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Does the *Reversibility Thesis* deliver all that Merleau-Ponty claims it can?¹**Anya Daly**

At the core of Merleau-Ponty's later unfinished work, his revisioned ontology *The Visible and the Invisible*, is the controversial *Reversibility Thesis*. In order to fully grasp what Merleau-Ponty intends by this thesis and what work he hopes it will achieve, it is necessary to consider what motivated him in this revisioning and also to situate it within his overall project. Why was he not satisfied with his earlier works which sought to undercut the dualist oppositions of mind/body, self/ other, interior/ exterior, subject/ object, immanence/ transcendence etc.,. Resolving these oppositions is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's overall philosophical project – to refute dualism and monism once and for all, so that philosophy is neither menaced by scepticism nor reduced to solipsism. Merleau-Ponty's efforts in this direction begin with perception and with the lived body, which is not a mere object in the world apart from the knowing subject but which nonetheless represents a point of view. Knowing/ perceiving subjects are thus located in place and time and as such consciousness takes on a 'certain physical and historical situation' (Pri.P:5, *RMM*: 403). The *Reversibility Thesis* must solve a number of inherited and potential issues for Merleau-Ponty, beginning with two arising directly from his thesis of the *Primacy of Perception*.

Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the *Primacy of Perception*, defended the claim that 'the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence' (Pri.P:13; *Pri.P*:43). It has been argued, however, that grounding everything including cultural and intellectual capacities in pre-reflective embodied percipience leads to a reductionism and anti-intellectualism wherein reason, truth and even philosophical endeavours become meaningless. The resolution of these philosophical issues is paramount for the viability of Merleau-Ponty's entire project. We must ask finally whether Merleau-Ponty does in fact avoid perceptual and ontological reductionism and also whether he is able to, as Renaud Barbaras explains, "integrate the possibility of objectification" so as to give back "to science a genuine foundation opposite from the scientific perversion" by thinking the dimensions of fact and essence together (Barbaras:83).

To appreciate and vindicate Merleau-Ponty's pivotal claim within the context of his project, it will be useful to begin by tracking the trajectory of the two principal criticisms against the *Primacy of Perception Thesis* and his corresponding refutations. The initial criticism of the primacy of perception, the argument from illusion, holds that due to the fact of illusions, perception could not offer truths. However, as Merleau-Ponty points out, the illusory perception is itself corrected on the basis of a further perception. And so, illusion is just one possible phase in the process of interrogating the world. The perceived oasis in the desert on closer inspection reveals through another perception, the reality, only more sand – that the oasis was a mere mirage.

And this is why the very fragility of a perception, attested by its breakup and by the substitution of another perception, far from authorizing us to efface the index of 'reality' from them all, obliges us to

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concede it to all of them, to recognize all of them to be variants of the same world, and finally to consider them not as all false but as ‘all true’, not as repeated failures in the determination of the world but as progressive approximations. (VI:41, VI:65)

The second and more complex criticism is that due to the fact of there being multitudinous and perhaps opposing possible perceptions, perception is inherently perspectival and so its epistemic status is reduced to a relativism. This criticism is addressed in *The Visible and the Invisible* by means of the reversibility thesis which undercuts the dichotomies of body-mind, immanence-transcendence, self-other and the ultimate reversibility is that which Merleau-Ponty maintains holds between the Visible (phenomena) and the Invisible (language, reflection and expression), between the originary world and the cultural world. What enables us to step beyond the criticism of perspectivism, which reduces perception (and so too knowledge) to merely one’s own perspective, is the capacity to find concordance and recognition through the generalities of reflection, language and artistic expression. And it is through these generalities that we know we live in a shared world. The irreducibility of the perceived visible world in this way depends on and is guaranteed by the invisibles of language, reflection and culture. The challenge for Merleau-Ponty at this point in his endeavours is to avoid any return to realism and objective thinking, but at the same time to allow for a non-totalizing ‘objectivity’ so that it is still possible to say – ‘this is true’ and ‘that is false’. The stakes in this later work are high and converge on two potential problems: firstly, whether Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of the notions of ‘Visible’ and ‘Invisible’ commits him to just another dualism and correlatively whether the reversibility thesis can not only establish connection but also uphold the irreducibility of the Other and the world; secondly, because he asserts that perception is ‘the presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence’ (Pri.P:13; Pri.P:43), it may be asked - is this ‘foundationalist’ and so susceptible to all the well-rehearsed criticisms of foundationalism?

The direction and language of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty himself acknowledges, had created a ‘bad ambiguity’ and so he proposes that while perception ‘initiated us to truth’ it is necessary to turn to the issue of expression which will not only be able to establish a good ambiguity but also provide the basis for an ethics (Pri.P: 11, RMM: 409). And so Merleau-Ponty shifts from the critical phase of his work, which tied his thinking and correlatively his expression to that of his philosophical targets, to the positive phase which is launched from his interrogations of expression and then proceeds into the elaboration of his non-dualist ontology through the *Reversibility Thesis*.

While some scholars have suggested that this later development represents a capitulation of his earlier work, I, along with others, hold that it is most definitely a continuation, a refinement and extension of the earlier concepts. There is much textual evidence to show that many of the later ideas are already pre-figured in the earlier works, and he himself writes that this new phase demands that – ‘the results of the Phenomenology of Perception’ must be brought to ‘ontological explicitation’ [sic] (VI: 183, 200; VI: 237, 253). Merleau-Ponty was aware that the concepts of his earlier works were still expressed in the dichotomous language of object and consciousness and it is for this reason he sought to define the new ontology in very different terms. So, the typically phenomenological terms of intentionality, transcendental field, horizons, and body make way for the more evocative terms and concepts of reversibility, chiasm, wild being and flesh. These evocations are particularly powerful in the aesthetic works, most notably in the last of which Sartre wrote – ‘*Eye and Mind* says all, provided one knows how to decipher it’.¹

What is the Reversibility Thesis? The reversibility thesis is the thesis that self, other and world are inherently relational - not in the obvious and trivial sense that they stand in relation to each other, can affect each other, that there are actual and potential causal connections between them. This without question is so and these relations occur between entities that are external to each other. Merleau-Ponty's *Reversibility Thesis*, however, proposes that self, other and world are internally related, that there is interdependence at the level of ontology. What does it mean to be internally related? The other - whether other subjectivities or the otherness of the world and things - is essential for self-awareness and vice versa. No self can be apprehended without an-other. Ipseity and alterity are mutually dependent and this interdependence is both pervasive and intrinsic. What is at stake here is whether the reversibility thesis is able to overcome skeptical objections in assuring real communication and at the same time avoid any collapse into solipsism in assuring real difference. The Other must be a genuine, irreducible Other.

The initial criticism of this thesis of reversibility is that across the various domains of reversibility symmetry and reciprocity are not guaranteed. I argue that this is a non-problem. Rather, the potentialities for asymmetry and non-reciprocity in fact guarantee the irreducibility of the Other and I further argue that reversibility needs to be appreciated as dialectical or aesthetic, rather than as a literal or 'mechanistic' reversal. A more serious criticism targets the viability of ontology itself. Is alterity as irreducible otherness ever compatible with ontology? Given that traditional ontology aims to account for Being as the substrate of existence, how can a heterogeneity of radical, irreducible others be accommodated?

This paper considers the above objections to the reversibility thesis from two of Merleau-Ponty's contemporaries - Claude Lefort a friend, philosopher and the executor of Merleau-Ponty's estate and the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas, who also drew on the work of Husserl, developed a philosophical vision which while intersecting with Merleau-Ponty's at important junctures, nonetheless arrived at an entirely different destination. By way of response, I argue alongside Dillon against the objections of Lefort and alongside Zahavi against the objections of Levinas. Both of these interpreters of Merleau-Ponty, I propose remain faithful to the core directions and spirit of his endeavours without becoming diverted by the less significant inconsistencies. Where relevant I have indicated where these interpretations may be extended.

