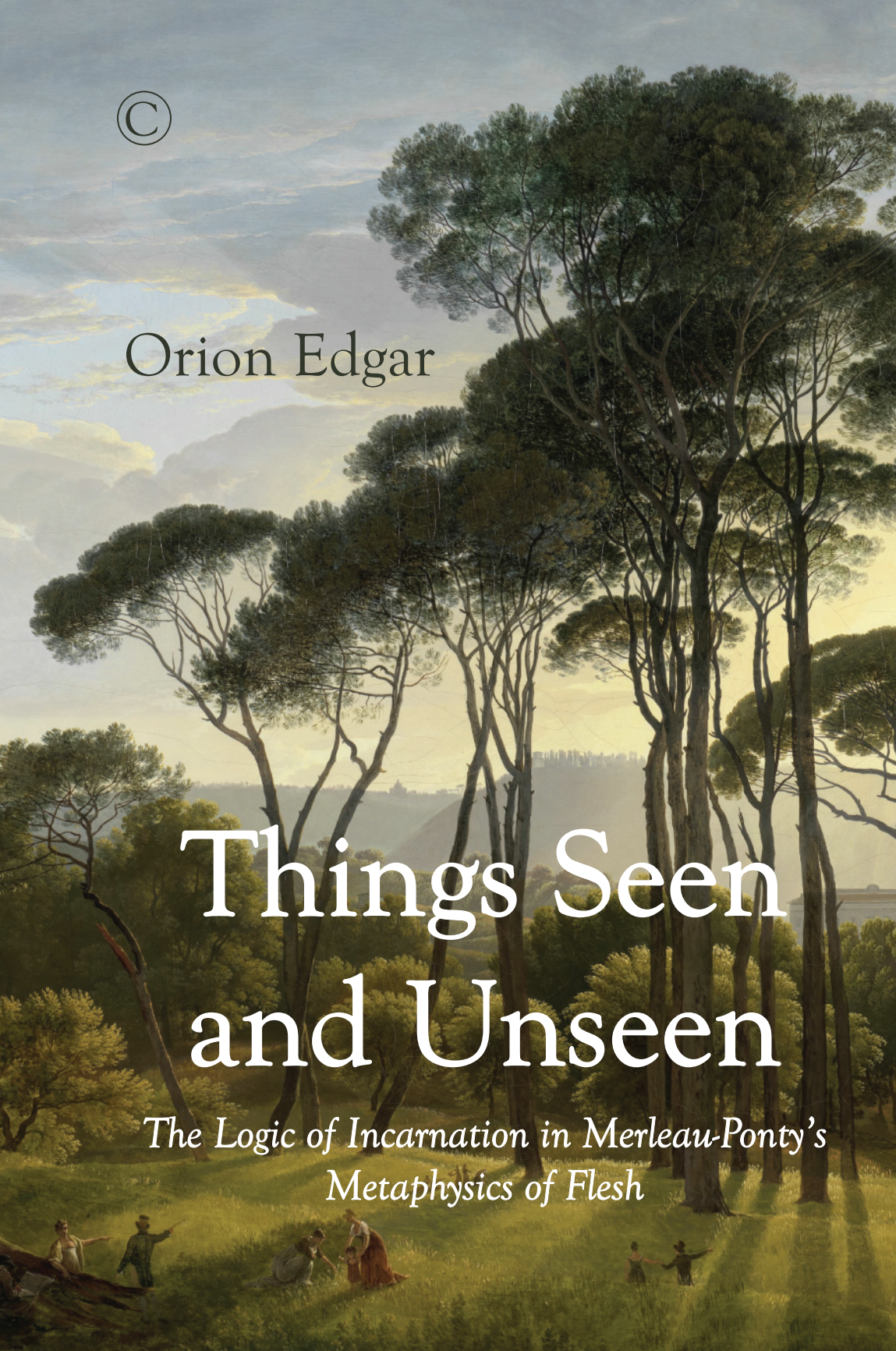
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Orion Edgar
Things Seen and Unseen
The Logic of Incarnation in Merleau-Ponty's Metaphysics of Flesh

"In this erudite and articulate book, Edgar offers an embodied account of human existence in terms of hunger, dependence, desire, and intersubjectivity. He does so by means of a sincere and subtle development of Merleau-Ponty's ontology. As such, he fleshes out the deep philosophical meaning of incarnation that has relevance for both epistemology and Christian theology. He diagnoses and overcomes the dualisms that still haunt the contemporary imagination. We do not realize how Cartesian we are."

