Intersubjectivity and Freedom in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*

In this article, I intend to show that Merleau-Ponty's conception of freedom is essentially tied to his view of the human subject as socially situated: that is, that it presupposes his views on the intersubjective dimension of subjectivity. In other words, I will show that on his view sociality is not an impediment but rather a condition of freedom. In this regard, his position contrasts starkly not only with modern philosophy's prevailing conceptions of autonomy (perhaps with the exception of Hegel) but also, and in particular, with Sartre's view on freedom. Very roughly, Sartre equates being a subject with freedom, and this, in turn, with self-determination in the sense of independence from others. Freedom is thus an essentially individual feature, and other subjects are viewed as hindrances to it. For Merleau-Ponty, freedom is also tied to subjectivity – to the fact that we are in some sense subjects. It is only insofar as we are subjects that we are free, but our subjectivity is not opposed to our social nature, for true subjectivity presupposes sociality.

For reasons of space, this investigation will focus on the *Phenomenology of Perception*, although, as with many other topics in Merleau-Ponty's thought, the same ideas are developed in other works.[1] For this same reason, I will put to the side the problem of how far Merleau-Ponty develops his thought beyond this early articulation in subsequent works.

In the first section, I will briefly touch on the relevance of the problem of intersubjectivity not only to the way in which Merleau-Ponty conceives of the specificity of phenomenology, but also to the problem of subjectivity. In the second section, I will provide a close reading of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of intersubjectivity. I will show that, contrary to what is sometimes claimed, the notion of body-subject does not solve the problem of other minds on its own; moreover, Merleau-Ponty does not claim this. He thinks there is a grain of truth in solipsism, even if that position misunderstands and misstates the issue. This grain of truth corresponds to the privileging of the first-person perspective over the perspective of others. In the fourth section, I will show that, despite this privilege, subjectivity is not only socially situated but presupposes intersubjectivity. In the fifth section, I will introduce Merleau-Ponty's discussion of freedom. Much of his account of freedom is built on his critique of Sartre. I will show that, although Merleau-Ponty does not deny freedom, unlike Sartre he views it as crucially tied to the agent's factical and social situation. In the sixth section, I will show that Merleau-Ponty's account of class consciousness is a good example of how action can be socially propelled and at the same time free. Finally, in the seventh and final section, I will conclude by providing an overview of how Merleau-Ponty brings his accounts of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to bear on the topic of freedom.

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[1] See, for example, the essay 'Cézanne's Doubt' from *Sense and Non-Sense,* which, despite what its title suggests, has freedom as its primary topic. On Intersubjectivity, see for example the lecture 'The Child's Relation with Others' from *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*.

I

The *Phenomenology of Perception*, inasmuch as it is a *phenomenology*, is an attempt to present a conception of subjectivity that is opposed to all empiricist conceptions in a broad sense – that is, opposed to any attempt to explain away subjectivity in favour of third-person processes. At the same time (and this arguably constitutes the novelty of Merleau-Ponty's work in comparison to his predecessors), the *Phenomenology of Perception* is a radical critique of the Cartesian, and even the Kantian, view of subjectivity.

That Merleau-Ponty contrasts his position on subjectivity with the modern tradition's preferred account is particularly relevant here. One of Merleau-Ponty's main goals, indeed perhaps his central goal, is to show that the phenomenological point of view should be carefully distinguished from the modern point of view, with which it is often conflated. Merleau-Ponty views intellectualism and idealism as the main traits of modern philosophy. By contrast, he sees the 'phenomenological point of view', which he associates with his reading of Husserl's later philosophy and Heidegger's existential phenomenology, as overcoming the modern intellectualist-idealist trend in philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty understands the phenomenological point of view as an overcoming of the intellectualist-idealist point of view in part because of the status each grants to subjects other than oneself. On his view, Descartes's and Kant's theories of subjectivity, if brought to their ultimate conclusions, leave no place for 'other subjects'. If the Cartesian conception is true, if my nature is that of a thinking substance from which everything bodily and material is excluded, my only distinguishing feature is the bare 'I think'. But this 'I think', the cogito, cannot serve to individuate me, and thus on this assumption there is no point in talking about other souls beyond my own (except maybe God's). Kant, for his part, thinks of the subject as the ultimate centre of thought and conceptual activity. On his view, we cognize the subject not as it is in itself, as a noumenon, but only as it appears in time, as a phenomenon – that is, as an 'empirical subject'. Since the transcendental subject is the ultimate condition of all cognition and cannot itself be cognized, all other possible subjects are only objects for it. For this reason, Kant conceives of the plurality of subjects as a plurality of *empirical* subjects. The transcendental subject as such cannot be identified with someone in particular and contradicts the possibility of another transcendental subject, for there is, *ex hypothesi*, only one ultimate condition of thought, and this lies within me as the one and only transcendental subject. Thus, although Kant does not put it precisely this way, the transcendental subject, the subjective correlate of nature, is essentially one, transcending the plurality of empirical subjects that appear within nature.

In a way that is related to their views on the nature of subjectivity, empiricism and intellectualism present seemingly opposed ontological accounts of the world. Whereas empiricism tends to be a materialist theory of reality, intellectualism corresponds to an idealist

point of view inasmuch as it traces reality back to some kind of subjective construct. For Merleau-Ponty, however, both approaches share the assumption that reality is ultimately intelligible, and the project of absolute knowledge is at least ideally conceivable (even if turns out, as with Kant, to be impossible for us humans). For this reason, the phenomenological point of view – which includes phenomenology's novel account of subjectivity – will bring with it a completely new way of looking at the world, a new ontology.[2]

As I said, Merleau-Ponty understands phenomenology, and in particular the work of Edmund Husserl, as presenting or at least strongly suggesting a view of subjectivity that is opposed to that favoured by the intellectualist-idealist tradition. It is true that Husserl's conception of subjectivity seems to have affinities with both Descartes's and Kant's conceptions. And it is perhaps no mistake that Husserl calls his own brand of idealism 'transcendental idealism' (although he tries to distinguish it from Kant's version). This notwithstanding, Merleau-Ponty sees implied in Husserl's work, especially in its final phase, a conception of the subject as temporal, embodied, finite and historical – a view that contrasts sharply with the intellectualist, idealist, Cartesian conception.[3]

