"Consciousness is the Property of Dialectic": What Hegel Taught Merleau-Ponty About Intentionality

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Abstract: I argue that Merleau-Ponty's reading of Hegel's account of experience exerts a significant and hitherto overlooked influence on his attempt to recast *Phénoménologie de la perception*'s account of intentionality. This reading informs two important claims of his later projects: that intentional relations are more fundamental than their relata; and that a metaphysical condition irreducible to consciousness or object constitutes the structure of intentionality. I argue that these positions inform key tenets of reversibility, and that a revisionary interpretation of Hegel's absolute offers Merleau-Ponty a model for the principle that individuates the basic conditions of experience. In addition to demonstrating that he was a more assiduous reader of Hegel than many commentators assume, and highlighting some overlooked debts to Hegel, these results show that Merleau-Ponty's later thought inherits significant idealist commitments, which should motivate us to reconsider its standing within post-Kantian philosophical currents.

Keywords: Intentionality, Metaphysics, Idealism, Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, Hegel

1. Introduction

Intentionality is a fundamental concept in phenomenology and philosophy of mind. It describes a basic feature of consciousness: activities like perceiving, thinking, or believing are typically directed to or about some object. Among phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty is widely recognized for broadening the scope of Husserl's, Scheler's, and Heidegger's analyses of intentionality, and especially for his insights into its embodied and perceptual dimensions.

Despite its fertile advances, Merleau-Ponty expresses some dissatisfaction with *Phénoménologie de la perception*'s account of intentionality and recasts it in subsequent writings. I will show that his reading of Hegel's account of experience in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* exercised a guiding influence on this project. Despite undermining what he calls the 'philosophy of consciousness,' in Merleau-Ponty's estimation *Phénoménologie* remains

too beholden to the subject-object framework and is unclear about which term (if any) takes precedence in intentional analysis (section 2). Among other influences, a reading of Hegel's account of experience points him towards a solution (section 3). On Hegel's view, subject and object are relative and derivative terms: intentionality rests on a more fundamental relational structure, irreducible to either relatum (section 4). Important conclusions from Merleau-Ponty's Hegel-interpretation inform his account of reversibility (section 5), widely recognized as key to his later understanding of subject-world relations. A revisionary interpretation of Hegel's absolute furnishes him with a model for the principle that individuates the basic terms of intentionality (section 6).

This shows that two positions central to Merleau-Ponty's later thought directly profit from his engagement with Hegel: (1) that relations are more fundamental than relata; and (2) that a metaphysical principle irreducible to consciousness or object constitutes the structure of experience. These results show that Merleau-Ponty was a more original reader of Hegel than many commentators assume, reveal hitherto overlooked conceptual debts to Hegel, and cast his view of phenomenological metaphysics in new light (section 7). While it is widely accepted that Merleau-Ponty progressively adopts a more speculative orientation, this is typically understood to exclude all forms of idealism. This paper shows that this widely held assumption should be reconsidered.

The hypothesis defended here does not, of course, grant Merleau-Ponty's Hegel-interpretation exclusive or unqualified explanatory power. Commentators have advanced alternative lines of interpretation to explain Merleau-Ponty's gradual adoption of the view that consciousness-world relations rest on invisible conditions that are more fundamental than those in mind or body. These accounts helpfully highlight conceptual resources and dimensions of intentionality that are supressed or remain unavailable in Hegel. Given the evidence presented below, however, there is good reason to think that Merleau-Ponty's

encounter with Hegel is of special importance. Hegel is repeatedly identified as the philosophical ancestor of some of Merleau-Ponty's most characteristic arguments, and his attempt to develop a more embodied and less consciousness-centric version of Husserl's view that mind and world are essentially co-referential is guided by a sustained engagement with Hegel.[1] The philosophical origins, arguments, and methodological presuppositions that underlie Merleau-Ponty's later view of intentionality jointly suggest a fidelity to a revisionary form of phenomenological idealism, which aims to reconcile a post-Husserlian emphasis on intentionality with some Hegelian premises. While a thorough exploration of its commitments and their merits is not possible here, these results already show that Merleau-Ponty's later philosophical trajectory is an unexpected heir of the idealist tradition. This should motivate us to reconsider his standing within post-Kantian philosophical currents.