—Philip Goodchild, Professor of Religion and Philosophy, University of Nottingham

"*Things Seen and Unseen* is a welcome and elegant contribution to the recovery of Merleau-Ponty's 'incarnational' phenomenology for theology. It will be read with value by those interested in theological aesthetics and philosophy of religion as well."

—Janet Soskice, Professor of Philosophical Theology, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge

"Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is at last beginning to receive the attention it so richly deserves. It remains one of the most fertile sources in recent thought for reshaping the way we think about knowledge, time, and embodiment—a reshaping made all the more urgent by the political and ecological disasters of our times. It is also a style of thought with obvious theological resonance, a question that has long been in need of the kind of careful, insightful, and creative attention that Orion Edgar provides in this really admirable study, which brings Merleau-Ponty's analyses of bodily existence together with central themes of the Christian imagination—incarnation and sacrament—in a deeply original and fruitful way."

—Rowan Williams, Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge

"In this sophisticated first monograph, Orion Edgar reexamines the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty from the perspective of the Catholic faith that always lapped at the edges of his thought. Once Merleau-Ponty's notions of 'flesh' and 'depth' (in particular) are thus freshly illuminated, his striking relevance for a contemporary theology of the incarnation becomes apparent. Edgar's

analysis is both philosophically insightful and theologically rich, and this study makes a significant contribution to Merleau-Ponty scholarship."

—Sarah Coakley, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge

"*Things Seen and Unseen* confirms the significance of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as one of the principal philosophical voices deserving contemporary theological attention. It also confirms Orion Edgar's significance as a voice in Christian philosophical theology. The *Veritas* series has its genesis in the Radical Orthodoxy movement and, since its beginnings, that movement has pointed to, and explored, the centrality of mediation to the Christian intellectual vision. This book is a further substantial contribution."

—Andrew Davison, Faculty of Divinity and Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge

"This is, quite simply, the most magnificent account of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology ever written. Edgar brings to life, in the fullest possible terms, the genius of Merleau-Ponty—the Church should be truly grateful."

—Conor Cunningham, Associate Professor in Theology and Philosophy, Department of Theology; Co-Director, Centre of Theology and Philosophy, University of Nottingham

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Things Seen and Unseen

The Logic of Incarnation in Merleau-Ponty's Metaphysics of Flesh

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It is a central thread of this work that thought is essentially embodied: it belongs not to the inner workings of an individual mind but to a bodily person located in a complex web of relations, to other people, to a world, and to the fundamental *logos* of that world. To compose a list of persons without whom my work could not be what it is would be an unending task; but I'd like to thank a few of whose influence I have been most keenly aware.

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INTRODUCTION

The Logic of Incarnation in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology

My aim in this book is to explicate the ontology that Maurice Merleau-Ponty was developing throughout his work, the final and most complete expression of which comes to us in the unfinished work published as *The Visible and the Invisible*, and to show how this ontology points towards a metaphysical completion grounded in the logic of the Catholic tradition in which Merleau-Ponty received a long formation. I will argue that the progression of Merleau-Ponty's thought is not well characterized by a turn from an early phenomenological philosophy of consciousness to a later, more consistent ontological philosophy of *flesh*. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's thought follows a trajectory (within each text and in his whole corpus) towards an incarnational understanding which is never brought to completion but which is continually reworked and refined, each time bringing to clearer expression something of the fundamental insight that is present from the beginning.

My conviction is that Merleau-Ponty's ontology participates in a radical movement of thought that seeks to liberate the thinker from dissipative dualisms by identifying the common source of their elements in an *intertwining*, that is, in a chiasmatically structured prior whole from which we make analytic abstractions. In modernity these abstractions remain determinative for thought; they impair a synthetic, intuitive understanding of structured wholes in the very same moment that they enable an analytic, atomic understanding of the elements of the experienced world. The analytic function well established, we are left with a glut of problems of integration that characterize the weakness of modern thought: the problems of mind and body, form and matter, ideal and real, thought and things, freedom and

causation, instinct and desire, animal and environment, body and world, telos and genesis, humanity and nature, and so on.

Merleau-Ponty's logic is *incarnational* in the sense that it takes as its icon the flesh, a supposed "union of opposites" which, inasmuch as it succeeds in uniting them, announces their originary indivision and the possibility of their transformation. This ontological story scandalizes our already-existing stories and our established categories, and this should come as no surprise; the clear separation of things, the making of these distinctions, initiated a great advance in human understanding of which it remains the fundamental basis. The search for knowledge depends on taking things apart to understand them. But if knowledge is not to supplant wisdom, if *scientia* is not to spurn its ancient concern with life and living, with integrating such knowledge into the world of thought, of values, and of relationships, it must learn to put things back together.

