

Speaking Bodies:
Communication and Freedom in Fichte and Merleau-Ponty

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts Program in Philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies

August 31, 2011

Presented to the Thesis Committee of Dr. Shannon Hoff (Advisor),
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Abstract

Drawing on the ideas of J.G. Fichte and M. Merleau-Ponty, I argue that experience and freedom are intersubjective, linguistic, and bodily. In the first chapter, I take up Fichte's three "fundamental principles" from the *Science of Knowledge* alongside his ideas of embodiment and intersubjectivity from the *Foundations of Natural Right* to show that all experience is an indefinite mixture of self and not-self, and, therefore, that both the *experiences* of self-consciousness and its freedom must also be accomplished with reference to the not-self, and particularly others. The second chapter is an examination of Merleau-Ponty's account of expression in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. The key insight I pursue here is that the medium of expression, which makes possible all significance, is bodily and intersubjective, and that any expressive act is therefore both self-opaque and soliciting cooperation. In the end, I turn to how this cooperation, i.e. freedom, should be enacted.

Introduction

Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?
RSV, Luke 6:39

And when you stare deeply into an abyss, the abyss also stares into you.
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 89

For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.
KJV, 1 Corinthians 13:12

We take it for granted that a person can both learn things and imagine things: we send our children to school so that they can learn about the big and wide world, and we also marvel at their ability to be spontaneous and creative—as, for instance, when a child draws something that one could never have conceived oneself. In our everyday attitude, imagination and learning pose us no problems, and we recognize the *reality* of each. But, if we merely scratch at the surface of this common mindset by reflecting a little further about it, what we come up against is that imagination and learning—though both allowed by our sense of reality—in fact describe two different and mutually exclusive *realities*. That is, each concept commits us to a view of the world and a person's relation to it that is distinct from and opposed to the other. The biggest difference between imagination and learning consists in their respective relations to the individual undertaking them. What

the individual arrives at in learning is most often treated as though it existed already, external to and independent of the individual's efforts. The individual, therefore, seems to bring nothing to the world about which she is learning. On the other hand, imagination consists precisely in that which the individual brings about in the world. To say that a thing has been imagined is, after all, to assert that its existence is dependent upon an individual's imaginative activity. Take for example works of art: a work of art typically commands greater appreciation and wonder the more it conveys a certain originality in an individual's, or a group's, process of thinking and creative efforts. A work of art is often appreciated, in other words, for the extent to which it is discontinuous with the world that has gone before it. Imagination stands in contrast to learning as regards the nature of the world because from its—i.e., imagination's—perspective, not only can the world change, but it changes on account of one's activity in relation to it. The world here is passive to the individual's activity.

Let us look at the reality of imagination more closely. What do we mean when we say “the individual's activity” here? If we proceed along the same lines of thought we have been following so far, we recognize that our understanding of the world has been as that which is “external” to the individual; it follows, thus, that we must conceive of the individual as that which is “internal” to the individual. She, in other words, must fundamentally be something that is not in the world, but exclusively internal to herself. What, then, is this exclusive internality that she is to herself? What is it that she has that neither anything nor anyone else has? It would seem that it is her awareness, or her mind, or thoughts, themselves—indeed, our experience with others would appear to confirm us in this; we cannot read *their* thoughts. To respond, then, to our question about “the

individual's activity," we are thus led to assert that it is her thought about the world that makes it what it is. If she can imagine—which we have just seen to mean “think about”—anything in the world, then it seems as though the world is in a sense dependent upon her imagination.

The tension between imagination and learning is not simply that they are mutually exclusive and that we must choose between them. The real concern here is that in choosing either over the other—presumably, for the sake of making sense, or being *reasonable*—we end up with a reality that seems to make a lot less sense and be much less reasonable than the naïve conception of reality—that admitted equally of imagination and learning—that we set out to correct. How? If we opt for the view of reality deployed by a commitment to learning, we end up undercutting the very idea of learning itself. And why is this? If we choose for learning, it means we choose for a situation in which one is passive to the external world outside oneself. This passivity, however, means that, ultimately, it is not one oneself who is learning, but simply that the world is accomplishing its own “external” process through one. Indeed, all reality on this view becomes external such that even one's seemingly internal space of awareness, or thought, takes on the character of externality. In other words, here one's internality is not even one's own—that is, one does not even dispose of the ability to “think about” things, but, rather, in this situation things themselves rather “think about” one. Awareness thus becomes external, and it is not this one who learns.

But—and understanding the relation between imagination and learning hinges on our properly understanding this point—this situation of pure externality is precisely the opposite of what we intended when we began using the term “external”; we meant it, in

fact, precisely to stand in opposition to our sense of ourselves, which is precisely not like our experience of other things in the world. And what is this sense of ourselves? We have already said it: it is our ability to imagine, or to “think about” things. And more specifically, we have said that imagination is typically admired for its “discontinuity” with the world. Our answer, therefore, is that our initial sense of ourselves—again, on the basis of which we invoked the term “external”—is to be actively discontinuous. In other words, our internal sense of ourselves begins from a sense of our being *unlike* and different from the world—a sense, all told, of being *free* in relation to the world. We are therefore witness to an intrinsic connection between freedom and awareness—or consciousness, or thought. The idea of thought already brings with it the sense of its own self-“activity” in relation to the world. Thus, not only does the view of reality stemming from learning end up undercutting learning itself, but it actually ends up undercutting the possibility to *choose* between the learning and imagination at all. If the perspective of learning were true, one’s “decision” with regard to whether one chose it or not would already have been pre-determined by external things, and this is to say that it would not be a decision at all, and all discussion on the matter would be moot. The idea, however, is to see that the possibility—i.e., our positing the distinction between external and internal— for arising at such a fatalistic standpoint as this was, in fact, “our” positing. In other words, it was an act on our part that presented us with the possibility to “choose” between learning, which ultimately denies choice and freedom, and imagination.¹

While the incoherence resulting from a commitment to the standpoint of learning would seem to project us, by default, as it were, towards the camp of imagination, it turns

¹ I am indebted to my uncle, Brian Morrissey, for the conversation that gave me the occasion to begin to articulate these ideas.

out that here, too, are problems. Indeed, if, in opposition to the determinism we just discussed in the case of learning, imagination commits us to a view of reality in which the world be simply a matter of our choice—not only of our conduct *within* that world, but of its very structure and limits themselves—we would have trouble seeing how imagination would amount to any more reasonable a standpoint than the one we have articulated through our treatment of learning. The fact is that we simply do not have the ability to change the world immediately, at will. We thus face a profound *aporia*: we either commit to one of two equally *unreasonable* choices—choices, again, that our impetus to be *reasonable* both presented to us and also demands of us—or we abandon this project altogether, even though it is a project that has arisen through some inexplicable inclination to be *reasonable* in the first place, and while nonetheless, and inevitably, still making use of the purchases of being reasonable in our daily lives.²

In this thesis, I confront this *aporia*. My aim is to uncover where our sense of freedom emerges from in this ambiguous situation, and whether it is merely illusory or not. My claim is that both perspectives—that is, on the one hand, that our internal sense of ourselves is made possible by external forces and therefore not itself, and, on the other, that our sense of our internal selves is primary and in fact reduces everything apparently “external” to ourselves to a projection of our internal selves—are, in fact, required for the experience of freedom, and that the only reason they might appear otherwise stems from not having sufficiently brought the fact of awareness to awareness, or achieved self-consciousness of consciousness. Yet, as the 19th-century thinker G.W.F. Hegel

² I discuss at more length below the manner in which this project of acting antithetically to being reasonable, or coherent, always ends, despite its best efforts, to betray a deeper coherence than one is immediately aware.

acknowledges in the “Preface” to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “the individual has the right to demand that Science should at least provide him with the ladder to this standpoint, should show him this standpoint within *himself*” (PS, 14, emphasis mine). In this thesis, I draw on two such “ladders,” each of which stands as its own chapter. The first is the philosophy of another 19th-century German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, which provides the basic logical framework at play in everything we think—or again, everything of which we are aware. In this manner, Fichte’s thought will serve less as a ladder in this thesis than as a clear picture of the “Science” itself—that is, the full articulation of what self-consciousness is. The force of his philosophy is twofold. In the first place, it recognizes that awareness is the only means we have of approaching reality, or what really *is*, such that what “really is” is never more than what anyone has ever been aware of about it. Similarly, in the second place, his philosophy points to the idea that awareness itself is only possible on the basis of inter-subjective cooperation.

In the second chapter, I discuss the thought of the 20th-century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The key insight I locate in his work is the identity of thought and language. What recognition of this identity enables is a subtle, though incredibly helpful, qualification of the Fichtean claim that awareness *is* the only reality. While Fichte’s claim is correct, Merleau-Ponty’s insight helps demonstrate the manner in which there stands a pre-awareness (or, indeed, pre-awarenesses)—which, following our line of thought, also amounts to a pre-reality—of which language is immanently “aware,” but not necessarily explicitly. The body, says Merleau-Ponty, is that which first enables this pre-awareness, and also that which sustains the full-blown awareness that language allows. He observes that the body is active and moves, never confining itself to a final

location, nor final pattern of activity. He discerns that the body is, therefore, capable of transcending itself, of doing more than it is ever simply doing in the present, and more than what it has done in the past. Merleau-Ponty is not alone in noticing this; as Fichte asserts in the *Foundations of Natural Right*,

each part [of the body] would have to be able to move while all the others remain at rest; each part, *ad infinitum*, would have to have its *own* movement, attributed only to it. The body would have to be configured such that it would always be up to freedom to think a part larger or smaller, as more complex or simple (FNR, 57).

The body, then, is active; *it does*—and it is capable of *doing* infinitely. What does it *do*? We have already seen that it surpasses itself. Logically, this already means that it does more than itself—that there must be something, or things, outside itself which it can do. If the body were alone in the universe, it would not be able to *do* anything because it would be deprived of anything that could give it the occasion to surpass itself. The body’s activity, therefore, only makes sense in a world populated with things other than itself. Merleau-Ponty calls this activity of the body that enables it to “catch up” (PP, 197) with that which is “external” to it “gesturing” (PP, 179). The body, therefore, opens onto the “external” world, and every gesture represents an acquisition of, or better, a *syncopation* or melding with, this world. Yet each of these gestures only hereby amounts to a pre-awareness: each alone only is itself, or again immediately *is* the thing whose movement it is miming. Each gesture is thus a separate, fully replete world. What, then, would it take for the world-making ability of the body to come to self-awareness? Our answer is already given in the question: it would take not simply a singular gestural world replete unto itself, but rather a syncopation of *all* worlds. That is, it would take an awareness of the body as that which gives “worlds” in the first place.

