20; pp. 122-30.
effect takes that stick out of the context or set of relations in which it is first found, and re-situates into a new context, a new set of relations, the relations among it and other tools.

This capacity to manipulate the world by instituting new relations between already existing relations is the distinctive feature of human gesture, of all human behaviour. It is the "symbolic capacity," the ability to use symbols.

In solving any problem, an animal is unable, because of its limited command of relations, to do something that is crucial to all human problem-solving. Whatever its goal may be, the animal cannot reverse its point of view and look at the problematic situation from the point of view of the goal. To do this requires an ability to command and move among three different sets of relations, the relations between the animal and the goal, the relations between the goal and the animal, and finally, the relations between these first two sets of relations.

Merleau-Ponty calls this capacity "reversibility": human beings can reverse their points of view on a problematic situation and view the situation from the point of the goal. Reversibility is rooted in the very character of human incarnation, in the command of relations of the second power made possible by that incarnation.
Pointing and drawing are also human activities that illustrate the human difference. What happens when I point to an object or in a direction? I am calling the attention of another to something. But to make this gesture, and to understand it, requires on my part and on the part of the other a command or grasp of relations other than those of one's immediate surroundings.

To point involves an ability to command and manipulate systems of relations both real and virtual. Pointing requires reversibility. One must be able to view a given situation from another point of view, while remaining in the spot where one is situated. One must be able to grasp the relations between oneself and the point, those between the point and oneself, and finally the relations between these two sets of relations.

The same is true when I draw a diagram in the dirt. I effectively trace a path from point A to point B without leaving the spot where I am. I do this by constructing a milieu of relations between relations. The act of drawing even a crude map or diagram in the dirt requires the command and co-ordination of at least three different systems of relations, the relations among the features of the drawing in the dirt, those among the features of the setting in the world to which the drawing corresponds and finally, the relations between the features of the map, on the one hand,
and the features of the setting in the world, on the other. By contrast, the non-human animal must walk through the different solutions in order to test them.¹

For Merleau-Ponty, animals do not draw for the same reason that they do not point or speak or write or keep and collect tools. Each of these activities requires an ability to take up and use relations over and above those that exist between the animal and its surroundings. Each involves the use of more than one context. To vary one’s point of view on an object is to change the context—the system of relations—in which it appears. And for an animal there is always only one context, the immediate physical world.

But we do observe that animals communicate. What is involved in such communication? And how to account for it, given what we have seen Merleau-Ponty maintain above? Here Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between signal and symbol. Animal communication is restricted to the use of signals, while human beings are capable of symbolic behaviour.

The crucial distinction between a signal and a symbol is that the latter is transposable from one setting to another. Again, the difference is one of relations. The relations between a signal and its surroundings are always

the same, fixed. An animal signal is univocal, it always bears the same meaning.

By contrast, the meaning of a symbol can vary according to its setting, in other words, according to the relations between the symbol and other symbols. Those are the relations that are variable in human behaviour. In animal behaviour, they are constant. "In animal behavior signs always remains signals and never become symbols."

A symbol can mean anything and anything can be a symbol. For a human being, anything and everything can be expressed in more than one way. For the being that commands relations of the second power any thing can be a symbol of any other thing. A particular cry of an animal has only one meaning, whether it be to warn of danger or to initiate mating. As such, it is a signal, a gesture of univocal value. On the other hand, one and the same human cry or sound can have different meanings depending on the setting or circumstances in which it is uttered. It can convey pain or joy. It can even be used ironically, that is, in a way that has the opposite of its usual meaning. The meaning of the human cry is defined by the set of relations between it and other cries, between it and other acts, as well as by

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*Ibid.* p. 120; p. 130.
its place in other yet larger systems of relations, such as traditions and cultures.

To say that human behaviour is capable of using symbols rather than simply signals is to say that it is oriented toward the virtual or the possible and that it reflects the categorial attitude, the ability to take one member of a group or set as representative of the rest.

Human behaviour is distinguished by the command of relations of the second power, and such a command is required by and reflected in all the activities that are distinctly human, from giving directions to writing a book, from building a skyscraper to painting a portrait. All these acts require the chiasm that is mind-as-body and body-as-mind. They all require a command of reversible fields of relations between relations.

And they are all esthesio-logical in character. Merleau-Ponty argues that the command of all these relations is at once bodily as well as mental. It requires mind as body and body as mind. It requires a new form of carnal unity in contrast to that of other animals. It reflects what Merleau-Ponty calls the chiasm, or intertwining, of mind and body.

As we have seen, the problem-solving techniques of even the highest primates reflect an inability to think in terms of, to orient themselves toward, the virtual, the
possible. A chimpanzee cannot remain in the position in which it finds itself and envision alternative routes to its goal. It must test the various alternatives individually by acting them through. Its relations with its surroundings are all immediate, concrete relations.

Furthermore, there is a limit to animal tool-invention. Animal tool-use is a matter of immediate, concrete relations. Animal tools are invented only under the pressure of the exigencies of the immediate de facto situation. For all of their so-called tool-use, animals do not collect tools and assemble tool boxes. They do not refine and improve them. They do no research or development. The difference between animal and human tool-use is not a matter of degree but of kind.

In contrast to the chimpanzee, the human being has command not only of the immediate relations but of a series of variations on those relations that are by nature and in principle open-ended. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, human gestures can trace in the air or in the dirt, virtual or possible solutions to a problem without having to test each one through by acting it out. Human behaviour is marked by an orientation to the virtual, the possible. In contrast to unchanging networks of signals, human systems of symbols are open-ended, in principle. It is always possible to institute new relations between established relations.
Merleau-Ponty uses the phrase "categorial attitude" to indicate the human ability to recognize a particular instance of something as representative of all similar cases. We find it, for example, in the ability to recognize different objects of the same colour.¹

Here again, what is at work is a command of relations. The categorial attitude requires that one be able to take something out of the immediate, concrete setting in which it is found and understand its place in another setting, to remove it from one set of relations and understand it in another.

What is involved in the categorial attitude can be seen by observing a patient whom injury has deprived of this capacity. Such a patient can continue to use words that are the names of colours, for example--that is, the patient has not lost the words--but cannot use them as names.

The problem is that "in the act of denomination, the object and the word are taken as representative of a category and are thus considered from a certain 'point of view' chosen by the one who names; this 'categorial

¹The Structure of Behavior, pp. 63-65 and Phenomenology of Perception, pp. 165-66; La structure du comportement, pp. 68-70 and Phénoménologie de la perception, pp. 204-205.
attitude' is no longer possible in a subject reduced to concrete and immediate experience."

Assuming a point of view on an object requires more than a command of the relations between oneself and the object. It also requires being able to understand how the current relations between oneself and the object are variable, can be changed. The afflicted patient's behaviour "adheres much more closely to the concrete and immediate relations of the milieu than the behavior of the normal person." Such a patient is, in a sense, trapped within the set of immediate, concrete relations.¹

In contrast to that of animals, human behaviour is characterized by the capacity to institute milieus, to found new systems of relations, to open new dimensions endlessly. Human beings do collect tools and assemble tool collections. Once an object from the immediate physical environment has been transformed into an instrument, it retains its meaning as such. It takes its place within a humanly instituted context of such instruments. Human beings never live only in the natural world. Instead, within that world they construct other worlds, systems of relations that can bestow new meaning on any worldly object.

¹Ibid., p. 64; p. 69.

²Ibid.
Human gesture transforms the world by instituting new relations in that world. Once these relations are established, they are the primary feature of the world in terms of which all human activity unfolds. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of dimensionality and his equating of dimensionality, sense, and Being in his last writings are part of the same discussion as the arguments he makes about human gesture and relations of the second power in The Structure of Behavior, his first work.

How is it possible for human gesture to transform the world by commanding relations of the second power? Merleau-Ponty argues that the human mind is not something added on to an animal body. Instead, he says, mind is "a new form of unity." It is a different kind of embodiment. It is this that makes possible the distinctively human way of gesturing.

The appearance of reason and mind does not leave intact a sphere of self-enclosed instincts in man . . . Man can never be an animal: his life is always more or less integrated than that of an animal . . . [Mind] is not a new form of being but a new form of unity . . . One is no longer dealing with a material reality nor, moreover, with a mental reality, but with a significative whole or a structure which properly belongs neither to the external world or to internal life."

The uniquely human ability to gesture symbolically, to institute meaning in the world, has its foundation in

"Ibid., pp. 181-82; pp. 196-97."
perception, in human incarnation as being-in-the-world, the unique way that human beings inhabit the world through their bodies.
Let us then return to sensation and scrutinize it closely enough to learn from it the living relations of the perceiver to his body and to his world.¹

In the 1920’s, two philosophical works were written and published wholly independently of one another and yet bearing certain profound similarities. Both works were also radically original and often misunderstood in their use of language and in the unusual approaches that they advocated.

In I and Thou, Martin Buber proposes viewing the world in terms of two different kinds of fundamental relations, the I-Thou relation and the I-It relation. He argues that the fundamental fact about human being is the capacity--and the necessity--to establish in the world these kinds of relations. In the I-Thou relation the other as Thou is an end in itself. By contrast, the I-It relation can be thought of as basically instrumental, the sort of relationship in which something is used as a means to an end. Both of these relations are necessary according to Buber and, at least in this world, we never find a pure case.

¹Phenomenology of Perception, p. 206; Phénoménologie de la perception, p. 241.

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of either one. Most importantly, human beings are fundamentally relational beings.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger seeks nothing less than a complete renewal of the philosophic project by presenting a radical departure from all previous approaches to ontology. The fundamental study, the study of Being, on which all of the philosophic tradition had been built, is in need of renewal, argues Heidegger, and the first step of such a renewal must be a new understanding of human being, the only being that can question, that can ask about Being.

This new understanding of human being also focusses on relations by examining every-day human activity and involvement in the world and then asking what kind of being human being must be for such activity and involvement to be possible. The answer that Heidegger arrives at stresses the uniqueness of human being as fundamentally temporal and interpretive.

The full force of Heidegger's view comes across in his definition of human being (*Dasein*) as care (*Sorge*):

The formally existential totality of Dasein's ontological structural whole must therefore be grasped in the following structure: the Being of Dasein means ahead-of-itself-Being-already-in-(the-world) as Being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world). This Being fills in the signification of the term
'care' [Sorge], which is used in a purely ontologico-existential manner.'

Only human being dwells in the present out of the past towards a future. And only human being speaks and writes and builds worlds of meaning within the physical world.

Both Buber and Heidegger seek to replace the view of human being as a static entity with a view that emphasized relations. Heidegger presents the phenomenological understanding of a "world" as a set of relations. He argues that to be a human being is to project a world. He goes so far as to use the word "world" as a verb. To be human is "to world"; human beings are "worlding" beings. This becomes clearer when he points out that there is the world of science, the world of business, the world of farming, the world of stamp-collecting, and so forth.

A world, in other words, is a milieu, a set of relations that define and constitute a particular set of interests, involvements, assumptions, orientations, and projects. In this sense, we all, each of us, have our own

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For Heidegger's exposition of the full meaning of this definition, see Being and Time, pp. 225-73; Sein und Zeit, pp. 160-230. I am indebted to Thomas Langan for drawing my attention to the significant and instructive similarities between Buber and Heidegger.
world, that horizon of interests and involvements that is ours. Each of us is always projecting a world.

According to Heidegger, we have to think of human being not as mind, nor as subject, nor as knower, not as an entity, but as what he calls “being-in-the-world.” He hyphenates the phrase in order to underscore the point that the world cannot be reduced away, that mind cannot be mind without the world, that human being exists as inhabiting the world, related to and involved with the world in all its dealings and in its very being.

Along these lines, Heidegger maintains that there is such a profound difference between a chair, for example, and a human being that one cannot refer to both of them as things. If a chair is a thing, an entity, then a human being cannot be called a thing or an entity. A chair’s existence is enclosed within itself. But to be human is to be outside of oneself in the world.

We have seen that Heidegger refers to human being as Dasein, ordinarily translated as ‘existence’. He points out that this word is composed of two different German words, da, which means ‘there’, and sein, which means ‘to be’. Human being is Dasein, to be there. To be where? To be in the world. To be a human being is to exist or ex-ist, to stand outside oneself and to dwell in and inhabit a world. This is very different from being an entity, a thing self-
enclosed. To be a human being, is also to be towards death. It is to be ekstatic, to be dwelling in the present, on the basis of a past, while opening a future. It is to be fundamentally relational, not entitative.

By contrast, Heidegger says, to see the subject as an entity separable from the world, as Descartes did, is to misunderstand human being in the most fundamental way.

In discussing the central problem of modern philosophy, the problem of knowledge, Heidegger asks, How do we come to know? We find ourselves already inhabiting, already thrown into a world of involvements and relations that define us and make us what we are. This comes first. This involvement with the whole system of relations to the world around us comes before questions about knowing, questions about doubting. We are in and of the world before we come to reflect and question and argue about it.

Knowing, Heidegger thus argues, is a founded mode of being. In order to know, one has to be a being-in-the-world. Knowing is not done by a mind that is a separable entity, apart from the rest of reality. Knowing is founded on the relations that are definitive of,
constitutive of, the knowing being; it is founded on being-in-the-world.¹

To disclose the kind of being that human being is and to clarify this notion of world, Heidegger looks at Dasein in its everydayness. He says that the world discloses itself, as he puts it, in the entities within the world.

Consider one of Heidegger's examples. You have used a hammer many times without even thinking about it. A hammer is just something you grab. You pick it up, and you use it. And then, the hammer breaks. When the hammer breaks, the hammer is revealed or disclosed. And so is the world as a set of horizons, a system of meaning.