There is in Merleau-Ponty's thought, then, a kind of methodological commitment to a coherentism both narrow and broad: his fundamental impulse "to understand the relations of consciousness and nature"[1] arises from dissatisfaction with the chasm left between them by Cartesian thought. What perception furnishes us with must make sense in its own terms, and if the phenomenological reduction means excising what we cannot fit into a predetermined set of terms, then it is of no use. As Merleau-Ponty tells us in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction. [. . .] If we were absolute spirit, the reduction would not be problematic. But since, on the contrary, we are in and toward the world, and since even our reflections take place in the temporal flow that they are trying to capture [. . .] there is no thought which encompasses all of our thought."[2]

My aim, then, is also to draw out those aspects of Merleau-Ponty's ontological thought that are of interest to Christian theology. In the use of the notion of *incarnation*, in the repeated deployment of sacramental language, of the notion of the centrality of faith, and in a continued dialogue with Christian thinkers, Merleau-Ponty is always drawing on and reflecting on the Christian tradition, and to the reader sensitive to this world of thought it is clear that he is deeply marked by his Roman Catholic upbringing, operating very much within a sacramental imaginary.[3]

1. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, 3.

2. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii–lxxviii. Except where specified, references to the *Phenomenology of Perception* are to the 2012 edition, translated by Donald Landes.

3. On Merleau-Ponty's connection with Christian thought, see Simpson, *Merleau-Ponty and Theology*; Kearney, *Anatheism*, especially 85–100; and "Merleau-Ponty and

Merleau-Ponty grew up as a Catholic and had an unusually happy childhood.[4] He broke with Catholicism in his twenties, partly in response to the shelling of working-class parts of Vienna by the Catholic "Christian Socialist" government of Engelbert Dollfuss, and he alludes to this event in the 1946 essay translated as "Faith and Good Faith." But, as Graham Ward says, "he never manages to shake off his Catholic imagination."[5] Merleau-Ponty's thought does not by any means require a Christian commitment to make sense. But it does draw on a set of ideas that an understanding of Christianity will help us to elucidate, and my contention will be that it is also informed by an essential strand of the Christian tradition, namely its incarnationalism, which gives the ontology that Merleau-Ponty was developing a singular significance for Christian thought and that demands a theological interpretation.

My emphasis will remain on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and its implications for ontology and for theology. I do not seek here to stage an encounter between Merleau-Ponty and theology in general or any particular theologian. This work has been begun by others; but I focus here on understanding and developing the *internal* logic of Merleau-Ponty's trajectory, understanding him in his intellectual and religious context, and attempting to tease out the implications of his thought with as little outside determination as possible. To stage an encounter would place us under the burden of focusing on how Merleau-Ponty's thought differs from Christian Orthodoxy, as it surely must. But such an exercise can easily miss what each can learn from the other, and as such I intend to develop Merleau-Ponty's thought in its theological sympathies, seeking not to Christianize Merleau-Ponty's philosophy but to draw out theological implications already present there. This will involve, in chapter 6, a dialogue between key theological ideas and Merleau-Ponty's work—a dialogue that, I claim, his later work anticipates, particularly through its engagement with incarnation as both a philosophical and a theological concept.

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the Sacramentality of the Flesh"; Saint Aubert, "L'incarnation change tout"; Milbank, "The Soul of Reciprocity Part Two: Reciprocity Granted"; Nordlander, "Figuring Flesh in Creation" and "The Wonder of Immanence"; and Whaite, "'Suspending the Material.'"

4. Sartre writes, "One day in 1947, Merleau told me that he had never recovered from an incomparable childhood. He had known that private world of happiness from which only age drives us. Pascalian from adolescence, without even having read Pascal, he experienced his singular selfhood as the singularity of an adventure." Sartre, *Situations*, 228.

5. Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 71 n. 25.

