

Strange Sounds:

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Dialectic

When I began my undergraduate studies in philosophy, my most immediate goal was to escape solipsism. Even before, at fifteen years old, the thought occurred to me that all of existence might be only the manifestations of my subjectivity, a thought that [\[CS1\]](#) haunted me thereafter like a ghost, blurring perception and loosening the world into a distant play of phenomena. The issue was not so much that I believed that I was the only existent thing, because it seemed to me a highly unlikely ontological scenario, but instead I wasn't sure that thought could think its way out of the conceptual trap of solitude—could philosophy deliver the world to me? How could I reconcile my meaning-giving power and the ubiquity of my perception with any belief in objects and the other subjects who ostensibly surrounded me?

It was in reading Edmund Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* that I was introduced to the object. In establishing his phenomenology, Husserl demonstrated the relationship between intentionality and the life-world, making room for both the contextual experiencing of subjectivity and the totality of objects that, consistently in one's life, seems so evidently 'there'. In allowing the givenness of beings to play in the metaphysical sandbox with the subject, Husserl escaped Kant's subject/object dichotomy, a dichotomy especially menacing to any college freshman seeking epistemological intimacy with the 'other.' I was further comforted by Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*, that entity that always already has a

vague understanding of Being, literally meaning, “there-being.” To Heidegger, Dasein is always at relation to things, a being in-the-world, inconceivable in solitude because consciousness is always consciousness of an object, as the phenomenological mantra goes.

However two phenomenologists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas, were themselves not entirely comfortable with the notion of the Other within Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology. Levinas, using the metaphor of light to represent the openness created by intentionality’s interaction with beings, sees phenomenology as denying room for a truly Other because, “Light is that through which something is other than myself, but already as if it came from me.”^[1] Taking only into account the phenomenological method laid out by his predecessors, Levinas sees no role for the other that is genuinely *Other*. Merleau-Ponty also sensed tension between the phenomenological concepts of subject and other, using the gateway of language to reveal this ambiguity. What is often seen as Levinas’ biggest break from what can be described as phenomenological asceticism (its strict denial of systematic assertions or binary-structured thinking), is his central use of the dialectic. This paper makes the argument that the dialectic also surfaces in Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to articulate the strife between the opposing linguistic forces of uniformity and expression. In referencing Levinas’ own separation from the phenomenological method, the ways in which Merleau-Ponty confronts language and the Other may be more fully revealed, as well as the dimensions of his dialectics that are consonant with and exterior to the phenomenology that affected both philosophers so fundamentally.

In contemplating the role of the other, Levinas first draws out the consequences of the phenomenological conception of intentionality. He says, “The illuminated object is something

one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated one encounters it as if it came from us. It does not have a fundamental strangeness. Its transcendence is wrapped in immanence.”[\[ii\]](#) His footnote on the same page further explains, “To see is already to render the encountered object one’s own, as drawn from one’s own ground.”[\[iii\]](#) While it may appear that the other, as other, transcends us, the very fact that it is present within the light of intentionality situates it immanently within the subject. This is indeed the sentiment set forth by Husserl and Heidegger. It was Husserl who initially stated that an object is always the object of consciousness, and thus bound otherness to the character of subjectivity. Givenness, or otherness, is only conceived through the disclosing power of the intentionality of consciousness. This sense of otherness is not adequate for Levinas.

In *The Prose of the World* Merleau-Ponty also brings into question the accessibility of the Other. His preoccupation with the philosophical threat of Solipsism resonates with the project Levinas undertakes in *Time and the Other*. Merleau-Ponty discusses the problem posed by the fact that language, as a chain of signifiers, can never in communication deliver to the subject a signification that he did not already have in mind. This is essentially the linguistic mirror of Levinas’ problem with Phenomenology, that the subject is unable to escape its own light. Merleau-Ponty is afraid that “we never find among other people’s words any that we have not put there ourselves. Communication is an appearance; it never brings us anything truly new. How could communication possibly carry us beyond our own powers of reflection, since the signs communication employs could never tell us anything unless we already grasped the signification?”[\[iv\]](#) This inevitable self-reference indeed poses a philosophical problem. Merleau-Ponty cannot gain access to the Other if he cannot find a way that the subject can move beyond itself in communication and inherit, at least partially, the intended significance of the other.