<div align="center">II</div>

Merleau-Ponty's main discussion of intersubjectivity in the *Phenomenology of Perception* can be found in the chapter 'Others and the Human World'.[4] From the outset, when we take a look at the context in which the chapter appears, we see that it is preceded by 'The Thing and the Natural World'. The sequence of chapters and Merleau-Ponty's introductory remarks in the chapter on intersubjectivity suggest that he may entertain the idea that there is a 'natural world' independent of the so-called 'cultural world'. However, although Merleau-Ponty deals with the natural world before and independently of the cultural world, it is likely that, for the most part, this is done only for the sake of presentation. For Merleau-Ponty, although there is a natural world, the world in which we find ourselves from the day we are born is already cultural, social and historical through and through, and it is only by abstraction that we can

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[2] For this reason, I believe that Merleau-Ponty's project was, from its very beginnings, concerned with ontology. Ontological claims appear not only in his last, unfinished, work (*The Visible and the Invisible*) but also in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, however much they may have developed over time.

[3] As is now widely known, much of Husserl's most relevant work was published after Merleau-Ponty's death. Although Merleau-Ponty was one of the first visitors to the Husserl Archives at Louvain, the material which is now at our disposal gives us a much more complete picture not only of Husserl's thought but also of its development throughout the years. However, I will not be concerned here with the accuracy of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl. For our purposes, what is important is that Merleau-Ponty understands his own position as laying out what was already implied in what he viewed as Husserl's position.

[4] Discussions on this chapter and the topic of intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty can be found in Barbaras (2004: 19ff., 239ff.); Carman (2008: 134ff.); Dillon (1988: 113ff.); Hass (2008: 100ff.); Langer (1989: 97ff.); Matthews (2002: 89ff.); Priest (1998: 179ff.); Romdenh-Romluc (2011: 130ff.).

think of it as purely natural.[5] (It should be noted that I add the predicates 'cultural' and 'historical' to 'social' here because the former depend on sociality.)

The view that the natural world is already given to us as a social world is not even a particularly original position. Heidegger had already contended that the world is essentially a social world – that is, that others are always already there with me in the world, such that we never find ourselves in a private, solipsistic world.[6] Our world is already filled with others, even when they are not factically present.[7] They are there, for example, whenever we perceive a tool as a tool, or any kind of artefact as an artefact. (The reason for this is not only that we did not invent or make the tool ourselves, but also that the tool was fashioned with reference to a normal-sized human body.) It is arguable that most of the ideas put forward by Heidegger in this regard can already be found, albeit in a different language, in Husserl. For example, we find in Husserl the idea that even natural things like trees are not given to us as private phenomena. Rather, we perceive them as public phenomena, as things that are in principle perceptible to others as well.[8] Merleau-Ponty, too, believes that we find the other embedded in things of culture, even when factically there is no one beside us.[9] Whenever I find traces of human action, even from the distant past, I encounter the other.

These introductory remarks are enough to show that the phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity significantly transforms the philosophical problem of others, as it is usually understood. From a phenomenological point of view, there is no sense in asking whether the world is my world only or also a world of others, a social world. The world is already given to me as a social world; it is therefore pointless to ask whether there are in fact others beside me, or whether others perceive and act in the world in which I find myself. Others are factically given to me along with my world, such that only by abstraction can we think of a solipsistic world. This is not to say that there is no phenomenological problem concerning others, for there is in fact such a problem. Since others are already given to me along with the world, phenomenology tries to make explicit the meaning of the other: what it means for me to encounter another I, and what the different forms of community and sociality mean.

According to Merleau-Ponty, although the other is given to me along with the world in the form of cultural artefacts, it is given through a 'veil of anonymity' (PhP 363 [405]).[10] In order to characterize the anonymous way in which the other is given to me through cultural objects, Merleau-Ponty relies on the French pronoun 'on' (one). This is an obvious nod to Heidegger's notion of *das Man*,[11] which the latter describes as referring to everyone and no one in particular, to the anonymous other who is along with me in the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the anonymous givenness of the other presupposes the broader problem of knowing

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[5] On the idea that for Merleau-Ponty the natural world is not independent of the intersubjective, cultural world, see Langer (1989: 97ff.).
[6] See *Being and Time*, §§25-7.
[7] See *Being and Time*, §26.
[8] On this idea see Zahavi (2003: 110).
[9] See Romdenh-Romluc (2011: 131).
[10] PhP refers to the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Page numbers are from the most recent English translation, by Donald Landes. The original pagination, which is also reproduced in Landes's translation, appears in square brackets. Quotations are from Landes's translation, except where indicated.
[11] See *Being and Time*, §27.

how the other, who is supposed to be an 'I' like myself, can be externalized in the form of cultural objects and behaviour. Merleau-Ponty even uses the Hegelian expression 'objective spirit' (PhP 363 [405]) to refer to the way human behaviour appears in the form of things.

Since cultural things can always be traced back, in one way or another, to human behaviour, we are ultimately referred back to the question of how the other can be manifested through her body. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he says that the body is the 'first cultural object' (PhP 406), not because it should be compared to a mere thing, even if a cultural one, but instead because it is the primary locus of behaviour, 'the place' where human behaviour shows itself. Thus the question becomes: how can a person, someone endowed with intelligence and freedom, manifest herself through her body?

Merleau-Ponty tries to deconstruct this problem by appealing to his theory of the body, as laid out in the first part of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In brief, Merleau-Ponty contends that the objective body – i.e. not only the body as seen from the third-person point of view, but in particular the body as a bundle of mechanisms and processes – is an abstraction. The body as it is immediately given to us, the body as we live it, the lived body – and also, as we will see, the body of the other as it is concretely given to us – is not an object among objects; it is not a mere thing that happens to be controlled by the mind. What phenomenological analysis of the way I live my body (for example by moving it in space) reveals is that my body has a special kind of intentionality; it partakes of the sense-giving activity usually ascribed to the mind, expressing meaning of itself not only through movement but also through perception and language.