In addition to these few interventions, a handful of commentators on Merleau-Ponty have attended to the theological dimension of his thought,[6] and many more theologians have seen fit to make use of his thought in passing.[7] Although theologies of the body have abounded in recent years, and especially in the wake of Pope John Paul II's 129 lectures on "Theology of the Body" between September 1979 and November 1984, these have tended to focus not on embodiment *per se* but on issues associated with the human body, and particularly on sexuality, where "body theology" has been a site of the battle between conservative approaches to sexual morality and the more progressive positions emerging from feminism and queer theory. Theoretical approaches to the body have tended to focus on the questions brought up by the facts of bodily difference, and as such the body has been territorialized and instrumentalized. This has diverted attention away from the body as precisely the ground that human beings share with each other and with the material world, and so often the question of what it is to be a body that is structured in *this particular* way, shared by human beings, that incarnates me in the world and grounds my relationships to others in concrete intersubjectivity, has been put aside in favor of questions of difference. Such questions are important, but to approach questions of bodily difference without a well-founded understanding of embodiment in general may be to put the cart before the horse. I attempt here to elucidate an ontology that understands the body in terms of *flesh*; following Merleau-Ponty, we start with perception, which draws us into an understanding of intersubjectivity, hunger, dependence, and desire, clarifying an account of vision liberated from the Cartesian scopic regime, and ultimately determining fleshly incarnation in terms of expression, institution, and historicity. In this way I attempt to offer an account of what it is to be an incarnate person by focusing on the irreducible structures of embodiment, which always already install us in a world of coexistence with others, a world in which love, hunger, suffering, and transformation carry metaphysical significance and are not simply epiphenomenal. Thus, the questions of the politics of the body, and the discussion of what it might mean for God to have assumed a body, find their much-needed systematic grounding in a logic of incarnation.

There is not a "Merleau-Ponty and Theology" industry in the way that there is for theological interpretations of Heidegger or Wittgenstein for example. For some time there have been occasional excursions into the field of engagement between Merleau-Ponty's thought and Christian theology, but

6. See, for example, Rabil, *Merleau-Ponty*; Bannan, "Merleau-Ponty on God"; Bernet, "The Subject in Nature"; and Hamrick and Van Der Veken, *Nature and Logos*.

7. See, for example, Pickstock, *After Writing*, 107–16; Cox, *The Secular City*, 5; Arnould, "Theologians Wanted!," 368; Blond, "Theology and Perception."

this remains a territory for the most part unexplored, and I here develop a fundamental route into that region on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's thought and its theological resonances, both latent and readily perceived.

What, then, is the importance of Merleau-Ponty's ontology? From the first, it proposes to move beyond entrenched dualisms. It is a refrain of my work here that we do not realize just how Cartesian we are. It is for this reason that I seek to develop Merleau-Ponty's ontology: to expose our assumed dualisms, to call them into question, and to find ways to overcome them. Of course, many others have sought to do this before me. I can hardly hope to succeed where they have failed. But this is not a question of finding the solution to the problem of dualism. We are interrogating the mystery of the fleshly connections of human beings and nature, of nature and God; where a rigid rationalism is challenged by the reconciliation of things, dualisms are not simply replaced by unitive monisms; rather, thought is challenged to come to terms with identity within difference. As I understand it, this is the basis for the progression of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Renaud Barbaras writes, "I am inclined more and more to think of Merleau-Ponty's final philosophy as not having fully cast off the presuppositions of the philosophy of consciousness and as faltering because of a lack, rather than an excess, of radicality."[8] Nevertheless Barbaras thinks it justified to keep on returning to Merleau-Ponty's thought; this thought proposes to help us to think our way out of a dualism *that we are in*, and not to dictate from without an entirely new ontology. In this sense, the ontology of the flesh is the goal of our philosophical exercise, and is neither a complete truth already somewhere expressed nor a final answer to the problem of ontology awaiting its definitive expression. To be truly expressed, it must be lived. I attempt to show here why, and how this is possible, by developing the ontology of the flesh in its implications for theology and for the practice of Christianity.

My anticipation is thus that Merleau-Ponty's ontology, to come to full expression, must be brought into dialogue with the world of *praxis*: in the flesh, philosophy is related to history, to action, and to nature. I *do not* think, nor claim, that Christian theology is the only realm in which Merleau-Ponty's ontology can come to a fuller expression. But there must be *a* field of practice and reflection on practice for such fuller expression to be attained, and the field of Christian life and sacramental practice is the one I have seen most clearly implied in his thought, and have settled on. I also see in Christian thought fertile ground for the development of a non-dualistic ontology. The religion of God incarnate, of the *logos* made flesh, has a long tradition of thinking of the intertwining of thought and action, of soul and body, of

8. Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, xxiv.

heaven and earth, of God and human beings, of self and others, of nature and history. This tradition is sometimes covered over by the influence of a sclerotic scholasticism, by simplistic thinking, by our daily failures in the difficult task of understanding and holding the two poles together.

My guiding questions, then, will be: How can Merleau-Ponty's ontology be developed in light of Christian life and thought? And what implications does this development have for philosophy and for theology?

