

The critical intertwining of historicity: historicity as phenomenological and existential crisis in Merleau-Ponty's works

O entrelaçamento crítico da história: a historicidade como crise fenomenológica e existencial nas obras de Merleau-Ponty

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ABSTRACT

Merleau-Ponty's account of historicity is significant both as a phenomenological account and as an existential account of our historical situation. Of course, these aspects of his work are not mutually exclusive, but intertwined. And each aspect contributes to the sense of crisis of human historicity. We will first consider the phenomenological crisis of historicity — which is to say, we will consider the crisis of historicity phenomenologically. This is the attempt to reveal the conditions of the possibility of history from within history or the structure of our historical situation — where Merleau-Ponty's position departs from Husserlian phenomenology. Next, we will consider the existential crisis of historicity — which is to say, we will consider the crisis of historicity existentially. This is the attempt to understand the imperative that things matter to us historically. Finally, we will briefly indicate the importance of these aspects of our historicity as a critical intertwining. This critical intertwining reveals the mutual encroachment of the "how" and the "why" of our historicity, which Merleau-Ponty describes at the end of his career as chiasmic existence within the flesh of the world. The critical intertwining as interrogation of our historical being provides the "who," "what," "when," and "where" of our historicity.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty. Historicity. Existential Crisis.

RESUMO

As considerações de Merleau-Ponty sobre a historicidade são significativas, tanto como um relato fenomenológico, quanto como um relato existencial de nossa situação histórica.

Naturalmente, estes aspectos de seu trabalho não se excluem mutuamente, mas se entrelaçam. E cada aspecto contribui para o sentido da crise da historicidade humana. Primeiro consideraremos a crise fenomenológica da historicidade – ou seja, consideraremos a crise da historicidade fenomenologicamente. Esta é a tentativa de revelar as condições da possibilidade da história a partir da história ou da estrutura de nossa situação histórica – onde a posição de Merleau-Ponty se afasta da fenomenologia husserliana. Em seguida, consideraremos a crise existencial de historicidade – ou seja, consideraremos a crise de historicidade existencialmente. Esta é a tentativa de compreender o imperativo de que as coisas são importantes para nós historicamente. Finalmente, vamos indicar brevemente a importância destes aspectos de nossa historicidade como um entrelaçamento crítico. Este entrelaçamento crítico revela a intrusão mútua do “como” e do “porquê” de nossa historicidade, que Merleau-Ponty descreve no final de sua carreira como uma existência chiasmática dentro da carne do mundo. O cruzamento crítico como interrogatório de nosso ser histórico fornece o “quem”, “o quê”, “quando” e “onde” de nossa historicidade.

Palavras-chave: Merleau-Ponty. Historicidade. Crise existencial.

Disclosure of a ‘sedimentation’ — disclosure of our ethnocentrism, our universalism as a naïve belief, as a projection of our history that we thought to be a law of the world.

(MERLEAU-PONTY, 1996, p. 41).

The phenomenological crisis of historicity: the husserlian origin

Edmund Husserl described a crisis in modernity such that philosophy had abandoned its promising critical roots.¹ It is important to recognize the reflexivity at work in the words *crisis* and *critical*. The crisis was recognized through the potential for philosophical critique, though the crisis was that the “critical roots” had yet to sprout.

Husserl was addressing the crisis dawning in the malaise of the interwar years and the disillusionment with the promise of the enlightenment is experienced in the crises of everyday life. Over the course of his lifetime, he witnessed the horrors of the first world war and the economic depression that arguably was one of the leading causes of the second. Husserl had been banished from his research libraries and was subject to antisemitic censorship. These are not merely ancillary historical observations — they reflect a cultural crisis Husserl thought could only be remedied by the development of philosophy as a rigorous science, transcendental phenomenology.²

¹ Husserl formulates this crisis in his 1935 essay, *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man* in a Eurocentric and, I think, a racist manner. It is not my intention to reiterate this aspect of his thought. [For an interesting account of this troubling essay as well as an original response to the problems identified by Husserl, cf. (GORDON, 1997).

² Again, I must sadly note that the promise of Husserl's philosophy is sutured to a repugnant cultural imperialism. Thus, Husserl fails to recognize the connection between the crisis of the rise of national socialism and the incipient German nationalism he espoused. Cf. Husserl's response to national socialism in 1933: “The future alone will judge which was the true Germany in 1933, and who were the true Germans — those who subscribe to the more or less materialistic-mythical racial prejudices of the day, or those Germans pure in heart and mind, heirs to the great Germans of the past whose tradition they revere and perpetuate” (EVANS, 2003, p. 421). History reveals now that the real problem is not who were the “true Germans,” but that fidelity itself.

Husserl associates the crisis of modernity with the lack of any doctrinal system in philosophy. Indeed, he portrays modernity as a series of failures which indirectly indicate the way toward the development of philosophy as a rigorous science.³ Neither the natural sciences nor the human sciences can provide reliable knowledge until they are grounded on philosophy as a rigorous science, which he construes as transcendental phenomenology. Empirical science and history each suffer a naiveté when lacking their philosophical grounding. Husserl makes it abundantly clear that the crisis of our time is not that philosophy needs to sharpen or to perfect its status as a rigorous science; it currently lacks any scientific orientation whatsoever (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 73). The crisis is recognizable through a series of failures to account for lived experience, first by the natural sciences and then by the human sciences.