The conception of the body as a lived body significantly transforms the problem of how I can access another through his body. For the objective view is, in this regard, exactly symmetrical to the intellectualist-idealist view mentioned above. Both the materialist and the idealist conceive of the body as a bundle of third-person processes. When we hold this view of the body, perception of the other becomes extremely problematic. Since the objective body displays no meaning, no intelligence – in sum, no subjectivity – we are allowed to question whether a mind lies behind the body of the other, that is, to question whether the other is in fact an *other* or just a meaningless body that deceives me into thinking it is a subject, an ego, just like myself. On the other hand, according to Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as a lived, subjective body, there is no problem concerning the existence of selves other than mine, for the body expresses meaning of itself, and it does not make sense to ask about the existence of a mind or soul behind the body's meaningful behaviour. On Merleau-Ponty's approach, I have access to the other quite directly: I see him behave in meaningful ways, I read emotions off his face, I hear him convey thoughts and feelings through language, etc.:

> 'If I do not learn within myself to recognize the junction of the for-itself and the in-itself, then none of these mechanisms that we call "other bodies" will ever come to life; if I have no outside, then others have no inside.' (PhP 391 [431])

One of the traditional philosophical arguments for explaining how I come to know about the existence of other minds (and thus other selves) beyond my own is the analogy argument. According to this argument, I implicitly ascribe mind and subjectivity to others in order to account for behaviour that I perceive in myself as a manifestation of mental states. Merleau-Ponty rejects this type of argument outright. First, he claims that it is empirically false. Children, for example, recognize others and their behaviour in a quite immediate way well before they are able to engage in this kind of reasoning. They perceive the body of the other and its intentions as being internally related to their bodies' intentions. (Merleau-Ponty observes that when a person pretends to bite a baby's hand, the baby immediately opens her mouth, recognizing without express comparison the relation between the adult's mouth as an 'organ for biting' and her own.)[12] In fact, contemporary neuroscience has even reinforced and confirmed Merleau-Ponty's insight into this matter. Since the discovery of mirror-neurons, we know that our brains come equipped with inborn capacities to recognize and empathize with others.[13]

However, Merleau-Ponty also has a priori grounds for rejecting the analogy argument. Indeed, this rejection can be viewed as a corollary of his broader theory of subjectivity, mind, body and intentionality. Suffice it to say that all reasoning by analogy presupposes an explicit comparison between myself and the other, but for this comparison to take place the other must somehow be previously given to me as an *other*, for otherwise I have no basis for drawing an analogy between us. In sum, the analogy argument already presupposes what it is trying to explain.[14]

The upshot of all this is that there is no absolute distance between myself and the other. Merleau-Ponty's main point in this respect is that if I were absolutely transparent to myself – that is, if I were nothing but a purely transcendental subject or a Cartesian cogito – the possibility of another subject like myself would remain quite unintelligible to me. However, before I come to regard myself as a cogito, before I am able to reflect and say to myself 'I think', I am already thrown into the world by way of my body. For Merleau-Ponty, I can never analyse and thoroughly rationalize this primitive relation to the world. Merleau-Ponty even calls this an 'ancient pact' (PhP 265 [302]) between my body and the world. It is this primitive relation to being, or to the world by virtue of being a body, of being *my* body, that Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls (making his own use of Heidegger's and, of course, Sartre's terminology) 'existence', 'transcendence' or 'being-in-the-world'.

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[12] See PhP, 368 [409].

[13] On the possibility that Merleau-Ponty foreshadowed the discovery of mirror neurons, see Carman (2008: 138).

[14] Taylor Carman (2008: 138) claims that Merleau-Ponty's critique of the analogy argument can be read as directed at Husserl's account of intersubjectivity, at least as it is presented in the *Cartesian Meditations*. But Husserl's position is not as cut and dried as Carman would want us to believe. Husserl rejects the idea that what he calls the 'apperception' of the other is achieved by any kind of inference, and in my view this is exactly what Merleau-Ponty is trying to convey with his critique of the analogy argument. It is true that Husserl holds that the greatest difficulty concerning apperception of the other is that the other is never given to me as an ego; were he so given to me, he would not appear as an *other* – that is, as different from me. But as we will see, Merleau-Ponty agrees with this Husserlian position as well. For an interpretation of Husserl's analysis of intersubjectivity that presents him as much closer to Merleau-Ponty, see Zahavi (2003: 112ff.). On Husserl's influence on Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity, see also Dillon (1988: 114ff.).

Insofar as I am a perceptive body, I always find myself already thrown into the world. This bodily, perceptive, pre-personal self is in some sense other than myself considered as a personal subject capable of saying 'I'. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is no true correspondence between the reflexive self, the self as subject in the Cartesian and Kantian sense, and the self as a pre-reflective body-subject in the world. Paradoxically, it is the lack of correspondence between these selves that makes the other possible for me. If I am in some sense an other to myself, then the possibility of other subjects, and namely of other body-subjects, becomes intelligible. It is also for this reason that Merleau-Ponty speaks of my access to the other as a 'sort of reflection' (PhP 367 [409])[15] (an analogue to the relation between the reflecting ego and the pre-personal ego):

'Others can be evident because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws its body along behind itself.' (PhP 368 [410])

Another way to put this is the following. If the world as a whole does not lie transparently before me, if I am nothing but a certain point of view on the world, then my perspective is not wholly discontinuous with other perspectives. Just as the different parts of my body display a pre-reflective unity among themselves (which Merleau-Ponty calls the *body schema*), a unity which is prior to them and determines their value and sense, the possibility of the point of view of the other is prefigured in my own. I form a sort of systematic unity with others that precedes all thought and rationality – a unity that ultimately corresponds to the world itself. In other words, my point of view is related to other possible points of view just as my different successive perspectives are related to each other. The possibility of a foreign perspective is already suggested by the fact that there is always more of the world for me to see:

'In fact, the other person is not enclosed in my perspective on the world because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it spontaneously slips into the other's perspective, and because they are gathered together in a single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception.' (PhP 369 [410-11])