When the hammer breaks, you become aware that the hammer which has been "ready at hand" or taken for granted is dependent upon a whole framework and context of relationships of meaning. A hammer can only be a hammer in terms of lumber and in terms of nails. Nails and lumber can only be what they are in terms of the larger framework in which they are put to use, that world or set of relations that are constitutive of the meaningful environment in which people dwell and design and build things.

We take that world, those horizons of relations, for granted most of the time. The way in which we inhabit the world, Heidegger is saying, is by projecting these relations as an extension of ourselves.

Heidegger provides a second example. The blinking arrow that is a car's turn signal is disclosive of the world in the same sort of way. A blinking arrow by itself means nothing, but to a human being a blinking arrow means "I am going to make a turn," because that blinking arrow has its meaning, takes its meaning, is what it is, in terms of the whole system of relationships that is composed of the highway system, the way automobiles are put together, the manner in which people have come to interact with one another, and so forth. This is what Heidegger means by looking at Dasein in its everydayness in order to disclose the kind of being that Dasein is.¹

In Heidegger's view, traditional philosophical approaches tend to be "entitative." They tend to think of human being as a static thing. Along with Buber and other thinkers in the twentieth century, Heidegger wants to replace this kind of entitative thinking, thinking in terms of things, with thinking that we might call relational.

¹Ibid., pp. 95-122; pp. 66-68.
The last century and a half has witnessed the emergence across the disciplines of the idea that the focus of fundamental inquiry should be shifted away from things or entities to relations. Shifting the focus of inquiry from things or entities to relations, the argument goes, can renew the project of human understanding and shed original light on a range of problems, puzzles, and phenomena.

Ferdinand de Saussure both revolutionized and revitalized the study of linguistics by arguing that a sign is not an entity with a fixed meaning. Instead, the meaning of the sign is its relation to all the other signs that constitute the language of which it is a part. If one looks at signs as objects, one will never understand them. The key is to see the relations among them that make each of them a sign.

The insistence by Gestalt psychologists that a whole is more than the sum of its parts makes the same point in a different way. To insist that the same parts put together in different arrangements are different wholes is to insist that the relations among the parts are definitive.

Where do we find this relational view in Merleau-Ponty? We find it throughout his work in both the critiques that he makes of other positions and the sorts of views that he endorses or takes inspiration from. And we find it as
well in the doctrines and ideas that Merleau-Ponty puts forth as his own.

The positions that he opposes share in common a tendency of the Cartesian scientific ethos to explain the world as composed of entities or things *partes extra partes*. By contrast, the positions for which Merleau-Ponty shows enthusiasm tend in one way or another to emphasize that if we see the world as composed of entities or things distinct within themselves, then we overlook the relations among and even within things that make them what they are.

Merleau-Ponty’s own work attempts to contribute to the shift away from an approach that is centred on entities toward one that is focussed on relations. In particular, he sees meaning as relational. Things make sense not in themselves but in the ways in which they are related to one another. The foundation of meaning is the system or network of meaning.

Other thinkers have held similar views of meaning. What Merleau-Ponty has done is to take this understanding of meaning and to suggest an appreciation of the unity among the different ways in which we make sense of the world. He sets forth a view that suggests the gestural foundation of all the kinds of meaning that we institute in the world around us. He shows how a view of meaning as relation requires a notion of incarnate gesture.
The existential analysis in *Phenomenology of Perception* is focused on relations. It is not an entitative analysis but a relational one. Because of the way in which I am embodied, the relations of this world are accessible to me in a different way than to an animal. My body as lived is a system of relations that opens onto a larger system of relations that is the world around me. Merleau-Ponty closes the book by quoting de Saint-Exupéry: "Man is but a network of relationships."

As we have seen, animals use signals, and animals clearly construct environments for themselves. But, Merleau-Ponty points out, human beings, in addition to being able to use signals, also use symbols. A symbol is transposable from one context to another. The difference is a difference in relations. And these relations are lost to sight for a view that sees human being as fundamentally entitative rather than relational.

To study the body as lived requires examining what it is to take up the world through a network or system of relations established by our incarnation. The approach that Merleau-Ponty takes to this effort is phenomenological in the purest spirit of Husserl's original vision—he attempts an extended and detailed description of lived human embodiment, a return to the way things are lived.
What emerges from this effort is an account of how all our relations to the world around us are founded in the way in which we are incarnated. In the end, this goes far beyond perception in the ordinary meaning of the word. It is because by perception he means incarnate being-in-the-world that in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty discusses the full range of ways in which human being institutes meaning in the world, from speech and art to sexuality and politics.

Merleau-Ponty argues that human beings are different from other living creatures in that they can gesture symbolically. For any other animal, the world is a set of fixed, concrete relations. For a human being, this physical setting is not the limit. Over and above the immediate concrete relations between the human being and its physical surroundings, the human being is able to establish and manipulate relations between relations, relations of the second power.

Each of us does this all the time. It is these relations that define and constitute our individual worlds as well as our languages and cultures.

This is the defining feature of being human. It is the way in which we give meaning to the world around us and to our lives individually and collectively. Throughout his
work, Merleau-Ponty explores and develops this view of meaning as relations between relations.

If we look at the world around us as we see it unfolding and as it has unfolded through history, we see a world in which each individual is a centre of meaning, the animating source of a network or system of relations between relations.

Such a network or system is composed of many smaller networks or systems of relations. In turn, for each of us the network of relations that defines and constitutes our world opens onto larger systems or networks of meaning that are also taken up by other human beings. What we call the world is at one and the same time various worlds or milieus. Some of these we share with some, but not all, other people. Also, there are worlds or milieus that we ourselves do not have access to, yet are shared by other people. To be outside of a language or a culture is to experience profoundly this last point. A world in this sense, writes Merleau-Ponty, is "a system of meanings whose reciprocities, relationships and involvements do not require to be made explicit in order to be exploited."

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'Phenomenology of Perception, p. 129; Phénoménologie de la perception, p. 150.'
Yet the "world," that is, the physical place, is something that we all inhabit together and each of us has direct access to the relations that constitute it.

Consider any individual and what that individual finds meaningful, what anything in particular means to him or her. Whatever it may be--an object, an event, another person--it takes its meaning from the relation between it and everything else in that person's life. Now, among other things, this means that a thing can have more than one meaning, that it can have multiple meanings, that it can take on different meanings at different times and for different people. Indeed, an object whose first meaning is simply functional, say, a pen, can come to be invested with further meaning as a result of the relations in which it comes to stand over time--the pen that was given to me by my wife and that I used daily over the years through many difficult and trying drafts of a dissertation, for example.

If we take this single simple example and extrapolate from it, we can see that what we call the world is for each of us made up of various systems of relations, some individual to ourselves, such as the relations of meaning that comprise my personal experience, what things mean to me, and some shared, such as the relations that make up a language or a culture that I share with other people.
Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that these systems of relations are open-ended. In other words, a system of relations provides the foundation for yet further relations. For example, a language makes possible endlessly varied ways in which things referred to by words can be related and re-arranged.

The relations that make up the human world also include relations between the present and the past, between this event and earlier events, and they include those relations that open, and define the possibilities of, the future.

In developing this view of meaning, Merleau-Ponty argues that, whereas much of the philosophic tradition has tended to view the body as limiting the mind, the body empowers the mind. This is part of what he means by “the primacy of perception.” Perception as incarnation is not the mere reception of sense data, but is our incarnate way of being.

Descartes’ subject is in essence a disembodied mind, a pure subject, a res cogitans which by its very nature is made of a different kind of substance than the material objects it knows. Framing the problem in this way means that certain problems become unsolvable and that certain facts such as the role of the lived body will never be accessible.
If the mind and the body are what Cartesian philosophy has deemed them to be, then scepticism may be an insoluble problem. But by the same measure, if the mind and the body are not adequately characterized by the tradition, then traditional scepticism loses much of its force. If only by using the powers that it enjoys as embodied can the mind reflect on and doubt the body's existence, then the very act of doubt undercuts and contradicts itself. If the body (and with it, the world) is built into the mind as its structure (what Merleau-Ponty calls the Weltlichkeit of the mind), then many traditional ideas about both the mind and the body must be reconsidered.

And this is Merleau-Ponty's point: the mind and the body that I experience are not the mind and the body as traditionally described. This gap between the characterization of the mind and the body provided by Cartesian metaphysics and by science, on the one hand, and our lived experience of them, on the other, provides the inspiration and impetus for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of perception as carnal being-in-the-world.

This is the true force of Merleau-Ponty's contention in The Structure of Behavior that mind is a real transformation, a new form of unity. The mind is not a thing, an organ nor a "power" that one "has." It is not something added on to animal nature. Rather, it is the
human organism's form, its total organization, its structure, its way of being-in-the-world.

When all is said and done, by perception Merleau-Ponty means embodied being-in-the-world, a way of being embodied that provides the foundation for the distinctively human way of dwelling in and taking up one's surroundings, for the distinctively human way of gesturing that commands relations between relations.

The body is our general medium for having a world, writes Merleau-Ponty.

Bodily experience forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness, a meaning which clings to certain contexts. My body is that meaningful core which behaves like a general function, and which nevertheless exists, and is susceptible to disease.¹

We have already seen some of the central points of Merleau-Ponty's view of perception as incarnation in his discussions of Descartes and of Husserl. The following pages will develop that view.

To understand perception as incarnate being-in-the-world, we must understand what Merleau-Ponty means by the lived body. My body as lived, Merleau-Ponty points out, is the field or set of relations in terms of which all of my experiences take place. It is also a field of relations that opens onto a larger field, the world. In living my

¹Ibid., pp. 146-47; pp. 171-72.
body, I am enmeshed into this world and I interact with it. There is this carnal dimension to all my experience, Merleau-Ponty argues, including my intellectual activity. That intellectual activity is possible as the activity of an embodied mind.

The personal or lived body is a lived, non-intellectual synthesis. As such, it has an intentionality of its own. Its spatiality illustrates the way in which it is able to play this role. My being in a body gives a dimension of spatiality to my position and my situation.

Besides the physical and geometrical distance which stands between myself and all things, a 'lived' distance binds me to things which count and exist for me, and links them to each other. This distance measures the 'scope' of my life at every moment.¹

My body inhabits space and time. If my hand traces a complicated path through the air, I do not need, in order to know its final position, to add together all movements made in the same direction and subtract those made in the opposite direction.² Mind and body do not function separately. Mind is the form of the human body. Through my body I inhabit space as opposed to being in it like a thing.

The movement upwards as a direction in physical space, and that of desire towards its objective are mutually symbolical, because they both express the same essential structure of our being, being situated in

¹Ibid., p. 286; p. 311.
²Ibid., pp. 139-40; p. 162.
relation to an environment . . . this structure alone gives significance to the direction up and down in the physical world.\(^1\)

I experience spatiality as an extension of my incarnation.

Rather than being an object for an "I think," Merleau-Ponty argues, one's own body is a synthesis, a grouping of lived-through meanings, a system of possible actions.\(^2\)

The connecting link between the parts of our body and that between our visual and tactile experience are not forged gradually and cumulatively. I do not translate the 'data of touch' into the language of seeing or vice-versa--I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body.\(^3\)

There is an organic relationship between the subject and space. My body as lived is "geared onto the world" and this is reflected by the fact that "my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world."\(^4\)

The origin of space as lived is this gearing of the subject onto his or her world.

Thus, space as lived has a primacy over geometrical space. The relations that constitute the lived body come first. It is the lived body as a system of relations that

\(^{1}\)Ibid., p. 284; p. 329.

\(^{2}\)Ibid., p. 153.

\(^{3}\)Ibid., pp. 149-50; pp. 175.

\(^{4}\)Ibid., p. 250; pp. 289-90.
makes possible analytical and geometrical space. The spatiality of the lived body has not thematic or explicit meaning... But it has a non-thematic or implicit meaning, and this is not a lesser meaning, for objective thought itself draws on the non-reflective, and presents itself as an explicit expression of non-reflective consciousness, so that radical reflection cannot consist in thematizing as parallel entities the world or space, and the non-temporal subject which thinks of them, but must go further back and seize this thematizing act itself with the horizons of implication which give it its significance.

The spatial field is lived as an extension of my bodily field. I always live in more than one field or context or world at a time (the spatial, the temporal, the linguistic, the sexual, and so forth), and these contexts or fields are concentric systems of relations.

Visual, tactile, and motor movements are available to us in virtue of their common meaning, Merleau-Ponty argues. Fields or systems of relations resemble one another as configurations, arrangements, systems of relations.

It is a marvel too little noticed that every movement of my eyes—even more, every displacement of my body—has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them, as, conversely, every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space. There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the

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1Ibid., p. 289; p. 334.
two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one.\footnote{The Visible and the Invisible, p. 134; L'invisible et l'invisible, p. 177.}

Merleau-Ponty's notion of a field of relations or a Gestalt is marked by two equally important features. First, as we have noted, such a field is open-ended. Second, it is a configuration, an arrangement.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the Gestalt is not an idea that could be experienced by a disembodied mind; instead, by its very character, it points to the role of the body. "My body is a Gestalt and it is co-present in every Gestalt... [T]he system it constitutes is ordered about a central hinge or a pivot which is openness to... a bound and not a free possibility."\footnote{Ibid., p. 205; p. 259.} As a Gestalt, the lived body, the field that is carnal being-in-the-world, is "a diacritical, oppositional, relative system whose pivot is the Etwas, the thing, the world and not the idea."ootnote{Ibid., p. 206; p. 259.}

To clarify all of this, Merleau-Ponty points out:

The Gestalt is not a spatio-temporal individual, it is ready to integrate itself into a constellation that spans space and time--but it is not free in regard to space and time, it is not aspatial, atemporal, it only escapes the time and space conceived as a series of events in themselves, it has a certain weight that doubtless fixes it not in an objective site and in a point of objective time, but in a region, a domain,
which it dominates, where it reigns, where it is everywhere present without one ever being able to say: it is here.¹

Merleau-Ponty tells us that the figure on a ground is "the simplest 'Etwas'--the Gestalt contains the key to the problem of the mind."² What does he mean by this assertion? His answer is emphatic: "To be conscious = to have a figure on a ground--one cannot go back any further."³

The discovery of the fundamental figure-ground structure or Gestalt, rooted in the lived body, Merleau-Ponty argues, overturns the traditional subject-object distinction. For "the figure-ground distinction introduces a third term between the 'subject' and the 'object'. It is that separation [écart] first of all that is the perceptual meaning."⁴

My bodily insertion into the world gives to my experience a perspectival and limited character which, rather than being a limitation to my knowing the world, is the means of my knowing the world. To be a mind is to be a perspective, to be situated, and to be other than what is known. There must be this difference, divergence, gap, or

¹Ibid., p. 205; p. 258.
²Ibid., p. 192; p. 246.
³Ibid., p. 191; p. 245.
⁴Ibid., p. 197; p. 250.
separation between me and the world if I am to know the world, to be conscious of it, to intend it, Merleau-Ponty argues.