Husserl's articulations of his phenomenological philosophy were presented as antidotes to the relativism characteristic of two aspects of the crisis of modernity presented by *historicism* and *psychologism*. These two aspects are interrelated in important ways. Both were the first faltering steps toward genuine critique that grew out of what Husserl saw as the unrealized promise of modernity. Husserl associates each aspect with its specific traits: psychologism with its naturalism, and historicism with its rationalism.⁴

The separation of nature and spirit is at the heart of the modern condition; and the two corresponding models of science, the natural sciences and the human sciences, are defined as mutually exclusive no matter how "we may bemoan it" (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 135). This entails two parallel metaphysical assumptions that occasion the crisis of modernity as well as the means to recognize the crisis. These are the discovery of nature and the discovery of history.

The discovery of nature involves a metaphysical assumption, "the existential positing of physical nature" (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 87) whereby nature is reified. It is the discovery of nature as object for the natural sciences (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 79). It is important to see that Husserl sees the discovery of nature as "very critical in its own way" (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 87). It was, after all, the first to recognize, albeit in a confused form, the need for a scientific approach. However, its critical capabilities required transformation. Another way of seeing this is, in effect, the value of the liability presented by naturalism. The discovery of nature and the attempt to account for lived experience in empirical terms inevitably falls short of its mark. Psychologism emerged as the naturalization of the psyche in an attempt to address this shortcoming. Husserl saw psychologism as a failure insofar as it located ideals within nature, and hence entailed fundamental contradictions and a naïve relativism; yet psychologism was "a muddy form" of a philosophical science — a step in the right direction.

The recognition of the failure of naturalism is the occasion of the second metaphysical discovery, the discovery of history (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 79).⁵ The discovery of history entails the existential positing of spirit as the object of study of the human sciences (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 89). The human sciences, through their naïve reductivism when ungrounded by a science of philosophy, entail a relativism of a different sort — historicism. Historicism is the attempt to account for lived experience essentially within history. For Husserl, the discovery of history that

³ This is consistent with the way Husserl saw his own philosophical trajectory. Most every text seems to be long sought-after proper introduction to transcendental phenomenology, only to be succeeded by the next attempt. An aged Husserl famously described himself as "a miserable beginner."

⁴ I use the term *rationalism* only out of desperation here, since *spiritism* or *intellectualism* are misleading in various ways. The trait is the reductivism of all things to *Geist*. Jack Reynolds suggested *culturalism* as an alternative; and while I think that it captures part of the meaning very well, it seems restricted to a certain form of objective spirit. So, I chose what I take to be the least onerous of these infelicitous alternatives, *rationalism*.

⁵ As we shall see below, Merleau-Ponty appropriates this very locution in his own original account of historicism as crisis.

was occasioned by the recognition of the limitations of naturalism marks another important step in the unfolding of the crisis of modernity. He regards the historicism the human sciences as “more original and hence more fundamental research” than the natural sciences can accomplish (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 129). The most important accomplishment of the historicist human sciences is the thoroughgoing critique of naturalism. However, while the human sciences recognized and thematized for the first time the limitations of naturalism, this new critical attitude came with its own liability: it entailed a historical skepticism. Like naturalism, historicist human science marks a step in the right direction as a furtive attempt to develop a scientific account of lived experience. However, the discovery of history as spirit as the object of study for the human sciences results in a reductive account trapped with history. Its naiveté is manifest insofar as it provides a *rationale* for the understanding of phenomena whose value and ideality are limited by their historical situatedness. The human sciences bear the problem of historicism since “historical reasons can only produce historical consequences” (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 126). Historicism forsakes the resources of history’s transcendental structure for the immediacy of the historical situation. Hence, it lacks the rational doctrinal principles of a rigorous science, which Husserl thought could only be provided by transcendental phenomenology and is mired in historical skepticism. According to Husserl, only transcendental phenomenology could correct the errors of historicism and provide an accurate scientific account of our historicity.

The most important attempt to develop a scientific historicist account, according to Husserl, is Dilthey’s *Weltanschauungsphilosophie*. Husserl recognizes it as an improvement upon earlier historicist models of the human sciences and another important step in the recognition of the need for philosophy as a rigorous science. Husserl notes that Dilthey’s account of *Weltanschauungen* [worldviews] is a noble, even if moribund, attempt to account for trans-historical ideals through the development of an historicist hermeneutics. Dilthey sought a science of interpretation that allowed for the understanding of ideas across history, but which was historically situated. Hence, Husserl laments, *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* is a “child of historical skepticism” (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 130). Even though Dilthey’s improvements produced “significant and wonderful things” (HUSSERL, 1965, p. 123) in its attempt to remedy historical skepticism, it still lacks recourse to the transcendental structures of history yielding another naïve relativism.