There are issues, however, concerning how to interpret this unity. If it is such that I cannot distinguish between myself and others, it cannot be used to account for intersubjectivity; ex hypothesi, there would be no distance between us in such a unity, and therefore no intersubjectivity in the strict sense. Perhaps this is why Merleau-Ponty will say (see the next section below) that his account of the lived body is not sufficient to account for intersubjectivity and to preclude every form of solipsism. Moreover, it can be argued (based in

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[15] That my original relation to the other is made possible and prefigured by the structure of my self-consciousness was already shown by Husserl. On this see Zahavi (2003: 113).

particular on the lecture 'The Child's Relation with Others' from *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*) that Merleau-Ponty holds that my primary relation to others is one of identity, and that only later do I develop a sense of being an individual self in opposition to them. This is also the core of Dillon's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's early stance on intersubjectivity (1988: 120ff.). Nevertheless, I have doubts about whether this position can in fact be ascribed to Merleau-Ponty based only on what he says in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In this text, it seems that, although I form a systematic unity with others in the sense that they complement my perspective on the world, there are also differences between us, such that I pre-reflexively know that my perspective differs from theirs. I will expand further on this pre-reflexive sense of self in the next section.[16]

<center>III</center>

As surprising as it may be, what we have said thus far is far from the whole story when it comes to Merleau-Ponty's take on the problem of intersubjectivity. First, just as it is my body that, through its 'ancient pact with the world', discloses the other, this other is not disclosed to me as a 'personal being', a 'subject' in the Cartesian or Kantian sense. Parallel to the anonymous character of myself as body-subject, the other is disclosed only as a body-subject, not as another 'I' considered as a personal being. This is what Merleau-Ponty's talk of the anonymous subject, of the 'one' (*on*), was meant to hint at. Thus, there remains a fundamental and inescapable asymmetry between myself and others. I can never live the point of view of the other as such; for that, I would have to stand to the other in the very relation in which he stands to himself, that is, to be him, in which case he would cease to be an *other*. What's more, for Merleau-Ponty there is even a grain of truth in solipsism:

> 'The difficulties of perceiving others are not all the result of objective thought, and they do not all cease with the discovery of behavior, or rather, objective thought and the resulting unicity of the cogito are not fictions, rather, they are well-founded phenomena, and we will have to seek their foundation.' (PhP 373 [414])

Although it might seem that Merleau-Ponty is falling back into the aporiae of the intellectualist position, it is important to stress that this impression is mistaken. Intellectualism, if followed through in a manner consistent with its own principles, leads to the idea that there can ultimately only be one subject. We saw that, according to Merleau-Ponty, one of phenomenology's defining traits in contrast with the intellectualist tradition is precisely that at its roots it is open to the possibility of other subjects. We are confronted with others as

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[16] For a discussion of this issue, see also Zahavi (2014: 78ff., 85ff., 203ff.).

a matter of fact; the problem concerns what this situation means: 'consciousnesses present the absurdity of a solipsism-shared-by-many, and such is the situation that must be understood' (PhP 376 [417]).

When he seems to endorse a form of solipsism, Merleau-Ponty wants to draw attention to the privilege of the first-person perspective. I am undeniably present to myself in a way that others can never be, at least for me. This self-presence is not necessarily that of the subject who is able to reflect and say of its representations that it is he who thinks them. For example, there is an undeniable self-presence even in unreflecting perception. I am pre-reflectively aware of my own perception and of its being my perspective on the world. This is what is at stake when Merleau-Ponty deals with what he calls the 'tacit cogito', in opposition to the Cartesian cogito, which he also calls the 'spoken cogito' (PhP 421ff. [461ff.]). This notion can easily be read as Merleau-Ponty's version of what Sartre calls the pre-reflective cogito. Sartre introduces this notion in *Transcendence of the Ego* and then, later, in *Being and Nothingness*, where it plays a pivotal role. With the notion of pre-reflective consciousness, Sartre showed that there is no contradiction between the fact that each of us is originally present to herself or himself in a pre-reflective way and the fact that this self-presence can be entirely pre-personal[17].

That we have a "pre-reflective" or "tacit" cogito through which we are always already pre-reflectively open to others – a cogito which is somehow prior to the "Cartesian cogito" in the sense that it is a condition of our being able to explicitly reflect on ourselves – is why we cannot read Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity as relying exclusively on the idea of a primordial identity with others (pace Dillon 1988). Indeed, appealing to this primordial identity does not solve the problem of intersubjectivity so much as prevent it from arising as a problem in the first place. Phenomenologically, we cannot escape the fact that our world is a social world. This means that others are always already here with me. My self-presence is always presence to the world, and others are disclosed along with that world, regardless of how we are to account for this disclosedness. Merleau-Ponty expressly endorses Husserl's thesis that 'transcendental subjectivity is an intersubjectivity' (see PhP 378 [419]). For Merleau-Ponty, this means, roughly, that the other is a condition or presupposition of my ability to reflect and take myself as a transcendental subject. Here, the other refers not to a factically existing other but to the world's social horizon. Along with subjectivity and world, this horizon has been opened once and for all, and for this reason we cannot escape from the other in much the same sense that, for Merleau-Ponty, we cannot escape the world. We cannot cease to situate ourselves in relation to this horizon of otherness.

In other words, although solipsism not only exists as an abstract philosophical thesis but also has genuine phenomenological roots in the distinction between the way the other is given to us and the way each of us is given to ourselves, it does not understand itself adequately. Solipsism does not understand that what it says belies the situation it wants to express. Solipsism asserts that I am the only existent self. Not only does the solipsist's need to assert this contradict her own assertion – a well-known critique – but, Merleau-Ponty would

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[17] Sartre's conception of 'pre-reflective consciousness' was recently adopted by Dan Zahavi, who makes extensive use of it in his numerous writings. (See, for example, Zahavi 2005).

add, she can also only pretend to take refuge in herself in opposition to others, because she finds herself already pre-reflectively surrounded by others in a social world.