This separation is the key to the depth or dimensionality which makes the perceptual field an articulated system of relations, a system of gaps, pivots, hinges, and divergences.

The others' words make me speak and think because they create within me an other than myself, a divergence (écart) by relation to [what I see] . . . and thus designate it to me myself. The other's words form a grill work through which I see my thought. . . . To be sure, it is necessary to think in order to speak, but to think in the sense of being in the world . . . .

I am always taking up different figures against the ground that is my lived body; perception is a "diacritical relative, oppositional system." Because I live my body as a network of relations, a system of symbols, my body provides a separation between me and the world that is also the means of my going unto the world, of engaging the world, of taking up the world as a "project" that is an extension of myself. Merleau-Ponty speaks of "perception as integration-differentation, my being set up on a universal diacritical system."

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1Ibid., p. 224; pp. 277-78.
2Ibid., p. 213; p. 267.
3Ibid., p. 233; p. 287.
The lived body, the flesh, is, at one and the same time, what binds me to the world and what separates me from it. It is "the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh."\(^1\)

It is in and through the lived body that the figure-ground structure is realized. As Merleau-Ponty puts it at one point, "every thought known to us occurs to a flesh."\(^2\)

The flesh is mind as body, body as mind, the chiasm of mind and body. It is the world and my lived body as they form a single diacritical relative system of relations accessible to me as a lived extension of my own incarnation. Merleau-Ponty writes of "that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal."\(^3\) And he emphasizes that "it is indeed a paradox of Being, and not a paradox of man, that we are dealing with here."\(^4\)

Our incarnate way of being is to be always deploying simultaneous, multiple, reversible fields of sense. Once I master a system of meaning, I have it at my disposal in the

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\(^1\)Ibid., p. 135; p. 178.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 146; p. 191.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 142; pp. 187-88.

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 136; p. 180.
same immediate, unthinking way that I have my body; it is lived as an extension of myself. This is Merleau-Ponty’s doctrine of perception, of being-in-the-world by carnally founding meaning.

Merleau-Ponty uses the term “perception” broadly to designate the human way of being-in-the-world. The mind is not something added onto an animal body; it is a new form of unity. My senses do not act individually. Instead, together they form a constant unity of sensations that is the background against which all individual perceptions take place. This figure-ground character of all perception is the key to understanding the incarnate mind. This structure is common to vision, to all sensation, and to thought. There is always a ground, a context. This structure is one of reversible relations between relations.

I exist as a lived body, a lived field of relations that opens onto a larger field called the world. My body as lived is a way of existing, the structure, form, and style of my way of being. I could not speak or think or use language if I did not have the kind of body that I have. Being-in-the-world as a body that can gesture symbolically and speak empowers me to summon, command, and manipulate relations of the second power, networks of signification, fields of meaning, systems of symbols.
Given the power of the lived human body to gesture symbolically, to employ symbols rather than signals, human being-in-the-world is synonymous with expression. There is a circuit of creative interaction between me and my surroundings. This interaction has as its essential feature a structuring of the field of human involvement through symbolic behaviour.

The lived body is unlike any object that we encounter in the world. The lived body is "that strange object which uses its own parts as a general system of symbols for the world and through which we can consequently 'be at home in' the world, 'understand' it and find significance in it."¹

The most convincing way to see this is to consider one's own body. My encounters with the world unfold naturally, not first in terms of what I think, but in terms of what I can do.

My body as lived does not belong to the realm of things in themselves. Its natural movement in and through the space of the world reflects a carnal intentionality that is revealed in the way in which those movements provide a context and setting, against which the things of the world are encountered, make sense, and are made use of.

¹Phenomenology of Perception, p. 237; Phénoménologie de la Perception, p. 274.
The lived body is the key to intentionality—it is through the body that consciousness is always "consciousness of." Perception gives us access to meaning because the lived body is a field in which different figures come to stand. Each of these figures takes its meaning from its relation to the background of other figures.

To be a mind, then, requires a body, not in the sense that the body’s senses supply the mind with the data on which it then operates. To be a mind requires a body in the sense that all my intending of all my various worlds is grounded in, made possible by the fact that I am an incarnate being whose body gives me the power and means of symbolic gesture, of commanding relations between relations, of building systems of meaning, of expression.

My body as lived enables me to take up the world as a project. My body as lived is at once both myself, what I am, and a thing that I use. It opens onto the world in a way that enables me to treat the world as an extension of myself, to live and move and be in it unthinkingly, comfortably, naturally. Far from being characterized by anything like a subject-object gap that would require some sort of intellectual bridge, my experience of the world is marked by a comfortable, natural sense of being bodily inserted into the world.
How are fields other than the lived body possible, how does the lived body make these fields possible? The answer is provided by symbolic gesture, a use of my body that has as its context and reference, not the field of immediate bodily sensation nor the immediate physical milieu, but a virtual field. The symbolic gesture is a carnal act that makes possible the establishment not merely of a relation between the gesturer and something in his or her immediate environment but relations of the second power, relations between relations.

By means of something that I am empowered to do by the form of my embodiment, I am able to move beyond the limitations of animal embodiment. Because of a particular kind of bodily action, the symbolic gesture that commands relations between relations, I am able to use or found contexts, networks of significations, matrices of relationships, other than and over and above, my immediate physical surroundings.

The body as lived is a set of relationships, a lived synthesis, a system of meanings. While there is a plurality of senses, Merleau-Ponty points out, sensing is prior to any of the senses. Thus, there is both a generality and a particularity of the senses, each of which is a correlative of the others as fields. Each sense is a "world," as Merleau-Ponty says, but each sense also communicates with
the others. There is a unity of the senses through the body such that the senses are distinct and yet indistinguishable, like the monocular images in binocular vision.¹

The body as lived plays the role of a general system of symbols. It is

a ready-made system of equivalents and transpositions from one sense to another. The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter and are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea . . . My body is the general instrument of my 'comprehension'.²

The lived body provides the ground against which any individual sensation or perception takes its meaning. The basic relationship between each new sensation and synthesized previous sensations is that of the figure to the ground. It is a relation of meaning. It is this relation that permits or enables the lived body to function as a system of meanings.

The senses can communicate and interact in the way that they do because they are the senses of one body. They are lived as concentric fields. My eye and my hand work together, and part of what each can do results from the fact that they are co-ordinated. So, toc, particular colours and sounds or particular colours and tastes can come together

¹Ibid., pp. 222-35.
into relationships that give their arrangement or configuration a particular meaning or sense.

The intersensory object is to the visual object what the visual object is to the monocular images of double vision, and the senses interact in perception as the two collaborate in vision. . . . [M]y body is, not a collection of adjacent organs, but a synergic system, all the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world.¹

My senses interact as the senses of one body in giving to any particular thing the meaning that it has.

Rather than an isolated red-sense datum, for example, there is a red body which has a coarse grainy cover, is heavy to the touch, and makes a certain loud thud when dropped to the floor. It can be opened and read, and so on, and all of these perceptions have a relation to one another (as well as to several other fields or systems of meaning) that is the meaning "book." And this nexus of relationships takes its further meaning from the place it has in several larger networks of significations.

The fact that the normal subject immediately grasps that the eye is to sight as the ear is to hearing shows that the eye and ear are immediately given to him as means of access to one and the same world, and furthermore that one world is for him antepredicatively self-evident . . . [A world is] a system of meanings whose reciprocities, relationships and involvements do not require to be made explicit in order to be exploited.²

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¹Ibid., pp. 233-34; p. 270.
²Ibid., p. 129; p. 150.
The lived body then is a synthesis of all the senses. It is a way of being-in-the-world in terms of the lived co-ordination of several senses, each of which is a world or system of relations.

My act of perception, in its unsophisticated form, does not itself bring about this synthesis; it takes advantage of work already done, of a general synthesis constituted once and for all, and this is what I mean when I say that I perceive with my body or my senses, since my body and my senses are precisely that familiarity with the world born of habit, that implicit or sedimentary body of knowledge. . . . [I]n perception we do not think the object and we do not think ourselves thinking. . . .

Each sense presents figures against the ground that is the lived body as the synthesis of all the senses. "The thing for my body . . . is caught up in the context of my body."²

Given my incarnation, the natural world in which I find the thing is for me a schema that appears in profiles, presents itself in outlines. It is not posited by any synthesis of understanding. And most significantly and importantly, it is qua world non-complete and open-ended. As a system of relations, it is a field with indefinitely extendable horizons. The world as the framework of sense is an unfinished project, Merleau-Ponty argues.

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¹Ibid., p. 238; p. 275.
²Signs, p. 168; Signes, p. 212.
With my lived body, I am able to gesture in the larger field called the world. That is, I am able to behave in a very particular way, I am able to act in the world, not just with the immediate, the concrete in view, but to act with the virtual in view as well. I am able to command relations between relations.

The body as lived assures that every other network of significations will be an extension of myself, onto which I shall open and therefore to which I shall have the kind of access that enables me to use that network as I use my body, so that its use becomes second nature. Every network of significations is a system of relations between relations. This is the key to my access to all the invisible human worlds of meaning such as language, culture, science, and politics.

Among the last lines that Merleau-Ponty wrote was the following summary statement of perception as carnal being-in-the-world, worthy of being quoted here at some length.

I have only to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it, even if I do not know how this happens in the nervous machine. . . .

In principle all my changes of place figure in a corner of my landscape; they are recorded on the map of the visible. Everything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the 'I can'. Each of the two maps is complete. The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being.
This extraordinary overlapping, which we never think about sufficiently, forbids us to conceive of vision as an operation of thought that would set up before the mind a picture or a representation of the world, a world of immanence and of ideality. Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world. And on its side, this world of which he is a part is not in itself, or matter. My movement is not a decision made by the mind, an absolute doing which would decree, from the depths of a subjective retreat, some change of place miraculously executed in extended space. 

. . . There is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place—when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible, lighting the fire that will not stop burning until some accident of the body will undo what no accident would have sufficed to do.!

As we shall next see, perception as carnal being-in-the-world is the key to understanding expression.

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¹ Primacy of Perception, pp. 162-64; L’œil et l’esprit, pp. 16-21.
CHAPTER IV

EXPRESSION

The accomplished painting . . . reaches its viewer and invites him to take up the gesture which created it and, skipping the intermediaries, to rejoin, without any guide other than a movement of the invented line (an almost incorporeal trace), the silent world of the painter, henceforth uttered and accessible.¹

The human symbolic gesture opens in the world new dimensions of meaning by instituting and commanding new relations of the second power. The painter and the speaker both use their bodies to take up the world and transform it, carving out of it new vectors, directions, and dimensions and providing a new milieu for those who will follow. This is the hallmark of all human activity and the key to every human act and institution. All of language flows from this basic human ability to gesture. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty says that language can be seen as an elaborate gesture.

His views on expression and language deepen and develop his view of meaning and his doctrine of perception as carnal being-in-the-world. Language is like a second

¹Signs, p. 51; Signes, p. 64.

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body, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "thought's body." Like my body, language is lived as an extension of myself.

Because the world for us is never just a concrete, physical world but always a system of symbols, a field of meaning, a system of relations between relations, our behaviour is always expressive. Perception as being-in-the-world is expression. "All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already primordial expression." Expression is not something over and above our everyday activity. Our lower level activities--those we share with living beings that do not gesture symbolically--are subsumed in and re-ordered in the new form of unity that is mind.

This is part of what it means to be a speaker. This is the difference that being a speaker makes. Mind is not something added on to our animal being; it is a new form of unity, a different way of being. And the fact that we can speak is the key to our freedom. To be free is to live in a world of meaning, of possibilities, rather than merely in the concrete, brute, physical world.

Speech is one way that we use our bodies. It is gesture. By understanding how it is similar to other (mute) gestures, Merleau-Ponty seeks to bring to light previously

\[Ibid., \text{ p. } 67; \text{ p. } 84.\]
unappreciated points about language. "The spoken word is a gesture," writes Merleau-Ponty, "and its meaning, a world."¹

Merleau-Ponty argues against the traditional notion of a parallelism between thought and language, the view that language translates thought. Aided by the notion of gesture, he argues that this view is a retrospective illusion. It is not because thought and language are parallel that we speak. Rather, it is because we can speak that, when we look back on already expressed thought, language and thought seem to be parallel. In fact, Merleau-Ponty argues, speech and thought are inseparable from one another. This is the chiasm of mind and body, mind as a new form of unity.

Speech accomplishes thought. This fact can be more readily grasped once we understand speech as gesture. The way to leave behind the confusions and difficulties that result from treating language and thought as parallel is to recognize both thought and language as carnal phenomena, Merleau-Ponty argues.

Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted, when our cultural store is put at the service of [a yet] unknown law, as our body suddenly lends itself to some new gesture in the formation of habit. The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its . . . . What I communicate with primarily

¹Phenomenology of Perception, p. 184; Phénoménologie de la perception, p. 214.
is not 'representations' or thought, but a speaking subject, with a certain style of being and with the 'world' at which he directs his aim.'

Thought as a carnal phenomenon, by its very character, tends toward the bodily activity of speech as its expression. Like other significative behaviour that is acquired, speech is rooted in behaviour that does not originally have significative value. In this case, the behaviour is the ability to make sounds.

To understand how behaviour that lacks significative value can be invested with it, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we look for the first attempts at language in the emotional gesticulation that human being uses to impose upon the world a view of the world, a re-arrangement of the world as encountered.

What counts first of all in the encounter between two conscious subjects, Merleau-Ponty argues, is the way that they use their bodies. Emotions are lived as "the simultaneous patterning of body and world." This is not a doctrine of "natural signs," he makes clear. Such a position would be justified "only if the anatomical organization of our body produced a correspondence between specific gestures and given 'states of mind'." Instead, a smile, for example, a universal mute gesture, often means

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., p. 183; pp. 213-14.}\]
different things in different cultures or situations. The use each of us can make of the lived body transcends the body as a biological entity. Given the human psycho-physiological equipment, there are countless possibilities. Accordingly, all human behaviour must be understood as at once both manufactured and natural, as Merleau-Ponty puts it. Every human gesture, act, form of behaviour, owes something to biological being and yet, at the same time, "eludes the simplicity of animal life."

Speech should be understood as one particular example of gestural behaviour that "creates meanings which are transcendent in relation to the anatomical apparatus and yet immanent to the behavior as such, since it communicates itself and is understood."

How does this behaviour, this gestural use of the human body, accomplish communication? In the case of speech, the phonetic gesture accomplishes both for the speaker and the listener "a certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence, exactly as a pattern of my bodily behavior endows the objects around me with a certain significance both for me and for others."

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"Ibid.," p. 189; p. 221.
The relations of the second power established between the speaker and the listener are determinative.

The process of expression, when it is successful, does not merely leave for the reader and the writer himself a kind of reminder, it brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience.¹

Human gestures carve out meanings in the world, as Merleau-Ponty likes to say, in the way that the simple act of pointing discussed earlier, establishes or sets down relations of the second power in the forms of directions, vectors, and dimensions between incarnate human beings.

To develop further this point, Merleau-Ponty discusses mute gestures. How does certain bodily behaviour come to take on a significative meaning? At a certain point, "a system of definitive powers is suddenly decentralized, broken up under a fresh law unknown to the subject or to the external witness, and one which reveals itself to them at the very moment at which the process occurs."² New relations are established.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates this point with an example he takes from Darwin: the squinting of eyes and the knitting of the brow have as their original functional value to

²Ibid., pp. 193-94; p. 226.
provide protection from the sun. These gestures are first taken up and made part of the human activity of meditation in the broadest sense and come finally to serve as a sign to others that one is thinking.

Language presents no greater difficulty to explanation, according to Merleau-Ponty. Contracting one's throat, emitting air between the tongue and the teeth, a particular way of bearing one's body are actions that come to be invested with a significance that is conveyed to and observed by other people.

The understanding of mute gestures, Merleau-Ponty points out, presupposes as their setting a perceived world common to all, a shared set of relations. Similarly, the phonetic gesticulation that is a word-gesture makes use of an alphabet and a setting of established related meanings common to all speakers. The setting itself does not provide a full explanation. To understand expression we must recognize "as an ultimate fact [the] open and indefinite power of giving significance, . . . both of apprehending and conveying a meaning" that distinguishes human being and is grounded in the way we live our bodies.

The act by which the spectator seizes upon the sense of gestures must be understood without mistaking it for a

\[\text{Ibid., p. 194; p. 226.}\]
purely cognitive operation, according to Merleau-Ponty. What is actually involved here is an act based in a kind of carnal reciprocity.

It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive 'things'. The meaning of a gesture thus 'understood' is not behind it, it is intermingled with the structure of the world outlined by the gesture, and which I take up on my own account.¹

Like all gestures, the linguistic gesture "delineates its own meaning." The meaning is immanent to the gesture itself as an act that aims at an established common setting or world of available meanings, a set of relations of the second power, in the same way that the mute act of pointing aims at the common perceptible world.

Available meanings, in other words former acts of expression, establish between speaking subjects a common world, to which the words being actually uttered in their novelty refer as does the gesture to the perceptible world. And the meaning of speech is nothing other than the way in which it handles this linguistic world or in which it plays modulations on the keyboard of acquired meanings. I seize it in an undivided act which is as short as a cry.²

Thus, the gestural meaning of speech has a carnal foundation. Once a word is learned, its style as constituted by its formation and sound remains with me. I now have the articulatory and acoustic style of the word-gesture as one of the modulations or possible uses of my

¹Ibid., p. 186; pp. 216-17.
²Ibid.
lived body. Having acquired a particular place in my linguistic world, it is as readily and immediately available as any other use of my lived body.

Part of Merleau-Ponty’s aim in studying language by returning to the concrete phenomenon of speech as lived is to avoid certain difficulties encountered by traditional approaches (such as the view that thought and speech are parallel) and to get at certain insights that elude such approaches. Thought and objective language, he argues, are forms of a more fundamental activity through which one projects oneself towards a “world.”

[T]he full meaning of a language is never translatable into another. We may speak several languages, but one of them always remains the one in which we live. In order completely to assimilate a language, it would be necessary to make the world which it expresses one’s own, and one never does belong to two worlds at once.¹

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty follows Saussure in arguing that what makes a sign is the way in which it stands out from the field of other signs. It is the deviation or separation (écart) between signs that counts in giving to any particular sign its meaning. The meaning of a given sign is determined “by the lateral relation of one sign to another,” by the configuration, arrangement, order of the total field of such signs. This is the key to language as to perception.

Since the sign has meaning only in so far as it is profiled against other signs, its meaning is entirely involved in language. Speech always comes into play against a background of speech . . . To understand it, we do not have to consult some inner lexicon which gives us the pure thoughts covered up by the words or forms we are perceiving; we only have to lend ourselves to its life, to its movement of differentiation and articulation, and to its eloquent gestures. . . . Our analyses of thought give us the impression that before it finds the words which express it, it is already a sort of ideal text that our sentences attempt to translate. But the author himself has no text to which he can compare his writing, and no language prior to language.¹

This understanding of language holds the key to understanding how language is acquired. Surrounded by relations between relations, the child comes over time to command them.

[W]ith the first phonemic oppositions the child is initiated to the lateral liaison of sign to sign as the foundation of an ultimate relation of sign to meaning---in the special form it has received in the language in question. . . . The untiring way in which the train of words crosses and recrosses itself, and the emergence one unimpeachable day of a certain phonemic scale according to which discourse is visibly composed, finally sways the child over to the side of those who speak. . . . It is because the sign is diacritical from the outset, because it is composed and organized in terms of itself, that it has an interior and ends up laying claim to a meaning.²

A system of expression is not made up of absolutely univocal meanings that can be rendered fully explicit or of significative forms clearly articulated in terms of one

¹Signs, pp. 42-43; Signes, pp. 53-54.
²Ibid., pp. 40-41; p. 51.
another. Instead, it consists of convergent linguistic gestures that are defined by their values in use. A command of relations between relations is crucial to this process.

Against the background of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of language, we can understand his analysis of how we come to understand other people.

In understanding others, the problem is always indeterminate because only the solution will bring the data retrospectively to light as convergent . . . There is, then, a taking up of others’ thought through speech, a reflection in others, an ability to think according to others which enriches our own thoughts. Here the meaning of words must be finally induced by the words themselves, or more exactly, their conceptual meaning must be formed by a kind of deduction from a gestural meaning, which is immanent in speech.¹

We see this, Merleau-Ponty argues, when in a foreign country we come to understand the meaning of words by virtue of their place “in a context of action.”

Merleau-Ponty writes that he seeks to re-establish “the roots of the mind in its body and in its world,” in order to reveal “in the experience of the perceived world a new type of relation between the mind and truth.”² Our perceptual life is the key to our intellectual life. It founds the means by which it is itself transcended and gone

¹Phenomenology of Perception, p. 179; Phénoménologie de la perception, pp. 208-09.

beyond. In this process language plays a crucial role. Knowledge and communication with others preserve and continue our perceptual life even while transforming it. Knowledge and communication sublimate rather than suppress our incarnation, and the characteristic operation of the mind is in the movement by which we recapture our corporeal existence and use it to symbolize instead of merely to co-exist.¹

The structure of our incarnation makes possible the superimposition of a virtual space upon actual space. This is the key to founding a system of symbols. "A system of correspondence is established between our spatial situation and that of others, and each one comes to symbolize all the others."²

The pointing gesture of which we are capable and the animal is not capable presupposes a virtual space. This mimic usage of our body "leads us to a concrete theory of the mind which will show the mind in a relationship of exchange with the instruments which it uses, but uses only while rendering to them what it has received from them, and more."³

The key point is that expressive gestures announce the constitution of a symbolical system capable of redesigning an infinite number of situations. They are a first language. . . .

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¹Ibid., p. 7; p. 405.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
meaning of language like that of gestures, thus does not lie in the elements composing it. The meaning is their common intention, and the spoken phrase is understood only if the hearer, following the 'verbal chain', goes beyond each of its links in the direction that they all designate together.1

The common intention reflected in and required by the use of language is realized through the command of relations between relations by speaker and listeners. The common intention reflects the fact that every act of language is an act of pointing.

Just as importantly, our experience of the world is inherently, inescapably, and in principle, intersubjective. "My vision overlaps another one; or rather they function together and fall as a matter of principle upon the same Visible World." Perception itself, being-in-the-world as a lived body, establishes, delivers, inserts me into a circuit of relations among lived bodies in which I encounter others and things. The experience of perception, more specifically the experience of vision, if properly examined, challenges the view of the encounter with another as the meeting of two "points of view," two "I think's." "Vision produces what reflection will never understand--a combat which at times has no victor, and a thought for which there is from now on no titular incumbent." In the encounter with an other, "vision is such that the obscure results of two glances

1Ibid., pp. 7-8; p. 406.
adjust to each other, and there are no longer two consciousnesses with their own teleology, but two mutually enfolding glances, alone in the world.\(^1\)

In arguing that the relationship between thought and speech is not, as often thought, a parallelism, Merleau-Ponty does not deny that "the very system of language has its thinkable structure." His point is that

when we speak we do not think about it as the linguist does; we do not even think about it—we think about what we are saying. . . . [I]n order to have something signified before us (whether at emission or reception), we must stop picturing its code or even its message to ourselves, and make sheer operators of the spoken word.\(^2\)

It is not the parallelism of thought and language that makes speech possible, argues Merleau-Ponty. Instead, it is because we speak that we come to think of thought and language as parallel.

If we think of speech as presupposing thought, Merleau-Ponty argues, we will never understand "why thought tends toward expression as toward its completion." He gives some examples to support his point. The most familiar thing, he points out, can strike us as indeterminate "as long as have not recalled its name." So too, each of us has a kind of ignorance of our own thoughts until we formulate them for ourselves. Finally, there are many cases of

\(^1\)Signs, pp. 16-17; Signes, pp. 23-24.
authors "who begin a book without knowing exactly what they are going to put into it . . ." 

The actual relation between thought and language is reflected in the way that language is available to us. We have access to it and make use of it as we have access to and make use of our arms and legs. My relation to the language I speak is immediate, spontaneous, natural, personal. Language as spoken is an extension of myself. This immediate, intimate relation to language as something I live as an extension of myself rests upon the corporeal character of language.

While language has its thinkable structure, we do not think about that structure when we speak. Instead, we think about what we are saying. I move my body without having first to visualize external space and then my body. Space is a field of action spread around me.

In the same way I do not need to visualize the word in order to know and pronounce it. It is enough that I possess its acoustic style as one of the modulations, one of the possible uses of my body.  

We do not (and cannot) think about the field of language in speaking any more than we think about the field of the lived body in acting and moving about. Thinking has

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1Phenomenology of Perception, p. 177; Phénoménologie de la perception, pp. 206-207.
its basis in incarnation. Speech as gesture is very much a natural spontaneous movement in virtual space comprising relations of the second power.

[Language] is the subject's taking up of a position in the world of his meanings. The term 'world' here is not a manner of speaking . . . The phonetic 'gesture' brings about, both for the speaking subject and for his hearers, a certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence, exactly as a pattern of my bodily behavior endows the objects around me with a certain significance both for me and for others.¹

Merleau-Ponty's most important points about expression are reflected in his discussions about painting and about Cézanne, to which we will now turn.

And still he had moments of doubt about this vocation. As he grew old, he wondered whether the novelty of his painting might not come from trouble with his eyes, whether his whole life had not been based upon an accident of his body.²

Merleau-Ponty's answer is that Cézanne's doubt and his solitude "are not essentially explained by his nervous temperament but by the purpose of his work . . . His difficulties are those of the first word."³

Every act of expression runs the risk of failure, it may lead nowhere. It is "a step taken in the fog--no one

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¹Ibid., p. 193; p. 225.
²Sense and Non-Sense, p. 9; Sens et non-sens, pp. 15-16.
³Ibid., p. 19; p. 33.
can say where, if anywhere, it will lead.” Yet we are all called to expression by our very nature as incarnate beings.

What is depth, what is light . . . not for the mind that cuts itself off from the body but for the mind that Descartes says is suffused throughout the body? . . . This philosophy still to be done . . . animates the painter . . . when in Cézanne’s words, he ‘thinks in painting’.

Thinking in painting is esthesio-logical. It is only possible for the chiasm of mind and body, for a being that is esthesio-logical.