It is in escaping this vision of solitude shared by Merleau-Ponty that Levinas' dialectic and consequent break from German phenomenology arises. Using the imagery of light, he demonstrated that phenomenology has no room for the Other. He sees no room for a plurality of existence within the perceptual circle of phenomenology that starts and ends with the subject. It is this plurality that Levinas is trying to illustrate, and death is his method of demonstration. Levinas sees death as being "foreign to all light" in that it is something that in-itself evades phenomenological experience. To Levinas, the subject does not experience death, but instead is made passive in the face of it. Unlike in Heideggerian phenomenology, death is not the utmost possibility of the subject, but instead means the subject's inability to be able. Death is the end of possibility—it is a mystery.

Death in Levinas' thought represents his first discovery of the Other. Since death is utter darkness, "refractory of all light," Levinas describes it in terms of alterity.^[v] Levinas has found the Other that has been so elusive to phenomenology, and with it he has also found the alterity of the future. Death, as that which can never be illuminated by subjectivity will never be a present. The present, in Levinas' philosophy, is the event of *hypostasis*—the moment of the existent's mastery over existence. The present is therefore always the mode of existing for the existent, and thus Death, as pure dissimilarity to the subject, will never gain access to it. The encounter with the truly Other thus necessitates the future, and therefore time, in that we encounter something alien to our surge into immediacy that is the present moment. To Levinas, the future is not the genetic branching out of the seed of the past, it is instead the arrival of the unknowable. The future springs upon the present as unpredictability, and therefore the notion of time and the alterity of death must be thought together. Time is neither existent in the transcendental ego, as

Husserl posited, nor is it existent in the life-world; it is instead the materialized subject coming to terms with the Other as future—it is the accomplishment of intersubjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, escapes solitude by recognizing the power of language to internalize the other through communication in part by becoming his/her words. He introduces “another idea of projection, according to which the other’s speech not only awakens in me ready-made thoughts but also involves me in a movement of thought of which I would have been incapable alone and finally opens me to unfamiliar significations. Here, then, I would have to admit that I do not just live my own thought but that, in the exercise of speech, I *become* the one to whom I am listening.”[\[vi\]](#) This phenomenon of self-transcendence is evidenced when one forgets whether he/she originated a joke, or in fact heard it from some one else. Also, when we listen to another’s music, we in some way become that melody itself. The song reverberates in our consciousness; we hum it and internalize it. It is for this reason that often when one listens to a song for a second time one enjoys it more, expecting the musical turns as though they were coming from one’s own mind. In communication, there is a sharing of identity.

Merleau-Ponty deepens his understanding of this reciprocal becoming through analogy to a loving relationship. He writes, “The relations between the reader and the book are like those loves in which one partner initially dominates because he was more proud or more temperamental, and then the situation changes and the other, more wise and more silent, rules.”[\[vii\]](#) The initial virility of the subject’s significations slowly falter and deliquesce, merging eventually with the cadence of the other, here represented as a book. Merleau-Ponty[\[CS2\]](#) further explains, “As long as language is functioning authentically, it is not a simple invitation to the listener or reader to discover in himself significations that were already there. It is rather a trick

whereby the writer or orator, touching on these significations already present in us, makes them yield strange sounds.”[\[viii\]](#) These “strange sounds” constitute the captivating phenomena of language—they can expose us to that which is other than us, though always through the rhythm of our own consciousness. Merleau-Ponty situates himself between giving and receptiveness in communication.

Language’s ability to access the significations of the other is similar to intimate physical interaction, what Levinas calls the “caress.”[\[ix\]](#) Levinas writes, “The caress is a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks.”[\[x\]](#) When one gives another person a massage, the massager is unaware of what his or her movement is invoking in the other’s consciousness. Both the massager and the person being touched are locked within the prisons of their own sensation—the seeking hand cannot, by its very nature, feel outside of itself. Yet, we find in society that there are some who are better at giving massages than others, just as there are writers more talented at getting their point across. The fact that one person can give a better massage than another at first seems to be only a matter of luck, since, certainly, no person can transcend his/her own perception. Yet, this is not the case. In touching another, we have a vague sense of how that touch feels for the other. What it means to touch someone softly, aggressively—those are meanings and experiences to which we can relate. More importantly, the massager him/herself has a back that has been touched before. Therefore, the mystery, while never seceding fully, allows for a communication. The

caress can speak and incite the other to envision, in some measure, the sensation of its choice; it is a hand that touches intentionally and affects partially what it intended.