The truth solipsism wants to express, although it does so in an inadequate way, is the fact that we are essentially free with regard to others. We will see below that, for Merleau-Ponty, freedom refers to the fact that I can never be totally pinned down by how others perceive me or by the situation in which I find myself. It is up to me to accept it, make it my own, or transform and even escape from it. It is because I dispose of an unrestricted power to deny my situation and, correlatively, am always open to new ways of being that I can never be totally identified with my public ways of being. The same is valid for the other: even when we are sure of having experienced his innermost core, it is in principle always possible that we might be deceived in this respect. The other always manages to slip away beneath his most persistent character traits, such that the potential for misunderstanding him is unavoidable. Merleau-Ponty's point, however, is that the possibility that we may be fundamentally wrong about someone does not entail any kind of solipsism, because it does not annul what I above refer to as the world's social horizon. Being wrong about others (and, Merleau-Ponty would add, being wrong about things) only means that I must replace a certain view of someone or something with another, but the fact that I am in a world – a world I share with others – cannot itself be escaped:

'As soon as existence gathers itself together and engages in a behavior, it appears to perception. And like every other perception, this one affirms more things than are grasped in it: when I say that I see the ashtray and that it is over there, I presuppose a complete unfolding of the experience that would have to go on indefinitely, and I open up an entire perceptual future. Likewise, when I say that I know someone or that I like him, I am aiming at an inexhaustible background beyond his qualities that indeed might one day shatter the image that I adopt of him. This is the price for there to be things and "others" for us, not through some illusion, but rather through a violent act that is perception itself.' (PhP 378-9 [419-20])

At some point, Merleau-Ponty suggests the possibility that freedom from others may be realized by escaping our social world and choosing a secluded life in complete independence, treating them as mere natural things instead of other subjects (PhP 377 [418]). However, according to Merleau-Ponty, what this extreme possibility shows is that this kind of life always has the form of a flight from the world (in this case, a flight from the social word) and for that reason presupposes it. In general, solitude is only possible by reference to possible communication with others (PhP 376 [417]). I can only be or feel alone with reference to a possible being with others. If solipsism were actually true, the solipsist would never feel lonely, for loneliness already presupposes an original openness to others:

'we must say about the experience of others what we have elsewhere said about reflection: that its object cannot absolutely escape it, since we only have a notion of the object through that experience.[18] Reflection must, in some way, present the unreflected, for otherwise we would have nothing to set against it, and it would not become a problem for us. Similarly, my experience must present others to me in some way, since if it did not do so I would not even speak of solitude, and I would not even declare others to be inaccessible.' (PhP 376 [417]; trans. modified)

IV

I will now try to summarize Merleau-Ponty's understanding of sociality and the consequences of his view. What does it mean to say that sociality is an unavoidable horizon of our being in the world? We are not born into a private world without others, a world we must step out of in order somehow to reach them. We are always already with others in the world. However, this being with others is not the same as having a cognition or representation of them. We are already with others before we are able to turn them into objects of cognition. In the same sense that I am my body before I come to know my body as an object (as I move it around in space, for instance), intersubjectivity is a relation that precedes all cognition and knowledge. As we will see below (section V), this does not entail that I can be reduced to a function of my social environment. If that were so, the privilege of my first-person perspective – the fact, that is, that there is only society, a social life and world for *someone* – would be forever lost:

'Thus, we must rediscover the social world, after the natural world, not as an object or a sum of objects, but as the permanent field or dimension of existence: I can certainly turn away from the social world, but I cannot cease to be situated in relation to it. Our relation to the social, like our relation to the world, is deeper than every explicit perception and deeper than every judgment. It is just as false to place us within society like an object in the midst of other objects, as it is to put society in us as an object of thought, and the error on both sides consists in treating the social as an object.' (PhP 379 [420])

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[18] I have modified Landes's translation at this point. I replaced 'through reflection' with 'through that experience'. Landes took the French '*par elle*' in the original text to refer to 'reflection' instead of 'experience', and thus rendered the phrase 'through reflection'. Although the original French is ambiguous, in my view it only makes sense if '*elle*' refers to 'experience', for the sentence expresses the idea that reflection can only put into question or even revoke our pre-reflective notion of the other, because the latter is *in fact given* to us pre-reflectively. In other words, reflection by itself could never have come up with the idea of an *other* if it were not given to it beforehand in a pre-reflective way. (Incidentally, the older English translation of *Phénoménologie de la perception* by Colin Smith also uses 'through that experience'.)

Intersubjectivity is not a mere relation of being; at least by the time of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty maintained the phenomenological assumption that all being must be being for me (even if I am taken as a body). Rather, it can be characterized as the kind of relation I entertain with what characterizes me as a fact, with my 'facticity'. This relation stamps my relation to the world with the mark of finitude but at the same time functions as a condition of the possibility of my openness to that same world (the paramount example of which is, of course, my body insofar as it opens me to the world).

Relying on Husserl, Merleau-Ponty often uses the term 'operative intentionality' (*fungierende Intentionalität*)[19] to characterize this pre-reflective, primordial relation to the other (but also to the body, time, space, etc.) in contrast to the kind of intentionality that is typical of cognition, that is, that posits its object explicitly before consciousness. The 'object' of 'operative intentionality' dwells ambiguously in my perception, simultaneously present and absent. Operative intentionality is relevant in this context because it is the condition of the possibility of act-intentionality – that is, of explicit cognitive acts.

Merleau-Ponty's middle path between objectivist and idealist accounts of intersubjectivity can be summarized in the following idea: I can only know sociality, culture and history because my point of view of the world is itself social, cultural and historical. In other words, I only have access to social, cultural and historical phenomena from my own particular social, cultural and historical perspective or point of view, whether I make this explicit to myself and others or not.

To the extent that it is an inescapable horizon of experience, the social world, much like the natural world, can never be adequately given to us in perception, and thus always remains on the fringe. It is essentially characterized as both a presence and an absence: a presence because I am in fact open to others and live in a social 'space', an absence because when I try to make clear to myself what the other is, how she is given to me, her innermost core always escapes me.

Intersubjectivity is thus an intrinsically paradoxical phenomenon. Merleau-Ponty does not shy away from this seemingly puzzling conclusion. On his view, phenomenology's task is not to solve the paradox but to make us aware of it. This is not to say that he does not try to ground the paradox of intersubjectivity in an ultimate condition of its possibility, but when he does so he is not so much attempting to solve the paradox as to link it to an ultimate fact about us. The latter is, according to Merleau-Ponty, our temporal being.