Such an investigation will, I hope, serve as a guide to theologians who are interested to make use of Merleau-Ponty's thought. In philosophical terms, this book seeks to show how a compelling reading of Merleau-Ponty, which begins without a commitment to methodological atheism, quickly reveals a convergence between Merleau-Ponty's thought and Christian theology. Merleau-Ponty, though not a Catholic Christian in any straightforward sense after he lost his faith in his mid-twenties, was no more straightforwardly a secularist or an atheist. The question of faith and its commitments remained with him, and that he received a Catholic funeral is no surprise, resonating as it does with his ongoing and ambiguous relationship to the faith he inherited and its deep thought-structures.

Developing Merleau-Ponty's thought in these directions will perhaps begin to elucidate a kind of natural theology. Natural theology after Descartes has always led in a basically deist direction. But, when we properly call into question the modern view of the world and its attendant mechanical picture of nature, natural theology begins to look like a rather different kind of exercise. A phenomenological starting-point, leading into the thick ontology of flesh that I will expound in chapters 5 and 6, ultimately points to a God intimated at the depths of the world, a world that bears subtle witness to its own created nature. This makes room for a metaphysics that escapes an objectivizing onto-theology, that affirms the contingency of the world. Such an investigation shows how faith necessarily goes "all the way down" in reason—and as such, this natural theology is always already in a sense revealed. There is no hard divide between the book of nature and the book of Scripture; revealed truth is forever intertwined with the truth of reason. As such, this is not a natural theology that would seek to establish by reason one or another kind of prerequisite for faith—to attempt, for example, to prove the existence of God or establish the coherence of theodicy. Rather, I seek to show how Merleau-Ponty's philosophy justifies a logic that is consonant with that of Christian faith, that must be committed to openness to it (though it cannot justify the claim that *only* this particular kind of theology can ultimately make sense of the ontology of flesh). Merleau-Ponty's philosophy coheres remarkably well with the Christian vision of God and creation correctly understood—but it cannot establish it with the force of law.

I will take several steps on the way. First of all, I explicate Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh with detailed attention to its genesis in his understanding of perception. I emphasize the centrality of a fundamental perceptual faith, and show how vision is grounded in its relationship to eating: perception is essential to life as crucial for nutrition, for meeting our appetitive needs. But in human beings perception exceeds the world of needs, as appetite is transformed in *hunger*, which is the imaginative development of desire.

Secondly, I offer an account of perception that affirms vision as the central and pre-eminent sense, but also as rooted in the body and the imbrication of the senses, as dependent on a perceptual faith which is basic, thus moving beyond the impasses of Cartesian perspectivalism and the postmodern antioculocentrism that is its inversion. On the basis of this account of vision I develop an understanding of transcendence as *depth*, which points to a conception of God as knowable at the same time that God must always elude our grasp and exceed every attempt at comprehension.

Thirdly, I show more clearly the roots of Merleau-Ponty's thought in an incarnational and sacramental logic whose source is Christian, and I develop the ontology of flesh with reference to this incarnational logic in theological thought, paying attention to sacramental practice. I show how Merleau-Ponty's notion of institution reveals that ontology and anthropology are intertwined; both a *philosophy of consciousness* and a *philosophy of nature* must be refused, understanding nature as "soil" for ontological flesh. Refusing to reduce God to consciousness or to nature provides a corrective to Spinozist pantheism and to an Idealist conception of God as *penseur absolu du monde*. This philosophical development will build towards an ontology that insists on an account of God that is grounded in Christian theology's deepest logic: that of incarnation.

In Part One I develop the groundwork for a Merleau-Pontyan ontology of *flesh* through an interrogation of perception. In the first chapter, I introduce Merleau-Ponty's fundamental insight, on the basis of his thought in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, situated within and drawing on the whole current of his philosophy. I offer an exposition of his opposition to the atomism of sensationalism and to the objective thought of idealism and empiricism. I explain his notion of the structured *gestalt* of perception and show how the idea of reversibility introduces the problem that the observer (scientific or philosophical) cannot stand outside of the world she observes. I show how the Cartesian problem of illusion drove a wedge between the mind and the world, and how a kind of perceptual faith is basic for Merleau-Ponty, a prerequisite for perception. This grounding of perception in life enables us to develop a sense of subjectivity in the midst of things,