Husserl saw the crisis of historicity in our time, in terms of naturalism and psychologism, as well as historicism and *Weltanschauungsphilosophie*, as a series of failures whose ultimate value lies in their recognized liability rather than their ability. He thought that only transcendental phenomenology could address the crisis of our time by laying bare the pure transcendental structure of history.

The phenomenological crisis of Historicity: Merleau-Ponty’s translation

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of the crisis of historicity, following Husserl, also is a critique of psychologism and historicism. Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl by describing the phenomenological crisis in terms of sustained interrogations of nature and history. Yet his critique of historicism is quite original and differs markedly from Husserl’s. For Merleau-Ponty, recognizing the transcendental structure of history in no way extricates us from our historical situation. In fact, that inability is not something to overcome, our historical engagement is an essential aspect of the structure of our historicity. Merleau-Ponty foregrounds the reflexivity of

historicity as a phenomenological crisis. The discovery of history is an event within history. "This circle is the definition of history: a reality which is the cause and effect of the knowledge we have of it" (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 250/205 - LPC). Merleau-Ponty's account of the crisis of historicity is not located in one text. It is spread across his work and articulated in a variety of ways. And as we shall see below, the phenomenological account of the crisis of our historicity is ineluctably intertwined with the existential account.

But let us begin this part of our analysis near the end of Merleau-Ponty's career. Merleau-Ponty begins his Preface to *Signes* by "going meta" as the kids say these days. He writes about the task of assembling the essays for the anthology, the editing process, and the difficulty of writing the Preface to such a volume that would establish the common domain of the included essays. However, these apparently incidental remarks radiate well beyond the self-indulgent musings of a famous philosophical author. They inaugurate an important discussion on historicity and ontology that will be the focus of this essay.

It is as if some cunning mechanism hid the event at the very moment it showed its face. As if history censored the dramas it is made up of, as if it loved to hide, and gave us a glimpse of truth only in brief moments of disarray. As if the rest of the time it contrived to thwart all our "surpassing," to restore the rules and formulas of its repertoire and persuade us in short that nothing is coming to pass. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 9)⁶.

One recalls the final words of *l'Oeil et l'esprit*, which were written roughly at the same time. (In fact, these would be the final two works Merleau-Ponty would live to see published). There, Merleau-Ponty beautifully emphasizes the infinite horizon of possible meanings of a painting that complement and complicate our urgent need to fix its meaning thus and so. "But this deception [the purported goal of a comprehensive and determinate meaning] is that of the imagined fact, which demands a positivity which exactly fills its void" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 92)⁷. But such a goal is not only unattainable, the quest for an apodictic meaning for these works of art is entirely the wrong goal. Instead, "they have almost their whole life ahead of them" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 93) insofar as they could come to be meaningful in unforeseeable ways.

If we consider the assembled texts of *Signes* as artistic expressions, as works of art, we may draw upon these two contemporaneous reflections to understand the rich senses in which our historicity is a crisis when considered hermeneutically and phenomenologically. Just as no painting ever comes to be "the" painting, none of these texts could offer "the last word" their topics. Importantly, they are not even Merleau-Ponty's "final words" on the subject, except perhaps in the most morbid sense of the phrase. The essays of *Signes*, which originally appeared over a period from 1947 – 1958, are texts reborn in their new context in 1960.⁸ They are reborn in the new context of the anthology and in the new context of that historical moment where new meanings (re)appear (Cf. DAVIS, 1990).

Please note that this is not an exceptional hermeneutic situation. Every text is an event that involves its writings and its readings, and hence its meanings must always manifest some degree of novelty. A unique invitation for interpretation is offered every time a text is read or re-read. This implies a critical hermeneutic insight that Merleau-Ponty explicitly stated about

⁶ All translations of Merleau-Ponty are mine, though I will sometimes provide corresponding citations in the published English translations after the French pagination when there is something to observe there.

⁷ I am reminded of the carnival barker who summons up victims by quickly assessing what they desire to proudly announce that that is exactly what they are selling.

⁸ In fact, they are re-re-born even as we speak.

actions in his infamous letter ending his association with Jean-Paul Sartre, and which discloses an aspect of Merleau-Ponty's account of the phenomenological crisis of historicity. Every act, like every (other) work of art, enjoys a "right of rectification" (DAVIS, 2001). Certainly actors, like authors and readers, are "condemned to meaning [*sens*]." (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960a, p. xiv). This includes a historical *sens* — both as meaning and direction. The imperative to fix meanings, rather than the fixing of any specific meanings, transcends historical moments. Every text and every act offer an invitation to meaningfulness that is neither reducible to nor irrelevant to the intention of its author or agent. Every act and every text offer an invitation to meaningfulness to its audience, including its author or its agent. In the specific case of the Preface to *Signes*, Merleau-Ponty avows that these texts, which he sees anew as reader, have changed meanings since he authored them. And there is no historical perspective where this invitation ceases, though a variety of forces might result in sedimented meanings that occlude and hold sway over other possible meanings, at least for that moment. "History never avows"⁹ means that history never determines or intends specific meanings such that truth and justice prevail. This bespeaks the crisis of our historicity: while we are situated within history and attuned to the historical context of our actions, history does not offer some God's-eye view of our situation. Unlike Husserl's solution to the phenomenological crisis of historicity, Merleau-Ponty seeks no pure transcendental recourse. Instead, the phenomenological essences are situated within lived history — a philosophy born where history is being made rather than one that seeks it ready-made (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 9-10). The danger and the allure is that this historical contingency becomes meaningful as "dream or nightmare." (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 10). Surely Husserl would regard this contingency as an abandoning of phenomenology and step back into the relativism of *Weltanschauungsphilosophie*. We must consider the matter further.