In her powerful examination of the co-existential form involved in parenting, and particularly nursing, that Eva-Maria Simms undertakes in the essay entitled, “Milk and Flesh,” Simms calls this syncopation of worlds “sensory integration” and remarks that “research in the relatively new field of sensory integration has shown that the development of our senses unfolds in interaction with the world made inviting by caring adults. Children who are kept in non-stimulating, sterile, and isolated environments have difficulty with hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting” (Simms, 29). The fundamental observation here is that the world-integrating gesture is made possible by others—by one’s caregivers—and that it is therefore inter-subjective.

For Merleau-Ponty, this inter-subjective gesture is language itself, and he explains that what this inter-subjectivity enables in contradistinction to other gestures is that “alone of all expressive processes, speech is able to settle into a sediment and constitute an acquisition for use in human relationships” (PP, 190). Language, in other words, is that which enables the body to become self-aware. But, unlike every other gesture that is a replete world unto itself, the linguistic gesture lacks such perfect self-awareness. This is because it both is and is not itself. At stake in language is not merely the idiosyncratic body gesturing itself, but rather the inter-subjective body of a community *trying* to find its self-expression. Indeed, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel remarks of self-consciousness that it “exists *for a self-consciousness*” and is therefore intrinsically an “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’” (PS, 110); the problem, however, is that self-consciousness is not itself immediately fully conscious of its co-belonging with others. That is, self-consciousness is not immediately fully self-conscious. Hegel writes, “What lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of... the unity of the different and

independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence” (PS, 110). We are left then with the question of how a self-consciousness can attain to a full, inter-bodily self-awareness. By way of beginning to answer this question, we first turn to Fichte’s thought.

Before moving on to the body of the thesis, I think it is important to address the case that Merleau-Ponty mounts against transcendental idealism in both the Preface and the final chapter, “Freedom,” of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. It is important I take this into account because my aim in this thesis is precisely to show a fundamental continuity between Fichte’s self-proclaimed philosophy of “transcendental idealism” (“First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge”, SK, 21) and the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty—a continuity, that is, that Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects. It is possible that Merleau-Ponty only has in mind Kant’s philosophy when he targets transcendental idealism, but because he does not specify, and so as to take into account any possible objections on this front, I will briefly take his argument into account and attempt to show the manner in which it seems to me misdirected.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the transcendental idealist approach

knows nothing of the problem of other minds, or of that of the world, because it insists that with the first glimmer of consciousness there appears in me theoretically the power of reaching some universal truth, and that the other person, being equally without thisness, location or body, the Alter and the Ego are one and the same in the true world which is the unifier of minds (PP, xii).

In other words, he judges that the transcendental idealist is incapable of accounting for the common experiences of misunderstanding, confusion, and opacity in the world.

Likewise, he believes that on such a view clarity might be better achieved in isolation

from the world. Though we will see that Fichte does offer the logical framework for all possible experience, he is in no way suggesting it is possible to derive from mere consciousness the actual experience of that which is in the world and in no way means to limit the extent to which one will find the world meaningful. Indeed, Fichte actually makes a case for the fact that a person will not even be able to appreciate the logical framework he has unearthed if she has not had an adequate formation—that is, if she has not experienced a proper upbringing. Moreover, we will see on Merleau-Ponty's side that his thought itself points to the fact that the form of all possible meaning—which he frames in terms of the fundamental movement, or gesture, that is language—is immanent and incipient in awareness from the start. In any event, though it would be understandable and even expected that Fichte and Merleau-Ponty betray different and perhaps conflicting superficial commitments simply by virtue of their different historical period (though to be honest, I have not encountered any of this sort), the real marvel is, in spite of any of Merleau-Ponty's charges, how deeply concordant their philosophies are at the deepest level.

Chapter 1

Fichte's Fundamental Principles and the Necessity of Upbringing

In this chapter, we examine the three “Fundamental Principles” Fichte lays out in his *Science of Knowledge*. My aim in having us do so is to show the necessity of having to think through the principles—or more precisely, the experiences to which they refer—for oneself. The idea is that wisdom—or accession to self-understanding—cannot be taught, but still somehow seems capable of being gestured towards such that it can be learned. I first consider the three principles, and then look at Fichte's remarks on upbringing, which, he proposes, is formative for the possibility of one's independent engagement with the principles.

Fichte proposes three principles without which knowledge—or the stuff of consciousness, or that about which one is aware—could not be. They are, in fact, quite resonant with our introductory reflections on imagination and learning. The first is the *sine qua non* of consciousness itself: identity. The principle is that the ego posits its own identity, but Fichte arrives at it by way of the logical principle of identity, remarking, “it matters not from whence it [reflection of the first principle of knowledge] starts. We choose that which offers the shortest road to our goal” (SK, 94). Fichte expresses the logical principle of identity in “[t]he proposition *A is A* (or $A = A$, since that is the

meaning of the logical copula) [which] is accepted by everyone and that without a moment's thought: it is admitted to be perfectly certain and established" (SK, 94). He explains, however, that any attempt to elucidate the provenance of this idea, or to prove it, is intrinsically elusive. The idea of identity, in other words, is "*without any other ground*" (SK, 94). Likewise, we can return here to the idea we arrived at in our introductory reflections about the self as "internal" to itself. The idea is that this sense of internality could not simply have come from outside oneself; rather, it *is* the very thought of the self. Identity names the very category by which to distinguish outside and inside in the first place. But we are getting ahead of ourselves—this is already to step into the second principle, which concerns otherness, or externality. With regard to the first principle of knowledge, Fichte makes very much of the fact that it is "absolutely unconditioned" (SK, 93)—which is another way of saying that it has no ground outside itself (SK, 94). The I posits itself. Fichte expresses this in the formula "I am I" (SK, 96). He recognizes that the self-evidence of this principle is a direct manifestation of one's own identity, of one's own self-experience. After all, where else could it come from if it is recognized as unconditioned? The significance of this coupling of self-identity and ungroundedness, means, for Fichte, that "we should be ascribing to ourselves the power of *asserting something absolutely*" (SK, 94). Thus, there is something in the nature of our identity that is fundamentally productive. Fichte moves on to explicate:

The proposition 'A = A' constitutes a *judgment*. But all judgment, so empirical consciousness tells us, is an activity of the human mind; for in empirical self-consciousness it has all the conditions of activity which must be presupposed as known and established for purposes of reflection... Now this activity is based on something that rests on no more ultimate ground, namely X [or the positing "I am I" (SK, 96)] = I am (SK, 97).

The whole of my thesis could be viewed as no more than an explication of this passage. Fichte's point here is not to say that the self always already explicitly knows itself. Rather, his point is that the self is always implicitly saying itself. The "I am" always at some level posits itself. However, it rarely accedes to the level where it grasps this self-positing. Fichte explains that "we must necessarily *think* this Act [of self-positing] as the basis of all consciousness" (SK, 93). The self always grasps itself implicitly, but it must explicitly posit itself as this grasping. Again, the self must *determine* itself in an explicit act of determination. "Fichte thus portrays the will as subject to a transcendental dynamics in which the will is being thought and hereby realized in sensible conditions," writes Günter Zöller (Zöller, 13). Only in this manner can the self be *self-determining*, which is to say free.

Now, it would be a mistake to think that the self posits itself for itself purely of its *own* volition. While the fundamental level of self is pure positing, or pure will or volition, and would thus seem to be able to posit limitlessly, it does not follow that this level of the self could in fact posit anything *limited*, such as itself, as something that stands over and against everything else. Pure volition, that is, could never have any sense of itself because to do so it would have to experience itself in opposition to something else, in which case, it would no longer be pure, but rather meditated volition. In the *Foundations of Natural Right*, Fichte speaks of this mediated level of volition as "representing" (FNR, 21), or the "world-intuiting activity" (FNR, 20). As we have just stated with regards to pure volition, he writes, "the world-intuiting activity is itself that free activity in the state of being bound" (FNR, 20). The point, however, is that this capacity for world-intuiting is not only requisite for a positing, or representing of the world, but likewise for positing the self.

“Thus,” writes Fichte, “willing and representing stand in constant necessary interaction, and neither is possible if the other is not present at the same time” (FNR, 22), even though representing “nevertheless... is posited as the contingent element” (FNR, 21). With the notion of representing, as that which is simultaneously contingent and bound, we are already in the domain of the second principle.

Fichte tells that the second principle is “conditioned as to content” (SK, 102), but not as to form. What he means by this is that the second requirement for knowledge—and even the knowledge of the self’s self-positing—is otherness, or, as we said in the introductory reflections, an “external” domain. In other words, self-awareness, self-positing, is only possible on the basis of self-alienation—or in other words, the possibility of self-positing is “conditioned” by non-identical “content”. As with the first principle, however, this second principle is “unprovable” (SK, 105) simply on the basis of pure things in the world, but “proceed[s] from a fact of empirical consciousness” (SK, 102). Indeed, this is the sense in which Fichte speaks of willing as fundamental and representing as “contingent.” That is, if we envisage the first principle of self-positing as willing and the second principle of non-identity in terms of representation, we can see that there could be no knowledge of any representation, or, in other words, of anything not posited by the self, if there were not first the self and its self-positing, or willing. The second principle of knowledge could never be first; knowledge could never be accounted for on the *basis* of representation. It is because the second principle rests on that more primary principle of willing, which intrinsically eludes final delimitation and strict identification that it, the second principle, too, is “unprovable,” inasmuch as *proof* is a

logical relationship that holds among representations, but which inherently falls short of capturing willing.