Objections to the Reversibility Thesis I : Lefort

Lefort, in the lecture entitled "Flesh and Otherness" given at the 1987 annual meeting of the Merleau-Ponty Circle at the University of Rhode Island,ⁱⁱ asserts that Merleau-Ponty has failed to understand infantile experience and this is why his reversibility cannot achieve what he hopes it will.ⁱⁱⁱ The crux of Lefort's criticism of Merleau-Ponty's account of otherness hinges on five interrelated claims. Firstly, that there is an original asymmetry between the experience of the infant and the adult (Lefort: 1990:9). Secondly, Lefort argues that because of the abundant evidence of asymmetry in *all* subject/ subject relationships, the reversibility thesis must be rejected. Merleau-Ponty's Other is merely a projected Other with its origins in the self. Thirdly, that the reversibility thesis is a relationship of binaries, such as, sensible and sentience, visibility and vision, outside and inside. These double back, the 'flesh' upon the 'flesh', the same upon the same and so cannot constitute a genuine, irreducible other - a third term is needed. Fourthly, drawing on Lacan's mirror stage, he identifies this third term as the one who names, and at the same time proposes that the 'name' and the 'law' are irreversibles (Lefort, 1990:11 -12). The child is not born into 'wild being' as Merleau-Ponty claims, but rather a world already 'tamed' because it is already named. The adult has named the child and the objects in the world. Finally, Lefort

questions whether vision, the ‘original openness to the sensible’ (Lefort, 1990:10), should be considered the first mode of perception which initiates an infant into the world. Rather, he suggests that touch is more primary in that the ‘enclosing maternal body and the first relation to the breast come before seeing’ (Lefort: 1990:10). So too he questions whether due to what he claims as an ‘indistinction’ of perspective between the mother and child, that ‘there is no cleavage between the outside and the inside’, desire may in fact be more primary than perception (Lefort: 1990:10-11). And this desire is, he asserts, another irreversible as with ‘the name and the law’.^{iv}

Lefort cannot accept Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis, which claims to reconcile the apparent contraries of overlapping, doubling back, intertwining with those of *écart*, fission, and alterity (Lefort, 1990:8); in brief, both sameness and difference. As Dillon notes Lefort emphasizes ‘sameness’. Dillon sums up where Lefort finds himself as a result of this bias:

Otherness becomes a meaning constituted by the body, and genuine alterity is lost in the selfsameness of the flesh. Reversibility becomes a structure immanent within the monolith of flesh. *Écart* (divergence, fission, dehiscence, etc.) is reduced to an illusion the flesh engenders within itself by projecting its own immanent reflexivity into the world it constitutes. (Dillon, 1990:18&19)

It is moreover important to remember that Merleau-Ponty was sometimes inconsistent because he himself was extending his thought towards a fuller understanding of his ontology – the later writings are works-in-progress. So it is in fact possible to find textual support for such criticisms as those elaborated by Lefort. However, as Dillon has rightly indicated, without ignoring the discrepancies, we should as interpreters focus on those references that support the overall thrust of his wider project in order to accomplish his vision of establishing a non-dualist ontology. Dillon’s choice of the word ‘monolith’ to describe Lefort’s interpretation of the reversibility of ‘flesh’, indicates a very substantive interpretation – ‘flesh’ is presented as an intractable, indivisible, uniform substance - and such an interpretation undoubtedly can serve only to derail Merleau-Ponty’s project not advance it.

The asymmetry between the infant and the adult

For Lefort, the infant’s experience is one of confusion, of a non-differentiation of inside and outside, and this is where the crucial difference is with the adult experience and why the infant can be a genuine Other for the adult (Lefort, 1990:9-10). This view of non-differentiation finds some textual support in Merleau-Ponty’s writings but is not definitive (VI:11-12, VI:27-28). Merleau-Ponty proposes in his course notes “The Child’s Relations with Others” (1960) that the infant doesn’t develop the self-other distinction until about six months and that the infant lived in an ‘an anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life’ (CRO: 119). This claim was mistaken and we now know in the light of recent neuroscience that in fact this distinction is established at birth and arguably earlier (Gallagher& Meltzoff, 1996:212). Despite this error, Merleau-Ponty rightly claims that this capacity to apprehend an-Other, this capacity to respond to an-Other, would be impossible unless the infant is already open to otherness – the infant already has within itself the category of Other. So while we can acknowledge that Lefort has identified a problem with one aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, neuroscience has clarified this debate.^v Merleau-Ponty’s claims with regard to the timing of the apprehension of the self - Other distinction have been shown to be erroneous. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty’s claim regarding the intrinsic nature of this distinction has been vindicated.

As Dillon notes, if this ‘indistinction’ between self and Other were upheld, it would be extremely problematic to explain how the infant is able to enter into the world, into the understandings of the adult and ‘the circuit of reversibility and become flesh’? (Dillon,1990:19). Within the economy of Lefort’s interpretation, the continuity of experience from infant to adult would be an impossibility.

Lefort’s recourse to Lacanian psychoanalysis also fails in giving an adequate account of this crucial shift from self-apprehension to world/ Other apprehension. Merleau-Ponty has argued that the alienating look or presence of an-Other is impossible to recognize unless the infant already has the category of otherness within itself. And if this is not the case, then we must ask - from where can this recognition be generated? If within the sphere of immanence as Lefort would assert, then this must be created from nothing. Dillon, however, argues that the meaning of any otherness must come from outside in the form of challenging others and a sometimes ‘recalcitrant world’ (Dillon, 1990:21). Further, I propose, prior to the ‘*Fort-Da*’ of Little Hans, there is simply the early articulation, whether linguistic or gestural, of the ‘no’ - the assertion of an independent will and the refusal to submit to the will of the adult. This assertion confronts a real external will not a mere projection. So too the body of this Other is not a mere projection and is evidently activated by an alien will which impinges on my actions, which uses ‘my’ world in a different manner from how I manipulate my world. This other body is in ‘my’ space, using ‘my’ familiar objects; and this experience is one shared by both infant and adult alike.

Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of the ‘mirror stage’ drew on the work of both Jacques Lacan and Henri Wallon, although he rejected the intellectual interpretation of this self-Other apprehension (CRO: 132) and also the notion of narcissistic identification as promoted by Lacan (CRO:135). Through the specular image, nonetheless, the infant is able to recognize both the sameness and difference between herself and her image, and so too the differences between the image of the parent and the parent, and through these, the distinction between the parent and herself. As Al-Saji notes (2006: 61), drawing on Merleau-Ponty, the self-Other distinction has a basis prior to this mirror stage in the voice of the Other and the responsiveness of infant babbling. There is much recent empirical research to support this view which is furthermore consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s gestural theory of language.^{vi} Merleau-Ponty’s account is thus inclusive of all modes of apprehension and importantly for him this self-Other distinction is ‘never completely finished’ (CRO:119). The world spans the experience of child and adult, of self and Other, and this world is both shared and divergent. In this way the ‘flesh’ of the world of which reversibility is the ultimate truth encompasses real connection and *écart* as an originary difference.

The non-problem of asymmetry between subjects

Lefort has proposed that asymmetry holds not only between infants and adults, but also structures all intersubjective encounters. Relying on the textual references to encroachment (*empiètement*), Dillon’s response to Lefort begins with the assertion that alterity must include both identity and difference, immanence and transcendence, if the Other is to be a genuine Other. There must be common ground in order for communication to be possible but at the same time difference and opacity, so that the Other is never fully revealed. Furthermore, the very fact that subjects – self and Other – are constantly changing emphasizes the dynamism and contingency of the relation, that there is always more to discover and that the relationship requires ongoing recalibration and reconfiguring. This contingency and opacity is exactly where the asymmetry in relations between subjects serves in fact to guarantee the irreducibility of the Other rather than, as Lefort

claims, undermines the reversibility thesis. It is still possible to uphold the reversibility thesis while at the same time recognizing that the relations between self and Other are asymmetrical and that the reciprocity which obtains is a non-substantive, non-mechanistic, dialectical reciprocity.

If we consider trees and other non-sentient life-forms, the asymmetry is obvious. We see trees but trees do not see us. Nonetheless, in a rather ambiguous statement in *Eye and Mind*, it appears that Merleau-Ponty in fact makes a contrary assertion by proposing that because of the enmeshment between the painter and the world, objects in a sense pass into him, 'the same thing is both out there in the world and here at the heart of vision' (EM:128, OE:28) and so there is inevitably a reversal such that the artist may have the experience of 'the trees... looking at me' (EM:129, OE:31). This illustration which on the surface seems to suggest that trees see us, as Dillon has observed, is aimed at showing how objects can define an external point-of-view on us as equally visible entities. We are unified within the same sphere of visibility – that is all.