In his Preface, Merleau-Ponty looks back to two specific dreams or nightmares from his past: his relationship with Marxism, and in this the context of his relationship with Sartre.¹⁰ Here we will limit our remarks primarily to the former. In this text, Merleau-Ponty portrays Marxism as a dream-or-nightmare whose truth must be critically revisited, as he notes in the dramatic concluding lines. "History never avows, and not even its lost illusions, but it does not repeat [*recommence*] them." (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 61).¹¹ But this is clearly not the complete dismissal of Marxism that one might mistake it for taken out of context. Earlier in the Preface, Merleau-Ponty referred to Marxism as a "secondary truth," a "failed truth," and a "classic" idea worthy of its reprise (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 21-22; 24). He offered an analogy between

⁹ The English translator renders this sentence, "History never confesses." [Signs (tr. R. McCleary), Northwestern University Press, 1964, p.4.] There is a sense in which *avouer* can mean *to confess*, but in the sense of making manifest something that was hidden, not in the religious sense of offering confession of sins to a priest. In English I think the religious or at least moral sense jumps out more than the original French. And, after all, there is a perfectly appropriate cognate available in English: *to avow*. Richard Simanke and Robert Vallier, in discussing this matter, disagree and affirm the translation into the English and Portuguese editions as "confesses." On the other hand, Jérôme Melançon agrees with me, but owing to the unpleasantness of the clunky-sounding word "avows" in this context, he would render the phrase "History admits nothing."

¹⁰ In fact, regarding his relationship with Sartre, it is more complicated than this in this text. Merleau-Ponty offers his reprise indirectly, as a lengthy commentary on Sartre's 1960 introduction to Paul Nizan's *Aden Arabie*. At first this seems to be a strange deviation in the line of the text. He blames Sartre for needing to evaluate Nizan as he was long ago, when, had he lived, Nizan would have changed beyond the Nizan Sartre needed him to be. It would take us far beyond the limits of this discussion to give an adequate account of this part of the text; but let us only remark that there are some very interesting places where Merleau-Ponty inserts himself into the account of the Nizan-Sartre relationship and even indicates that one purpose of this preface is to offer readers an account of historicity and politics that differs from Sartre.

¹¹ I must note the misleading English translation by Richard McCleary of this sentence (op. cit., p. 35). McCleary renders it "History never confesses, not even her lost illusions, but neither does she dream of them again." This is a very speculative translation, to say the least. The French sentence reads, "*L'histoire n'avoue jamais, et pas même ses illusions perdues, mais elle ne les recommence pas.*" See note 24 above regarding the contentious "confesses for *avoue*; but the more egregious error here is the substitution of dream for *recommence*. One must admit that *repeat* is not a perfect rendering for *recommence*; but the literal *restart* is ungainly.

understanding the truth of Marxism today with understanding the truth of the Pythagorean theorem. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 21). Since the discovery of alternate geometric spaces other than plane geometry, we recognize that the truth of the Pythagorean theorem is restricted to the specific frame of reference. But that does not mean it is false. It is a "failed truth" in the sense that one can no longer present it as a comprehensive account of all geometric possibilities, as it was for centuries. Likewise, with regard to Marxism, we are not living in the political domain of the nineteenth century. Marxism can no longer be presented, if it ever was, as a timeless truth. It is historically bound. If one maintains, as Merleau-Ponty seemed to do in *Humanisme et terreur*, that Marxism is not a philosophy of history but *the* philosophy of history, we must amend that bold claim with the provision that it must be subject to critique since the philosophy of history itself is a historical phenomenon.¹² If history does not repeat its lost illusions, it will be through critique that engages these secondary truths rather than dismissing them outright. We will return to Merleau-Ponty's late account of Marxism in the final section.