Quoting Valery’s remark that “the painter takes his body with him,” Merleau-Ponty argues that “we cannot even imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.” In painting, every technique is “a technique of the body.” The painter “interrogates with his vision.”

The act of painting reflects and requires the form of carnal unity that is mind. Only human being is capable of “a vision which penetrates right to the root of things beneath the imposed order of humanity. Everything indicates

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1Ibid., p. 3; p. 8.

2Primacy of Perception, p. 178; L’œil et l’esprit, p. 60.

3Ibid., p. 162; p. 16.

4Ibid., p. 166; p. 28.
that animals cannot **look** at things, cannot penetrate them in expectation of nothing but the truth.”¹

Drawing “a basic, distinction not between ‘the senses’ and ‘the understanding’ but rather between the spontaneous organization of the things we perceive and the human organization of ideas and sciences,” Cézanne set out to paint the “primordial world” in order to reveal “the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself.”²

According to Merleau-Ponty, the painter “gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible.”² Paintings reveal the invisible, the dimensionality that consists of relations between relations. This is what it means to say that the painter “interrogates with his gaze.”

The painter does this by bringing into play the system of relations to which we have access through our incarnation.

> By a sort of reversal, every color we perceive in nature elicits the appearance of its complement; and these complementarities heighten one another. To achieve sunlit colors in a picture which will be seen in the dim light of apartments, not only must there be

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¹*Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 16; *Sens et non-sens*, p. 28.


³*Primacy of Perception*, p. 166; *L’œil et l’esprit*, p. 27.
a green—if you are painting grass—but also the
complementary red which will make it vibrate.\(^2\)

This requires a return to primordial perception, prompted by
the realization that distinctions between touch and sight
come from a science of the human body.

The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on
the basis of the contributions of the senses; rather, it
presents itself to us from the start as the center
from which these contributions radiate. We see the
depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of
objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see their odor.
If the painter is to express the world, the arrangement
of his colors must carry with it this indivisible
whole, or else his picture will only hint at things and
will not give them in the imperious unity, the
presence, the unsurpassable plenitude which is for us
the definition of the real.\(^2\)

To succeed, the painter must grasp, command, and
bring to the canvas the system of carnally founded relations
that gives the human world its dimensionality and its depth.
Discussing a work by Gericault, Merleau-Ponty points out
that the horses in the painting assume a posture that is
impossible for real horses. Yet, painted in this way,

\[\text{[the horses] bring me to see the body's grip upon the}
\text{soil and that, according to a logic of body and world I}
\text{know well, these 'grips' upon space are also ways of}
\text{taking hold of time [la durée]. The photograph keeps}
\text{open the instants which the onrush of time closes up}
\text{forthwith . . . But this is what painting, in contrast,}
\text{makes visible, because the horses have in them that}\]

\(^2\)Sense and Non-Sense, pp. 11-12; Sens et non-sens,
pp. 19-20.

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 15; p. 26.
'leaving here, going there,' because they have a foot in each instant.¹

Only if the painter's achievement is seen in this way can the true character of painting and of art be understood. "Painting," Merleau-Ponty asserts, "celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility."²

What is that enigma? That vision is neither mental nor carnal yet both at once. Vision is an act of the chiasm that is the intertwining of mind and body. Vision is esthesio-logical. This is why we could not imagine how a mind could paint.

Art is misunderstood by a tradition that does not grasp the intertwining of mind and body. "Art is not construction, artifice, meticulous relationship to a space and world existing outside."³ It "is not imitation, nor is it something manufactured according to the wishes of instinct or good taste. It is a process of expressing."⁴

Recall Cézanne's doubt. Recall Merleau-Ponty's point that, like a step into the fog, expression is always threatened with failure.

¹Primacy of Perception, pp. 185-86; L'œil et l'esprit, pp. 80-81.
³Ibid., p. 182; p. 70.
⁴Sense and Non-Sense, p. 17; Sens et non-sens, p. 30.
Because he returns to the source of silent and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built in order to know it, the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout, whether it can detach itself from the flow of individual life in which it originates and give the independent existence of an identifiable meaning.

What is required for there to be meaning? Successful painters awaken the experience which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others. A successful work has the strange power to teach its own lesson.

The successful work of art opens a new field. Writes Merleau-Ponty, "[I]f they are great, the sense we give to them [art works] later on has issued from them. It is the work itself that has opened the field from which it appears in another light."

How does the work of art open a field and teach its own lesson? Merleau-Ponty gives an example.

We see that the hand pointing to us in The Nightwatch is truly there only when we see that its shadow on the captain's body presents it simultaneously in profile. The spatiality of the captain lies at the meeting place of two lines of sight which are incompossible and yet together. Everyone with eyes has at some time or other witnessed this play of shadows, or something like it, and has been made by it to see a space and the things included therein. But it works in

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1Ibid., p. 19; p. 32.
2Ibid., p. 19; p. 33.
3Primacy of Perception, p. 179; L'œil et l'esprit, p. 62.
us without us; it hides itself in making the object visible. To see the object, it is necessary not to see the play of shadows and light around it.

The act of painting is like the act of pointing, which traces paths in the air, establishing a field of relations of the second power accessible to all of us as incarnate human beings.

The painter’s work is an original gesture commanding relations that are there for the painter and, through the work of art, are opened to everyone else. Writes Merleau-Ponty, “[T]hose gestures, those paths which he alone can trace and which will be revelations to others . . . to him they seem to emanate from the things themselves, like the patterns of the constellations.”

Cézanne’s doubt is very understandable once we grasp the nature of the task he faced. “Expressing what exists,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “is an endless task.” How so? “For painters the world will always be yet to be painted, even if it lasts millions of years . . . It will end without having been conquered in painting.” Why? Because “the question

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*Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 15; Sens et non-sens, p. 26.

*Primacy of Perception*, p. 189; L’œil et l’esprit, p. 90.
is to make space and light, which are there, speak to us. There is no end to this question, since the vision to which it addresses itself is itself a question."

This is not to say that expression is futile or without achievement. Far from it. We should think of the work of art not as a means of pleasure. Instead, like productive philosophical thought,

it contains, better than ideas, matrices of ideas . . . [I]t provides us with symbols whose meaning we never stop developing. Precisely because it dwells and makes us dwell in a world we do not have the key to, the work of art teaches us to see and ultimately gives us something to think about as no analytical work can.

Art and expression give us access to depth, to dimensionality, to the matrices of ideas that are composed of relations between relations.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of depth or dimensionality captures the system of relations between relations that constitutes the framework of the human world. The work of the painter is built upon, makes use of, and reveals the depth or dimensionality that is composed of these relations.

Here it is helpful to recall Merleau-Ponty’s discussion, examined earlier, of the Gestalt as an idea that would not be possible for a mind without a body. We have seen Merleau-Ponty describe the Gestalt as “a principle of

1Ibid., p. 178; pp. 59-60.

2Signs, p. 77; Signes, pp. 96-97.
distribution, the pivot of a system of equivalences" that makes human carnal being-in-the-world "a diacritical, oppositive, relative" system.

Merleau-Ponty describes depth as "the dimension in which the thing is presented . . . as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves."1 Depth is the "dimension which lets Van Gogh say he must go 'further on'."2 So understood, it is "the experience of the reversibility of dimensions . . . of a voluminosity we express in a word when we say that a thing is there."3 To say that a thing is "there" is to point, and to point, as we have seen, is to command relations between relations, relations of the second power.

Any line in a work by a painter like Cézanne reflects the power of the human command of relations between relations.

Relative to it [the line], every subsequent inflection will have a diacritical value, will be another aspect of the line's relationship to itself, will form an adventure, a history, a meaning of the line—all this according as it slants more or less, more or less rapidly, more or less subtly. Making its way in space, it nevertheless corrodes prosaic space and the partes extra partes; it develops a way of extending itself actively into that space which sub-

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1Sense and Non-Sense, p. 25; Sens et non-sens, p. 25.
2Primacy of Perception, p. 161; L'œil et l'esprit, p. 15.
3Ibid., p. 180; p. 65.
tends the spatiality of a thing quite as much as that of a man or an apple tree.¹

The true nature and power of a work of art can now be appreciated. The work of art awakens powers that are dormant in every-day vision.

When through the water’s thickness I see the tiling at the bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water and the reflections there; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without this flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it as it is and where it is . . . This internal animation, this radiation of the visible is what the painter seeks under the name of depth, of space, of color.²

The work of art requires and reveals those relations between relations that make the world both meaningful and inexhaustible for human beings.

And all of this leads us to a new understanding of vision as the vision of mind and body as intertwined.

We must take literally what vision teaches us: namely, that through it we come in contact with the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere all at once, and that even our power to imagine ourselves elsewhere—'I am in Petersburg in my bed, in Paris, my eyes see the sun'—or to intend [viser] real beings wherever they are, borrows from vision and employs means we owe it.³

Our mental life is intertwined with our carnal life. Vision reflects and is possible because of the chiasm or

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¹Ibid., pp. 183-84; pp. 74-75.
²Ibid., p. 182; pp. 70-71.
intertwining of mind and body. Seeing is an act of the chiasm that is the two as one. It is not an act of either.

Painting is important to Merleau-Ponty because it reflects and thereby reveals the reversibility that is the new form of unity that is mind. Reversibility is another way of stating that our incarnation makes it possible for us to command relations between relations.

The difference between human embodiment and that of other animals is that as human beings we are able to reverse our point of view on any situation. As we saw earlier, unlike other animals, a human being can solve a problem by viewing it from the point of view of the goal. We have discussed earlier how this involves a command of the set of relations between the human being and the goal, the set of relations between the goal and the human being, and the set of relations between these first two sets of relations.

Reversibility means more than the fact that we can shift points of view. The point is that we are doing this all the time in living that new form of carnal unity that is mind. To develop this point, Merleau-Ponty points out that in touching “I touch myself touching.”

He uses this phrase quite deliberately to show that every act of human sensation, of the new form of carnal unity that is mind, is different in kind from every act of sensation of any and every non-human animal.
Let us try to understand what he means when he says that "I touch myself touching." Because what is true of touch is true of all the senses, this phrase explains the uniqueness of vision by that new form of unity that is mind. I see myself seeing. This is reversibility. This is mind and body as one, in their unity, their intertwining. This is the esthesio-logical character of human being, such that no human act is purely mental or purely bodily.

When I look across the street, I do not simply grasp the relations between me and what is over there. At the same time, in the same act, I grasp, I experience, how those spatial relations are related to the spatial relations between whatever I am looking at and me.

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible . . . Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.

As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision (as is so well indicated by the double meaning of the word) be doubled with a complementary vision or with another vision: myself seen from without, such as another would see me, installed in the midst of the visible, occupied in considering it from a certain spot.

As a chiasm of mind and body, as an esthesio-logical being, I am always commanding multiple reversible fields of

'The Visible and the Invisible, p. 134; Le visible et l'invisible, p. 177.'
relations of the second power, such that they inform, shape, and deepen one another. The senses are worlds, as Merleau-Ponty points out, but not completely separated worlds—they communicate and are doing so all the time. I am always making use of a larger context that encompasses, and in which I situate and thus give meaning to, the immediate, concrete relations.

Thus, human perception is different in kind from animal perception. That is the difference that mind as a new form of unity makes. The experience that is human vision is the grasp of relations between relations. Every act of human vision involves reversibility.

No one will see the table which now meets my eye; only I can do that. And yet I know that at the same moment it presses upon every glance in exactly the same way. For I see these other glances too.¹

Reversibility is our very way of being. We think and perceive in terms of up and down, left and right, back and forth, and so on. Given the new form of carnal unity that is mind, each term is in terms of the other for us.

So, too, everything we do, every act of expression, is addressed to oneself even as it is addressed to others. Expression requires reversibility. And reversibility makes possible interrogation, whether it be the interrogation of

¹Signs, p. 15; Signes, p. 23.
the painter or interrogation in other forms. Reversibility means that our very way of being is interrogative.

The vision of the painter must be understood not as an operation of mind on the data delivered by the senses but as an operation of the chiasm that is mind and body. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty calls human vision an enigma in order to underscore that it cannot be understood if seen as an act of a mind that is distinct from the body or as an act of a body that is distinct from mind. The dimensionality that is meaning arises out of the chiasm of mind and body, neither of which can be what it is except with and through the other. The intertwining of mind and body must be understood to understand vision.

Against the background of these remarks, we can understand the final points about vision that we want to examine.

"Now perhaps we have a better sense of what is meant by that little verb 'to see'," Merleau-Ponty writes. "Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself." The eye of mind as body and body as mind "accomplishes the prodigious work of opening the soul to what is not the soul."

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'S'Primacy of Perception, p. 186; p. 83."
He quotes Cézanne's remark that "the landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness." And elsewhere he explains, "Inevitably the roles between him and the visible are reversed. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them."

Understanding the chiasm of mind and body that makes for reversibility is the key to understanding expression and meaning.

There is no break in this circuit; it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here . . . This procession of what is upon what one sees and makes seen, of what sees and makes seen upon what is--this is vision itself.¹

Emphasizing reversibility, Merleau-Ponty argues that "inspiration" should be taken literally.

There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.²

In this way, Merleau-Ponty sets out his answer to the question, "What, then, is this secret science . . . which lets Van Gogh say he must go 'further on'? What is

¹Sense and Non-Sense, p. 17; Sens et non-sens, p. 30.
²Primacy of Perception, p. 167; L'œil et l'esprit, p. 31.
³Ibid., p. 188; pp. 86-87.
⁴Ibid., p. 167; pp. 31-32.
this fundamental of painting, perhaps of all culture?"¹

The reversibility that is human incarnation gives to vision, and to all perception, its diacritical character as a system of symbols. "Every visual something, as individual as it is, functions also as a dimension . . . ."²

Meaning can only be understood by understanding incarnation, the living diacritical system comprising relations between relations, relations of the second power, from which it emerges. "[D]epth, color, form, line, movement, contour, physiognomy are all branches of Being . . . each can sway all the rest."³

Certain points that Merleau-Ponty makes about reason can be understood against the background of his discussion of Cézanne and painting. He seeks to set out an esthesiological understanding of reason that is consonant with his view of mind and body as a chiasm, intertwined as one.