There is no unambiguous “representation” that indubitably attests to the validity of the principle of non-identity, but the principle nevertheless colours all consciousness. The point here, as we have already observed in the introduction, is that the second principle derives more from a necessity in the experience of thought itself than from a necessity in the external world of things as such. Fichte thus writes, “the proposition ‘ $\sim A$ is not equal to A ’ will undoubtedly be accepted by everyone as perfectly certain and established, and it is hardly to be expected that anyone should demand proof of it” (SK, 102). The problem Fichte means to point out here is that while this attitude is a fact of experience, it is not in experience, and—this is the significant part—cannot be derived in purely logical terms. That is, the first and most fundamental of all logical operations—namely, identity, or $A = A$ —could never be contorted so as to derive from it the second principle of $\sim A \neq A$. It is in this sense that it is “unconditionally asserted in respect of its mere form” (SK, 105-6). This is because the notion of difference is not carried within pure identity itself. Yet, as Fichte maintains and as we observed in our own introductory remarks, both the first principle and the second arise in experience—they are “fact[s] of consciousness” (SK, 102). This is why we are enjoined not to examine logic, or the “self-apparent” framework of thought itself, but must rather look to the realm of experience in which both $A = A$ and $\sim A \neq A$ obtain. We must, that is, look beyond the immediate problem to the realm in which it arises.

For Fichte, the third principle names this realm. The logical form of this realm is precisely the identity of both identity, or the first principle, and non-identity, or the

second principle. He tells us that this principle is “conditioned as to form” (SK, 105), but “unconditioned only as to content” (SK, 106). Similarly, he says that this principle names “the area in which everything can be proved” (SK, 105). In other words, in the domain of the third principle, which is, after all, the domain of experience, everything will be experienced as either self, or not-self, but that what counts as either can be anything. While the form of experience is herein limited, the actual content of experience is unlimited, or infinite. Fichte explains that the infinity ensues from the fact that any experience of identity is intrinsically and irreducibly mediated by non-identity. The form of experience of identity, in other words, is conditioned by non-identity. This means that no actual modicum of identity is final, but all identity can be further differentiated from itself—not in whole, because it would then remain self-same (as either completely self or completely not self), but in part. Fichte thus ascertains

We have unified the opposing self and not-self through the concept of divisibility. If we abstract from the specific content of self and not-self, leaving only the *mere form of the union of opposites through the concept of divisibility*, we obtain the logical proposition known hitherto as the *grounding principle*: $A \text{ in part} = \sim A$, and *vice versa* (SK, 110).

Our lived sense that anything could happen, that experience is in some manner infinite is therefore validated in the third principle insofar as any whole, any identity, and most significantly, any meaning, is infinitely open to further determination and therefore further meaning. As we will see in the second chapter, it is only when one has grasped the identity of the first two principles that one can self-consciously enact this infinity in experience, which is to say, fully experience freedom. That is, it is only in an appreciation of this identity that one can hope to truly recognize one’s freedom. Fichte writes in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, “self-consciousness is possible if the rational

being can – in one and the same undivided moment – ascribe an efficacy to itself and posit something in opposition to that efficacy” (FNR, 30).

Fichte therefore already provides a basic outline of the solution to what we called the *aporia* of reason in the introduction, by which we meant the sense in which reasonable reflection seems to conduct us, on the one hand, to choose between two equally unsatisfying views of reality (that my identity is everything, or that the external world, or non-identity, makes up my identity), or, on the other, to reject reason altogether. Fichte’s solution stems from a full appreciation of the fact that the first principle could never account for the second, but nevertheless that the difference, or non-identity, at issue in the second principle must somehow have become available for the identity, or selfhood, at issue in the first principle. We discussed how the self’s own sense of self, its self-awareness, depends on the principle of difference. This could only be the case if the self were not simply left to its own devices as pure volition, or pure positing, but were “*determined to be self-determining*” (FNR, 31). Furthermore, Fichte’s (and Merleau-Ponty’s) real insight is that the self will continue to be so determined, which is to say, restrictedly (self-)aware, until it has taken up this determination for itself.

The question, then, is what this determined-ness to be self-determining consists in. Like Fichte, Schelling offers a clear reply: “the ground we are looking for outside the individual can only lie in *another individual*” (Schelling, *The System of Transcendental Idealism*, 235). It is only another individual who can offer one recognition of one’s own identity—it is only another “unconditioned being” who can make manifest to oneself one’s own freedom. How does this happen? Fichte explains that another does this in a “limitation of the I” (FNR, 34). As we have already stated, one’s pure volition must

somehow be mediated by the other. To be made aware of one's volition, one must be limited in the exercise of that volition. Or again, to be made aware that one wants some determined and distinct thing, one must be made aware that one does not want anything and everything. And it is only another who can enable one's self-awareness of one's volition, and that the other only does it through an exercise of her own volition itself, because nothing, after all, is forcing her to care for one. The reason only another self-aware and free person can do this and that one could never attain to self-awareness on one's own is because insofar as one remains pure willing, or pure identity, one lacks the faculty of discrimination necessary for willing one thing over any other and is therefore essentially subject to "willing" anything with which one is presented. In principle, therefore, one is fundamentally passive to any process, but there is nothing in the world that can teach the process of self-awareness, or self-determination, other than another free person. The other therefore cultivates one's freedom in and through her own freedom. We will see in the next chapter that the medium of this sharing of freedom is the same medium of communication as such—namely, language. Language, that is, is both the medium of and vehicle for self-consciousness. Likewise, Fichte explains that self-consciousness is not immediate, but, like the learning and eventual mastery of a language, is a process that occurs along a certain spectrum—and insofar as the spectrum at issue is one of passively being determined to active self-determination, the process of self-consciousness requires continual though varying forms of support from other people. The self-determination that issues from one's self-consciousness requires, that is, a proper "upbringing" (FNR, 38). Indeed, Fichte writes,

Everything depends upon having become really intimately aware of one's freedom, through constant exercise thereof *with clear consciousness*, so that it has come to be dear to us beyond all else. Once education from earliest youth makes it the chief aim and intended object merely to develop the internal powers of the pupil, without prescribing their direction; once people start to cultivate the individual for his own purposes and as an instrument for his own will, and not as a soulless implement for others, the Science of Knowledge will then become generally intelligible and easily understood. Education of the whole man, from his earliest years onwards: that is the only means to the dissemination of philosophy (SK, 76).

The next chapter explores the idea that upbringing brings about the ability to identify with the inter-subjectivity of language that makes one's self-determination possible in the first place. Further, it introduces the idea that the only properly consistent way to face one's freedom is by addressing and empowering the freedom of all. It does this through an examination of the work of Merleau-Ponty.

Chapter 2

Meaning as Communication, and the Body: Merleau-Ponty on the “Sense” of Freedom

The *aporia* from which we set out is that reasonable thinking seems to demand of us that we choose between one of two mutually exclusive and unreasonable views—on the one side, the view that everything in the world, including my actions and even reflections on myself, is externally determined, and, on the other, the view that everything in the world is a projection of my internal will. Insofar as neither view on its own account can make sense of the other, our question has been how to proceed reasonably from this *aporia*—on which side must we start if neither seems adequate on its own? We know by way of Fichte that we do not have to choose one over the other, but that we must simply examine more closely the situation that gives rise to both views in the first place. What is this situation that contains both views? As Fichte claims, it is the empirical situation—that is, it is the situation of experience. Indeed, it is only from this situation that allows both for learning and imagination that we could ever hope to learn about imagination and simultaneously imagine what must be at work in learning. What is required, then, is a self-conscious examination of the experience of thought—that is, a study of the phenomenon of thought, or *phenomenology* of it—that will enable us to understand the necessity of our apparent *aporia*. Not only will it enable us to understand

this necessity, but also—if it has been truly reflected upon and has in fact become more than an empty formula, but rather an experience, or habit—it will enable us to will it as the condition of our freedom. Likewise, Hegel writes that spirit—as the standpoint of the “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’” (PS, 110)—“brings into existence the unity of its self [‘internal’] and substance [‘external’] as its own work, and thus as an actual existence” (PS, 266). It is the sense in which the self-consciousness that has grasped itself as “spirit” recognizes the manner in which this task of identification of the two orders is “*its own work*” that I mean to point to in this passage.

In this chapter, we look to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological philosophy for the insights it brings to the question of the process of this identification. I claimed above that his chief insight in this regard is the identification of thought and language. The idea here is that one’s very internal life has been made possible on the basis of an inter-subjective phenomenon. The extent to which one has truly ascertained and sensed this situation is, we will see, determinative for the exercise of one’s freedom—that is, whether one takes freedom up in, through, and as an inter-subjective endeavour, or over and against other individuals.

This chapter is organized into six sections. In the first section I put forward Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental observation about thought—namely, that it is identical with speech (which is here considered to be indistinguishable from language). In the next three sections, I look more carefully at the two requirements for communication—first, that one be able to understand another, and second, that one be able to articulate oneself such that another can understand what one says. I also explore how Merleau-Ponty understands these two requirements in relation to the formation of meaning. More

precisely, in the second section, I devote particular attention to what Merleau-Ponty means by the phrase “*the word has a meaning*” (PP, 177). In the third section, I focus on a statement of Merleau-Ponty’s that seems opposed to the idea that the word has a meaning—namely, “in man, there is no natural sign” (PP, 188). In the fourth section I deal with the more difficult issue of how one communicates with oneself and ask how communication is at issue when one thinks on one’s own. We will see that this is the same question as what language expresses if not self-present thought. Merleau-Ponty’s answer, I show, is the body. In the fifth section, I turn to examine the peculiar nature of the linguistic gesture and the paradox apparent within it. That is, I explain how “language is... uncommunicative of anything other than itself, that its meaning is inseparable from it” (PP, 188), and yet that the speaker of a language does not “[know] everything in advance” (PP, 178). Finally, in the sixth section, I tie the issue of significance back to our concerns about freedom. Here I propose that the fact of freedom necessarily, if followed through, amounts to a reevaluation of self-present meaning, such that any acquisition of knowledge must, on this standpoint, be treated as open to significance beyond what it is taken to “represent” immediately. Freedom, I argue, consists, on the one hand, in appreciating the historicity of every acquisition of meaning, and, on the other, in having such impressions confirmed by others, who, after all, are by definition, as language users, the only arbiters of the veracity of one’s interpretations.