We might adapt this hermeneutical account to reveal its phenomenological orientation by recalling Merleau-Ponty's famous adage from *Phénoménologie de la perception* (where, after all, Merleau-Ponty was launching his own original direction in existential phenomenology): "the greatest teaching of the phenomenological reduction is that no complete reduction is possible." (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960a, p. xiii). Likewise, the greatest lesson we can draw from our historicity is that no historical account is ever complete, objective, let alone absolute. Merleau-Ponty's transcendental reflection is always situated within lived experience and never pure. "There is in human existence no unconditional possession, and no fortuitous attribute. Human existence will force us to revise our usual notion of necessity and contingency, because it is the transformation of contingency to necessity by the act of reprise" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960a, p. 199). The demand for reprise is built-into our very existence. Far from a closing over on the past, history is an "open and singular" phenomenon, and "a series of events that not only have a sense, but still provide it themselves." "The historical subject does not create his role from scratch." History, then, is neither a perpetual novelty nor a perpetual repetition, but the unique movement that both creates stable forms and breaks them" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960a, p. 103-104; 90). The phenomenological crisis of historicity reveals this radical openness as the matrix of the *sens* of history.

However, Merleau-Ponty's account of the phenomenological crisis of historicity has a transcendental aspect (albeit in a new sense of transcendental) insofar as he seeks to reveal the structure of history and not be trapped within a naïve relativism. That is, we have recourse to what I have elsewhere called "historical depth" (Cf. DAVIS, 2016). Merleau-Ponty provides a detailed account of depth, especially in *Phénoménologie de la perception* and *L'Oeil et l'esprit*. We see depth in a painting or in the world by virtue of the conditions for the possibility of our experience. Likewise, our actions are meaningful with a historical resonance. There is an historical depth to our actions that allows for the right to rectification. This involves both protention and retention. The possible meanings of an action are its latent presence, as are the meanings taken up through its provenance. Furthermore, these are intertwined such that new meanings of an action's provenance will continue to emerge, just as new future meanings of an action will take on further new meanings when recontextualized in terms of newly seen old meanings.¹³ "There is in the flesh of contingency a virtue proper to the scenario, which does not

¹² We will return to this reflexivity below in the discussion of the discovery of history as a historical phenomenon.

¹³ Cf. Davis (2021) for a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's attention of the future anterior meanings of political actions in the context of determining whether an action is revolutionary, especially in the context of his discussion of the show trials in Stalin's USSR.

encroach upon the plurality of interpretations, which even are its deep reason, which make of it a durable theme of historical life and which have right to a philosophical status" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964b, p. 61-62). Our historicity guarantees that our acts are phenomena — events that "have almost their whole life ahead of them" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964b, p. 93). The result is not, as Husserl might have suspected, an arbitrary or capricious relativism, nor a historicist account of historicity, but a realistic and concrete invitation to meaning. This invitation to historical meaning is fundamentally intertwined with the existential crisis of historicity. As we shall see in the next section, Merleau-Ponty's original phenomenological account offers a different critique of historicism by translating the structure of our historicity from a quest for apodicticity to an existential imperative.

The existential crisis of historicity

In 1956, Merleau-Ponty and Ferdinand Alquié published an anthology organized around various themes in the history of philosophy titled *Les philosophes célèbres*.¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty wrote several very short introductory essays for various sections. In 1960, while editing *Signes*, Merleau-Ponty published most of these short pieces ensemble as the essay "Everywhere and Nowhere" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 203-258). However, he omitted two pieces, one of which, "The Discovery of History," is especially germane to our project.¹⁵ It is an interesting little essay that foregrounds the existential crisis of historicity.

The discovery of history is an event within history. It is a life-changing event that forever alters the structure of our being. Having a history is not just an additional sphere of knowledge — knowledge of the past. "When [people] begin to live and think historically, this is not a new object that their knowledge annexes. It is a new structure of time (a new relation with others, a new idea of meaning and truth)" (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 250/205 - LPC). This is the *sens* of history emerging within history, a reflexivity we have already seen in our discussion of the phenomenological crisis of historicity. But there is an existential imperative unique to our historicity: we must act. Our acts form and are informed by the *sens* of history. This is yet another important aspect of Merleau-Ponty's adage that we are "condemned to meaning." We are condemned to live and act meaningfully. The discovery of history involves the complication of our temporality. In history, "what we do opens a field, founds, institutes, recovers, and anticipates" (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 250/206 - LPC).

Our actions bespeak "a secret consonance between that which has been, that which is, and that which will be" (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 250/205 - LPC). It is important to note that these temporal dimensions encroach upon one another. The past, present and future are not separate phenomena in serial sequence. Our present actions carry forward the past and portend the future. Each act bears witness to its most ancient provenance and bears its weight even when not brought to consciousness. "And, as the body reassembles itself upon awakening around an object so as to become 'conduct' again, the most ancient time is summoned to witness that which it is about to become in us" (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 250/205 - LPC). Likewise, our present actions bear the future in the sense of bearing a child. And this

Zinoviev, Kamenev, and others proclaimed heroes of the Bolshevik October revolution were held accountable for what their actions had come to mean twenty years later.

¹⁴ (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956). I will cite this text hereafter as LPC and provide the French pagination before the English translation.