Merleau-Ponty speaks critically in a number of places about what he refers to as "the philosophy of God-like survey," the view that somehow the human mind is able to escape its circumstances and situation and view the world from a privileged position of pure objectivity. He argues

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¹Ibid., p. 161; p. 15.
²Ibid., p. 187; p. 85.
³Ibid., p. 188; p. 98.
that it cannot, but he also argues that, rather than being a limitation on our ability to know the world, our situatedness, including our incarnation, is the means of our knowing the world. "Reflection cannot 'go beyond' this opening to the world, except by making use of powers it owes to the opening itself."¹

Prior to any thematization, prior to any conceptualization, is our very involvement in the world. The world is there first, from the beginning as the milieu, the framework of all our activities. The world "is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions . . . [T]here is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself."²

Rationality or reason involves and requires certain ways of being in and taking up the world. Our intellectual activity takes place as the development, the building on this involvement.

Knowledge will then be based upon the unimpeachable fact that we are not in a situation like an object in objective space. Our situation is for us the source of our curiosity, our investigations, and our interest in first other situations as variants of our own and then in our own life, illuminated by (and this time considered as a variant of) the lives of others.

¹Signs, p. 164; Signes, p. 207.

²Phenomenology of Perception, p. xi; Phénoménologie de la perception, p. v.
Ultimately our situation is what links us to the whole of human experience, no less than what separates us from it.¹

Our involvement with the world, the relations that constitute our incarnate being-in-the-world, is the source of our intellectual life, the foundation from which we build the worlds of speech, society, and culture. Rationality is perspectival, temporal, historical. It is "neither a total nor an immediate guarantee. It is somehow open which is to say that it is menaced."²

Rationality is a particular way of engaging, taking up, dwelling in, and transforming the world and is grounded not in any suprasensible faculty or mind, but in historically established and maintained practices. "To say that there exists rationality is to say that perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges."³ Like meaning, rationality erupts, emerges in the silent, brute world with gesture and speech and through their elaboration and history.

This idea of reason is tied closely to expression. Perception, art, and science form a continuum of expression, of ways of establishing fields of meaning, contexts of

¹Signs, pp. 109-10; Signes, pp. 137-38.
²Ibid., p. 23.
³Phenomenology of Perception, p. xix.
meaning, systems of relations. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty puts painting, film, and literature on the same plane as activities that would traditionally be regarded as activities of reason. He seeks to underscore the unity of meaning. This appreciation of the breadth of ways in which meaning is instituted is central to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of an expanded reason.

As a historically instituted and maintained undertaking, rationality is menaced. As an institution which must be transmitted between generations, it is threatened. Each act of expression, says Merleau-Ponty, is like a step into the fog—we do not know where it will lead or whether it will succeed or fail. As a human act, rationality too is expression, and as such is threatened with failure. Reason does not read the truth off nature but instead seeks to found contexts of meaning that create possibilities for action and for yet newer meaning. Rationality, like all expression, is an on-going, historical enterprise.

Categorization, division, subdivision, and all the principal acts of traditional philosophical analysis, can be seen as acts that command relations between relations. This is part of Merleau-Ponty’s integration of the rational and the irrational into an expanded idea of reason. This view of reason seeks to encompass the truth of traditional views
by showing what acts of reason have in common with all human acts, all of which as expressive institute meaning by commanding relations of the second power.

Merleau-Ponty sees reason as a concrete, incarnate, human activity in the world, an always-threatened, on-going historical enterprise and effort, an institution which like any other institution can be endangered. As such, reason has emerged over history within the human situation. It is a collective enterprise and achievement, the building over history of systems of meaning.

For Husserl, the path to the rehabilitation of reason lies in seeking to make philosophy emulate science. For Merleau-Ponty, the path lies in demonstrating what all human efforts to institute meaning have in common and in understanding the significance and implications of this commonality. Phenomenology seeks "to penetrate the mystery of reason and of the world," as Merleau-Ponty puts it, by showing through a careful, descriptive account how the instituting of meaning takes place. It seeks to provide an account that does not rely on or require traditional notions of subject, mind, and consciousness. The key to this effort is the insight into incarnation.

We tend to think of the body as a kind of thing, an object. Merleau-Ponty wants us to see the way in which we live our body, to see what it means to be a creature that is
in the world as a human body, with the world available, unthinkingly, at the end of our fingertips. He is calling attention to the relations—the ways in which I am in and of the world through my incarnation—that make it possible for me to move in, command, and manipulate the world around me.

This is why Merleau-Ponty argues that mind is a new form of unity, that mind and body are a chiasm, mind as body and body as mind. If the mind is seen as somehow inside the body, we would have to stop and think before we do anything. Merleau-Ponty argues that the doing is the thinking. Most of the time we do not use our mind and then make use of our body; we use our body as we use, in using, our mind, and vice versa.

Even before we fully understand the gestures of others, we are using the distinctive form of carnal unity that is mind, using our own body as gestural equipment, as the means of expression. Children talk before they know words. In this regard, speaking is like singing or humming. I have a nephew who, as far as he was concerned, was talking long before anyone could understand anything he was trying to say, yet he was clearly using his body to give expression to thoughts and ideas. His speech as bodily activity, as the formulation of thoughts, came before speech as communication. He was not communicating, but was using mind as body, and body as mind.
Language as expression is, first and foremost, a way of using our bodies. Expression is a bodily act. It is not purely mental; it is in its very character fundamentally carnal as well.

Language and expression show that while mind is not body and body is not mind, neither one of them could be what it is without the other. They form a chiasm, each term of which is reversible with the other, in that they are intertwined. Expression is esthesio-logical in character.

We find expression as the institution of new relations wherever we find human activities, which all bestow meaning in one way or another. This includes speech and painting, writing and film-making, but also the everyday activities and involvements that invest an individual human life with meaning, and the larger scale collective human enterprises that give rise to institutions and shape human history. Accordingly, speech, writing, painting, film-making, institution, and history are all topics of focus and concern for Merleau-Ponty.

All these forms of expression, all human activities, are variations on the fundamentally--and definitively--human act of taking up the world as a system of symbols, of commanding relations between relations. This is, in turn, made possible by the character of human embodiment. All forms of human expression in one way or another are examples
of human gesture instituting and commanding relations of the second power, relations between relations.

Our bodies are always engaged in and for expression. Each of us moves and acts in a certain way. We walk down the street in a recognizable manner. Long before you can see the face of a friend coming down the street, you can know who it is because of the way she walks. In other words, that particular way of using her body is one of the ways she expresses and lives the circuit of relations that makes her who she is. The act of walking reflects the fact that body is mind, mind is body, not the same thing but neither what it is without the other, inseparable from each other and neither one reducible to the other, a chiasm whose terms are reversible, in that neither has primacy over the other.

Each of us has an individual signature. We use our bodies all the time to express the relations with the world that make us who and what we are. And we do so naturally and unthinkingly. Every human act is an act of expression.

The ways in which we move our hands when we talk communicate that we are trying to say something, but we do so not only for someone else: those bodily movements help us to accomplish or bring about our thoughts. Mind is a new form of unity, mind is being put together in a particular kind of way, living a particular kind of body, and thus
being able to do certain things by commanding relations between relations.

Are there silent thoughts? Certainly. Every thought is not accompanied by some sort of bodily gestural activity, but that is not the point. The thought would not have been possible without all sorts of earlier previous bodily gestural activity. Our mental life would not be possible without our bodily life; the character of our mental life has its foundation in the character of our bodily life. Mind and body form a chiasm, each what it is in and through the other.

"Man is but a network of relations," Merleau-Ponty writes at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Each of us is an individual schema of relations, some of which we share with others and some of which we do not. That is where the challenge and fascination of human life and human interaction come into play.

The relationship that any one of us has to our parents is different than the relationship that any of our siblings has to our parents in a whole host of different ways. What has meaning to me and what has meaning to my sister differ according to the relations that make up my world and the relations that make up hers.

In the case of each of us, there are some relations that we share with others (the distance from here to the
wall is the same for any of us when sitting here), and there are others that are individual to us alone (the relation of this moment to one’s individual past).

The world that I live in and the world that you live in are the same physical place, yet different worlds in terms of their meaning. A given place to me, the classroom where I teach, for example, might be a place I go to with enthusiasm because it is where I get to talk all day and act like I know what I am talking about. The same place might fill students, however, with anxiety because they have to sit there and listen to someone who thinks he knows what he is talking about. The exact same physical situation has two different meanings. We all, each of us, have our own world.

Does that fact mean that we cannot communicate? It can present certain problems to communication, to understanding, but it is precisely because the form of our embodiment enables us to gesture symbolically, to command relations between relations, that we can communicate and understand. We are not simply stuck with our physical surroundings as the sole context of meaning in our lives.

Merleau-Ponty has set forth a particular view of meaning as relation. Meaning consists of the relations that are instituted in the world by human being-in-the-world. All meaning is ultimately gestural, a result of the activity of incarnate human beings in the world.
Thus, Merleau-Ponty has shown a unity among all the ways that we make sense, from speech to painting, from constructing furniture and houses to building institutions that pass between generations.

Seen in this way, meaning, once instituted, is the fundamental fact about the world for us. As the relations that make the world, the world that it is, meaning or sense is dimensionality. And as the dimensionality that is the foundation of the world, sense is equated with Being by Merleau-Ponty. "Being," he writes, "is what requires creation of us for us to experience it."

Merleau-Ponty speaks of "a genius for ambiguity that defines man." He uses the word "ambiguity" in a very particular way and is sometimes misunderstood. Any human act can bear a wide variety of meanings. For a human being, nothing is really univocal. That is the real point about ambiguity. Just as importantly, we really cannot single out anything we do that is purely mental, or anything that is purely carnal. The mental and the bodily are intertwined. Every human act is an act of expression.

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'The Visible and the Invisible, p. 197; Le visible et l’invisible, p. 251.'
CHAPTER V

THE SENSE OF LAUGHTER

In the previous chapters, we have examined Merleau-Ponty's theory of meaning. Human gesture commands relations between relations. These relations define our world and make for meaning. The foundations of these relations is perception, the chiasm of mind and body that is the human way of being-in-the-world. All forms of human expression reflect these facts.

How can these points about meaning help us to understand the sense of laughter? What do they reveal about the nature of humour, about what is going on when we laugh? To answer these questions, we will now consider the example of a particular school of Marxist thought.

As the Marx Brothers comedy team prepared to make a film entitled A Night in Casablanca, Warner Brothers Studio, which had earlier released Casablanca, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, threatened to sue. Groucho Marx responded as follows:

Dear Warner Brothers:

Apparently there is more than one way of conquering a city and holding it as your own. For example, up to the time that we contemplated making this picture, I had no idea that the city of Casablanca belonged
exclusively to Warner Brothers. However, it was only a few days after our announcement appeared that we received your long, ominous legal document warning us not to use the name Casablanca.

It seems that in 1471, Ferdinand Balboa Warner, your great-great-grandfather, while looking for a shortcut to the city of Burbank, had stumbled on the shores of Africa and, raising his alpenstock (which he later turned in for a hundred shares of the common), named it Casablanca. . . .

You claim you own Casablanca and that no one else can use that name without your permission. What about 'Warner Brothers'? Do you own that, too? You probably have the right to use the name Warner, but what about Brothers?

Professionally, we were brothers long before you were. We were touring the sticks as The Marx Brothers when Vitaphone was still a gleam in the inventor's eye, and even before us there had been other brothers--the Smith Brothers; the Brothers Karamazov; Dan Brothers, an outfielder with Detroit; and 'Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?' (This was originally 'Brothers, Can You Spare a Dime?' but this was spreading a dime pretty thin, so they threw out one brother, gave all the money to the other and whittled it down to, 'Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?')

Now Jack, how about you? Do you maintain that yours is an original name? Well, it's not. It was used long before you were born. Offhand, I can think of two Jacks--there was Jack of 'Jack and the Beanstalk', and Jack the Ripper, who cut quite a figure in his day.

As for you, Harry, you probably sign your checks, sure in the belief that you are the first Harry of all time and that all other Harrys are impostors. I can think of two Harrys that preceded you. There was Lighthouse Harry of Revolutionary fame and a Harry Appelbaum who lived on the corner of 93rd Street and Lexington Avenue. Unfortunately, Appelbaum wasn't too well known. The last I heard of him, he was selling neckties at Weber and Heilbroner.

Now about the Burbank studio. I believe this is what you brothers call your place. Old man Burbank is gone. Perhaps you remember him. He was a great man in a garden. His wife often said Luther had ten green thumbs. What a witty woman she must have been! Burbank was the wizard who crossed all those fruits and vegetables until he had the poor plants in such a confused and jittery condition that they could never
decide whether to enter the dining room on the meat platter or the dessert dish.

This is pure conjecture, of course, but who knows—perhaps Burbank's survivors aren't too happy with the fact that a plant that grinds out pictures on a quota settled in their town, appropriated Burbank's name and uses it as a front for their films. . . .

Sincerely,

Groucho Marx

Marx Brothers films are typically zany, mad-cap, fast-paced, absurd. They are filled with outrageous behaviour, different kinds of lunacy, a sort of uproarious mayhem perpetrated by three preposterously dressed characters, two of them in curly wigs and the third with grease-paint eyebrows and mustache. At their best, the Marx Brothers are at once both high-brow and low-brow in their humour, turning everything upside down and inside out.