I. Thought and Meaning as Speech

In “The Body as Expression, and Speech,” Merleau-Ponty declares that he is “trying to describe the phenomenon of speech and the specific act of meaning” (PP, 174). He does not mean by this that he has two distinct objects of investigation in the chapter. His aim is rather to show and argue for how speech and the “act of meaning” are the same. The significance of his project here will be lost on us unless we understand what he means by speech and the seemingly elusive “act of meaning”. By the former, Merleau-Ponty has in mind more than mere vocalization of noise, but rather communication itself. I therefore use “speech” synonymously with “language.” As for the “act of meaning,” I propose we take it as the act of making meaning, or making sense (of something). Likewise, I understand this act to mean the process by which something accedes to consciousness, awareness, or thought. In this sense, meaning is the stuff of consciousness. To restate Merleau-Ponty’s project then, we can say that it aims at demonstrating the identity of communication and awareness, of language and thought. This insight strikes at the heart of his philosophy, and the consistency with which he follows through on it is part of why his work is so valuable. What, then, does this insight really mean? In what manner are we to understand speech and the act of meaning to be akin?

Speech allows me to convey a situation without re-enacting it; it has the capacity to represent a situation in such a way that the situation does not have to be present. To make sense of something, Merleau-Ponty argues, involves the same articulatory ability. Both operations, that is, involve a certain re-rendering of a situation in a different medium. For Merleau-Ponty, meaning-making and speech share the same medium: i.e., words. The observation that meaning-making and speech are the same in this regard has

deep implications for our conceptions of both speech and meaning-making, and will require us to rethink each. However, it is meaning that particularly concerns us here, so we will be more interested in the implications that the notion and practice of speech bring to our conception of meaning than *vice versa*. I do not, however, think that such an inclination is unfair. After all, no sooner have we taken stock of our typical view of speech than our conception of meaning is challenged. Allow me to explain. The typical view of speech is that it gives external representation to the meaning we have within ourselves—to our thoughts. We are not accustomed, then, to thinking of meaning as taking place in some external medium, as Merleau-Ponty argues it does. We rather tend to think that meaning consists in thoughts, which are just themselves and in no way require an external medium. We typically treat the meaning we have in thoughts as personal, and not without good reason; others cannot hear one's thoughts. But the simple fact that one can keep one's thoughts to oneself is not ground enough to assert that thoughts are immediate, and have no basis outside themselves. As Merleau-Ponty observes, if meaning did simply inhere in immediate and self-present thoughts in this way, "we could not understand why thought tends towards expression as towards its completion, why the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name" (PP, 177). Merleau-Ponty says, "thought is no 'internal' thing, and does not exist independently of the world and of words" (PP, 183). Certainly Merleau-Ponty admits the possibility of having "internal" sense impressions, like pain or something of the sort, but he explains that unless such an impression is rendered in "the constraints of speech and communication, [it] would no sooner appear than... sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not even exist for itself" (PP, 177). In other

words, all awareness—whether of private sensations or public spectacles—is only possible on the basis of such an external (though not necessarily audible!) rendering in speech, or language.

If meaning, as the content of awareness, is not the immediate and self-present thing we often take it to be, then what is it, really? If thought does not purely and immediately think itself, what does it think? These are the questions that will orient the rest of the chapter, and I will continually return to them. But we already have sketches of our answers—or at least we have indications as to where to look for answers. It was on the basis of the similarity of meaning and speech that we arrived at these questions, so I suggest we return to the issue of their identity for our answer. I therefore propose we examine meaning by way of speech, which, after all, we are working to expose as equivalent. What can we say about speech? In the first place, it would seem to be communicative. If one has the power of speech, it means that one can make oneself understood by others who also have that power and speak the same language. Speech thus only obtains in a communicative context, in which one both understands others and can be understood by them in turn. If meaning, or awareness, is like speech, it too should have these features of communication; it should involve the ability to make sense of others and to be understood by others. As we have already seen, however, it is not just the ability to be understood by others that is at issue when it comes to self-aware meaning; Merleau-Ponty clearly explains that one does not even become aware of one's own impressions if they are not captured in the external tools of articulation (PP, 177). This external medium is what allows for self-awareness; meaning, as the external medium of articulation, allows one to become aware of oneself. Unlike our common understanding

of speech as occurring between two people, it would therefore seem that meaning amounts to the ability to converse with oneself. To dispose of meaning is to dispose of the ability to understand. Of course, this also implies that it is possible to misunderstand oneself. If one converses with oneself, it can only be because there are at some level two selves at play: a self-aware self, and a deeper, less transparent self. I claimed that an examination of what is involved in speech would provide us a sketch of the answer to the question of what thought thinks if, like speech, it articulates something outside itself. We now have our answer in outline: it is this deeper, elusive self, which, together with self-awareness, comprises a total self. We will see that Merleau-Ponty calls this total self “the body.” To better understand this total though nevertheless ambiguous (PP, 198) self, I look in the next two sections at the two movements required for communication that we saw above—namely, that one be able to make sense of another and that one be able to make oneself understood—respectively.

II. Immanent Meaning: Making Sense of Others, I

In this section, I examine Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of how communication involves the ability to make sense of things outside oneself. My aim is to understand in what way one comes to make new meaning—that is, how one comes to learn; however, following Merleau-Ponty’s lead, we will first do so in terms of speech itself, between speakers, and then move on to the implications for the act of meaning—which, as we have already seen, is synonymous with speech. Typically, explains Merleau-Ponty, “it might appear that speech heard can bring [the speaker] nothing” (PP, 178). “A

consciousness constructs—for x —that linguistic mechanism which will provide another consciousness with the chance of having the same thoughts, but nothing really passes between them” (PP, 178). This typical view of understanding another speaker is another manifestation of the idea that speech is the mere external representation of ideas internal to the speaker. The conundrum this view faces is that nothing, in the end, is communicated. Meaning is only translated from one consciousness to the next, and it would appear that if the consciousness on the receiving end lacks the necessary equipment, communication fails. As Merleau-Ponty clarifies, “communication between consciousnesses is not based on the common meaning of their respective experiences, for it is equally the basis of that meaning” (PP, 185).

The fact that understanding others is not a matter of properly computing the sensible data which they make available for me in terms I already possess—that it is not a matter of translation—is well testified to in experience. Reflecting on the delivery of a speech, Merleau-Ponty observes, “the orator’s ‘thought’ is empty while he is speaking and, when a text is read to us, provided it is read with expression, we have no thought marginal to the text itself, for the words fully occupy our mind and fulfill our expectations” (PP, 180). What the example reveals is the same insight we encountered in the previous section: that the act of meaning, or thought itself, and speech are synonymous. The idea is that meaning is nothing external to speech, but is accomplished through it. “*The word has a meaning*” (PP, 177), claims Merleau-Ponty. More explicitly, he writes, “there is thus, in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks or writes, a *thought in speech*” (PP, 179). Speech is not the translation of meaning, but is rather the very carrying out of thought. Or again, speech itself makes meaning. The

meaning of speech is nowhere outside of speech itself. “The word and speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body” (PP, 182), writes Merleau-Ponty. His thesis is that communication—the actual exchange of *new* meaning, or the understanding of something outside of oneself—is only possible if meaning actually inheres in speech, because, at base, nothing else but speech is exchanged in communication. One does not acquire meaning from others, that is, by running a cable from their brains to one’s own.

So what is communication? What does it achieve? If speech is the occurrence of thought itself, then communication, when it is successful, is “a taking up of others’ thought through speech, a reflection in others, an ability to think *according to others* which enriches our own thoughts” (PP, 179). Thus, when it is successful, speech is thinking together. When speech is successful, the meaning communicated is as present for the listener as it is for the speaker. They are living it together, simultaneously. The meaning of speech is, therefore, not something trapped inside one’s isolated psyche, but inheres in the essentially shared medium of speech and articulation itself. Though we will take up this issue of the communication of meaning more explicitly below, it is already possible to discern that all meaning is inherently shareable in the same manner that successful speech is. This is yet another implication of the claim that speech and meaning-making are identical. If speech is inherently communicable, so too must be meaning.

III. Transcendent Meaning: Making Sense of Others, II

While we have spoken up to this point primarily about “successful speech,” I first turn in this section to a consideration of unsuccessful speech. What I want to show here is that comprehension depends upon a certain level of experience in the listener. The idea is that grasping the meaning of others requires a certain activity, which has either been accomplished previously or is accomplished in listening itself. My aim is to decisively demonstrate how the operation of meaning that we called learning in the introduction requires a certain self-activity on the part of the learner. My contention, however, is not merely that learning requires effort, but that what one learns is precisely one’s activity itself. Meaning, that is, consists in a certain self-activity, in a certain modulation of one’s own existence. To learn about other people and things is to become acquainted with one’s own possibilities for “taking them up.”

The idea behind this section, then, is to show that the other side to communication—namely, the ability to make oneself understood by others—is fundamentally no different from one’s ability to understand others, which we just discussed in the previous section. This is because both of these sides of communication can be understood in terms of the ability to understand oneself: to understand others, as I have just sketched, basically means to become acquainted with one’s own existential possibilities or possibilities of action; to express oneself for others, we have already briefly seen in the first section, involves nothing outside becoming aware of oneself because the medium of awareness is speech, which is inherently communicable. Through Merleau-Ponty’s investigations of the manner in which one comes to understand oneself,

we will be in a position to appreciate his notion of the body, which will be the final idea we explore in this section.

If meaning simply consisted in speech, it might be argued, why is everything not fully grasped the first time it is heard? Why do people not understand each and every language at once? First, let us be clear about Merleau-Ponty's argument about the immanence of meaning in words and speech. By this immanence he does mean to say that meaning is immediately understood, but only that it is understandable. He explains, "the meaning of the gesture is not contained in it like some physical or physiological phenomenon. The meaning of the word is not contained in the word as a sound" (PP, 193). To be meaningful, the word must suggest more than its mere physical presence—more than its mere sound, or the shape of ink on paper. What else, then, is it?