This is not the place to go into Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of time. Suffice it to say, for him, following Heidegger, the sense of being must be read from that of time. Although time is always centred on an ever-changing present, its past and future dimensions reveal the same sort of presence-absence that characterizes the phenomenon of the other. If all being is ultimately temporal, if I am nothing but time, the fact not only that am I aware of others but also that my perspective is somehow informed by theirs is made intelligible. If to be temporal

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[19] See, for example, PhP lxxxii [18], 440–1 [479-80], 453 [492], 472 [510].

is essentially to exist outside oneself, if the present moment opens to a past before I was born and a future that will extend beyond my life, it is less puzzling that we are thrown into a social world we did not create – a world that, at the same time, presupposes a point of view from within it, from which it is possible to get a grip on it (much like every past and future presupposes a present from which they come into perspective, while at the same time the present presupposes all past moments and must make space for all subsequent, impending moments). In other words, what Merleau-Ponty will try to show in the chapter on temporality is that the temporal structure of the self lies at the root, among other things, of intersubjectivity and its paradoxical character.

<div align="center">V</div>

Most of the features that show up in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of intersubjectivity are central to his account of freedom.[20] In the first place, Merleau-Ponty believes that we are free beings. The fact that we are free is, for him, closely connected to the fact that we are self-aware creatures, that is, subjects, and for this reason the precise nature of this freedom depends on the kind of subjectivity we have. This is why a book that is purportedly on 'perception' can close with a chapter on 'freedom': its main topic is actually the kind of subjects we really are.

Merleau-Ponty's endorsement of freedom is very much entailed by his rejection of empiricism. Empiricism is, among other things, the philosophical doctrine according to which perception can be explained away by third-person accounts of processes in the organism; it is therefore no surprise that Merleau-Ponty comes to view empiricism as being closely connected to determinism. According to this doctrine, everything we do is fully determined by its causal antecedents such that, having acted one way, we could not have acted differently (given these antecedents). Against determinists, Merleau-Ponty sides with the champions of freedom in the sense that he, too, holds that actions stem from self-aware creatures that can thus be held accountable for them. And yet, although Merleau-Ponty criticizes the empiricists, his real target in the chapter on freedom is a certain conception of freedom, of what it means for us to be free, which he sees as embodied in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

Here I will not give a reading of the whole chapter on freedom; nor will I enter into detail on Sartre's own conception of freedom. My main aim is, rather, to show that one of Merleau-Ponty's main points of contention against Sartre's conception lies precisely in the role played by the intersubjective dimension of the self in his conception of freedom.

According to the intellectualist-idealist conception of freedom (which Merleau-Ponty seems to identify with Sartre), we are in principle free whether we are explicitly aware of it or

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[20] For discussions on Merleau-Ponty's account of freedom in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, see Langer (1989: 133ff.) and Priest (1998: 150ff.).

not, whatever we do and whatever our circumstances. Intellectualism pays no regard to our factical situation and views the subject as a pure, self-determining consciousness. In particular, for Sartre consciousness (or what he calls the 'for-itself') is a nothing, meaning that it cannot be determined as this or that by something outside itself. (The for-itself is, in Merleau-Ponty's view, another version of Descartes's cogito or Kant's transcendental subject, although Sartre characterizes it as pre-reflective.) Although the human being comes to regard herself as having qualities, permanent dispositions and character traits, she does this insofar as she does not live up to the nothing she is in her innermost core as consciousness. For example, whenever I regard myself as having determinate proprieties, I am looking at myself as if I were another; I objectify myself. In other words, according to Sartre's perspective, what I am for others, the for-others (*pour autrui*), negates my freedom.

Merleau-Ponty starts by pointing out that this conception of freedom is self-contradictory and self-undermining. First, since according to this conception each one of us is in his innermost core 'nothing' and thus free, we are all equally free; the slave who is resigned to his situation is as much a slave as he who breaks his shackles and sets himself free (PhP 461 [500]). Each one of our actions is free on this account; each manifests the same amount of freedom, and none is more deserving of this title than any other. For Merleau-Ponty, this conception of freedom causes us to lose sight of one particular feature of our natural concept of freedom, rendering it extremely counter-intuitive. There are some important cases where we feel that freedom, rather than being ready-made or innately part of us, is something for which we must strive, and thus some sort of achievement. On Sartre's view, '[t]he idea of an acquisition is rejected in the name of freedom, but then freedom becomes a primordial acquisition and something like our state of nature' (PhP 461 [500]). More than this, however, if freedom were actually how Sartre conceives it, freedom could not be made worldly; that is, it could not appear outwardly in our actions: 'Since we do not have to bring freedom about, it must be the gift granted us of having no gift, or that nature of consciousness that consists in not having a nature, and in no case can it be expressed on the outside or figure in our life' (PhP 461 [500]).

On Merleau-Ponty's view, Sartre's conception of freedom entails, furthermore, that I am at any moment able to pursue a different course of action than that in which I am presently engaged – that, at bottom, both my past and present circumstances and actions should be a matter of indifference when it comes to my absolute freedom, since outside of myself nothing can determine me to action. This view disregards the fact that my past and present circumstances influence what I go on to do, that intentional activity stretches across time. Because of this, actions are only possible if time is not a mere sequence of instants, if my present action lives off the past, if what I did or decided moments ago lingers in what I go on to do (even if this ultimately entails giving up on a given project). The fact, for example, that I started writing this article early in the day and have been writing ever since might serve as a motive for me to carry on writing to the extent that it strengthens my self-confidence and my will to finish it. But it could equally serve as a motive for stopping; my early start explains my now being tired and supports the notion that I've surely done enough for the day. In either case, my earlier activity will impact my future choice. Had I instead decided to go out this morning and enjoy the beautiful outdoors, this would have played an equal role in explaining my subsequent behaviour: my guilt upon coming home might have motivated me to work

through the night, or it might have discouraged me to the point of postponing work until tomorrow.