Each of the Marx Brothers provides an example of a different kind of humour. With Groucho, there are wise-cracking insults ("I'll bet your father spent the first year of your life throwing rocks at the stork."), sexual innuendo ("I wish you'd keep my hands to yourself."), humourous use of chiasm ("Oh, why can't we break away from all this, just you and I, and lodge with my fleas in the hills? I mean, flee to my lodge in the hills."), irreverence ("Do you

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suppose I could buy back my introduction to you?"), nonsense ("You’ve got to get up early if you want to get out of bed.") and witty asides to the audience ("That might be a wisecrack but I doubt it."). Chico is known for outrageous puns and comical piano playing. Harpo is famous for mime and various gags, often child-like, built around the fact that he does not speak. Some of his humour comes from the ways in which his character interacts with characters who do speak.

All of these kinds of humour involve gesture. To “get” them requires that one have command of certain relations between relations.

The goal of this chapter is not to set out a theory of laughter and humour but, more modestly, to show how some of the things that Merleau-Ponty has to say about meaning might contribute to such a theory. One view of humour is that it is a kind of release of tension. Another view is that it permits expression of feelings and ideas that are alive in the subconscious but would be socially taboo if expressed directly or in the normal manner. There is no need to deny either of these points. Instead, Merleau-Ponty’s insights bring out other important points about humour and laughter.

Humour is clearly contextual in character—it requires and reflects the ability to shift from the world or
context of our immediate surroundings and concerns to other sets of relations altogether. Indeed, part of the rupture that makes for humour and laughter involves this sudden unexpected shift from one perspective or context to another.

But humour is also illuminating. In part, it is the shift, the juxtaposition, of contexts that makes it illuminating. Not simply a diversion or a release, humour is a way of seeing, a way of understanding the world around us.

And humour is carnal. A disembodied being would not have a sense of humour. Humour and laughter require the sort of limited situated perspective that is the fate of an incarnate being.

When I laugh I use my body, but in a very particular way. A laugh is like a sneeze, and yet it is not. It is like a statement, and yet it is not. Unlike a sneeze, a laugh always says something, even though in doing so, it may be completely spontaneous, utterly uncontrolled, and wholly unintended. Unlike a statement, a laugh has no content even though it can speak volumes.

Merleau-Ponty’s theory of meaning helps us to understand laughter and humour by clarifying how they reflect the uniquely human capacity to make the world meaningful.
To Merleau-Ponty, what makes us human is the capacity to institute within our immediate concrete surroundings, systems of relations of the second power that are, as he has put it, “open-ended,” that is, the basis for endless variation, for ever-new relations between relations. Telling a joke is an example of this. Telling a joke is possible only because we can do this. So, too, laughter is possible only because we can do this. Laughter is an act of expression possible only for that new form of carnal unity that is mind.

Consider the way in which any joke requires and addresses contexts over and above the immediate physical surroundings. When I tell a joke, in one way or another (that is, through words or actions or some combination thereof), I posit a situation that currently does not exist. This is absolutely necessary for there to be a joke.

Telling a joke involves a whole series of shifts of context. Jokes are of philosophical interest as examples of meaningful human acts, all of which involve and require that we shift among contexts in ways, and with a range and speed, that are hopelessly beyond the capacity of any other animal. These contexts or systems of relations include the language in which the joke is told, the world to which the language refers, and the virtual world that is the setting of the
joke and is a set of relations built from and made possible by the first two systems of relations.

For the joke to be funny, the new context must be one in which the earlier elements or events are absurdly incongruous. That is, mere change of context is not enough. In juxtaposing Burbank and Africa in his letter to Warner Brothers, Groucho blind-sides the reader in a way that delights because the contrast is so stark and pointed. Had he used, say, the Narragansett Bay, instead of Africa, the effect would have been lost.

From our study of Merleau-Ponty, we can appreciate how a set of relations, by virtue of its arrangement, suggests certain possibilities and not others. The set of relations "points," so to speak, in a particular way. All jokes are variations on the fundamental command of relations between relations that we see in the act of pointing. Every joke is an act of pointing. It creates certain expectations.

Jokes require precision. They must be told exactly right, or they are not funny, they fail. They require a set-up to work. People have to be looking one way to be expecting one thing in order to be blindsided, surprised (and delighted) by the punch line. (It is called a "punch" line for a reason.) Jokes also have to point exactly. Precision is required. If the joke is not told right, if
the set-up is off, then the whole effect is lost. Only a being that can point can make a joke. Only a being that can command relations between relations can joke. And by pointing with precision, jokes can reveal, inform, and instruct. By suggesting in the opening lines of his letter that the Warner Brothers had conquered and held the city of Casablanca for their own, Groucho calls attention directly to their presumptuousness.

An important part of a joke is the surprise that occurs when expectations are not met. We are going along expecting something on the basis of what has already happened, and something different happens instead. In a sense, every joke is a variation on the child’s joke: “See this? Look out for this!” (Young children find this hilarious.)

Surprise is essential. Sometimes we can see the joke coming, and usually whenever we can, it is not as funny. Surprise contributes to the delight of the joke. Surprise, though, is not the whole story. Not all surprises are funny.

Mere incongruity is not enough. There must be a clash of contexts, a juxtaposition of two different sets of relations, each pointing different ways, each setting up different expectations. And as the word “clash” suggests, there must be a certain kind of relation between the
differences between the two contexts. That is, the clash itself must point, it must illuminate, must make us see something we did not see. This is an important source of the delight in humour.

When Groucho puts obscure Harry Appelbaum, tie salesman, alongside immortal Lighthorse Harry Lee, American Revolutionary War hero, and then runs through a long list of well-known but utterly unrelated brothers, he is deftly pointing to the untenable character of the Warner Brothers' claims.

Jokes are carnal. And not just slapstick jokes. A disembodied being would not tell jokes. Merleau-Ponty speaks of the disembodied point of view as "God-like survey." Why would a disembodied mind tell a joke? If we viewed the world with God-like survey, seeing everything in its relation to everything else, then we would have no inclination to tell jokes. We would not have a sense of humour. We would have no use for, no need for, jokes. They would not summon our interest or involvement. Nothing could "strike" us in the way required for a joke.

Only because we are perspectival beings do we have a sense of humour. And because we are perspectival beings, humour is an important and valuable way of exploring and understanding the world and our experience. It is one of the ways that as carnal, perspectival beings we make sense
of the world. Groucho’s letter puts the dispute with Warner Brothers in perspective by effectively asking, “How serious a matter is this, really?”

Shifts of perspective are instructive. They are illuminating. We learn from them. And jokes make good use of them. A joke shows rather than explains. It gets us to see. The shift in perspective instructs. How? A joke puts us in the middle of a world, an open-ended system of relations between relations, a different perspective. And if you cannot shift to the second perspective, then you cannot “get” the joke.

We immediately grasp the point of Groucho’s remarks to Jack Warner only because we are familiar with the worlds of Jack and the Beanstalk and Jack the Ripper.

Humour and laughter thus help us understand and make sense of the world and our experience. For Merleau-Ponty, our situatedness, our embodiment, our perspectival way of being, is not a limitation so much as a means, something that we use. We learn, we explore, we question, we understand, by shifting perspective. And we delight in all of this in the same way that Aristotle says that we delight in our senses.

Humour involves not just the mind and the body, but the mind as body and the body as mind, the chiasm that is the two and that makes everything we do esthesio-logical.
Laughter is carnal. To laugh we must have bodies. We would be incapable of enjoying something humourous if we were incapable of laughing.

Shifting perspective is shifting one’s point of view. It requires reversibility. It entails a shift of relations, a shift of contexts by its very nature. To view something from a different perspective is to see it in a different set of relations. This is true even at the most mundane level. Walking around a room discloses the room because moving about the room changes one’s perspective and one sees more fully the various systems of relations that define the room, make it the room that it is. In this way, we come to grasp possibilities.

So too, when we examine something, we pick it up and turn it around, shifting our perspective and, from moment to moment, thereby changing the set of relations in which we view it.

Similarly, humour and laughter lift us out of our immediate involvement, the set of immediate relations, and thereby gives us perspective. And they do this with a particular kind of delight—for an important part of humour is that it gives us delight, that we delight in it. Laughter lifts us, lightens us, even as it enlightens us. In all this it also reflects our humanity, our uniquely human esthesio-logical capacities grounded in the new form
of carnal unity that is mind. In helping us to see things differently, laughter frees us from the restrictions of our immediate relations to the world around us. Groucho’s letter, by provoking laughter at the alleged controversy, lets the reader see that the immediate situation is better viewed in a different way.

Albert Camus, in discussing the absurd, points out that when one is walking down a familiar street, the whole scene can suddenly strike one as senseless, as utterly without meaning. The whole scene loses its meaning. What has been lost? What has suddenly disappeared? The connections, the relations between oneself and everything around one. This can happen even with our most familiar surroundings (say, the neighbourhood one has lived in for a lifetime). All of the connections among the things of one’s world suddenly disappear. One suddenly loses them. The relations that tie everything together into a meaningful milieu or context and tie oneself to that milieu suddenly, if temporarily, just fall away.

The experience of the absurd shows that those connecting relations are not in the surrounding world but are projected, to use Heidegger’s term, by us. As Merleau-Ponty has argued, each of us is a centre of meaning, each of us is at the centre of a system of relations between relations.
Say any word over again a few dozen times. Repeated enough times the word loses meaning. What does it lose? What dissolves as you say it over and over again? The connections, the relations between it and other words, between it and everything else. Seen by itself, apart from, bereft of those connections, the word is meaningless.

Absurdist humour—humour that is funny because it is absurd—can be understood in a similar way. It shatters or severs connections, thereby revealing them. This can be done by creating a picture of something that is utterly contrary to the rules of the world of immediate concrete relations. Groucho does this in his letter with the visual image of Luther Burbank’s pathetically confused fruits and vegetables trying to figure out whether to board the meat platter or the dessert dish.

Why should this be funny, even enjoyable or delightful? Why should it make us laugh? The clue is that laughter involves our body, that humour and laughter are not simply mental.

Through my body I am engaged in a complex, multi-dimensional set of relations (including those relations that we might call “mental,” but that are grounded in and made possible by my embodiment). Virtually all these relations are, most of the time, lived unthinkingly in the way that one unthinkingly lives one’s body. The delight and insight
from seeing these relations revealed or exposed is carnally founded, founded in my carnal perspectivism.

"Man is nothing but a network of relations," Merleau-Ponty has said. In living these relations, in and through them, I carry myself in and toward the world in a way that is my own, that is different--because so many of the relations are different--from that of anyone else. Each of us is a different set of relations from that of anyone and everyone else. So each of us bears ourself in and toward the world in a unique and individual way. Each of us has a style, a particular way of doing things, and one of the things that makes life enjoyable, that even sustains us on a mundane, day-to-day basis, is taking delight in our individuality, our uniqueness, our style of doing what we do large and small.

Humour, like other forms of expression, is a means of situating oneself within and with reference to the framework of relations that constitutes one’s world. We can see this by considering comical irreverence.

Insult and irreverence are a staple not only of Groucho but of much of comedy. Why should this kind of humour be funny? Part of what is involved here is playfulness. Insults are not really funny if they seem to be purely mean-spirited.
There is little that is playful about insult in itself, at least little that is playful between the insulter and the insulted. But there may be playfulness between the insulter and the audience. Because ridicule is so direct and pointed, it is not funny if the object of ridicule is a sympathetic figure. To be deserving of ridicule, the individual must stand in a particular relation to both the insulter and the audience. Figures of authority are common objects of ridicule because both the comedian and the audience stand or have stood on the receiving end of the authority’s power. The reversal of fortune can be delightful.

One target of such humour can be academia. In the opening shot of the film Horsefeathers we observe a long row of solemn academically robed professors. Each of them sports a distinguished-looking beard. When the camera reaches the end of the row there is Groucho in full academic robes—shaving. The wisecrack is clear. And it signals that in taking over as the new president of Huxley College, Quincy Adams Wagstaff, as Groucho’s character is called, will turn everything upside down and inside out. A few minutes later, his inaugural speech begins the process.

RETIRING PRESIDENT: It would please the faculty if you would throw your cigar away.
WAGSTAFF: The faculty members might just as well keep their seats. There'll be no diving for this cigar. Ahem!

Members of the faculty, faculty members, students of Huxley, Huxley students. I guess that covers everything. Well, I thought my razor was dull, until I heard his speech, and that reminds me of a story that's so dirty I'm ashamed to think of it myself.

As I look out over your eager faces I can readily understand why this college is flat on its back. The last college I presided over things were slightly different. I was flat on my back. Things kept going from bad to worse, but we all put our shoulders to the wheel, and it wasn't long before I was flat on my back again. Any questions?!

Insult and ridicule use words to do something that we cannot do in actions or in fact--removing the insulted from an established position of power or authority. In humourous ridicule, we do in one context what we cannot do in another.

This second context, the set of relations in which the powerful are made fun of, makes it easier to live with that other set of relations that ridicule does not change and in which the powerful remain powerful.

Teasing and playful insult remind us that there is more than one way in which we can see ourselves, that our own view of ourselves is just one perspective or set of relations and perhaps one that we need from time to time to reconsider. Again, like other forms of humour, it helps us to re-situate ourselves, and in doing so, to renew our

appreciation, our understanding, our sense of ourselves and our surroundings.

As such, it also suggests interesting questions: Would we be capable of insight if we were incapable of humour? Are insight and humour not two examples of the same human capacity, the capacity for reversibility that is grounded in our command of relations between relations?

In this view, in our playful teasing, we render a service to one another, a service that is essential to healthy interaction among inherently perspectival and thus competitive human beings.