By way of answering this question, Merleau-Ponty consults experience. He observes that

in a foreign country, I begin to understand the meaning of words through their place in a context of action, and by taking part in a communal life—in the same way an as yet imperfectly understood piece of philosophical writing discloses to me at least a certain 'style'... which is the first draft of meaning. I begin to understand a philosophy by feeling my way into its existential manner, by reproducing the tone and accent of the philosopher (PP, 179).

The acquisition of the meaning of a word, or that of a speaker, depends upon familiarizing oneself with a certain style of acting. He writes about words that "their conceptual meaning must be formed by a kind of deduction from a *gestural meaning*" (PP, 179). Accession to this "gestural meaning," it turns out, is contingent upon one's own capacity to mime it.

In the same vein, the reason one does “not ‘understand’ the sexual pantomime of the dog, still less of the cockchafer or the praying mantis” (PP, 184), is because one lacks all the equipment. Furthermore, he cites the example of a child who has witnessed sexual intercourse: “The sexual scene will be merely an unfamiliar and disturbing spectacle, without meaning until the child has reached the stage of sexual maturity at which this behaviour becomes possible for him” (PP, 185). Comprehension of a word, of another, of a gesture, presupposes the ability on the part of the listener or viewer to reproduce it. But, it would be a mistake to conclude from these observations that one’s comprehension of another’s gesture is merely understandable in terms of the similarity of their biological make-up—as though it were this make-up itself that imparted the gesture’s meaning. “It is not enough for two conscious subjects to have the same organs and nervous system for the same emotions to produce in both the same signs [or gestures]” (PP, 189). This is because “there is in man no natural sign [or gesture]” (PP, 188); there is no natural and instinctive and “immutably given” way for humans to use their body (PP, 189). One’s comprehension of another’s gestures, therefore—of her use of her body—is in no way guaranteed by anything external, like the sound of the word, or one’s physical body. The point is that one is not merely passive to another’s speech.

Accession to the meaning of another requires activity—it mobilises one’s whole internal self. The ability to comprehend another is not merely some static capacity given to one from outside oneself. It is rather internal to that self; it is a function of that self’s own activity itself. If we reflect back on the introduction to this chapter in which we described the two apparently opposed operations of meaning-making, learning and imagination, we can now see that learning—the acquisition of foreign meaning—can

only occur on the basis of an activity internal to oneself. This is because there is nothing external to oneself that could finally and immutably guarantee its being taken up in the right way. Indeed, consider the example of a child who has been told by her parents to say “thank you” her whole life. While she may for the most part comply with their wishes and say “thank you” when she receives something, it will not be until she actually has the internal experience of gratitude that she will understand the real meaning of the words. Up until then, she will only have used them to avoid her parents’ rebukes. The point is that what is heard or received from another only fully arises to the listener’s awareness when it is met by an intention of his own to signify an experience he himself is undergoing. For the listener to acquire meaning from another, therefore, implies that he is able to identify at some fundamental level with that other. The implication, in fact, is that the listener can only make sense out of intentions towards signification that he can experience as his own.

It would seem, then, that the listener’s capacity to make sense of another presupposes his ability to make sense of himself—his intentions, after all, must accord with those of the speaker if he is to understand the speaker. Because, as we observed in the first section, this ability to make sense of oneself, to give meaning to oneself, can only occur in the medium of articulation, as all meaning must, we are thus able to see how this ability simultaneously names the ability of self-expression. This self-expression—this ability to articulate oneself in communicable terms—corresponds exactly to the second requirement of communication and speech that we observed above—namely, the ability to articulate oneself such that another can understand. The first requirement—the ability for one to understand another—was the basis for the last

section. The position in which we now find ourselves is that one can only understand another on the basis of an act of self-expression. We will, however, be better situated to examine the operation of identification that seems to be demanded for such an understanding of another person's speech if we first consider the act of one's self-expression on its own terms.

IV. Embodied Meaning: Making Sense of Oneself

Whereas up until now I have primarily been interested in describing what is involved for the listener, or learner, I now turn to the speaker—to the one who expresses oneself. My aim is to show that the act of speech, or self-expression, is fundamentally like that of listening to another—save that in this case the one to whom one is listening and of whom one is making sense is no other than oneself. The idea is that there is an aspect of oneself about which one is not immediately aware. Indeed, insofar as we have seen that even the meaning one acquires from others must proceed by way of this obscure level of oneself, it follows that one will stand in a certain ignorance of it so long as one still has the capacity to acquire new meaning. Another way to say this is that all possibility for new meaning is subtended by this obscure level of oneself. And insofar as it remains obscure, it is not, strictly speaking, in the self, and identical to it, but is rather other. Indeed, this layer subtending the self-transparent self is the means by which the latter becomes acquainted with otherness at all.

The force of the idea is that while this level of otherness is not identical with the self, it is, nonetheless, continuous with it. While it amounts to no real purchase to name

this obscure level of the self—after all, it is in its nature to elude any final denomination—Merleau-Ponty does have a name for the whole self that takes up both the transparent—which is to say, self-aware—and obscure levels. He calls it the “body” (PP, 238-9). In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty writes concerning these two layers of the self that the body

is not a self though transparence, like thought, which only thinks its object by assimilating it, by constituting it, by transforming it into thought. It is a self through confusion, narcissism, through inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees, and through inherence of sensing in the sensed—a self, therefore, that is caught up in things, that has a front and a back, a past and a future (EM, 162-3).

My aim in this section is to understand the relation between the self-aware and obscure levels of the body so as to comprehend how the first acquires new meaning by way of the second.

“I reach back for the word as my hand reaches toward the part of my body which is being pricked” (PP, 180), Merleau-Ponty claims. It is not, however, that “man can speak as the electric lamp can become incandescent” (PP, 175). Speech, that is, is not a simple matter of cause and effect, or a pure automatism. Neither is scratching an itch: if one’s hands are indisposed for whatever reason, one might use another part of one’s body to scratch oneself, or perhaps, if the itch is on one’s back, one might rub against the chair one is sitting in. Merleau-Ponty means the example to demonstrate the manner in which one does not need to think, or “visualize,” one’s words before speaking them (PP, 180). When a friend asks how one is doing, one does not need to look for the words to reply, but simply says, for instance, “I’m fine.” The experience of speech is not the experience of standing before the dictionary in one’s mind carefully plotting one’s syntax

and depth of expression. Most often when one speaks, the words simply “come on their own.”

Indeed, even when this is not the case and one cannot recall a word or find the right expression for a sentiment, one does not run for the dictionary but most often repeats an inarticulate noise, for instance “uh... uh,” or gestures with one’s hand, or cocks one’s head, or something similar. Even when one is quite desperate and these standard measures have been to no avail, one does not consult the dictionary but rather consults the experience one is trying to vocalize, and often makes use of expressions like “You know...” and “It’s like...,” all the while gesturing significantly. What I mean to drive at in these examples is the idea that speech, or expression, does not issue from a fully transparent standpoint, but—especially when one is attempting to express something for the first time—is supported by certain patterns of action. We might say that speech, or at least what Merleau-Ponty calls “authentic speech,” which is speech that is saying something for the first time (PP, footnote 1, 178), is not first visualized then translated, but felt. Indeed, this phenomenon of being struck dumb looking for the thread of one’s speech clearly demonstrates that the intention one is articulating is precisely not first present for one before one speaks. One’s significative intention is only finally apprehended in its articulation. We already observed the identity of articulation and meaning, or thought, in the first section, and in this experience we are observing nothing else. As Merleau-Ponty explains,

what misleads us in this connection, and causes us to believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression, is thought already constituted and expressed, which we can silently recall to ourselves, and through which we acquire the illusion of an inner life. But in reality this supposed silence is alive with words, this inner life is an inner language (PP, 183).

Merleau-Ponty also calls this inner life—this landscape populated by these previously “constituted and expressed” intentions—“second-order expression” (PP, 178, note 1). I will return to second-order speech below; at present our object is to understand expression of the “first-order” and we have been discussing the experience of “felt” meaning, which, as opposed to involving a self-conscious realm of fully-formed thoughts, points towards a murky domain that is beneath the self-aware denomination that finally accomplishes the act of meaning. The experience of felt meaning points towards what we might call “pre-meaning,” in the sense that it names something that is like a spectre on the horizon—not quite distinct enough to make out until one has shifted one’s focus. Merleau-Ponty calls this realm of pre-meaning “*gestural meaning*” (PP, 179), and what is at issue for us is the need to understand the shift in focus that brings it to “full meaning.”

If we are to understand the act of expression by which new meaning comes to be for one, it is essential that we properly understand the relation of speech, or language, to gestural meaning. The fact of the matter is that gestural meaning does not stand in opposition to the transparent and full meaning of denomination, but, rather, “the spoken word is a gesture” (PP, 184). Again, Merleau-Ponty’s argument is not that gestural meaning merely stands at the basis of all denominative, transparent meaning. Rather, I will repeat, “the spoken word is a gesture” itself (PP, 184)—it is merely another, albeit highly developed, form of gestural meaning. The physical body’s gesture and the “linguistic gesture” only seem different because the first appears to orient one to the physical world, while “[v]erbal gesticulating, on the other hand, aims at a mental setting which is not given to everybody, and which it is its task to communicate” (PP, 186). The mistake here is to assume that the world is self-evident in the first place. As I began to

argue in the first section, it is only that which has been articulated in the first place that arises to one's awareness as though it were immediate. As we have just seen with second-order expression, however, this supposed inner life of awareness is only peopled by past acts of expression. In other words, one's awareness of the outside world is not at all immediate, but is, in fact, *mediated* by a history of past expressive acts. Quoting Merleau-Ponty, "every external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body, just as every perception of my body is made explicit in the language of external perception" (PP, 206). Given this line of reasoning, we are forced to re-assess our understanding of what a gesture is. If it does not rely on ostensive definition and point to a world, what does it do?