This touches on a central aspect of Merleau-Ponty's view on freedom. Freedom, like subjectivity in general, always presupposes a given starting point, as it were – a given factual situation in relation to which the subject must decide, either by endorsing or refusing it. Decisions do not happen in a vacuum, as in Sartre's account (at least as Merleau-Ponty reads him). The subject always already finds herself in a certain context, and social and cultural factors play a role in determining the field of possible action. Freedom can only exist in the interplay between an agent and her situation.

Given this critique, Merleau-Ponty tries to answer a possible objection from the Sartrean (or indeed idealist) side. The objection is that even though I always already find myself in a given factical situation, this situation has sense only for me, for all value and sense ultimately comes from me, and thus I am not constrained by any situation except those that I myself have 'created' (a version of this imagined objection can be found in PhP 463-4 [502]).

Merleau-Ponty does not deny that sense and value exist only for me, but everything hinges on what 'me' refers to in this sentence. There is a sense in which the way things appear to me depends on what Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls my personal being or self, that is, my free and explicit projects, my 'explicit intentions' (PhP 464 [503]). In relation to the project of writing this paper, my laptop appears conducive and serviceable; it is more to me than a material thing endowed with objective properties (being black in colour, solid, etc.). When we discussed the problem of intersubjectivity, however, we saw that the self can also refer to my pre-personal body-subject. In this sense, things depend on me as well – a mountain appears objectively impassable to me, not because of some project or other that I entertain but in relation to my body (and to the body of every normal-sized human being).[21] This can be said to be the main lesson of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this time applied to the topic of freedom: although it is true that in some sense the world is dependent on the self, this self is not a free-floating transcendental subject or cogito, but rather inhabits the world that it constitutes. As a consequence, I, considered as a reflexive, transparent, personal self, did not create the world or situation in which I find myself. There are objective limits to my freedom, limits that are not of my choosing and that do not depend on my explicit valuations and projects.

VI

Merleau-Ponty applies his views on freedom (which stem directly, or so it seems, from a critique of Sartre's conception) to his views on history and Marxist theory. Although our main

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[21] The example of the mountain appears in Merleau-Ponty's text (PhP 464 [503]), although it comes originally from Sartre (see *Being and Nothingness* 481ff. [page numbers refer to the English edition]). Unsurprisingly, their respective analyses differ in important respects.

focus here is not Merleau-Ponty's views on these themes, it is in the framework of his discussion of class consciousness that most of his more detailed views on the relation between sociality and freedom appear.

Concerning the problem of how class consciousness comes to pass, Merleau-Ponty's main contention is that it does not arise from the objective economical situation; that is, it is not something bound to happen as soon as certain objective conditions are met, and thus should not be viewed in a deterministic way. This means that class consciousness and its possible outcome, the proletarian revolution, are in a sense the product of human subjectivity and freedom. But this does not mean (again contra Sartre, who embodies the kind of intellectualist position Merleau-Ponty rejects) that the proletarian revolution is a permanent possibility, independent of actual life conditions in a given society. For the intellectualist who endorses an idea of absolute freedom, it is as if I could at any moment choose to be a 'proletarian' or 'bourgeois', while I 'for-myself', to use Sartre's terminology, remain nothing. In sum, as is always the case when it comes to Merleau-Ponty's way of dealing with philosophical problems, both the objectivist-empiricist and the intellectualist-idealist account of class consciousness and proletarian revolution are revealed to be inadequate. As he himself writes, 'idealism and objective thought equally miss the arrival of class consciousness, the first because it deduces actual existence from consciousness, the other because it derives consciousness from actual existence, and both of them because they are unaware of the relation of motivation' (PhP 473 [511]).

While I am not specifically concerned here with Merleau-Ponty's account of class consciousness, it is interesting to see what this account tells us about his views on intersubjectivity and freedom. Contrary to Sartre's account, social position and economical situation matter to the emergence of class consciousness. However, they matter not insofar as they are *represented* in a purely intellectual and detached manner, but insofar as they are *lived* by me. It is my concrete life conditions as they are *lived* and *felt by me* that may give rise to class consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's point, in this respect, is very much the same as the point he makes in the chapter on intersubjectivity (see section IV above). Before I take up a position regarding, say, class struggle (and as a presupposition of this decision), I am already socially and economically situated. I exist as a factory worker, a teacher, a business executive, an academic, etc. This does not mean that my concrete existence infallibly determines the position I ultimately take on my life. I may very well decide to abandon corporate life in favour of voluntary work in Africa. But this decision is only possible because it is preceded by corporate life and all that goes with it, and my serving as a volunteer only makes sense if understood as called for, as motivated, by my previous way of life.

For Merleau-Ponty, my life displays sense (or, as the other meaning of the French *sens* has it, *direction*) that can only be lived and that does not follow from taking an explicit position on it. This sense or direction of my life, which includes the way I identify (or fail to identify) with others around me, is not something that I can represent or know explicitly. It is, according to my interpretation, yet another instance of operative intentionality (see section IV). To illustrate the kind of sense or direction life has, comparisons with the lived body are once again inevitable: just as my body displays a special kind of intentionality by being engaged in motor activities (playing piano, or tennis, or even opening a door), such that if someone were to ask

me how to do what I am doing I would find it difficult to explain and would ultimately simply tell her to practice it herself, so, according to Merleau-Ponty, life exhibits an analogous phenomenon of sense: a sense that can only be recognized through the activity, which in this case is life itself.

For Merleau-Ponty, this spontaneous sense or direction of life can be felt as a common destiny among people. In his example of the development of class consciousness, workers come to view their respective existences and destinies as being tied to those of all other workers and opposed to those of exploiters – a sense of things which might be powerful enough to ground a future proletarian revolution. The latter is not an end posited in advance and is not a conscious choice.

The fact that life can assume this collective sense is a presupposition of the very possibility of historical truth and sense, according to Merleau-Ponty. History is revealed as having the same structure as individual life inasmuch as it is an interchange between given social situations and the way individuals embody or transform them. Even though the sense of history sometimes seems to be determined exclusively by the will and actions of powerful individual figures and leaders, such as Napoleon, their actions must somehow be related to the sense already prefigured in collective history. If history were the mere outcome of the volition of free individuals, it would display no sense or direction. The idea of distinct periods or cycles would be absurd; anything could happen at any time, depending on the groundless will of certain individuals (PhP 474 [513]).