With regard to animals, sentience is evident but not equivalent in that perceptual organs vary in terms of scope and capacities. The auditory ranges of dogs and elephants differ significantly from humans, as do the visual sensibilities of eagles and bats. So the question of asymmetry becomes especially relevant in the comparisons between humans. Sentience in principle is not an issue and in principle the apparatus is equivalent.^{vii} Notwithstanding the above qualifications of sentience and equivalence in powers regarding perceptual organs, we must ask - is it possible to have the same visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory experience as another? Clearly this is not the case and we can only hope for a close approximation, enough to ascertain degrees of agreement or disagreement. With regard to reversibility we must also ask – does the Other see me as I see him/ her? Or more significantly - can I see myself as the Other sees me? In both cases the answer must simply be 'no' – because I am always 'on the same side of my body' (VI:147 &148, VI:194). The other may 'share' an experience, which may be 'now', but it is always 'there' not 'here'. Embodiment is definitive. In this way, the objection of asymmetry presented by Lefort becomes not just a non-problem, but in fact serves to support the requirement of irreducibility.

The question of irreducibility – is a third term needed?

Lefort has further argued that Merleau-Ponty's Other is merely a projected Other constituted within the realm of the subject, that 'the body communicates to the things its own divergence' (Lefort, 1990:5). Dillon points out that the role Lefort assigns the body is similar to that of Husserl's transcendental ego and Kant's transcendental unity of apperception. And so Dillon proposes that by 'denying transcendence to things, they [Lefort, Kant & Husserl^{viii}] cannot account for alterity' (Dillon, 1990:17) and further he argues that Lefort has therefore failed to appreciate Merleau-Ponty's conception of the lived body and such basic tenets of Merleau-Ponty's ontology as 'autochthonous organization and the doctrine of matter pregnant with form' (Dillon, 1990:18). Things, the world and others are meaningful in-themselves and do not rely for meaning on a constituting subject, whether a transcendental consciousness or a lived body. When we open our eyes, Merleau-Ponty writes, what we see is the thing itself (VI: 11, VI: 27) not a mere representation, it is the thing (VI: 7, VI: 21) as the locus of its meanings; meanings are thus not conferred from outside. Furthermore, I suggest that the necessity, as Lefort sees it, for a third term becomes redundant. Within Merleau-Ponty's account the *relata* are already internally related, and these internal reversible relations transcend the *relata*, whether subject/ object or subject/ subject. The

relation characterized by internal encroachment serves thus to unify the *relata* within a dynamic system. In the course “The Experience of Others” (1951-1952), Merleau-Ponty writes:

My body is not given to me as a sum of sensations but as a whole. A form which is common to both visual and tactile perceptions, is the link between the other person’s body and my own. The two bodies can therefore communicate through the different perceptions. Everything transpires as if the other person’s intuitions and motor realizations existed in a sort of relation of internal encroachment, as if my body and the body of the other person together formed a system. (EO: 52)

And so contrary to Lefort, Dillon asserts that this encroachment is not an internal projection of the otherness of the Other, but ‘an introjection of that alien vantage’ (Dillon, 1990:21), through which I discover my own self-alienation. And further I propose, it is important to remember that the apparent binaries of the reversible relation are not absolute disjunctive binaries at the level of ontology but rather interdependent poles *within* the relation, distinguishable in reflection but inseparable in reality.

Lefort’s irreversibles and Merleau-Ponty’s ‘wild being’

In pursuing his search for a third term to unify the *relata*, Lefort calls again on Lacanian theory and argues that because the infant is already born into a world that is named by the adult and is more importantly himself named, that this third term is to be found in the naming adult and correlatively the ‘law’. Merleau-Ponty’s ‘wild being’ is thus in Lefort’s view a mere fanciful illusion. More precisely, Lefort argues that because the infant is born into a ‘web of wishes, expectations and fears of which he will never possess the meaning’ (Lefort, 1990:10), Merleau-Ponty’s world is not ‘wild’ but already tamed, tamed by the naming adult. The infant depends on the other – the adult – so as to be initiated into the world of named things. Furthermore, Lefort proposes the naming of the child himself, testifies even more powerfully to the irreducible transcendence of the other outside me. This relation between the infant and adult is thus according to Lefort’s account irreversible. And so he proposes the already named world and the ‘law’ cannot be reconciled with Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of reversibility.

This key notion of ‘wild being’ in the later writings warrants further elucidation. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of this paper, what follows is a necessarily brief discussion based on a few illuminating quotes.

Lefort, mistakenly, but understandably to a certain extent ^{ix}, has taken a developmental, ontogenetic approach to this notion of ‘wild being’ which inevitably has led him off-track. Merleau-Ponty, who held the Chair for Child Psychology (1949-1952) at the Sorbonne, was intimately acquainted with developmental psychology and psychoanalysis. And so it strikes me as strange that Lefort would try to tackle him on this territory. Merleau-Ponty has clearly acknowledged that the child is born into sociality and a world already spoken (CRO:119,120), and so it would be reasonable to assume that his notion of ‘wild being’ is reconcilable with these understandings. This notion of a ‘wild being’, for which there is a corresponding ‘wild logos’ in contradistinction to language as *institution*, is pre-figured in a number of discussions in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. The following is in my opinion one of the most pertinent:

The linguistic and intersubjective world no longer surprises us, we no longer distinguish it from the world itself, and it is within a world already spoken and speaking that we think. We become unaware of the contingent element in expression and communication, whether it be in the child learning to speak, or in the writer saying and thinking something for the first time, in short, in all who transform a certain kind of silence into speech. (PP:184, PP:214, PP:224)

As long as ‘we fail to find beneath the chatter of words, this primordial silence’, as long as we remain caught in the world already constituted by the naming adult and the ‘law’ our ‘view of man will remain superficial’ (PP:184, PP:214, PP:224) and the ‘wild logos’, the well-spring of creativity will be stifled. Lefort’s failure is exactly of this order, and his misapprehension hinges significantly on his deployment of a linear, serial understanding of time - the before and after, in-utero and ex-utero existence. Merleau-Ponty’s conception of ‘wild being’ is not to be understood in this way. In the working notes, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes his rejection of this serial time for comprehending ‘wild being’. He writes: ‘the “wild” or “brute” being is introduced – the serial time, that of “acts” [birth] and decisions [to name], is overcome – the mythical time reintroduced’ – (VI:168, VI:222).

Drawing on Bergson, Merleau-Ponty writes: ‘Never had the brute being of the perceived world been so described. By unveiling it according to duration as it comes to be, Bergson regains at the heart of man a pre-Socratic and “pre-human” meaning of the world’ (S:185, S:233). We must be clear here that despite the references to historic times, Merleau-Ponty is not alluding to a wild pre-history which precedes human consciousness and existence. The notion of duration which he borrows from Bergson is a duration that endures beneath all experience, where existence and essence collide, anterior to reflective consciousness with its thematizing, objectifying and totalizing tendencies. In this way he opposes ‘brute’ or savage being to ‘sedimented-ontic being’ (N:220). The former pertains to an ever-present mythical dimension of existence, a brute existence which we never quit (VI:117, VI:156), which subtends the latter - the serial time of discrete historic moments, the time of sedimented-ontic being. Furthermore, the process of sedimentation builds layer upon layer of representations none of which exhaust Merleau-Ponty’s promiscuous ‘wild being’ (VI:253, VI:306) and he argues it is true philosophy’s task to restore the meaning to Being – through ‘wild logos’ as creativity. Wild being ‘asks of our experience of the world what the world is before it is a thing one speaks of and which is taken for granted, before it has been reduced to a set of manageable disposable significations’ (VI:102, VI:138).

At the beginning of the chapter, ‘The Intertwining, the Chiasm’ in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes the role of ‘wild being’ in philosophy thus:

If it is true that as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection or coincidence it rejudges what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not been ‘worked over’, that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both ‘subject’ and ‘object’, both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them. (VI:130, VI:172)

Transitional moments like birth, and for that matter death, give us a *flavor* of ‘wild being’, wherein everything is new and full of wonder, and the initial experience outstrips our capacities to ‘name’ and solidify the experience through

thematization and objectification. There is a gap, however brief, wherein all expectations, desires and secure determinations are undercut. How can this possibly be achieved? Another concept in Merleau-Ponty's later writings in need of further elucidation is that of hyper-reflection, by means of which philosophers might reliably access 'wild being'. This is the focus of a forthcoming paper.

Suffice to say that for all the reasons above, I reject Lefort's claim, that due to the fact that the infant is preceded into the world by 'naming adults' and not as he claims into a 'wild' world, Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis cannot be upheld.

Merleau-Ponty privileges vision over touch

Lefort and others have argued that Merleau-Ponty's focus on vision as opposed to other perceptual powers, and correlatively painting as opposed to other art forms, has given his work a particular bias. There is a legitimate basis for this claim, but it is by no means the full story. Without question there are lacunae in Merleau-Ponty's analyses, but I dispute any claims that these undermine his central theses, rather I suggest they provide opportunities for further investigation. So we must ask - does he in fact consider the other perceptual powers? And further, what is it that Merleau-Ponty values in vision as the pre-eminent perceptual capacity to elucidate his reversibility thesis?