fundamentally situated with regard to objects and the world. The fundamental dimension of perception is the existential dimension of depth, and this is allied to *meaning*, made clearer by the French word that Merleau-Ponty uses, *sens*, which implies not only *meaning* or *sense* but also *directedness* and *orientation*. Thus perception is grounded in the life of the moving body. But to fully understand perception in its existential dimension, an account of seeing is not enough. So, in chapter 2, I turn to the question of eating as perception to develop a thicker understanding of perception in general. Rather than beginning with the question of "taste" and the metaphorical use of that concept in the aesthetic philosophy of the eighteenth century, I begin with hunger, contrasting the simple animal appetite, whose drive maintains nutrition and growth, with hunger properly speaking, which is not simply appetite but also its imaginative development, that takes hunger beyond the simple expression of a lack or a need towards the expressive development of possibilities. This typifies the *lability* of human beings in which they transcend the operation of the purely given. I then turn to a consideration of the sense of taste as an example that helps us to develop an understanding of perception as contact with the world that does not depend on the construction of a mental theatre of representation in which the world is re-created "inside my head." Taste thus transforms the Cartesian epistemological question, of how I can know that I am not being deceived by an illusion, into a new form of epistemological question: how can I know a world of which I am only part and to which my access must necessarily be partial? This epistemological reformulation opens onto and is bound up with further questions, of the nature of subjectivity and of ontology: what is it to be a perceiving being, incarnate in this world? The answer to this question begins with an anthropology of the human as a *hungry* being, that is, as dependent and desiring, as willing matter, subject to a world which he also transforms through his desire, charged not only with *conatus* and the instinct for survival but with an openness to his own remaking and thus to the transformation of the world.

Chapter 3 marks a crossing point between Part One, in which I have laid my groundwork in an account of perception, and Part Two, in which I develop the ontology of flesh. I assess what I have called "the old ontology" of Descartes, paying special attention to his account of visual perception as presented in the *Optics*. That text constitutes a crucial moment in the history of ontology insofar as it reifies a universal geometrism into a mathematized conception of space, which is consummated in its imagined joining to a totally abstract principle of subjectivity with which it can never remain in contact. Mind is excluded from a mathematized nature, and the human being as desiring body is rent asunder.

Part Two begins in earnest in chapter 4, where I begin to develop an ontological alternative to the Cartesian scene on the basis of a renewed understanding of visual perception, which escapes the absolute distance of the Platonic cave, the chasm of Cartesian *mathesis*, and the paranoid hostility of Sartre's neo-Cartesianism. Merleau-Ponty's positive account of vision, especially as expressed in his late essay "Eye and Mind," establishes *depth* as the fundamental dimension of perceptive intertwining with the world, in which sight organizes our perceptive knowledge, including our tactile sensations, in such a way that we can "have the world at distance": that is, we are installed among things, in contact with them, without coinciding with them in full presence. As such, we perceptually interrogate and explore a world that massively transcends us, and sight is understood in its fundamental dependence on movement and intersensoriality. The "thickness" of the things sight perceives in this fuller account can reveal their meanings in our intersubjective relation to them and a richer materiality of color and melody, not just of line and instantaneity, with which our engagement is necessarily simultaneously passive and active, that is, interrogative. This interrogation refuses an absolutely passive illumination of a clear and distinct vision of the world, and as such suggests an incarnationalism that embraces ambiguity and that refuses to withdraw from the transcendence that we encounter in immanence but that ultimately escapes us.

In chapter 5, I re-install this account of vision in an ontology of flesh and draw out the implications of incarnational thought in both philosophical and theological terms. I develop an understanding of transcendence as *depth* rather than as height, of the *logos* of things, which appears in their depths as revealing an orientation not to God conceived as utterly outside, as *penseur absolu du monde*, nor to a pantheist God who is convertible with nature, but rather to a God at work within nature, refusing a rationalist deism as well as a romanticist spiritualism, and revealing God "on the other side of things." In this conception, nature is the soil of meaning, neither as given in pure ideality nor as constituted by a thinker, but as instituted by the thinking subjects that are grounded in it. I develop in detail Merleau-Ponty's logic of institution as presented in his 1954–55 lectures on that theme, showing how the later lectures establish Nature as a ground of meaning that is beyond objectivity. As such, a philosophy of nature is as much a failure of ontology as is a philosophy of consciousness; the ontology of flesh demands that both poles are understood in terms of their intertwinement with one another, and I develop this incarnationalism by showing how Renaud Barbaras misunderstands it as the insertion of consciousness into nature and how Michel Henry evacuates all life from the world in a Manichaeism that refuses the humility of humanity.