At the same time, whenever Merleau-Ponty talks of the sense or direction of a community of people, and thus the sense or direction of history, it should be kept in mind that this sense or direction must be lived by the individuals who comprise that people, even if in a non-reflexive or 'operative' sense, and that the sense of history should not be mistaken for a necessary (Hegelian) progression towards some predetermined end. Moreover, according to Merleau-Ponty, both at the individual and the collective level, the sense of life is by its very nature multivocal. Since events can always be seen from multiple perspectives, and since there is no absolute perspective given that each of us grasps the world from our own point of view, what the sense of history is in each case depends on *whose* perspective we are talking about. To take the previous example, the bourgeois does not identify with the workers' interests and claims, and nor is his sense of his life bound up with the proletarian revolution. Given human freedom, this does not preclude his joining the workers' struggle, as often happens, but it makes it less likely. At the individual level, since the sense or direction of life is essentially lived, and for this reason also ambiguous, it is always possible to be mistaken about it. Moreover, our temporal nature, the fact that life is always in some sense open, that at every passing moment the sense of my life must be reconfigured, means not only that I can be wrong about myself but that the possibility of changing the course of my life is essentially open to me.

To conclude, I will try to bring together some loose ends and take another look at the argument as a whole, further developing some of its points.

Merleau-Ponty, as much as Sartre, links freedom to subjectivity.[22] At bottom, this idea derives directly from Kant's notion of spontaneity. Spontaneity has a theoretical and a practical dimension. Theoretically, it is manifested in our ability to think ourselves as the subject of our thoughts (the transcendental subject); practically, it is manifested in our capacity to be autonomous, free agents. What is essential to this view is the idea that we can rise above the realm of nature in both a cognitive and a practical sense. Sartre's conception of subjectivity – that is, his concept of the 'for-itself' (*pour-soi*) – again takes up Kant's notion of spontaneity inasmuch as the for-itself equates to our intrinsic reflexivity and our non-determinacy as subjects: the idea that, as subjects, we cannot be determined by being (by the in-itself). According to this view, we are 'nothing' and can thus be said to be free.

To this point, Merleau-Ponty would not object to this view of ourselves as spontaneous in the relevant sense – that is, as both cognitive and practical beings. The problem for Merleau-Ponty lies, rather, in the way our spontaneity, and thus also the nature of our subjectivity, is to be understood. As mentioned above (see section III), I read him as endorsing Sartre's notion of pre-reflective consciousness as a major advance in comparison to intellectualist conceptions of subjectivity: the subject's inherent reflexivity does not require an explicit act of reflection; we are usually 'for ourselves' without performing any explicit act of reflection, any explicit 'I think...', and thus what I call our inherent reflexivity as subjects is implicit, or, to use Sartre's term, 'pre-reflective'. In other words, consciousness is by its nature always self-consciousness in a sense that does not require the self to attend explicitly to itself as such (and this is why I deem it 'inherently reflexive').

What Merleau-Ponty objects to in Sartre's conception of the cogito lies in the strict opposition Sartre establishes between it and his other major category of being, the 'in-itself'. For Merleau-Ponty, the strict opposition and mutual exclusion between the 'in-itself' and the 'for-itself' lies at the root of Sartre's failure to account adequately for, among other things, intersubjectivity and freedom. There must be some sort of mediation between the 'in-itself' and the 'for-itself' to the effect that the former can be seen as in some sense included in the latter.[23] Merleau-Ponty's main thesis in this regard is that the for-itself (the subject) cannot be set apart from his factical situation. In other words, the for-itself is the for-itself of his body, his tradition, his culture, etc. According to Merleau-Ponty, none of these 'factors' is essentially opposed to the 'for-itself'. On the contrary, the 'for-itself' is only 'for-itself' – that is, a perspective on the world, or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, a certain grip on the world, because he

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[22] See, for example, the following passage, where freedom is intrinsically linked to subjectivity: "My freedom, that fundamental power I have of being the subject of all of my experiences (...)" (PhP 377 [418]).

[23] It is this lack of mediation that Merleau-Ponty would later, in his *Adventures of Dialectics*, identify as Sartre's main mistake. See especially p. 142: 'Contrary to appearances, being-for-itself is all Sartre has ever accepted, with its inevitable correlate: pure being-in-itself.'

himself is an embodied creature. He is socially, culturally and historically situated, and this in such a way that only in an abstract sense can the 'for-itself' be set apart from these features, which make up what we've been calling his 'facticity'. Not only is his 'facticity' not essentially opposed to his being a subject, to being-for-itself, but it is, in truth, its condition.

Applied to the problem of intersubjectivity and freedom, Merleau-Ponty's point is that I can only set myself apart from others (and thus be free *of* them) because I always already find myself situated in relation to them. Put in more Sartrean terms, the 'for-itself' can certainly be conceived as 'negation' and 'nothingness', but as a determinate negation. I am not an absolute nothingness, in which case I would be absolutely free. My nothingness always ensues from the negation of being (of the body, nature, others) and for that reason essentially presupposes it:

> The central phenomenon, which simultaneously grounds my subjectivity and my transcendence toward the other, consists in the fact that I am given to myself. *I am given*, which is to say I find myself already situated and engaged in a physical and social world; *I am given to myself*, which is to say that this situation is never concealed from me, it is never around me like some foreign necessity, and I am never actually enclosed in my situation like an object in a box. My freedom, that fundamental power I have of being the subject of all of my experiences, is not distinct from my insertion in the world. I am destined to be free, to be unable to reduce myself to any of my experiences, to maintain with regard to every factual situation a faculty of withdrawal, and this destiny was sealed the moment that my transcendental field was opened, the moment I was born as vision and as knowledge, the moment I was thrown into the world. (PhP 377 [417-8])

The fact that I am socially situated does not preclude my freedom; it is a condition of my freedom. My actions are never the outcome of absolute freedom or absolute determinism. For Merleau-Ponty, this is a false dilemma. Instead, my actions can be said to be motivated by my factical situation, but I am no less free for it. In this regard, my situation is only decisive insofar as it is freely *lived* by me.

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