For Merleau-Ponty vision is uniquely instructive in that it can give an object in totality and at a distance. Painting is the art which approaches everything innocently, whereas writing is implicitly conceptual and even philosophical, in that it tends to stand back from and make appraisals. Music 'is too far on the hither side of the world ...' and depicts only 'its ebb and flow, its growth, its upheavals, its turbulence' (EM:123, OE:14). With vision, we immediately know how to reach something. The seen is accessible and all the potentials for action are laid out before us. And correlatively movement is just as intimately connected with vision, which changes according to our movement within the context. There is a dynamic overlapping of powers and scope (EM:124, OE:17). Thus while he justifies his privileging of vision, he does not discount these other powers but (perhaps confusingly) refers to them as the invisibles, discovered in the "hollows" of vision. The paradoxes, antinomies and reversals of vision and movement are all brought into sharp relief in the problems of painting. 'Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence' (EM:126, OE:22) and it is through creative endeavours and in virtue of the fact of embodiment that these equivalents and formulas undergo a transubstantiation and become available to others.

Merleau-Ponty claims that we have underestimated the powers of vision and the enigma of visibility. What is needed is an expanded understanding of *all* the powers of perception, an understanding that can recognize 'the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visible existence' (VI:134, VI:177) and conversely that 'what we call a visible is ... a quality pregnant with a texture' (VI:136, VI:180). Our eyes are much more than just receptors of sense-data, of colours, light and lines. Merleau-Ponty thus objects to Berenson's statement (EM:127, OE:23) proposing that painting was capable of evoking tactile values. On first blush Berenson's statement seems to accord perfectly with Merleau-Ponty's own doctrine of synaesthesia and with most people's experience of 'great art'. However, Merleau-Ponty's objection is extremely pertinent in that it encapsulates the thrust of his new ontology. He writes:

What [great art] does is entirely different, almost the inverse. It gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible; thanks to it we do not need a “muscular sense” in order to possess the voluminosity of the world. This voracious vision, reaching beyond the “visual givens”, opens upon a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or the caesurae. The eye lives in this texture as a man in his house. (EM:127, OE:27)

It is for these reasons that Merleau-Ponty suggests that the painter ‘practices a magical theory of vision’ (EM:127, OE:27) which he likens to a mirror within which the universe is concentrated. All the perceptual modes are immediately synaesthetic. Texture is not something derived on the basis of vision, it is not evoked by vision, the tactile *already inheres* in the visual. And so when the painter’s gaze interrogates the thing seen, it is not just asking for the visual sense data - the light, shadows, reflections, shapes and colour. Rather it is asking for how these compose its being. What causes the mountain to be, and to be mountain instead of say tree? This is the artist’s question, whereas the ‘visible in the profane sense forgets its premises’ (EM:128, OE:30). And so Lefort’s criticism that Merleau-Ponty indefensibly prioritizes vision over touch and the other perceptual modalities does not in fact hit the mark.

Dillon also points out the problem created by Merleau-Ponty’s choice of the term ‘flesh’ to elaborate his ontology of reversibility, because there is then the tendency to regard it as substance. This observation from Dillon, which many have subsequently taken up, is one of the most important points for a plausible interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology. Merleau-Ponty’s statement – ‘We must not think the flesh starting from substances ... but we must think it ... as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being’ (VI:147: VI:193) – is both confusing and contradictory. The use of the terms ‘element’ and ‘concrete emblem’ further compound the misconceptions and Dillon proposes that the emphasis needs to be on the last phrase – ‘a general manner of being’. Hence, it is crucial that reversibility be understood adverbially (how) and not substantively (what). Against any monolithic interpretation, ‘flesh’ needs to be understood as essentially heterogeneous and dynamic.

The main cause of Lefort’s rejection of Merleau-Ponty’s account of alterity is his erroneous interpretation of the reversibility thesis. Contrary to Lefort’s projected Other, Dillon argues that ‘I discover my own otherness through the traumatic impact of an alien gesture ... the otherness I discover in my relations to things, other persons, and myself is an otherness that cannot be explained by transcendental constitution, for it involves the experience of a difference that transcends my experience – that is, the other is given as opaque and recalcitrant to the categories I project’ (Dillon,1990:24).

It is thus clear that Lefort’s objections cannot be upheld. The criticism of asymmetry turns out to guarantee the irreducibility of the Other rather than undermine the reversibility thesis. The apparent binaries of the reversible relation are not absolute disjunctive binaries at the level of ontology but rather interdependent poles *within* the relation, distinguishable in reflection but inseparable in reality. Lefort’s claim that Merleau-Ponty’s Other is merely a projected Other with its origins in the self must be rejected and I have argued in agreement with Dillon that the other resists such reductions in the simple facts that the Other is able to surprise, to resist, to challenge and also importantly to define an ‘alien’ point of view on myself. The related Lacanian-inspired objection from Lefort proposes that there needs to be a

third term to ensure that the irreducibility requirement is met, and this he identifies as the ‘name’, the ‘one who names’ and the ‘law’. I have argued that because the *relata* are already internally related the need for any third term becomes redundant– the *relation* transcends the *relata*. Lefort’s criticism that the child is not born into ‘wild being’ but rather an already ‘named’ and ‘tamed’ world is founded on a misapprehension of this notion. The key to the correct interpretation is to be found in Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of ‘serial’ time with regard to this idea. Merleau-Ponty has argued for a mythical dimension which endures beneath the sedimented-ontic realities which depend on language as institution, as ‘law’. Finally, it is evident that Merleau-Ponty does take account of other perceptual modes, and nonetheless has offered a plausible defence of his prioritizing vision for the elucidation of his philosophical project.

Objections to the Reversibility Thesis II : Levinas

The criticisms from Levinas draw our attention to the fact that the viability of the reversibility thesis arises out of a larger concern to explore whether the very notion of alterity as explicated by Merleau-Ponty is compatible with an ontological project. Ontologies seek to apprehend the nature of Being and its relation to beings, and have historically tended towards homogenizing, reductive and totalizing outcomes. Such outcomes seem to be incompatible with the pluralism intrinsic to alterity – that the Other, whether as thing, world or another subject, is heterogeneous, irreducible, overdetermined, emergent and even disturbingly recalcitrant. Merleau-Ponty’s re-visioned ontology which rests on his prototype of being – ‘the flesh’ – claims to be able to both offer real connection, real communication and at the same time uphold the irreducibility and heterogeneity of the Other, thereby defeating skeptical objections and avoiding solipsism. This larger question of the compatibility of ontology with alterity is the key which underpins and motivates Levinas’ criticisms of Merleau-Ponty’s account of otherness and reversibility.

In two essays (Levinas, 1990: 53-66) that Levinas dedicates to the work of Merleau-Ponty on the related issues of intersubjectivity and sensibility, Levinas offers a sympathetic, even appreciative account of Merleau-Ponty’s position. However, his presentation of aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the Other is pursued in his own very particular manner and I suggest at times distorts in the detail and in the omissions.^x Both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas developed their philosophies in response to the same philosophical predecessors – Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Husserl - and pitted their ideas against not only each other but also their philosophical contemporaries – Heidegger and Sartre most notably - but with very different outcomes. These striking differences are what make the comparison between the two thinkers so fascinating and in my opinion philosophically fruitful in that such a juxtaposition highlights the originality of both thinkers. As Agata Zielinski notes in her book, *Lecture de Merleau-Ponty et Levinas: Le corps, le monde, l'autre*, at first glance it appears that Levinas takes phenomenology towards a radical transcendence whereas Merleau-Ponty’s direction is towards a radical immanence of the body in the world. Finally, however, it becomes apparent that both offer an alternative to Husserlian transcendentalism by articulating a “transcendence in immanence” (Zielinski, 2002:12) but of entirely different and opposing orders. While Merleau-Ponty elaborates a philosophy based on a non-dual ontology, Levinas champions metaphysics, reverting to various dualisms and so finds more concordance in certain respects with Sartre. Even though Levinas clearly appreciated the evolving nature of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project, his criticisms for the most part appear to be directed at Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of the later Husserl in *Idéen II*, as presented in *The Philosopher and his Shadow*. Furthermore, he summarily rejects ontology as a viable means of accounting for otherness, but does not seem to take account of the specificities of Merleau-Ponty’s non-dual ontology of ‘flesh’ and the correlative epistemology which evolved beyond primordial percipience to encompass expression. And so,

in order to better understand the basis for Levinas' rejection of Merleau-Ponty's account of alterity for which the reversibility thesis is the core notion, we must also look beyond these two essays for answers in his more general philosophy.