¹⁵ I have translated this essay along with the other omitted essay, in (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1992).

temporal encroachment issues an imperative to act and live historically without any reassurance or warrant issued by its *sens*. "Even our present is an undertaking. But whatever we thought, our institutions, our plans encroach upon the future, they look forward to a new impetus, they function only as historical milieu, they are always, as one says, 'conditions' of history, - and set men in their ignorance within the atmosphere of history" (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 250/205 - LPC). Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of atmosphere throughout his work. It works alongside other metaphors such as halo and horizon to connote an indistinct latent orienting presence.¹⁶ This historical atmosphere is not always clear, yet just as we must breathe in the air, history affords and demands inspiration. Our historicity does not provide the reassurance of a causal nexus — like Asimov's psychohistory in his *Foundation* trilogy — such that we can understand our actions within a temporal causal chain. History is not a function formed of plotted points, nor should we aspire to this goal which would reduce us to functionaries. "[History] does not establish in substituting for causality or natural finality another order of causality or finality which annuls them; instead, it insinuates itself there, it makes them speak its language, it deceives them with their own diversion" (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 251/207 - LPC). The past and future *colonize* our present (as is true of the other temporal dimensions, each of which colonizes the others imperiously), urging the urgency of our actions.

Earlier, Merleau-Ponty addressed the existential crisis of historicity in the preface to his 1948 anthology, *Sens et non-sens*. He compared ethical and political actions, and the judgments of their meaning, to artistic expressions. "Expression is like a step taken in the fog — no one can say where, if it will lead somewhere" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960b, p. 08). The same precarity obtains in aesthetic and political praxis. "In morality [or in politics] as in art, there is no solution for the person who will not make a move without being sure of step and who wants to be accurate and have absolute self-control at every moment. Our only resort is the spontaneous movement which binds us to others for good or ill, out of selfishness or generosity" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960b, p. 08). Cézanne is presented as an aesthetic hero by Merleau-Ponty for his resolve and dedication to his vision against the condemnation and ridicule offered by his contemporaries. Yet that resolve did not come with any secret historical assurance.

Just as Cézanne wondered whether what came from his hands had any meaning and would be understood, just as a person of good will comes to doubt that our lives are compatible with each other when one considers the conflicts within one's own particular life, so today's citizen is not sure whether the human world is possible.

But failure is not absolute. Cézanne won out against chance, and people, too, can win provided they will measure the dangers and the task. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960b, p. 9).

The existential crisis of historicity is the axiological aspect of the phenomenological crisis of historicity. History does not provide ultimate answers; it is an interrogation. Instead of the assurance of a destiny, history provides a latency of *sens* by which and for which we are responsible. "There is a discovery of history, but it is not that of a thing, a force, or of a destiny. It is a discovery of an interrogation, or, if one wishes, of anguish" (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 251/207 - LPC).

¹⁶ We shall attend to the ontological significance of these metaphors in the final section of this essay.

The critical intertwining of historicity as flesh

Though it would be impossible to defend either of them in this limited space, I propose two speculative assertions that will form the basis for the ontological account of historicity as critical intertwining adumbrated in this section. First, at his best, Merleau-Ponty can most productively be read as a philosopher of difference. Secondly, and in a related manner, his notion of the flesh of the world can best be conceived as a new sort of transcendental horizon of differentiation that is in no way pure.¹⁷

Merleau-Ponty's ontology is an interrogation of being situated within being — an “endo-ontology” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 283). Likewise, his ontological account of historicity is interrogative in style. In fact, we have seen above that he described the discovery of history as an interrogation that reveals the most pressing metaphysical questions. When we keep in mind that Merleau-Ponty's account of historicity is fraught with divergence [*écart*], we see that the interrogation into the *sens* of history brings to light an ontological reflexivity such that we matter historically through our “difference and rivalry,...the disorder of history” (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 251/207 - LPC).

As we have seen, the phenomenological crisis of historicity entails that we account for the structure of history nowhere else but within history. The existential crisis of historicity entails that, lacking any external access or any pure transcendental access to the meaning [*sens*] of history, we are condemned to make history meaningful through our actions. Thus, the phenomenological crisis concerns “how” the interrogation of our historicity occurs. And the existential crisis of historicity concerns “why” we frame the meaning of our actions historically. The remainder of this section will show how interrogation of being as the flesh of the world can be extended to reveal other aspects of the crisis of our historicity. More specifically, this ontological interrogation as a critical intertwining reveals the situatedness of history in the following forms, each of which describes a transformative rediscovery. The “who” of historicity is revealed as the collaborative agency of reversible subjectivity as a rediscovery of the self or subjectivity. The “what” of historicity is revealed as strategic hypostasis as a rediscovery of objective fact. The “when” of historicity is revealed as lived temporality rather than the serial schema of discrete moments of past, present, and future. And finally, the “where” of our historicity is revealed as emplacement — the place of lived space rather than the abstraction of Cartesian space. We will not explore each of these transformations individually here. Instead, let us attend to the interrogative ontology of Merleau-Ponty's late works to offer an account of each of these transformations collectively as they inform the situatedness of our historicity.