Merleau-Ponty's answer is that each gesture creates a world (PP, 184), and that what gestures is the body. He writes, "I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject, and this life among things has nothing in common with the elaboration of scientifically conceived objects" (PP, 185). Merleau-Ponty's argument is that the external world reveals itself to one through the practices one's body employs on the things in it. Above we noted about the listener that if she is to truly grasp the message being communicated to her, the message must somehow correspond to an expressive intention on her part. That is, the speaker's intended meaning is only captured when the listener shares a similar intention. "The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernable in the conduct of other people" (PP, 185). The idea is that communication, or understanding of something external to one, only occurs when one is adequately disposed to the use of the other's

intended object, or the external thing. It is *use*, then, that imparts to a thing its meaning. Use, or the practices of employing a thing, is that which meaningfully determines the world, and by extension the things in it. Things only take shape for awareness through the practices in which they are involved. Meaning, that is, is not a simple reflection of the thing, but, rather, the thing only comes to be reflected in awareness by the way in which it is employed. “For example, the knitting of the brows intended, according to Darwin, to protect the eye from the sun, or the narrowing of the eyes to enable one to see sharply, become component parts of the human act of meditation” (PP, 194). The story is no different with objects outside of oneself. The point, however, is that the framework through which one engages with these objects is the body. “We are in the world through our body, and ... we perceive the world with our body” (PP, 206). It is the body’s activity that invests things with significance. The idea, however, is to understand that this investment with significance is self-referential. It is only through the body’s own modulation that the thing comes to be. Therefore, the meaning of the thing is, properly speaking, not of the thing itself, but only of the body’s own gestures in relation to the thing. And the reason the self of self-awareness, or the inner life of second-order expression, can learn things—the reason it can continue to encounter further new and different things outside itself, or, again, the reason there remains an other to it—is because the body has the capacity to act differently in relation to the things it encounters. And we do not need to look far for evidence of the fact that the body represents a primal activity. Consider, for instance, the experience of being on hold, waiting to connect with a service operator. Most often, at regular intervals there are recordings advertising a service or communicating a piece of information. Even if one pays as little attention as

possible to these recordings, it most often will not take longer than ten minutes before one has learned them. Similarly, when one hears the same song over and over, even if one dislikes it one eventually memorizes it. Or again, at a concert, one might be surprised to catch oneself swaying, or tapping one's foot to the music; one might even lose the rhythm of one's motion as soon as one notices it. What these examples help demonstrate is a fundamental projection that defines the body. "The act by which I lend myself to the spectacle must be recognized as irreducible to anything else" (PP, 185), Merleau-Ponty claims. That is, we must acknowledge in the body a primal *desire* to "catch up" with what it encounters. Merleau-Ponty states, "the human body is defined in terms of appropriating, in an indefinite series of discontinuous acts, significant cores which transcend and transfigure its natural powers" (PP, 193).

It is worth emphasizing this point: the body, says Merleau-Ponty, is "defined" by its ability to change its "natural powers" (PP, 193). This is not an ability that it *possesses*; it, rather, *is* this ability. And, to be clear, what is this ability? Simply put, it is gesturing itself—that is, a *doing* that projects gestural meaning—which I will henceforth call "sense," in order to distinguish it from self-aware, denominative meaning. On this topic, Merleau-Ponty writes, "there is an autochthonous significance of the world which is constituted in the dealings which our incarnate existence has with it" (PP, 441). More specifically (and this is what we have uncovered in this section), this ability is not merely the body's ability to change its relationship to things; we just saw above that things only are for it through its own activity. This ability that defines the body is its ability to change its relation to *itself*. As Harry Adams claims, "an excess of signification is always insinuated in the body" (Adams, 157). In fact, things take on significance for the body

precisely through such changes of its self-relation. The body “is not where it is, nor what it is—since we see it secreting in itself a ‘significance’ which comes to it from nowhere, projecting that significance upon its material surrounding” (PP, 197). The body’s ability to change its relation to itself—to act differently, at the most basic level—strikes at the heart of what we sought to understand in this section—namely, how the body names a totality in which identity and difference, or self-awareness and that which it has not yet appropriated, are continuous. We have seen that this is the case for two reasons: one, because other things only attain significance for the body through its own gestures in relation to them; and two, because the body is not bound to continue its past gestures *ad infinitum*, but can ever gesture anew—which is to say, gesture, or act, *freely*.

V. *The Linguistic Gesture: Making Sense of Others and Otherness through Oneself*

The body only learns itself, we have seen, and it only has other, new things to learn, because it can change its relation to itself. It is because the body is free with regard to itself that meaning is a possibility for it. But we have said little as yet about the acquisition of self-aware, articulated meaning. How does the linguistic gesture seem to arrive at a form of self-awareness if it, as any other bodily gesture, merely gestures within itself, and, as it were, to itself? If language is merely another self-contained gesture, and thereby only “says itself as gesture,” how does it not only allow for self-awareness, but the self-awareness of a world beyond itself? Thinking back to our first chapter, if the body is representative of the first principle of pure identity and pure will, how does the second principle of differentiation arise?

The first thing I seek to explore in this section is how the experience of the acquisition of meaning resonates with this sense of the idea that the body only learns of itself. As the project behind this thesis is to think together meaning and freedom, it is towards a proper consideration of freedom that I am endeavouring. In this regard, we have already observed that the fundamental projective activity that names the body is that which furnishes the possibility of self-aware, denominative meaning. But if the inner self constituted by past, second-order meaning—the self, that is, of self-awareness—were merely passive to the creative activity of the body, we would have a hard time explaining how we, as self-conscious, experience ourselves as free. By way of working towards an adequate articulation of this, albeit often ambiguous, experience of freedom, my second aim in this section is to examine the relation of the linguistic gesture to the primal active movement of the body. I aim to expose in what manner this relation is not simply a one-way street, but that the acquisitions of the linguistic gesture, of self-aware meaning, amount to a two-way street in the sense that they have great bearing on the denominative acquisitions made possible by the future movements of the body. I want to show, that is, how what one has learned has the ability to impact and direct one's future learning.

In the second and third sections of this chapter, our primary concern was to determine what was involved in understanding others, and while we saw in the previous section that such comprehension could only be possible on the basis of one's body's experience of itself, the story of communication is still incomplete. Given what we have seen about the necessity that the speaker's intention resonate with a similar intention in the listener, it might still be possible for a person to misunderstand the actual occurrence of communication. That one's accession to another's meaning is only available on the

basis of one's own experience of a similar significative intention as that of the speaker should not be taken to mean that successful communication ultimately hinges on the prior experiences of those communicating. To cite Merleau-Ponty again, "communication between consciousnesses is not based on the common meaning of their respective experiences, for it is equally the basis of that meaning" (PP, 185). "The fact," he writes, "is that we have the capacity to understand [in communication] over and above what we may have spontaneously thought" on our own (PP, 178). Rather, "what I communicate with primarily is not 'representations' or thought, but a speaking subject, with a certain style of being and with the 'world' at which he directs his aim" (PP, 183). Indeed, unless we deny the act of real communication in favour of a theory of the inter-subjective translation of private mental states—that is, unless we deny that one can accede to *new* meaning by way of another—then it must be the case that through speech itself there is a simultaneous and shared experience of a significative intention. Merleau-Ponty writes, "the gesture presents itself to me as a question, bringing certain perceptible bits of the world to my notice, and inviting my concurrence" (PP, 185). Sometimes, however, as when another is using too unfamiliar an idiom, it is too difficult for one to fully accede to her intention, although—as we have seen in the example of being in a foreign country—at least a certain "style" may have been revealed (PP, 179). And the idea is that it is through familiarizing oneself enough with this style that one will finally be able to understand a foreign idiom, or even language. As Merleau-Ponty writes, in this vein, "every language conveys its own teaching" (PP, 179). In the idea that what prevents one from the synchronous exchange of meaning with another is a lack of a certain familiarity with style, we are witness to our second concern in this section, which is to see the

manner in which past acquisitions of meaning bear on one's possibilities for new meaning.

Communication presupposes a certain amount of shared equipment; "people can speak to us only a language we already understand, each word of a difficult text awakens in us thoughts which were ours beforehand, but these meanings sometimes combine to form new thought which recasts them all, and we are transported to the heart of the matter, we find the source" (PP, 178). Reflect, for instance, on our previous example of the child who finally learns what "thank you" means to express; the words were there for her all along, but it was the intention she lacked. Again describing successful communication, Merleau-Ponty writes that it "brings [meaning] to life in an organism of words, establishing it... as a new sense organ, opening a new field or new dimension to our experience" (PP, 182). Communication opens in the listener herself a whole new dimension of experience. But this new territory of experience, this new world to which the new acquisition of meaning amounts, is not merely something that comes to sit *next to* the "worlds" of past acquisitions. One only lives in one world. Even if the experience of different languages—which are different worlds of significance insofar as they have distinct styles and geneses of articulation—are possible for a person, one "never does belong to two worlds at once" (PP, 187). The reason for this is that one's inner life of self-awareness does not exist somewhere outside the medium of expression, but is, in fact, composed of this medium, and is therefore determined by it—which is to say simultaneously limited and empowered by it. Again, one's self-consciousness can only situate itself among its acquisitions of meaning—"thought... does not exist independently

of the world and of words” (PP, 183). And, as we are now in a position to see, this is because the world and words name precisely the stuff of thought, or of one’s inner life.

An acquisition of meaning, the learning of something new, does not enter one’s consciousness like a box in a factory. This analogy fails because it would imply that the inner life of consciousness—i.e., second-order meaning, or language, as we have seen—has empty space within itself, as though it were a fixed structure that imported fixed and discrete entities from another, equally spatial, location. Rather, “we are always in a plenum” (PP, 452), and this is because self-awareness is nowhere outside articulation. To reiterate, the new acquisition of meaning is not simply a matter of coming to possess new objects, but it must in some manner come through the very second-order meaning of which one disposes. In Merleau-Ponty’s words,

The new sense-giving intention knows itself only by donning already available meanings, the outcome of previous acts of expression. Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted, when our cultural store is put at the service of this unknown law, as our body suddenly lends itself to some new gesture in the formation of habit (PP, 183).

To this extent, a new word is not necessarily required to accomplish new meaning, and is indeed seldom required, but new meaning rather emerges from a reorganization of the relations between these words. The body’s gesturing, the sense-giving activity that it is, should not, we have seen, be considered along the lines of the common physical understanding of the body in that it does not simply discover new “things” about itself. If we continued with the spatial metaphor, it would rather be that every acquisition of meaning introduces a new dimension to reality (PP, 182); reality itself, that is, expands on this model.