In chapter 6 I go on to develop the sacramental implications of this intertwining of humanity and nature, suggesting that an understanding of *epiphany* grounds the relation of the logic of incarnation we have been developing to the continual transformation of history and thus the advent of historical time: for Merleau-Ponty, "sensation is, literally, a communion."[9] A certain *logos* is made known in and through material things, which announces and to some extent presents a transcendent *beyond*. We have called this beyond "God," but the question of its nature passes beyond the limits of philosophy. What Merleau-Ponty's incarnationalism has taught us is that the difficulty and ambiguity of this *beyond* must not be neutralized by attempts to determine it beyond its presentations; it must not become an attempt to explain away the world, suffering and joy, but to look upon the truths present in them.

Where theology has been dismissed in modern thought, it has been on the basis of the flat, objectivized ontologies that we have here called into question. Naturalism supplanted an explanatory theology with its inverse. Merleau-Ponty's critique of Christianity, based on a view of God as the *ens realissimum*, seeks to guard against such a flat ontology and a dissolution of mystery. A properly incarnational theology returns us to the God who is not *ens realissimum* but *ipsum esse subsistens*—the uncreated ground of existence, beyond determination but known in self-revelation, who is the metaphysical source that assures freedom and contingency in a nonetheless ordered world. An ontology of the flesh calls into question the division between natural and supernatural; its sacramentality is not an assertion of the supernatural but an interrogation of nature that takes seriously the notion that *logos* appears within nature and thus makes a question of nature. This makes possible a metaphysics that is grounded in the perceived world, that affirms a reason that dwells in the contingency of things and does not demand a Spinozistic determinism nor a Leibnizian rationalism for which everything is necessarily as it must be. For the one who finds God made known in the flesh, in nature and history, sacramentality institutes and expresses God's self-revelation by continued participation in it. Such participation does not simply repeat that revelation but also brings it into dialogue with the world and with its own history, so that the Eucharist always fractures and sends out those who are gathered, so that *mass* must always also be *mission*.

9. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 219.

PART ONE

Perception

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Merleau-Ponty's Embodied Philosophy

In this chapter I introduce Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thought. I show how his developing philosophy provides an avenue for thinking about the human person, the world, and knowledge beyond fundamental (though often latent or unnoticed) dualisms in contemporary philosophy. Thinking with Merleau-Ponty, and the embodied mode of philosophy of which he is a key source, we will see that our understanding of perception is crucial for the formation of a paradigm for viewing the relation of the human person with the world around him: for, in perception, the domain of causes, of physical events, is connected to the domain of reasons, or mental events; things are connected to thoughts. Philosophy has tended to conceptualize perception as internal visual representation, making central the question of how an internal "picture" of the world is formed, and how we can know *how much* and *in what ways* that picture is in accord with the external world of causes, and so asking how the individual senses are connected to one another. These are the classical questions of epistemology. We will see how Merleau-Ponty's account of perception may dispel this picture, which, according to Wittgenstein, "held us captive."

In the following chapter I will go on to propose a richer account of perception which will ask instead how our originary common sense of the world is analyzed into the five individual senses, and will take the more concrete (and more inextricably intertwined) senses of taste, smell, and touch, in their primordial relation to the more abstract senses, as primary. If we form our paradigm for perception in light of the act of eating, we can form a robust idea of perception beyond the epistemological picture, as the communion of persons with the world, which are not two basically

incommensurable categories. We will see that the human being is from the beginning at the heart of things, not a spirit alien in the world, but rather an incarnate, bodily subject of an objective world. This conception of human being will lead to a reconsideration of the concept of nature as implied by the notion of a domain of causes, and of the concept of freedom as implied by the domain of reasons, leading to a conception of nature that has situated freedom at its heart, and opening onto the investigation of an incarnational ontology of flesh in the latter part of this book.

Merleau-Ponty's Gestalt Phenomenology

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty traces out a conception of the human subject that is opposed to the problematic and too abstract conceptions of human being in the philosophy of his time. He begins by analyzing the accounts of the perception of objects offered on the one hand by the scientifically-minded Empiricists, and on the other by rationalist Intellectualists, starting with the idea of sensation.

Both the realist Empiricist and the idealist Intellectualist account for the object in terms of its atomic components in perception—pure sensations. This seemingly common-sense starting point already governs the trajectory of such accounts in a problematic direction, by misconceiving the relationship of the object of perception to its subject.