The following discussion examines Levinas' four main criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's account of alterity. Firstly, Levinas proposes that alterity is essentially incompatible with ontology in that ontologies are always reductive, totalizing and homogenizing. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty's inclusion of the internal alterities of time, reflection and the body in addition to the external alterities of things and the world in his account of alterity Levinas argues is misguided and must be rejected. Why? Because these internal alterities are constituted within the subject and with regard to the external alterities, because the relation that obtains between subjects and things and the world is non-reciprocal. Alterity in Levinas' view is only possible between subjects. Thirdly, Levinas asserts that Merleau-Ponty's alterity persists in a Husserlian epistemic vein, a problem of knowledge, and the Other is presented as other-than-me and so does not leave the domain of the self. Finally, Levinas proposes that Merleau-Ponty failed to recognize that the first relation of the subject to the Other is via sentiment not sensation (Levinas,1990:63 &64), with suffering serving as 'a pathway leading to the Other, leading to the human' (Levinas,1990:66).

I argue that Levinas has failed to appreciate that Merleau-Ponty's ontology is radically different from traditional western ontologies in that it is a non-dual ontology and as such is non-totalizing, heterogeneous and non-reductive, and so his criticisms do not find their target. Furthermore, due to the heterogeneity of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, he is in fact able to accommodate things and world in his account of alterity and that the issue of non-reciprocity is a non-issue. So too Levinas' objection to the inclusion of the internal alterities of time, reflection and the body cannot be defended, because these in fact underwrite the possibility of the apprehension of both the self and an external Other. Contributing to this confusion is Levinas' notion of self which, as Zahavi has noted, is a very restricted one. Zahavi further suggests this self is 'a latecomer' and 'presupposes a more primitive but also more fundamental type of selfhood, namely the one intrinsic to the very stream of consciousness' (Zahavi, 2004:137). I further claim that Levinas has failed to adequately recognize that Merleau-Ponty's elaborations of key notions are often expanded beyond the traditional articulations of these – such as perception, sensation^{xi} and style, and this failure has led to his misapprehension regarding Merleau-Ponty's epistemology. I also briefly examine the most central notion of *substitution* which Levinas sets down in his later work *Autrement qu'être*. He has unequivocally rejected empathy, being another mode of intentionality, as a valid pathway to the Other. However, despite this, his designation of substitution is 'standing in the place of the Other'. In our common understanding this is involved in empathy, or does he in fact mean taking over the other's place – usurpation? So it is important to investigate how these two conflicting assertions can or cannot be reconciled within the overall parameters of his project. Levinas has a vested interest in defending his radical dualisms – the absolute disjunctions of the domains of ontology and metaphysics, self and Other, body and mind, interiority and exteriority – due to his implicit and explicit religious commitments, and so gears all notions and terms towards this end. This ensures that it is extremely difficult to grapple with him on shared philosophical terrain and he can always retreat into the mystery, 'God on high, outside the world' (Levinas, 1990:60). That being said, I do think he is offering a unique perspective and his account may be the best theistic interpretation of the later Husserl, whereas Merleau-Ponty could be said to offer the best non-theistic interpretation.

The compatibility of ontology and alterity

The main objection motivating Levinas' rejection of Merleau-Ponty's account of alterity is that ontology and alterity are essentially incompatible and this objection is underpinned by Levinas' rather idiosyncratic interpretation of the relation between ontology and metaphysics. For Levinas, two relationships are possible to the world. The first is an ontological relationship which totalizes and unifies the experience of Being around either the subject or the immanent 'cosmos'. The second is what he proposes is a metaphysical relationship which does not merely decenter, but rather subverts the ego via the transcendence of infinite otherness given in the face-to-face encounter. The encounter with the face or speech of an-Other according to Levinas transcends all ontological categories and presents the ego with an unavoidable ethical obligation.^{xii} The ethical relation precedes the ontological relation (Levinas, 1969:197, 1961:171). The Other, both human and divine, he argues, serve to challenge Western philosophical totalitarianism as expressed through the various ontological accounts. Hence he opposes *totalité* with *infini* in his first major work. The infinite expresses that which is irreducible, ungraspable and untotalizable in the Other. Thus for Levinas, trying to apprehend an Other through ontology is completely misguided and doomed from the start as any proposed Other within an ontology must be of the 'same' and apparent 'difference' still arises from the domain of this 'same'. The presentation of the Other is always in terms of being other-than-me, and as such does 'not leave home'. This misguided approach is illustrated for him in Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of the internal alterities of time, reflection and the body, as well as the external alterities of objects and the world. Levinas denies that these are able to offer an irreducible other as they always have their reference within the subject's experience and in this way the subject in a sense 'domesticates' or constitutes these experiences of otherness thereby bringing them under the self's domination.^{xiii} Levinas rejects the reversibility thesis thus:

The self and the other do not constitute a simple correlation which would be reversible. The reversibility of a relation where the terms are indifferently read from left to right and from right to left would couple them, the *one* to the *other*; they would complete one another in a system visible from the outside. The intended transcendence would thus be reabsorbed into the unity of the system, destroying the radical alterity of the other. (Levinas, 1969: 35 & 36)

Levinas argues that the relationship with the other is not a phenomenon, it is not empirically present, but rather it is absolutely transcendent, an infinity not a totality.

At this point I would like to turn to some analyses by Zahavi, who is able to respond to Levinas, on behalf, as it were, of Merleau-Ponty. Zahavi argues that Levinas' notion of self, being constituted only in the moment of becoming responsible for an-Other as presented in *Totalité et Infini*, is too narrowly defined such that claims that the sense of self depends on the encounter with the Other become trivially true. What interests Zahavi is the underlying presupposition of 'a more primitive but also more fundamental type of selfhood, namely the one intrinsic to the very stream of consciousness, the one to be found in the very subjectivity or first person-givenness of our experiences' (Zahavi,2004:137). So before any apprehension of responsibility for anything exterior is possible, there must already be a sense of *myself* about experience in general, that I am always this side of my body (VI: 148, VI: 194). Zahavi, following Merleau-Ponty, notes that this body has a dual aspect as both subject and object, thereby establishing an *internal alterity* identifiable through our temporal, bodily and reflective capacities of experience. It is this internal alterity which lays the grounds for our openness to Otherness in things, the world and other subjects. For Levinas, however, the only alterity that truly warrants the

appellation Otherness is that found in the encounter with other subjects. He argues that all other kinds of alterity internal to the subject's experience of body, time and reflection are constituted within the consciousness of the subject and so are only 'colonized' others, not radical others. So too with artifacts which are actually or potentially appropriated for our use. They become extensions of the self itself. Equally, that we can navigate our way in the world rendering it familiar, a part of our map, cancels the sense of true alterity to which difference rather than sameness is essential (Levinas, 1969:130, 131, 1961:103, 104). So for Levinas, the encounter with the Other can never be epistemic, or even perceptual, because according to him any intentional acts such as knowing and perceiving necessarily involve appropriation, domination or objectification and as such constitute a violence towards the Other. The true encounter with an Other is essentially and primarily ethical.

While we can acknowledge that this encounter between subjects is without question most significant, nonetheless the internal alterities of body, time and reflection do in fact lay the grounds for this encounter, and cannot be dismissed as 'merely internal differences controlled and dominated by the subject' (Zahavi, 2004:139). Furthermore, temporality is itself at the very core of subjectivity.^{xiv} The double-sensation in the body is not an identity. Rather there is a time-generating slippage in attention from touching to being touched, an alteration. This is the case also with reflection which never merely copies nor repeats the experience but rather alters it, and thereby, as Zahavi asserts, establishes a certain alterity. The very act of reflection pre-supposes a capacity for self-distanciation. Zahavi thus emphasizes Merleau-Ponty's assertion that the 'lived and the understood never coincide' – so there is never mastery by a sovereign ego as Levinas claims. Merleau-Ponty proposes, in agreement with Husserl, that for intersubjectivity to be even possible, subjectivity must already include the category of Other. The capacity for non-coinciding reversible sensations in the touching/ touched model, that self-experience is not unbroken self-presence, guarantees not only the possibility of experience of an Other, but also the recognition of the self in a mirror. He writes:

If the sole experience of the subject is the one which I gain by coinciding with it, if the mind, by definition, eludes 'the outside spectator' and can be recognized only from within, my cogito is necessarily unique, and cannot be 'shared in' by another. Perhaps we can say that it is 'transferable' to others. But then how could such a transfer ever be brought about? What spectacle can ever validly induce me to posit outside myself that mode of existence the whole significance of which demands that it be grasped from within? Unless I learn within myself to recognize the junction of the *for itself* and the *in itself*, none of those mechanisms called other bodies will ever be able to come to life; unless I have an exterior others have no interior. The plurality of consciousness is impossible if I have an absolute consciousness of myself (PP:373, PP:434, PP:431).