There is, of course, another side to teasing. Because perspectival beings are inescapably competitive, teasing can be fierce and even mean. Verbal insult uses language as a “second body” to do with the gestures that are words something we are not allowed to do, feel restrained from doing, with our physical bodies.

Insult shatters the field of relations between two individuals. It reveals—because it requires—relations between relations.

Insult and teasing are forms of irreverence. Irreverence often involves comparing two things of unequal weight or scale. The distortion that makes for this kind of humour is not merely incongruity or contrast; it requires a distortion of scale, making things less important than they
really are or making them more so. Such distortion of scale requires command of relations between relations.

This is especially true of irony, satire, and sarcasm, all of which involve pointing out what is the case by saying the opposite. The whole first paragraph of Groucho’s letter effectively ridicules the Warner Brothers by contending that they had conquered and held the city of Casablanca and that it belonged exclusively to them. In referring to the letter from the Warners’ lawyers as “ominous,” Groucho is in fact treating it dismissively, even though that word by itself would ordinarily suggest something serious.

Irreverent humour requires that there be things that are held to be “sacred,” to be revered. This is only possible for beings that can command relations between relations, beings that can acknowledge and address through action a context over and above the immediate, concrete world.

We chuckle when we read Groucho’s reference to “Ferdinand Balboa Warner, your great-great-grandfather.” This joke requires not just knowing who Balboa was, but also appreciating his significance, the meaning of his achievements, the historical difference that he made, for better or for worse. To do this, one must have command of different systems of relations, different contexts.
Acts of irreverence break social rules. Breaking the rules is funny, because even as we act as though a given particular set of relations, as circumscribed by the rules, were the only set--that is how we act when we follow any rules--we know that in truth it never is, no matter what rules we are talking about. And acknowledging this truth through irreverence produces delight. Humour has to be "true" in a certain sense, as we say, for example, that love is true or one's aim is true. Humour has to make sense to be funny.

Irreverence--doing or saying what you are not supposed to--requires command not only of what is but of what is supposed to be. It requires a command of relations between relations. It challenges the prevailing world view by appealing to a different one that is at odds with it. Irreverence requires a contest between different systems of relations of the second power.

Wisecracks involve the rupture or clash of contexts. The wisecrack suddenly introduces into one context or set of relations, a wholly different one--shifting the direction in which everyone is inclined, is looking, the direction of expectations, the direction in which everything has so far pointed.

Why do we take delight in this happening, at least when it happens in a certain way? In part, we are taking
delight in our ability to shift between different sets of relations. We take delight in it just as we take delight in other things that we can do, such as our mobility when we take a walk or stretch. Again, Aristotle makes the point that the human animal can delight in sensation, including all forms of doing or action.

This shift in contexts, it is worth noting, is at once unsettling and settling. The first effect of the shift is disruptive, but the second effect is to make us see something we would not have seen. By shifting our perspective in a way that is provocative (in the truest or strictest sense of the word), humour helps us to make sense of the world. It adds to our understanding, renews and rejuvenates our interest by re-situating us with respect to our surroundings.

One key to humour is the equivocal character of all human gestures, including words. The reversibility inherent to language as a lived system of relations between relations comes through both clearly and entertainingly in that form of humour that is the pun.

In the following scene from *Cocoanuts*, Groucho (as Hammer) is reviewing with Chico a map of real estate that he is selling in Florida.

HAMMER: Here’s Cocoanut Manor. Here’s Cocoanut Heights. That’s a swamp--right over where the--where the road forks, that’s Cocoanut Junction.
CHICO: Where have you got Cocoanut Custard?

HAMMER: Why, that’s on one of the forks. You probably eat with your knife, so you wouldn’t have to worry about that.

HAMMER: Now, here’s the main road, leading out of Cocoanut Manor. That’s the road I wish you were on. Now over here--on this site we’re going to build an Eye and Ear Hospital. This is going to be a site for sore eyes. You understand?

That’s fine. Now, right here is the residential section.

CHICO: People live there, eh?

HAMMER: No, that’s the stockyard. Now all along here--this is the river front--all along the river, all along the river--those are all levees.

CHICO: That’s the Jewish neighborhood.

HAMMER: You’re a peach, boy! Now, here is a little peninsula, and here is a viaduct leading over to the mainland.

CHICO: Why a duck?

HAMMER: I’m all right. How are you? I say here is a little peninsula, and here’s a viaduct leading over to the mainland.

CHICO: All right. Why a duck?

HAMMER: I’m not playing Ask-Me-Another. I say, that’s a viaduct.

CHICO: All right. Why a duck? Why a--why a duck? Why a-no-chicken?

HAMMER: I don’t know why-a-no-chicken. I’m a stranger here myself. All I know is that it’s a viaduct. You try to cross over there on a chicken, and you’ll find out why a duck. It’s deep water, that’s viaduct.

CHICO: That’s-why-a-duck?
HAMMER: Look . . . Suppose you were out horseback riding and you came to that stream and wanted to ford over there, you couldn’t make it. Too deep.

CHICO: But what do you want with a Ford when you gotta horse?

HAMMER: Well, I’m sorry the matter ever came up. All I know is that it’s a viaduct.

CHICO: Now look . . . all righta . . . I catcha on to why-a-horse, why-a-chicken, why-a-this, why-a-that. I no catch on to why-a-duck.

HAMMER: I was only fooling. I was only fooling. They’re going to build a tunnel in the morning. Now, is that clear to you?

CHICO: Yes. Everything--excepta why-a-duck.

HAMMER: Well, that’s fine. Now I can go ahead. Now, look, I’m going to take you down and show you our cemetery. I’ve got a waiting list of fifty people at that cemetery just dying to get in. But I like you--

CHICO: --Ah--you’re-a-my friend.

HAMMER: I like you and I’m going--

CHICO: --I know you like-a . . .

HAMMER: To shove you in ahead of all of them. I’m going to see that you get a steady position.

CHICO: That’s good.

HAMMER: And if I can arrange it, it will be horizontal . . .

In the above "Why a Duck?" exchange, constant shifts of perspective provoke the esthesio-logical experience that is laughter. We “get” a pun when we recognize that a word

'Laughing Matters, pp. 377-80.
is being used equivocally, that is, when we grasp the different set of relations in which the word can stand and have a different meaning. Animals cannot do this. Again, a shift of relations is something that delights. We can delight in all our natural abilities, in any of those esthesio-logical capacities that define our very way of being.

While we groan at puns, even as we groan we smile, because we delight in them. And we can admit to times when we caved into temptation because a particular pun was “irresistible”--“Sorry, I couldn’t help myself.”

Groucho’s letter provides two good examples. He writes that Jack the Ripper “cut quite a figure in his day.” And he tells us that after raising his alpenstock, Ferdinand Balboa Warner turned it in “for a hundred shares of the common.”

Puns, plays on words, are common to all languages. They constitute important ways in which speaking beings can perceive and non-speaking beings cannot.

Humour is a form of play. There is evidence that animals engage in play. In this sense, play is not uniquely human. But that animals, like humans, engage in behaviour that we call playful does not answer the crucial question of whether animal play differs in definitive ways from the play
of human beings. The same is true of animal communication and animal societies.

There is a level of behavioural complexity, of involvement with the world, that distinguishes human beings even from the other primates. The issue is how to describe and understand that difference. Merleau-Ponty has argued that the difference can be understood in terms of relations that are accessible to and manipulable by human beings and yet are beyond the other animals. These relations are evident in all forms of human activity, from walking to communication to play to human society. The difference can be expressed in a basic principle, that the human act, communicative, social, or playful is, by virtue of its command of multiple, complex systems of relations of the second power, of a different kind than any act of any non-human animal.

Humour is one of those human acts of meaning, from the equivocal use of terms to the construction within the physical world of a multiplicity of other worlds, linguistic, cultural, communal, and even personal, that are beyond other animals. It is one of the ways that we make sense of the world, one of the ways that we decipher our surroundings and situate ourselves within them. As such, it is one of the ways that we make the world a meaningful place for ourselves. And it is by making the world a meaningful
place, by making the world a human place, that we make sense of the world.

Laughter reflects everything about us that makes us human. From what seems like a simple act, we can unfold the range of distinctively human relations that make for meaning. And, by focussing on laughter, we can bring out something important about those relations--their carnal dimension.

We have seen that for Merleau-Ponty all human acts are gestural, are esthesio-logical, at once carnal and mental, are addressed to a milieu of relations between relations over and above the relations of the immediate concrete physical environment. They take their meaning from the way in which they fit into larger systems of relations constructed intersubjectively and lived individually as an extension of one’s incarnation. Laughter may well be the perfect example of this.

Laughing is like pointing or using a tool. Pointing requires a command of relations of the second power. To use a tool, it is not enough to be familiar with one’s physical surroundings; one must also command the system of relations that give the tool its nature and meaning. Laughter requires command of a number of different sets of relations, and it is addressed to a world that not everyone has access to.
Laughter requires an individual perspective along with an intersubjective awareness. Laughter requires surprise. It requires a command of possibilities. It requires a sense of self. Every gesture that I make is addressed to myself, even those that are also addressed to others. A sense of self requires a realization that there are other perspectives, that one's own perspective is not the only possibility. Every human act requires and thus reflects this reversibility.

To laugh is to be aware of possibilities. Every time I laugh, I am saying through my laughter that I see something more than what is before my eyes. I am saying through my laughter that there are relations and possibilities that others may not see. Not everyone who is looking at the same thing laughs. Our individual worlds are made up of different sets of relations, not all of which are common to the worlds of others.

Every laugh is expressive; no two people laugh in exactly the same way. Our laughter, like our walking, has a style. Each of us laughs differently at different times and at different things. These differences between individuals, and even in the case of the same individual, reflect the fact that in no two instances is the totality of relations that make for meaning ever quite the same.
To laugh is to be able to intend. To laugh is to be capable of the thing-structure. Like pointing or drawing a map in the dirt, laughing requires the categorial attitude.

When I laugh, I am using my carnally founded capacities to shift and re-situate myself toward the world around me. I am shifting my perspective on that world to reveal and see something about its dimensionality and its depth, and thereby to appreciate and understand it.

The insight I have in laughing is caught up in my bodily dwelling in the world, in that bodily connection and familiarity by which I define for myself both myself and the world.

This is important. Laughter is personal. It is part of the process that is at once the expression and the on-going making of the person that I am. As Aristotle argued in discussing ethics, we make ourselves by what we do. Our habits form and transform our character. Laughter as expression contributes to the forming and transforming of my person. Partly through my laughter and my humour, I make myself the person that I am.

Laughter thus reflects the chiasm of mind and body, the chiasm of myself and the world that makes me a being-in-the-world and from which meaning emerges.
CONCLUSION

Laughter reflects truths about every human act. Every human act is a gesture, at once carnal and mental. Meaning emerges in the world through human gesture, which manipulates relations over and above the existing relations of the physical milieu. Laughter requires all of this. It requires a sense of the possible. It requires being able to see more than what is there in front of you, to see not only the way things are, but the way they could be, to see not only how things can fit together, but how they cannot. The comical opposes the serious. To be serious is to concentrate exclusively on certain relations. To be comical is to challenge the exclusivity of those same relations by calling attention to others. Animals cannot be comical any more than they can be serious.

Humour requires that we be able to see the world not as it is and to see it as it is not. And animals cannot do this. This seemingly simple difference is in fact reflective of a chasm that separates and distinguishes human gesture, perception, and expression from the activity of even the highest non-human primates.

Merleau-Ponty argues for the gestural character of every human act. We would be more inclined perhaps to think
of a poem as a gesture than to think of a scientific theory as one. But to say that they are both gestures is not to say that there is no difference between them. Instead, it is to call attention to what they have in common—each of them requires the establishment and manipulation of new relations between previously established relations, an act that is beyond every creature other than human beings. It is in this way that Merleau-Ponty would explain even the process of abstraction. Abstraction is an act of human gesture that becomes possible at a certain stage of development in the command of different systems of relations.

Merleau-Ponty shows that to use a meaning is to take up and live a whole system of meanings. And while this insight is not original to him, his position is original in two important ways. First, he grounds the command of systems in our incarnation. Second, he extends this view of meaning as system to the many ways that we make sense of the world, from language to painting to perception.

Whatever may be their shortcomings, his formulations force us to think about the different systems of meaning that can be so taken up and about the way in which the use of any meaning requires a command of a whole system of meanings. Even if we are not prepared to accept all of what Merleau-Ponty has to say, his view challenges us to
acknowledge that we make the world meaningful in more ways than just understanding it.

Meaning presents a challenge of its own to explanation, one that cannot be met by using such categories as thing, subject, and object. It requires a new language and a new method to explain what is most profoundly true of meaning—its power to change the world out of which it emerges. If, for realism, meaning is found in the world and for idealism, meaning is imposed upon the world, Merleau-Ponty’s position is that meaning is built in the world. Meaning is a transformation of the world. The question about meaning is broader than the question about knowledge. We make sense of the world in more ways than by knowing it. And so, Merleau-Ponty has sought to indicate relations that are not truly subjective nor objective.

Perhaps most importantly, Merleau-Ponty has provided a contemporary formulation of a classical, even timeless, philosophical insight. We are animals, but for better or for worse, we are also more. We are creatures of instinct and passion, but that is not the whole story.

In philosophy, questions are perennial, no answers are final. Philosophers are to be deemed successful when they cast new light on problems worthy of consideration, bring to the foreground concerns that had receded too far from view, and especially when they take age-old
philosophical issues and make them living concerns once again. Merleau-Ponty has accomplished this with respect to the problem of meaning. Whether or not one agrees with all of his conclusions, his effort is original and worthy of respect.

Laughter is testament to the fact that every human act is esthesio-logical: it borrows from our biological make-up while, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, it “eludes the simplicity of animal life.”

To laugh is human.
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