Thus one only attains to self-conscious meaning through one's past acquisitions of meaning. By extension, one only learns through oneself. But we are now situated to see that everything hinges on our understanding of this self. If the self were only that of self-awareness, we would not be able to explain *new* meaning. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's discussion of aphasia is precisely to evince this point. Citing the case of the aphasiac Schneider, he writes, "there is no sign of a decline of general intelligence, and it is still the case that words are organized through their meaning. But the meaning is, as it were, ossified" (PP, 196). A person such as Schneider only operates within a closed and static world, and can only display intelligence in solutions "of a problem, where we discover an unknown quantity through its relationship with known ones" (PP, 178-9). The point is that this type of person, as Goldstein writes, is "totally lacking in that productivity which is man's deepest essence" (PP, 196).³ Therefore, claims Merleau-Ponty, "[t]he task of a radical reflection, the kind that aims at self-comprehension, consists, paradoxically enough, in recovering the unreflective experience of the world... and displaying reflection as one possibility of my being" (PP, 241). Full self-awareness, that is, is only possible on the basis of one's recognition of the primal and ever-elusive sense-giving activity that is the body. Such awareness consists in the fact that meaning is a self-saying of the full body, not merely of self-awareness. And because the definition of the body is its own movement, or its capacity to transcend itself in new patterns of activity, it therefore only follows that meaning—which is at base merely the self-gesturing of this body—is but another movement of body, but one that enables the body to move in relation to its own (past) movement.

³ Merleau-Ponty is here quoting Goldstein's *L'analyse de l'aphasie et l'essence du langage*, p. 496.

Merleau-Ponty's argument, on my reading, is that such an understanding of the dynamism at one's core is a function of one's take on language, which, we have seen, is synonymous with one's inner life of self-awareness. Unless one appreciates the gestural nature of language, one will fail to apprehend this dynamism. Merleau-Ponty speaks of language as "the linguistic gesture" (PP, 186) in the singular. Very much hinges on this singularity. Words are not discrete and unrelated gestures, but, as we have seen, are all interrelated; each new acquisition of meaning re-orientates the relations between words (PP, 178). "Language," states Merleau-Ponty, "is... uncommunicative of anything other than itself... its meaning is inseparable from it" (PP, 188). It is only on the basis of this self-referentiality of the linguistic gesture that anything is meaningful at all. The new acquisition of meaning is only meaningful in relation to a *whole* language, the whole world of meaning. And, as we observed, there is only one world of self-awareness. Therefore, the linguistic gesture is continuous. Merleau-Ponty explains, "alone of all expressive processes, speech is able to settle into a sediment and constitute an acquisition for use in human relationships" (PP, 190). This sediment, we should note, is merely one more designation for second-order expression, which we have also variously termed inner life, self-awareness, denominative meaning and self-consciousness.

As was mentioned above, the linguistic gesture is not the sole gesture of the body. Every single movement a person makes is a gesture; each work of art is a gesture. The difference between these gestures and the linguistic, however, is that "the expressive process in the case of speech can be indefinitely reiterated, that it is possible to speak about speech whereas it is impossible to paint about painting" (PP, 190). Every work of art, on the other hand, "starts its task at the beginning, having a new world to deliver"

(PP, 190). Insofar as we operate in one world and have one self-awareness, however, speech is an endless gesture. If we were to compare language to an art form, it would be closest to music; language amounts to the song that we are all always singing.⁴ Indeed, it only ends at death: language is “the fire that will not stop burning until some accident of the body will undo what no accident could have sufficed to do” (EM, 163-4).

Furthermore, to avoid any possible confusion, it is worth pointing out that while each gesture outlines a different world, it is not the case that these worlds do not interact. Quite the opposite is, in fact, the case. Not only is it Merleau-Ponty’s goal in “Eye and Mind” to investigate painting as a particular world-creating gesture, but it is also his aim to expose by way of painting insights that hold true for each sensory field (vision, hearing, etc.). Here he writes that painting continuously gestures anew, and that it takes self-awareness to coordinate the significance of such gesturing. Fichte writes of this gestural integration, “a person cannot see if he does not first accept an influence upon himself and then internally reproduce the form of the object, that is, actively construct the object’s outline” (FNR, 61). Where speech differs is in its continuity; the gesture of language persists. And in this respect we can appreciate the sense in which “the body, as our permanent means of ‘taking up attitudes’ and thus constructing pseudo-presents, is the medium of our communication with time as well as with space” (PP, 181). Language, for its part, is merely that gesture of the body that enables it to become aware of its relationship to time.

⁴ I owe this articulation to Ted Toadvine, who writes in *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, “melody can serve here as the analogue of behavioural structure [of which language is the consummate form] because it demonstrates all of the same elements: the circular relation of parts and whole, the orientation toward a norm, and the transposability that allow its essential structure to be detached from any particular physical embodiment” (Toadvine, 31).

We have said that one can reflect on oneself in two ways: one, as does the aphasiac, in a world of stunted possibilities; or two, “radically,” so as to account for the otherness of the body (PP, 241). As Philip Morris writes, “philosophy must begin in a radical responsibility to an openness that perpetually exceeds it” (Morris, 119), and if we understand by philosophy the pursuit of self-knowledge which names our concern here, we have the resources to appreciate that the body, as that openness subtending self-consciousness, is philosophy’s proper concern.

Let us therefore draw together our reflections so as to best account for what the expansive second self-awareness of the body involves. Or, and this is the same question, *what* does it say in its self-saying? The answer can only be that it learns to say itself—but not as a thing. It rather says its own self-saying, and, as with the painter’s vision described by Merleau-Ponty in “Eye and Mind” that “learns only by seeing” (EM, 165), the self-saying of the linguistic gesture “learns only from itself” (EM, 165). The linguistic gesture says its own self-*saying*— it says itself as an activity, that is. And we will remember that what is definitive for Merleau-Ponty about the body is that it “appropriat[es], in an indefinite series of discontinuous acts, significant cores which transcend and transfigure its natural powers” (PP, 193). The idea I mean to drive at is that language ultimately only says *its* own “discontinuous” activity, which we have also called its ability to be otherwise. What language says, in the end, is only its ability to “catch up” or be together with otherness.⁵ While every gesture will only ever implicitly say this, language is that which can say it explicitly as well.

⁵ I rely for this formulation on a comment made by Dr. John Russon in one of his Sunday Night Philosophy reading group sessions. Indeed, if it were not for my involvement in a

VI. *Ambiguous Freedom*

In this last section, we turn to the issue of freedom. I aim here merely to tie together the lessons we have already learned, and to express them in the language of freedom. My main concern is to show that, while the body is absolutely free in its relation to itself, the self of self-denomination—the self that has meaning for itself—is only so ambiguously. I show that the central issue here concerns the self’s ability to direct its own acquisitions of meaning, an issue that resonates with the question I pose in the introduction concerning the relationship between learning and imagination, which commonly appear to be the two, albeit conflicting, operations of meaning formation.

To begin, let us compare the body’s freedom with the freedom of self-awareness. We have said of the body that it is the capacity to change its relation to itself. We have seen that it does so in gestures, and that each of these gestures creates the world anew. The body, therefore, is not limited in its world creative ability; it is *pure* freedom. Self-awareness, on the other hand, could never attain to this pure freedom because, as we know, it in fact names a single world. What this means is that one is not extrinsic to the world of meaning one lives in and is. “The non-being which constitutes us could not possibly find its way into the world’s plenum,” writes Merleau-Ponty (PP, 437). One cannot, that is, carry over one’s self-awareness from one world to the next. This is not possible because, as we know now, meaning is immanent in the gesture itself. To start a new gesture would mean to throw out the significance one had attained in and through it.

number of Dr. Russon’s many efforts to facilitate philosophical study and community, this thesis could not have been written. I am infinitely grateful for this.

And seeing as how one's self-awareness is precisely nothing but an inner life afforded by past acts of significance, it is evident that "I can no longer pretend to be a cipher, and to choose myself continuously from the standpoint of nothing at all" (PP, 452).

Despite not being able to continuously reinvent oneself, however, one surely does seem to dispose of a certain sense of freedom. As Merleau-Ponty explains, "I can at any moment interrupt my projects. But what *is* this power? It is the power to begin something else [within one's world of constituted meaning], for we never remain suspended in nothingness" (PP, 452). We have the ability, then, to do things such as change the channel, or go out and walk the dog, or continue reading a book, but we never have the ability to step outside of our world into some nether zone of non-being. "There is no freedom without a field," writes Merleau-Ponty (PP, 439). And my freedom consists in my ability to decide to do something else, or to do the same thing differently—but always in the same world. "I am situated in my social environment, and my freedom, though it may have the power to commit me elsewhere, has not the power to transform me instantaneously, into what I decide to be" (PP, 447). Creation—and, as the passage shows, self-creation as well—does not occur instantaneously, says Merleau-Ponty. His claim, however, is not that it does not occur, but merely that it occurs over time—in a mediated fashion, we might say. Our aim is to understand the nature of this mediation, because, in fact, the question we are ultimately pursuing is one's self-conscious experience of freedom as one's ability not merely to decide within the world, but to pursue the self-transformative and world-expanding freedom of the body. And our previous observation that everything under the purview of self-consciousness amounts to an acquisition of its own should be noted in this regard. Therefore, the experience of

freedom we are pursuing will be no different in this regard. It is this observation that leads Merleau-Ponty to assert that “[i]n reality, the intellectual project [of self-knowledge] and the positing of consciousness are merely the bringing to completion of an existential project” (PP, 447). Indeed, in following this statement to its logical conclusions we are witness to the fact that the true aim of each and every of the body’s acts is to marvel at its own activity. How, then, can the body come to accomplish this project in the linguistic gesture?