The very fact of embodiment, that the body is neither pure subject nor pure object ensures that intersubjectivity is possible. My self-awareness is thus not an unassailable, unified Cartesian interiority, and in this way self-awareness anticipates the awareness of the Other. Self-awareness combines both the first person perspective, *the myness of experience* and the third person perspective, my experience of myself through *the gaze of the Other*. And so we can see that this is exactly where Levinas erred. He has failed to grasp the true relation between body and mind and as a consequence of this, he mistakenly rejects the alterities internal to the subject. However, it is in virtue of such alterities that both self-recognition and recognition of an-Other is assured. As Zahavi rightly points out, if following Levinas, we were to refuse to legitimate the alterities internal to the self and to the world, then the self would become over-inflated,

too powerful as that which subsumes all such experiences within its own domain. Put simply, it would be a solipsistic self. Moreover, this self, prior to the challenge by an-Other, would then be ‘completely caught up in a self-sufficient and self-enclosed presence’ and then it could be asked – what could possibly motivate an encounter with an-Other? (Zahavi, 2004: 152). How could egological isolation be broken? The powerful face-to-face encounter whether perceptual or dialogic would be rendered completely impotent unless the subject was already capable of self-distanciation, that is, already had the category of internal otherness.

Levinas’ account of intersubjectivity, like that of Sartre’s involves a radical otherness, which he claims is capable of threatening and even overthrowing the sovereignty of the ego. However, unlike Sartre for whom self divides into self as object, *the in-itself*, and the self as freedom/ subject, *the for-itself*, Levinas posits *the self-for-the-other* – that ‘oneself is a responsibility for others’ (Levinas, 1996:87). For Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, however, there is no sovereign ego and intersubjectivity is founded on kinship made possible by the very structure of our own subjectivity.

Levinas has argued that both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty never got beyond an epistemic apprehension of Others through the various modes of intentionality which necessarily objectify. Zahavi, however, notes that Husserl pre-empted just such a criticism in proposing that objects can never be reduced to ‘merely my intentional correlates if they are experienced by others... The intersubjective experienceability of the object testifies to its real transcendence’ (Zahavi, 2001:159&160). This also applies to other subjects. And so Merleau-Ponty pursues a similar line when he asserts that it is the behavior of the Other in a shared world, that someone is making use of my familiar objects, which assures intersubjective being. In *the gaze* when I am also an Other for the Other, that I can be an alter ego for an Other, takes this one step further and affirms the plurality of subjects inhabiting the world (PP:348, PP:406, *PP:405,406*). Levinas, in contrast, refuses to see the Other as an alter ego. It even seems as though the Other is not even a fellow human being but just, Other. At first glance, it would appear that humanity has become redundant in Levinas’ account and this seems completely incompatible with his claim that the other’s suffering opens the ethical in the domain of ontology. He claims that within the encounter, the radical Other demands our respect, compassion, pity and such demands come from beyond Being. It may, however, be countered that Levinas is criticizing the tendency of humanism to valorize the self and thereby ultimately alienate the Other. Notwithstanding this allowance, Levinas still has not adequately addressed the problem of how the demands of the Other from beyond Being can possibly penetrate the ego. How can this self possibly break egological isolation to not only apprehend the suffering of the Other but also respond to the concomitant demands?

What differentiates the encounter between subjects from the encounter with objects and the world is the capacity for reciprocity. And so Levinas argues that because of the evident non-reciprocity in relations with objects, objects cannot qualify as truly Other. Interestingly, Levinas himself seems to be arguing for a non-reciprocal relation to the Other, in that the relation is unidirectional, from Other to self, from the Other’s demands on the self. So this seems to belie Levinas’ criticisms of non-reciprocity in Merleau-Ponty’s account.

Furthermore, Levinas puts a very particular interpretation on the phenomenological notion of *intentionality*. So while he acknowledges that intentionality brings us into contact with what is other, this contact is achieved in an appropriating, objectifying way. Any others apprehended via the intentionalities of perception, imagination, and importantly empathy, are still constituted within the self (Levinas, 1969:122-124, *1961: 95-96*). For Levinas, a true Other must be an Other

subject, accessible only within metaphysical relation and this leads to an ethics of transcendence. He proposes that ‘the interhuman is thus an interface: a double axis where what is “of the world” qua *phenomenological intelligibility* is juxtaposed with what is “not of the world” qua *ethical responsibility*’ (Kearney, 1984:56). Ethical exigencies arising from responsibility for the Other disrupt all possible stances in the world whether personal or political, and open us up to a meaning *otherwise than being* (autrement qu’être) which originates outside the world. Merleau-Ponty does not dispute that the alterity that obtains between subjects is of the most powerful kind, but he nonetheless proposes, contrary to Levinas, that the other forms of alterity are essential to the subject as that whereby the subject breaks egological isolation, opens to and is able to discover this more challenging alterity.

Epistemology beyond reflection

In the early work *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas is concerned with the concrete other, as encountered in day to day life. However, his later work *Autrement qu’être* argues for an ahistorical, eternal other prior to the existence of the self which is, he claims, derivative. This later articulation is ironically in some respects much closer to Merleau-Ponty’s account of alterity which Levinas had previously misrepresented as only an epistemic apprehension. It is crucial to keep in mind this distinction between the earlier account and the later one. In the earlier work the problem for Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, as articulated by Levinas, is that ideas/ knowledge/ meaning originate in consciousness and therefore such epistemic apprehensions of another remain within the sphere of self. Furthermore, Levinas claims that alterity found in knowledge is always a totalization, and in this way, constitutes a violence towards the Other. How then is contact established? Levinas proposes, eschewing reason, that this becomes possible through ‘sensibility’, which is anterior to reason and the rational categories which organize experience. This contact begins with sensations which nourish whether literally or figuratively so that experience becomes a consumption or appropriation of exteriorities – whether food, sunshine, music, water, tools and other people. This contact through sensation polarizes subject and object – and the subject swings between need and satisfaction, or is caught in desire which he claims is insatiable. And it is through these drives that an ego is established in the world. Subjectivity is thus established at the level of sensibility rather than rationality, in the concrete encounter and thereby provides a basis for contact. This would seem at first glance not to be problematic for Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation, except that Levinas argues that this contact through sensibility is entirely passive. The Other appears to the passive self from outside. Further, according to Levinas, it is when the self tries to ‘consume’, appropriate and objectify the other that the ethical moment is born because the Other resists consumption, refuses appropriation and exceeds any attempts to objectify. Levinas proposes the Other then comes to be experienced as a ‘weight’, s/he catches us off-guard and may astonish us. The Other can only do this, Levinas argues, because of his/ her essential transcendence and that s/he comes from beyond the world and is irreducible to the categories of my thought.

Underlying these claims are a number of presuppositions which can be challenged from a Merleau-Pontian perspective. Firstly, there is the problem that runs through all the philosophical encounters between Levinas and Merleau-Ponty – that is, the assumption of an absolute disjunction between exteriorities and interiorities. For Merleau-Ponty this is not the case because there is rather a dynamic interplay between the traditional dichotomies of transcendence and immanence, and so too with all the dichotomous derivatives. Secondly, there is the assumption that the self desires to ‘consume’ or appropriate the Other. In my view, a Merleau-Pontian response to this claim could be that in fact, the self *may* possibly desire this, but may equally delight in the otherness of the Other, that there *is* an Other, an alter ego, a fellow creature, so the self is no longer condemned to ‘incommunicable solitude’. The self may thus have a vested interest in *maintaining*

and even *promoting* the irreducibility of the Other. Thirdly, there is no need to import Otherness from some other-worldly domain, rather the Other can be accounted for within Merleau-Ponty's non-totalizable, non-dual ontology and guarantees the possibility of encounters which expand and enrich the world of both self and Other. The concrete face-to-face encounter is important for both philosophers in generating a sense of responsibility. While for one this responsibility issues from an other-worldly demand, for the other philosopher this responsibility arises within the context of fellow-feeling and a shared world.