Earlier we noted Merleau-Ponty's enigmatic use of the metaphors of atmosphere, halo, and horizon in the context of understanding how our historicity involves an existential crisis by issuing an imperative to act while we lack the complete understanding of our actions. Let us explore the ontological significance of these and other metaphors. Indeed, one cannot help but note that the study of Merleau-Ponty's work is a rich study of metaphors. For example, let us add the complex of metaphors, text, context, and pretext. The use of such metaphors is not a shortcoming on the part of Merleau-Ponty to account for our historicity; rather these indirect and allusive tropes may be the most precise way to understand the phenomenon and bespeak Merleau-Ponty's indirect ontology. Like any text, history has a *sens* which has more meaning than any particular reading can account for literally. One aspect of this excess of meaning is the

¹⁷ I explore these theses in some depth in a forthcoming project, *Reversibilities of the Flesh*.

latency expressed in these metaphors. Our historicity is like an atmosphere, a halo, a horizon, and a context insofar as we need it to live, it is all around us, and for the most part we are not conscious of it. For the most part, our historicity is present as a latency — an indirect yet necessary presence all around consciousness. This historical excess of meaning, this latency of meaning (*sens* as meaning and direction), is something that we carry along with us and which carries us along. In our everyday actions, we are aware of it as we might be aware of a particular spice in our food: one might notice its presence only if it were missing. Of course, we can foreground our historicity, as we are doing right now through a sort of transcendental reflection and as we saw above in our account of the phenomenological crisis of historicity. Indeed, our historicity can be hyperbolically foregrounded and fetishized as we have seen in the statues venerating Confederate soldiers from the United States civil war. These overdeterminations of the *sens* of history are historical ironies: history is full of irony as we sanguinely assure ourselves of some historical legacy. These furtive efforts deny the encroachment of the past's ability to give itself a future spontaneity within history — a future-anterior interior to every present (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1955, p. 178-179).

This atmosphere, halo, horizon, context is present as “a scintillation of being, an uninterrupted upsurge which adds being to being” (MERLEAU-PONTY; ALQUIÉ, 1956, p. 250/206 -LPC). This upsurge of being disrupts itself and is the ontological ground of the phenomenological and existential crises of historicity. It is at once the condition of the possibility of historicity and its existential imperative. The upsurge of being, adding being to being, is manifest as divergence (*écart*) through differentiation and the emerging spread of divergent beings. This is the divergence of the flesh of the world Merleau-Ponty only began to explore in his work in the final few years of his life.

Merleau-Ponty began to articulate his vision for a new ontology in the posthumously published work we know as *Le visible et l'invisible*.

Once again, the flesh we are speaking of is not matter. It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested to in notably when the body sees itself, touches itself engaged in [en train de] seeing and touching the things, such that, simultaneously, as tangible it descends among them, as touching it dominates them all and draws this rapport and even this double rapport within itself, by dehiscence of fission of its own mass (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 191-192).

The flesh of the world is being-in-the-world. It is not matter, but it is always material, if one includes the latency of all material things. It is a transcendental horizon that figures in its own grounding. When we think of the flesh as a unity, we must be careful to see that unity as the difference of differences. Merleau-Ponty uses various metaphors to describe this grounding-difference: pivot, fold, coil, and dehiscence. He likens the unity of our bodies to the flesh of the world (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964a, p. 186). Just as we should not think of each of our hands as little “subjectivities” somehow integrated into some synthetic unity like a bouquet comprised of individual flowers arranged in a vase. My hands participate in an organic unity which implicates them as different — my left and my right hands. Your left and right hands differ from one another and from mine as a difference of differences. Indeed, your orienting dimensions of left and right differ from mine as we face one another. That unity as the difference of differences is what Merleau-Ponty names the flesh of the world. And just as we would fail to understand our own embodiment if we approach it *partes extra partes* — or at least understand it only as an abstraction, likewise we would miss an important synergy of our lived experience if we reduce our shared lived experience to a game of “connect the dots”.

With all of this in mind, let us return to our metaphors regarding our historicity to understand the crisis of historicity ontologically. The flesh of the world as an upsurge of being disrupting itself, as fission, dehiscence, divergence, and difference is the atmosphere, halo, and horizon wherein we live historically.

When we *reify* ourselves as given fixed identities that need to be connected — when we form laws based upon independent private property or speak of individual human rights, for example — we overdetermine ourselves and deny the interdependence of our historicity. These metaphors express the fundamental ambiguity of our existence. We are neither and both agent and action. That is, we recognize our identities as divergent styles of being. An important aspect of that appearance or emergence — as differing differences.¹⁸ The crisis of historicity as the flesh of the world shows that individual freedom, fetishized in some political models, is an illusion to be achieved only collectively through the instituting differentiation of historicity. Let us return to Merleau-Ponty's Preface to *Signes* and turn our attention more specifically to the political implications of this ontological account.