The answer consists only in the idea that we have now seen repeatedly—namely, that the body only gestures itself, and likewise “learns only from itself” (EM, 165). Applied to the linguistic gesture, the aim of which is only to say its own self-saying, this means that speech only comes to possess the self-awareness of its own message from its speech. The whole point, however, is to see that this does not mean that aimless blathering will lead to one’s self-awareness of the body.⁶ We have seen that “authentic speech” (PP, 178, note 1), on the contrary, is the saying of the self’s otherness. An authentic commitment to speaking, therefore, amounts to fully committing to understanding the other with whom, or about which, one is speaking. Clearly, this does not entail avoiding certain “touchy” subjects—at least, not with those to whom one is deeply committed; nor does it mean to excuse oneself from every conversation in which one feels challenged or threatened—although there are certainly *some* conversations in

⁶ One is reminded of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he asserts, “one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for nobody understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding, encouragement and consolation. . . . Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified” (RSV, 1 Cor. 14:2-5). This raises the very interesting question concerning the inter-subjective, or political, implications of the self-awareness that we have seen language enables.

which this would be the wise thing to do. Authentic speaking, then, and likewise its aim—which is the expanded sense of self-awareness which comes from being able to identify with the body’s productive capacities—are only achieved through the practice of authentic speech, which itself only comes about because of one’s own efforts, or one’s own decisions.

This notion of decision is important here, because if the mundane experience of freedom comes from one’s ability to interrupt one’s projects (PP, 438), it must also be the case that one can equally decide to sustain them. Along these lines, then, we can intimate the sense in which the mundane experience of freedom might seem to suggest that the proper exercise of freedom consists in performing precisely such random acts of discontinuity.⁷ Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty provides us with the basis for appreciating the questionability of such an understanding: “I am a general refusal to be anything, accompanied surreptitiously by a continual acceptance of such and such a qualified form of being. *For even this general refusal is still one manner of being, and has its place in the world*” (PP, 452). Thus even the idea of discontinuity—that is, to decide to interrupt one’s own projects—is an idea that comes from the world, which is to say one’s past acquisitions of meaning. Discontinuity itself is *within* this world. In this manner, one’s insistence on discontinuous practices amounts to little more than a hopping about within the domain of previously constituted meaning; the practice of discontinuity, that is, commits one to a static world of second-order meaning. What makes this practice look otherwise is its infinite meanderings within the confines of its world. We can see, however, the manner in which such a practice, in fact, only amounts to infinite

⁷ George Sluizer’s film, *The Vanishing*, offers an interesting examination of the extent to which such a conception of freedom can be damaging.

recurrence. What does it mean to accede to an expanding, bodily, world? What would one have to *decide* in order to bring it about? If the choice of discontinuity fails, we are led to wonder whether continuity, or commitment itself, is the decision for which we should opt. As we observed about authentic speech, that it only comes to uncover itself through itself, as an ability to both *brook* and *endure* taboo and uncomfortable situations, it would seem the case that the decision for continuity really is the key to an expanding bodily world.

Yet, one might be inclined to ask in what respect the commitment to discontinuity differs from the form of commitment we posited in authentic speech. Indeed, did we not admit that the situations in which such speech engages are precisely taboo, or cut off from daily life? Are these situations not in a certain sense foreign as well? While these questions are tremendously inviting avenues for further reflection, the thorough-going treatment they would require in order to be adequately answered would take us much too far afield here. General wisdom tells us, ultimately, that the things one hates reveal a frustrated relationship to oneself. Often, topics about which one is not open to discussion concern, in fact, things one knows all too well, and which one is, in the end, only trying to evade. There is, however, another more manageable line to pursue in trying to explain away the apparent identity of these two commitments—that is, the one to discontinuous decisions, and the other to uncomfortable topics. If they are both commitments, in what respect do they differ? Simply put, their difference consists in one's self-conscious relations to these commitments—namely, the one who decides for discontinuity fails to understand the deeper manner in which she is still committed to the same world. The disclosiveness afforded by the other posture of commitment therefore hinges on self-

awareness. What is one aware of in this posture? Or, because, finally, we are attempting to describe how language *comes* to say itself self-consciously in a person, what is the “sense” (in the technical sense of this term deployed above, as pre-aware, gestural significance) one is pursuing in this posture? It is the same truth incipient in all gestures, and this is self-referentiality, or “self-sayingness.” It is not moot to ask the question of how one conceptualizes this self-referentiality from the standpoint of one who has not yet learned to say this self-sayingness, but it would be misdirected if one thought that any one concept could finally and unequivocally capture the experience of bearing witness to this self-sayingness.

Insofar as this “expansive posture”⁸ is precisely only that, a “posture,” or “sense,” I would submit that one of the closest and fairest concepts by which one could denominate it is “faith.” “It is true,” to borrow Merleau-Ponty’s turn of phrase, “that the problem has been merely shifted on stage further back” (PP, 186): how did faith come to be constituted? But to pursue this further question, as though faith had some conceptual object, would be exactly to miss its force. Our aim is to uncover an attitude immanent in the linguistic gesture itself that orients its very self to decisions that will be disclosive for it. What I mean by “faith” is merely the “self-sense” immanent in all gesture. Indeed, as we saw by way of Fichte, we are already “*determined to be self-determining*” (FNR, 31). It is by virtue of this “pre-decision” made in and through others, though still *by oneself*, as a body, that one can decide anything and indeed everything, at all. Like every other gesture, the linguistic gesture—as that which enables us to decide for ourselves—or, “[i]n Kantian terms,” “the categorical act,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it, is therefore not an

⁸ I will use this formulation from here on to describe the form of commitment that can result in one’s self-awareness of the body.

ultimate attitude, but in fact, it builds itself up into a certain ‘attitude’” (PP, 192). The point is to appreciate that “one” cannot decide for—by which I mean “explicitly” embrace—the expansiveness that subtends one’s self-awareness. “One” cannot do this on one’s own, that is. But if one identifies with the inter-subjective “we” that makes one’s self experience possible in the first place, this expansiveness will be embraced. Merleau-Ponty reveals that this embrace will not take the form of a clear and distinct idea, but rather a style, which is to say an attitude allowing an infinitely unfolding future. He writes, “I am a psychological and historical structure, and have received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style. All my actions and thoughts stand in a relationship to this structure” (PP, 455). It is for this reason that it is only “by being unrestrictedly and unreservedly what I am at present that I have a chance of moving forward; it is by plunging into the present and the world, by taking on deliberately [which is to say, “responsibly”] what I am fortuitously, by willing what I do and doing what I do, that I can go further” (PP, 455-6). It is only, then, as Schelling notes, “objectively [that] *we* never act; [the truth of the matter] is rather that another acts through us” (Schelling, 213, emphasis added). The actual exercise of freedom, therefore, is always necessarily ambiguous, “never determinism and never absolute choice” (PP, 453). But one thing is certain: “We need have no *fear* that our choices or actions restrict our liberty, since choice and action...” and, I would add, commitment, “cut us loose from our anchorage” (PP, 456). This attitude that embraces our continuity with the world and, primarily, others enables us alongside Nietzsche’s overman to ecstatically affirm in the face of “the stone” of past determinations, “but thus I willed it!” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 140-141).

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined the intrinsic relation between awareness, or the meaning of which one disposes, and freedom. We have seen that freedom is the result of continuity and commitment, rather than the exercise of capricious choice. The self-transcendence that is the body gestures everywhere, and, in gesturing, “worlds” (to borrow a Heideggerian neologism). It is only the inter-subjective gesture of language that enables the body to become self-conscious, and better direct its own “worlding.” Without the linguistic gesture, the body is condemned to be a victim of circumstance—free to enact that with which it is presented, but unfree with regard to that with which it presents itself. In language, the body is oriented both outside, towards others, and back towards itself, as that activity of syncopation with otherness.

Those other bodies with whom the linguistic body seeks to be, however, also have a stake in the linguistic gesture. Thus, no matter the extent to which one has mastered language and how well one manipulates the inter-subjective meaning for which language would seem to allow, this is all for naught unless others recognize the message one means to convey with one’s language. Unless one’s use of language is both understood, but what is more, confirmed, language is meaningless, and fails its task of reaching others and reshaping their world. Freedom is a communal achievement. This does not just mean that

one is only free in a community, but also that a community only properly *is* to the extent that the individuals comprising it freely identify with their belonging to it. Of course, there are laws which serve as external expressions of an implicit and universal internal commitment. By their very nature, however, laws fade into the background of a person's reality and, in the common experience of things, infrequently draw attention to themselves as communal achievements. Laws, that is, are identical to grammar and language in this manner; as John Russon writes, "the very success of our society in providing us with reliable access to interpersonal space has concealed from us the essentially intersubjective nature of space" ("On the Road").

The issue to which I mean to point in these reflections is that the purchases of our past freedom are simultaneously what enable us to ignore them. The difficulty is that freedom, intrinsically working towards external manifestations of its ability to "catch up" with others and otherness, simultaneously, and through its very successes, builds up a vast and significant world. Because this world can only be identified with and successfully taken up from a proper orientation towards "being together"—as that language's immanent "sense"—it weighs all the more heavily on a person who, for whatever bad experiences, has trouble owning up to her innate tendency towards togetherness. The world, that is, can appear all the more alienating to "disoriented" individuals precisely in relation to how much it has become an expression of freedom. Similarly, the individual who keenly senses, and who might even be fully aware of, the vital significance recognition plays for her sense of herself, while seemingly equipped to better experience freedom, is also for that reason all the more sensitive to failed

communication or, worse, instances in which the other with whom she is communicating deliberately chooses to frustrate her attempts to communicate.

I close with these reflections so as to point to how fragile a thing freedom can be. It is not only a function of one's own relation to one's personal past, nor a function of the community as whole; one's freedom, and indeed the freedom of a society, if it is to make good on itself, has to contend at some level with the idiosyncrasy of each individual's acquisition of language. Merleau-Ponty writes, "*your* freedom cannot be willed without leaving behind its singular relevance, and without willing freedom *for all*" (PP, 456). It is therefore incumbent upon us to strive to communicate with others not only in the terms freedom has made available, but in its spirit as well.⁹ Only in this way can we hope to educate for freedom. We do this not for our immediate benefit, but for the benefit of mediation itself—that is, for all those with whom we relate in the future, and in the past.

⁹ Paul writes, "'Knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up" (RSV, 1 Cor. 8:1).

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