Sensation and Sentiment

Levinas' final objection is that the Other must be apprehended in 'sentiment' rather than 'sensation'; that feeling is prior to touch and so alterity is therefore not first and foremost a modality of sensation, but of sentiment.^{xv} Here again, Levinas is promoting his radical distinction between ontology and metaphysics, with sensation/ perception belonging to the realm of ontology and sentiment to that of metaphysics. The first, he argues, concerns Being and the second the Good and therefore ethics. In my view these distinctions do not hold up under scrutiny and depend on the misapprehension of the real relation between exteriority and interiority.

For Merleau-Ponty, interiority is not radically separated from exteriority – the felt (*le senti*) is the necessary counterpart of feeling (*sentir*) – and this is why Merleau-Ponty can offer a rehabilitated account of sensation which accommodates sentiment. The feeling response/ affectivity is thus not separate from the knowing/ the perceptual experience. As neuroscience has discovered, perception is already affectively informed in two ways. Firstly, it is affect which motivates the selection of which percept is the focus of attention. Secondly, the affective valence of any experience is registered prior to any cognitive apprehension; we experience attraction, repulsion or indifference before information about the cognitive significance is noted. The tendency to separate these functions is due only to language, and in reality, they are not separable, they are two distinguishable aspects of the one experience. We can see this in Merleau-Ponty's prescient criticism of empiricism for excluding 'from perception the anger or the pain which I nevertheless read in a face, the religion whose essence I seize in some hesitation or reticence, the city whose temper I recognize in the attitude of a policeman or the style of a public building' (PP:23&24, PP:27, PP:47). Levinas claims that Merleau-Ponty's rehabilitated account of sensation is repeating that of empiricist sensualism,^{xvi} however, Merleau-Ponty is very clear in his repudiation of such approaches which he argues falsify not only the cultural world and the natural world, but also the intrinsic relation that obtains between them (PP:24, PP:28, PP:48).

Merleau-Ponty thus, in this early work, rejects such impoverished accounts of perception and correlatively impoverished accounts of sensation and unequivocally affirms affect, along with action and will as original modes of engagement with the world including other subjects. In Levinas' view, if the subject's engagement with an-Other is via perception/ sensation this necessarily involves appropriation and domination by the self – as being other-than-me, and this he mistakenly claims is the account which Merleau-Ponty is offering. Levinas further suggests that Merleau-Ponty's sentiment is merely *information about sentiment*, and he then rather inconsistently proposes that true sentiment is the "attuning oneself to the other" (Levinas, "Sensibility", 1990:64). To my mind this equates true sentiment with empathy, which Levinas has already rejected for being another mode of intentionality. Levinas makes a number of further inconsistent and confusing assertions around the notion of sentiment. He derides the transfers of sentiment (Levinas, 1996:91), such as in sympathy or empathy, and insists they play no role in his account of ethics. The ethical relation is

not a human relation but rather a relation to infinity which is revealed via the face-to-face encounter. This encounter with the Other is not with an alter ego, nor a fellow human being, but the other is just Other. In this way one could argue that Levinas' refusal to recognize the Other as an alter ego, constitutes a more devastating violence than intentionality. In stark contrast with this view, Merleau-Ponty's perceptual/ expressive engagement with the Other in a shared world, involves multiple dimensions – emotional, imaginative, historical, cultural, in addition to reversibilities which enrich rather than impoverish any encounter.

As noted earlier, Levinas' claims that the Other is first apprehended in sentiment, rather than sensation, which Levinas proposes is Merleau-Ponty's standpoint – *feeling* (sentir) versus *the felt* (le senti). Does Levinas' oppositional interpretation of Merleau-Ponty in fact hold up under scrutiny? Zahavi tackles this issue of oppositions in the wider debate around intersubjectivity. Zahavi (2001:151), argues for a broader and richer conception of intersubjectivity rather than that promoted by Levinas in the exclusive face-to-face encounters between subjects. Following the phenomenologists, Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Zahavi proposes that intersubjectivity is evident in 'simple perception, in tool-use, in emotions, drives and different types of self awareness ... [and moreover that] the three regions 'self', 'others' and 'world' belong together; they reciprocally illuminate one another, and can only be understood in their interconnection' (Zahavi, 2001:151). Again Levinas' tendency to dichotomize the key terms of the debate proves to be the underlying cause of his misapprehension and rejection of the phenomenological viewpoint. He rejects Merleau-Ponty's arguments for a dynamic interplay between exteriorities and interiorities as opposed to an absolute disjunction. For Levinas, 'the presentation of the face, expression, does not disclose an inward world previously closed, adding thus a new region to comprehend or take over' (Levinas, 1969:212), rather it conceals the other's interiority and in this way for Levinas the face-to-face encounter guarantees irreducibility. What is paramount for Levinas is the concrete encounter with an Other - when the subject is able to 'stand in the shoes of the Other', when the face/ speech of the Other demands respect and compassion - not only is that whereby an irreducible Other is established but also wherein the ethical imperative is assured.

Irreducibility

The crux of Levinas' criticisms of the alterity offered in the reversibility thesis is that these presentations of the Other as the Other of a self, as other-than-me, offer a relative Other which never leaves the orbit of the same/ the self. So, as previously discussed, underpinning Levinas' rejection of Merleau-Ponty's account is that against Merleau-Ponty's non-dualism, he is promoting various dualisms, most notably the dualism of an absolute disjunction between self and other – the Other is an absolute, radical Other. This Other is only known to the subject in his/ her demands for care, for compassion, for respect – and so the first mode of connection with an-Other is always at the level of ethics and responsibility. Moreover, Levinas stresses this relation is irreversible, asymmetrical and unidirectional – from Other to the self. This notion of unidirectionality goes completely against Merleau-Ponty's idea of reciprocity which ensures self/ Other differentiation. 'In the absences of reciprocity there is not an alter ego, since the world of the one then takes in completely that of the other, so that one feels disinherited in favour of the other' (PP:357, PP:416, PP:414).

These differences between the two philosophers accentuate the significant divergence in their overall philosophical projects. For Levinas true ethics by-passes the alter ego and demands a sub-jection to the Other, an annihilation of any egoistic interests, whereas for Merleau-Ponty there needs must be an alter ego in a lateral relation which requires an

ethical relation to the self as much as to the Other. Thus, Merleau-Ponty would argue that the relation of self to Other is bi-directional, that is, reversible, not only in the demands of the Other but also when a subject experiences an-Other in the refusal or acceptance of the subject's claims for care, respect and compassion and vice versa. This mutuality is central to Merleau-Ponty's vision and I propose serves to dignify the relation between subjects - mutuality rather than subjection. How can resistance to tyranny and self-defence in abuse be accommodated within the philosophical economy of Levinas' ethics? The ethical edict 'thou shalt not kill' epitomizes for Levinas the primacy the life of the Other has over the self. Levinas asserts that murder is impossible because the murderer is trying to kill the otherness of the Other and this can never be achieved because this otherness issues from infinity, outside the world. The motivation of a murderer is entirely debatable. Moreover, the elusiveness of the murdered Other can be accounted for in *not* reducing the Other to the physical body. There is no need to import infinity to explain this. Levinas does, however, have a response to such a question. He proposes that each subject is responsible for the responsibility of the Other and he repeatedly quotes the following statement from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'everyone of us is guilty before all, for everyone and everything, and I more than others...'. This quote certainly captures his sense of subjectivity as being defined by responsibility, passivity and sub-jection. But I wonder, is this not then a tacit endorsement of exploitation, masochism and collusion in bad behavior?

Levinas concludes that there is a 'spiritual bond' between subjects grounded in 'non-in-difference', or love which demands recognition when confronted with the face of the Other and issues 'from most high outside the world'. Moreover, he proposes that God is apprehended only by means of the interhuman dimension. And so here, we can clearly see that, despite protestations that he maintains distinct boundaries between his philosophical and his theological accounts, Levinas' philosophical project is driven by a religious agenda. We could say that Levinas' project bears a similarity in this sense to that of Kant's in his efforts to define the limits of reason so as to protect the domain of 'faith'. Levinas delimits both ontology and metaphysics so that a human-mediated God relation can be upheld and this has become his *idée fixe*. This is also why he cannot accept Merleau-Ponty's account which accommodates ambiguities, most notably the reversibility which underwrites identity-in-difference and defines his prototype of Being – the flesh.