Surely the promise of dialectical history, and most especially of dialectical materialism, is the ability not only to understand our political judgments and actions in a historical context, but to provide a way to change the world for the better through our historically-grounded political choices. Marx famously distinguishes his thought from the philosophical *status quo* in his eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers hitherto have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it" (MARX; ENGELS, 1953, p. 07)¹⁹. It is discouraging that Marx and Engels set their course for progress outside of philosophy; but there can be no question about this. Perhaps the most infamous expression of this is when they wrote: "Philosophy and the study of the real world are related like Onanism or masturbation and sex" (MARX; ENGELS, 1953, p. 218)²⁰ Merleau-Ponty and Sartre hoped to find a new path to transform philosophy such that it could play an active role in the proposed changes in the world. They wanted to reconcile Marxism with philosophy through existentialism. This is why they founded *Les temps modernes* as a non-orthodox leftist philosophical journal. As we know, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre parted ways in 1953, and Merleau-Ponty's political position changed over the remaining years of his life. In the Preface to *Signes*, he is looking back not only over his own political works and what they have come to mean, but over the development of contemporary Marxism in the ensuing years. And it is significant that this political account is fashioned as he was developing his nascent ontology of the flesh.

By 1960, Merleau-Ponty had become more acutely aware of the dogmatic danger of orthodox Marxism. Earlier, in *Humanisme et terreur*, Merleau-Ponty focused on the existential dilemma of a historical political agent. One is responsible not only for what an action means here and now, but for what it will have come to mean in the future. This future anterior meaning was at the heart of the dilemma he revealed in his analysis of the Moscow 1936-38 "show trials." The very actions that distinguished Bukharin, Rykov, Zelensky and others as heroes of the Bolshevik revolution twenty years prior now were presented by the prosecution as having taken on entirely new meanings which revealed them to be traitors. During the 1940's, Merleau-Ponty described this precarity as essential to the existential imperative to act while knowing full well

¹⁸ This critique of adequation and identity must be seen to apply even to self-consciousness. In an unpublished working note from 1958, Merleau-Ponty points out the Cartesian cogito does not bespeak adequation or identity — it is an example of *écart*: the cogito is "an invariant term for an inductive *residue*." Cf. Vol. VI Projets de livre 1958-1960, p.209 notes on reserve at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

¹⁹ "Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden *interpretiert*, es kömmt drauf an, sie zu *verändern*."

²⁰ "Philosophie und Studium der wirklichen Welt verhalten sich zueinander wie Onanie und Geschlechtsliebe."

that the meaning of our actions might come to mean something different. While this existential imperative remained an important part of what we have described here as the existential crisis of historicity, by 1960, Merleau-Ponty thought that orthodox Marxists justified anything and everything with the assumption that the truth of Marxism *as it was considered to be true* would prevail. But now we must assume a new philosophical posture that reveals contemporary Marxists as abandoning the autocritical element that was the promise of Marxism.

It is this family of interrogations concerning Marxist ontology which is evaded [*escamoté*] if Marxism is validated straightaway as a truth for some later date. These interrogations have always constituted the pathos and profound life of Marxism: the trial or test of the creative negation, the realization-destruction. In forgetting them, one repudiates Marxism as revolution (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 18).

It is important to see what Merleau-Ponty is and is not rejecting concerning Marxism in 1960. He is *not* abandoning the existential crisis of historicity. According to Merleau-Ponty, contemporary Marxism has abnegated the existential imperative that once distinguished it from philosophical dogmatism. In so doing, contemporary Marxism has covered-over its historicity.

It is also significant that he framed the political problem in ontological terms. According to Merleau-Ponty, contemporary Marxism has abandoned an interrogative ontology. It can no longer situate us at the moments of decision. It can no longer ask after the who, what, when, or where of agency, which emerge through divergence in the flesh of the world. Instead, contemporary Marxism has adopted a declarative ontology that stipulates its unsituated truths. The hope Merleau-Ponty offers is that we can reclaim the critical promise of Marxism by recognizing its truths as secondary truths. We must honor them by subjecting them to reprise. We must recognize that they have come to mean something new in order to assume the interrogation of our historicity. Later in the same Preface, Merleau-Ponty makes the ontological grounding more explicit.

We take *others* as they appear in the flesh of the world.... Before others are or are submitted to my conditions of their possibility, they must be there is reliefs, divergences [*écarts*], variants of one sole Vision in which I also participate.... [They are] my twins or the flesh of my flesh (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 29).

While I believe that it is an unfortunate way to describe our collective and communal being-in-the-world as "one sole Vision,"²¹ one might read this unity as a difference of differences as I have indicated above, situating my practical relations with others within the interrogative ontology. We must celebrate the ambiguity of the flesh of the world through our understanding of the crisis of historicity. History is neither reducible to a set of mechanical forces nor to human initiative. "There is no 'last analysis,' because there is a flesh of history in which, as in our body, everything counts and has a bearing..." (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 36). The ontology of the flesh of the world provides the critical intertwining of the phenomenological and existential crises of historicity by showing how we belong, and do not belong, together through our differentiation. Let us hope that in the present troubled times, this critical intertwining shows the possibility for liberation and the disruption of the oppression currently maintained by demagogues around the world. Even in our moments of despair, "the night of thought is inhabited by the glimmer of being" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1960c, p. 28).

²¹ I address this concern at length in a work in progress, *Reversibilities of the Flesh of the World*.

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