For the empiricist, perception offers access to the world as it is, and this is in part because the world is composed of deterministic entities that stand in observable relation to one another; consciousness, then, must be another thing in the world, and perception a theoretically observable relation between things. By contrast, for the intellectualist, we can only come to know the world-as-experienced, and consciousness cannot be accounted for as part of that world, but is the experiencer that constitutes the world as experienced. Nevertheless, the world as experienced is, for the Intellectualist, composed of determinable entities that stand in relation to one another, which is to say a reductive analysis of it is possible.[10]

Merleau-Ponty's dual-headed attack on these two positions focuses on what they share—the thought that the world, whether real or experienced, is analyzable into determinate parts whose relation to one another can be reduced into determinate constituent elements. This is the significance of his notion of *gestalt*. In the long introduction (comprising the first four

10. I owe this formulation of the Empiricist and Intellectualist position to that given by Komarine Romdenh-Romluc in lectures at the University of Nottingham and in Romdenh-Romluc, *Guidebook to Merleau-Ponty*.

chapters) to *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty opposes this gestaltist view to the reductive view, which supposes sensations as atomistic units of perception and which asserts the "Constancy Hypothesis"—that is, that these sensed units are part of a simple one-to-one correspondence between sensory stimuli and perceived qualities, so that a mental representation of the world corresponding to these stimuli, is built up out of these atomic units.

The notion of sensation is problematic because we perceive not just sensations, but things, persons, and, indeed, a world. These perceptions, on the model of objective thought, must be produced in some way by the combination of sensations in the space of mental representation. But if, as the realist might prefer to say, they are combined according to a manner determined by the object itself (that is, individual sensations refer to the object, and provide the principle according to which they are combined into the object that is the source of the stimulus), then the notion of "sensation" must be excluded, for the simple property is *not* sensed, but rather a *thing* with certain analyzable properties is sensed—the sensations are artificial abstractions from the prior reality of intentional perception.

Alternatively, if sensations are not combined in a manner given by the object, they must be combined according to some principle internal to me, and there is in fact no reason to think that our perception refers to the world at all: I may happen to combine certain kinds of sensation in certain ways but there is no rule by which such combinations could be compared to real objects and affirmed or rejected as veridical or illusory.

For the empiricist, the subject must combine sensations into perceived objects according to a principle given by the objects themselves. Thus consciousness is simply part of a causal chain, and just another thing in the world. It is, though, hard to see in what sense there is truly a pure and neutral "sensation," in this case—it seems that perception must already have intentionality, must already refer to a perceived "thing," or else the manner in which sensations are combined into objects must not be according to the principle given by the thing itself, in which case it is hard to see how perception can refer to anything at all. For the intellectualist, it is clear that sensations are combined according to a principle given by consciousness, which constitutes the world as perceived. In this case, sense experience would seem to be understood as a form of judgment, which erases the commonsense distinction between judgment and perception, making it very difficult to understand what it means for things to "seem" one way (as in many optical illusions, for example) when we in fact know that they are another way.

Otherwise, if perception is not already a form of judgment for the intellectualist, then their account will fall foul of the same problems as the

empiricist account—either perception of the object is given according to the object, or there is no reason to think that perception represents the real world at all. The second part of this faulty theorization of perception, the Constancy Hypothesis, is equally easily shown to be false, according to Merleau-Ponty. For him, it

> enters into conflict with the givens of consciousness, and the same psychologists who posit it also acknowledge its theoretical character. For example, the intensity of a sound lowers its [perceived] pitch under certain conditions; the addition of auxiliary lines renders two objectively equal shapes unequal [in the Müller-Lyer illusion]; and a colored area appears uniformly colored even though the chromatic thresholds of the different regions of the retina ought to make it red here and orange there, and in certain cases even colorless. [. . .] When red and green presented together give a resulting gray, it is conceded that the central combination of stimuli may immediately give rise to a sensation different from what the objective stimuli would require. When the apparent size of an object varies with its apparent distance, or when its apparent color varies with the memories we have of it, it is conceded that "sensorial processes are not impervious to central influences." In this case, then, the "sensible" can no longer be defined as the immediate effect of an external stimulus.[11]

Merleau-Ponty's arguments here do not carry the force of deductive certainty. Nevertheless, they open up, in the pages that follow, a way of viewing the world that makes good sense of the human situation. In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty has told us that

> Because we are through and through related to the world, the only way for us to catch sight of ourselves is by suspending this movement, by refusing to be complicit with it (or as Hussserl often says, to see it *ohne mitzumachen* [without taking part]), or again, to put it out of play. This is not because we renounce the certainties of common sense and the natural attitude—on the contrary, these are the constant theme of philosophy—but rather because, precisely as the presuppositions of every thought, they are "taken for granted" and they pass by unnoticed, and because we must abstain from them for a moment in order to awaken them and to make them appear. Perhaps the best formulation of the reduction is the one offered by Husserl's assistant Eugen Fink when he spoke of a "wonder" before the world.[12]

11. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 8, translation modified.
12. Ibid., lxxvii.