The chapter entitled 'Substitution' is regarded as the key to understanding Levinas' later account of the ethical imperative. We could say this is his equivalent to Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis in that it performs a similar function in his ethical project. Through this notion Levinas aims to challenge ontological renderings of identity which he had not adequately addressed in his earlier work *Totalité et Infini*. Although in this work, the Other 'calls the self into question', the sovereignty of the ego nonetheless remains intact. In *Autrement qu'être*, I am responsible for everything and everyone, even that which is against my will, to the extreme he argues of being responsible for the responsibility of the Other. The language he uses reflects this extreme stance and *substitution* is revealed in an inner affective life of self-persecution, obsession for all the Others, uni-directional love and purgation of guilt. He borrows the phrase from Rimbaud 'I am other', to illustrate his claim that at the core of subjectivity is an *I-for-the-other*,^{xvii} and the *for-itself* is merely derived from this. Thus here, we get a clear indication that Levinas' account involves dependent relations, the unidirectional dependence of self on the Other, as opposed to Merleau-Ponty's interdependence. It is important to note that there is a certain concordance with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty in their assertions that the self is born into sociality, however, while they ground this in the lateral intertwining of Being, Levinas places this outside Being, beyond ontology and this is a unidirectional relation. 'Subjectivity is being a hostage' (Levinas, 1978:202, 1974:127) to the Other, thereby

reversing the traditional centrality and domination of the self, and substitution underwrites this relation by forcing the self 'to stand in the place of the other'. It is on this basis of substitution that the self responds to the Other and is absolutely, irreversibly responsible for the Other. 'In substitution my being that belongs to me and not to another is undone, and it is through substitution that I am not "another", but me' (Levinas, 1978:202, 1974:127).

Earlier I posed the possibility that when Levinas asserts that the self must 'stand in the place of the Other', because he rejects empathy and reversibility, he could mean usurpation. This seems to me to be a possible alternative to an account of intersubjectivity based on empathy and reversibility. However, in order to keep faith with Levinas' aims it is necessary to consider the possibility of an usurpation that undercuts the sovereignty of the usurper in the very act of usurping. In this way, there can be a radical reversal and the usurper finds herself as hostage to the Other. Levinas proposes that 'it is through the condition of being a hostage that there can be pity, compassion, pardon and proximity in the world – even the little there is, even the simple "after you sir"' (Levinas, 1996:91). I am already in my core *for-the-Other* anterior to any sense of self arising, before reason and before freedom are possible.

Merleau-Ponty also refers to this notion of *substitution* but in an entirely different manner; his substitution is effected in the world and in virtue of embodiment, whereas for Levinas this is an other-worldly event and occurs in virtue of a pre-existing responsibility. Merleau-Ponty writes that the reason why '... the compresence of my "consciousness" and my "body" is extended into the compresence of myself and the other person, is that the "I am able to" and the "the other person exists" belong here and now to the same world, that the body proper is a premonition of the other person, the *Einfühlung* (*empathy*) an echo of my incarnation, and that a flash of meaning makes them *substitutable* in the absolute presence of origins' (S:175: S:221). The above discussion of the notion of 'substitution' in the works of Levinas and Merleau-Ponty is admittedly inconclusive and requires further investigation. What is clear, however, is that each philosopher's pivotal notion – 'substitution for Levinas' and 'reversibility' for Merleau-Ponty – does important philosophical work only within the parameters of their distinct metaphysical/ ontological commitments.

Conclusion

I have argued that Levinas' failure to recognize that Merleau-Ponty's non-dual ontology is of an entirely different order to traditional ontologies has led to various misapprehensions of key concepts including the reversibility thesis which underwrites Merleau-Ponty's account of alterity. Merleau-Ponty's non-dual ontology is heterogenous, non-totalizing and non-reductive and is thus not only able to accommodate intersubjective alterities but also the alterities that obtain in regard to things and the world. Levinas has claimed that the internal alterities of time, reflection and the body cannot be regarded as true alterities as they do not leave the sphere of the self. So too he rejects the purported alterity of things and the world as these are according to him 'domesticated Others' not true others. Alterity for Levinas is only possible between subjects. While acknowledging that the alterity which obtains between subjects is of the most powerful kind, I have argued that alterity internal to the subject is essential as that whereby the subject is able to experience her own self-alienation and thereby recognize external alterity. Otherness is a category internal to the self and subjectivity is an intersubjectivity; ipseity and alterity are mutually determining. Correlatively, the issues raised by Levinas of asymmetry and non-reciprocity across the various domains of alterity, I have demonstrated are both non-problems and in fact serve to guarantee the irreducibility of the Other. It is my contention that the reversibility thesis - that self, other and world are inherently relational, that there is interdependence at the level of ontology - is vindicated by all the arguments above.

Levinas presents a very persuasive account if one is willing to accept the underlying theistic religious metaphysics, but within a philosophical orientation this account becomes implausible for all the reasons detailed in the earlier discussions. These criticisms notwithstanding, Levinas' ethical vision, as also Merleau-Ponty's vision, represent important challenges to the hegemony of reflective ethical accounts with their reinstatement of the concrete, the embodied encounter, at the heart of ethical consideration. Pivotal in both accounts is the decentering of the ethical subject, asymmetrical for Levinas and relational for Merleau-Ponty; and while the asymmetricality of one and the relationality of the other ensure two very different approaches, the themes of proximity, vulnerability, the demands of the Other, and unavoidable responsibility establish a common ground for interrogation and useful dialogue.

Endnotes

ⁱ *Les Temps Modernes* (184-5. Oct. 1961:372)

ⁱⁱ The compilation of essays in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* 1990 - provide not only the paper delivered by Lefort, but also related critical works of Levinas and responses to these.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'It is not accurate to say that the child cannot differentiate between its own and other's experience – it is not a question of perspectives at that moment. The child, the infant, begins by coming into a world that the other sees, whereas it does not see it as one world'. (Lefort, 1990:9)

^{iv} Renaud Barbaras' recent work has also emphasized this particular issue in Merleau-Ponty's work, and taken the notions of depth and desire in fruitful directions.

^v Meltzoff and Moore (1977)

^{vi} Willet, Cynthia. *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities*, London: Routledge 1995 ; Christophe, Anne et al. "Bootstrapping Lexical and Syntactic Acquisition" in *Language and Speech*, 2008, 51 (1&2). 61-75

^{vii} It should be noted that there is a lacuna in Merleau-Ponty's considerations with regard to deaf and blind people.

^{viii} It is important to note that some of the scholarship regarding Husserl's philosophical commitments has depended on secondary sources and also has not necessarily taken account of the later works, works which Merleau-Ponty had access to but which have only relatively recently become available in English. Zahavi's paper (2002) "Merleau-Ponty on Husserl : A reappraisal" is thus an invaluable resource for scholars so as to accurately attribute philosophical views and insights. My point here is that Dillon's claim that Husserl cannot account for alterity is challengeable.

^{ix} Understandable on two counts: firstly, that Lefort maintains a strong commitment to the traditions of psychoanalysis – Freudian, Kleinian and Lacanian, and; secondly, because Merleau-Ponty himself makes a number of references to the birth of the infant within the context of his discussion of 'wild being'. However, once again, we must emphasize those references that complete his overall project and set aside those that divert from the principal aims.

^x As noted by Michael B. Smith in his introduction to these two texts, the translator had to contend with Levinas' particularly allusive style of writing along with a frequent absence of the copula, so both these particularities add to the difficulties of interpretation.

^{xi} 'Also, one might wonder whether, to a certain degree, Merleau-Ponty is not rehabilitating here, while deepening it, the sensualist conception of sensation which was both feeling [sentir] and felt [senti], without empiricism having had to be startled at this psychism, which it construed without the dynamism of horizons, and without intentionality'. (Levinas ,1990:57)

^{xii} It is in discourse rather than perception that the face is revealed (Levinas, 1969:193, 1961:167) beyond phenomenality (Levinas, 1969:200, 1961:174).

^{xiii} As soon as a self observes or uses objects in the world, they become part of the domain of the self and therefore not Other. *ibid.* (Levinas, 1969:111, 132,133, 1961:83, 105,106); The self's engagement through intentionality cancels any sense of alterity. *ibid.* (Levinas, 1969:27,28, 129, 1961:xv, xvi,102,103)

^{xiv} ‘I am myself time’ (PP:421, PP:489, PP:483).

^{xv} *Op.Cit.* Levinas (1990) pp 63,64

^{xvi} Levinas notes that for Merleau-Ponty, motor and perceptual acts are intertwined; but then Levinas claims that for Merleau-Ponty, these acts ‘are lived in the form of “sensation”, in which, as in the doctrine of empiricist sensualism, the *feeling* coincides, without any intentionality, with the *felt*’. (Levinas, “Sensibility”, 1990: 61)

^{xvii} ‘This rupture of identity, this changing of being into signification, that is into substitution, is the subject’s subjectivity, or its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility’ (Levinas, 1996:120&121).

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