Merleau-Ponty escapes solipsism by thinking this possibility of receiving foreign significations in language, not requiring the dialectic as did Levinas who proposed the opaque alterity of death. In order to grasp the dialectical movement of Merleau-Ponty's thought, his insights into language must be more deeply examined, particularly those of central concern to *The Prose of the World*. In this text, Merleau-Ponty directs his thought towards the complex relationship between sedimented language, the linguistic character of a specific culture, and speech. He struggles with a fundamental opposition between these differing influences within language. He writes: "We may say that there are two languages. First there is language after the fact, or language as an institution, which effaces itself in order to yield the meaning that it conveys. Second there is the language which creates itself in its expressive acts, which sweeps me on from the signs toward meaning—sedimented language and speech."[\[xi\]](#) Here Merleau-Ponty creates a linguistic division that implicates his dialectic. Language as an institution only arises after language has been said. Once the event of communication has occurred, language can be categorized and systematized. Merleau-Ponty[\[CS3\]](#) further explains, "N[\[CS4\]](#)o accident becomes a linguistic instrument unless language breathes into it the value of a new mode of speech, by treating it as an example of a 'rule' that in the future will apply to a whole sector of signs."[\[xii\]](#) One accustoms one's[\[CS5\]](#) speaking to match the contents of what can be found in a dictionary as well as the syntactical precepts pulsing below a linguistic culture, yet these words and customs were certainly *used* before they reached the status of convention. At the same time, if there were not profound commonalities in the ways in which we as embodied beings experience the world,

communication would be impossible. Merleau-Ponty's dialectic rests between the "twin but contrary demands of expressivity and uniformity."[\[xiii\]](#)

There are contrary forces always at work during the birth and in the aftermath of language. There is a simultaneous surge towards creativity, towards originality, towards making an impact through the words one is saying and a delimiting instinct that locks this organic flux into cells, maps it like a topographer transposing a changing landscape onto the static medium of paper and ink. This is why Merleau-Ponty says that "to express oneself is, therefore a paradoxical enterprise."[\[xiv\]](#) On one hand we have the rational rules and unifying clauses within language, and on the other there exists actual speech—the desire to communicate.

This dialectic can be elucidated through concrete observation of the methods often employed to teach students a foreign language. A student exposed to the academic pedagogy will quickly realize that language is first taught as a system. The teacher advises the student to create note cards in order to best memorize the grammatical rules and standardized lexicon. An introduction to a foreign language entails a comprehensive study of the unifying aspects of that particular system of communication. One learns that in French, the adjective usually comes after the noun, and in English, the opposite. We learn the roles of subject and predicate in a sentence, and practice exercises to commit these guidelines to memory. But that is precisely what these laws are—guidelines. The foreign language student cannot internalize the language he is studying only on accord of its rules; he must also become immersed in it. It is in actually traveling to France and speaking in a living environment that one learns the language. It is in manipulating these foreign words in a place where expression is only possible through such organic manipulation that understanding arises.

Musical expression offers another gateway to an understanding of the paradox of language.

Music, like language, communicates. When we listen to “Minuet in G” by Bach we are affected by his choice of notes and our consciousness changes. Our mood is altered by the musical theme, and the tempo affects our heartbeat. There are those analytically minded musical academicians who, guided by the rules of music theory, set for themselves the task of studying Bach’s composition in order to understand what exactly makes the work expressive. However, in understanding the ways that Bach’s composition conforms to the system of musical *theory*, they will not arrive at the essence of his music itself. No matter how well one understands the theoretical dynamic of Bach’s compositions, one will not be able to compose music as he did. Needless to say that Bach, as well, was fully aware of the musical institution, a heritage that silently rested beneath his musical arrangements. But this is very different from the expressiveness of the composition—whatever in the minuet enchants and transforms the listener.

Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty arrives at the metaphor of painting to represent the expressiveness and historicity of language. Painting, like language, fuses logic, style and convention. He views painting as a means of further understanding the tension between speech and the institution of language. Merleau-Ponty explains, “The meaning of the painting is lost for those of us for whom painting is not the way of communicating with the world. But for the painter—and even for all the enthusiasts of painting—the meaning is more than a wave of heat at the surface of the canvas, since it is capable of demanding *that* color or *that* object in preference to all others, and since it commands the arrangement of a painting just as imperiously as a syntax or a logic”[\[xv\]](#). The meaning of a painting is lost for those who do not speak the painting language. If one is not deeply affected by painting, if one is not immersed in both its expressive act and sedimented culture, one[\[CS7\]](#) will not understand what the painter has placed onto the canvas. This is a similar

phenomenon to an American student who travels to France and stares blankly at those who speak to him because he has not yet been involved in expressing himself in that particular society.

While the student will still pick up on the “wave of heat” on the surface of the conversation in the form of anger, sadness, and other emotional fluctuations evident through the tone of communication, one will not get beneath that vague sense to the more fundamental significance.

The student will not be able to evince why one word was chosen instead of another, why the seemingly sad or angry person has expressed himself/herself in this or that particular way. Like language, painting is not a hazy expression lacking form or logic. The artist chooses a certain compositional layout and color scheme to best articulate his intention. If in *Starry Night*, Van Gogh is attempting to convey the longing despair he felt while looking at the night sky from within a mental institution, he must understand the components necessary to communicate this experience through the medium of oil paint. While the painting cannot afterwards be reduced to these distinct components, its ‘syntax’ is nonetheless a vitally constitutive element of its production.

In his introduction to *The Prose of the World*, John O’Neill writes, “The philosopher, like the painter or writer, must know how to assimilate the accumulation of tradition, style, and form in order to make an expressive use of them the way he moves his body without a precise concern for its anatomical and neurological structure without which every gesture is impossible. The true philosopher has philosophy in his bones, but these are not a dead man’s bones. Philosophy is his life, the flesh of his thought through which he is open to the thoughts of other thinkers, exposed to their moods and times while still belonging to his own.”[\[xvi\]](#) The movement of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas’ body of work borrows from the historical anatomy of the German Phenomenology that so deeply affected them. Both philosophers internalized the rigorous rhythm

of Husserl and Heidegger's philosophical projects, in turn transforming it and assimilating it into their own creative expression. Their writing would elude such expression if not for the ways it transfigured the concepts inherited from the past, in turn creating a plethora of "strange" yet lucid sounds. Merleau-Ponty and Levinas both adopted the dialectic as a method of questioning the accessibility of the other and establishing the general course of their ontological propositions. Levinas discovered the Other that he endeavored to find, and Merleau-Ponty showed the simultaneously creative and uniform dimensions of language. Like conceptual painters, both philosophers made their broad canvases the stage for a transformative interpretation of the philosophical culture they embodied and an elaboration of the mystery at once pushing philosophy onward and forever calling into question the validity of its ever-changing method.

[i] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 64.

[ii] Merleau-Ponty, 64.

[iii] Merleau-Ponty, 64.

[iv] Merleau-Ponty, 7.

[v] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1979) 75.

[vi] Merleau-Ponty, 118.

[vii] Merleau-Ponty, 12-13.

[viii] Merleau-Ponty, 13.

[ix] Levinas, 89.

[x] Levinas, 89.

[\[xi\]](#) Merleau-Ponty, 10.

[\[xii\]](#) Merleau-Ponty, 35.

[\[xiii\]](#) Merleau-Ponty, 35.

[\[xiv\]](#) Merleau-Ponty, 35.

[\[xv\]](#) Merleau-Ponty, 62.

[\[xvi\]](#) O’Neil/ xli.

[\[CS1\]](#) that

[\[CS2\]](#) Merleau-Ponty

[\[CS3\]](#)Merleau-Ponty

[\[CS4\]](#) “No (upper case)

[\[CS5\]](#) one’s

[\[CS6\]](#) “to (lower case)

[\[CS7\]](#) one (or “the viewer”)