2. Intentionality at an Impasse

Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie* develops a sophisticated account of "the organic relation between subject and world" (*PhP* 154/*PP* 189; *PhP* 156/*PP* 191; *PhP* 179/*PP* 213).[2] It aims to recover the "primary sense" of the "original text" of perception and describe our basic mode of "originary intentionality" (*PhP* 353/*PP* 394; *PhP* 22/*PP* 45; *PhP* 407/*PP* 447; *PhP* 248/*PP* 286). Against intellectualism, it defines subjectivity as an embodied agent (*PhP* 226/*PP* 191) situated in its "engagement in the world" (*PhP* 457/*PP* 496; *PhP* 496/*PP* 456). Careful analyses of attention, spatial and colour perception, object-use, and linguistic expression disclose a form of embodied, pre-reflective, and pre-predicative intentionality, and

[1] For Husserl's formulation of the universal a priori of correlation see Hua. 6 §46. *Structure* defines "Transcendental idealism" as the view that "subject and object [are] inseparable correlates" (*SC* 215/*SB* 199). Despite defending a mind-world reciprocity, for Merleau-Ponty the world remains irreducible to and "distinct from the subject."

[2] Citations to *Phénoménologie de la perception* refer by abbreviated title to the page numbers of the 2005 French edition, followed by those of the 2012 English translation.

challenge the view that judgments or representations secure subjects' connection with objects (*PhP* 171–72/*PP* 139–40; *PhP* 382/*PP* 340). This connection instead rests on a capacity to pre-predicatively recognize and merge with motivational structures in the phenomenal field (*PhP* 180/*PP* 146; *PhP* 194/*PP* 159). Merleau-Ponty replaces a theoretical (act-matter or noetic) model with a pragmatic view of operative intentionality. The latter accords an intelligence to practical activity and embodied skill.

Shortly after *Phénoménologie*'s publication, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the project of revising the "relations between the subjective and the objective" may still be incomplete (*SnS* 151/*SNS* 86).[3] A key limitation concerns the assumptions guiding his analysis of subject-object relations: "The problems posed in *Ph.P.* are insoluble [*insolubles*] because I start there from the 'consciousness'—'object' distinction" (*LV* 250/*VI* 200).[4] This claim implicates methodological and functional features of his account, which I will address in turn.

Merleau-Ponty contends that "lived experience" and the "perceived world" enjoy a fundamental "ontological sense" (*PhP* 9/*PP* lxxii; *PhP* 394/*PP* 353; *MPR* 90, 109). This view circumscribes phenomenology's basic goals: to recover "the unreflective experience of the world" and disclose the lived structures supporting it (*PhP* 288/*PP* 251). The terms 'unreflective' or 'prepredicative' refer to meanings encountered in pretheoretical experience (*PhP* 16/*PP* lxxix; *PhP* 18/*PP* lxxxii; *PhP* 74/*PP* 99; *PhP* 162/*PP* 131; *PhP* 282/*PP* 244; *PhP* 351/*PP* 311; *PhP* 378/*PP* 336). For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness "only fully grasps itself if it refers to the prereflective fund it presupposes" (*PhP* 289/*PP* 252).

A core assumption guiding this view is that a study of pre-reflective experience unfolds within the subject-object or subject-world framework. Merleau-Ponty is often lauded for arguing that subject- and object-terms (or prereflective and reflective activities) are

[3] See *CPP* 341 for the empirical counterpart of this claim.
[4] For Merleau-Ponty's self-criticisms see Noble, "De la conscience," 4–8. Citations to *Le visible et l'invisible* refer by abbreviated title to the page numbers of the 2001 French edition, followed by those of the English translation. Translations are often modified.

coreferential (*PhP* 493/*PP* 454). Accordingly, reflecting subjects attempt to recover the pre-reflective meaning of the objects they are directed to, without assuming that the latter are semantically inert, or that meaning derives solely from theoretical study of perceptual structures.

Despite its merits, this approach encounters residual ambiguities about the functions of subject and object-terms. Worries partly derive from the ostensible privilege accorded to subjectivity. Despite subject-object coreferentiality, *Phénoménologie* suggests the "engaged subject" is more fundamental (*PhP* 317/*PP* 279): "I perceive with my body" (*PhP* 382/*PP* 341); "Things and instants can only be linked together to form a world through this ambiguous being that we call 'subjectivity'" (*PhP* 390/*PP* 348). Analyses of spatiality and temporality suggest that while meaning is formed in a subject's encounter with a meaningful world, phenomenology details prereflective experience by focusing on how consciousness takes up worldly structures (*PhP* 127–32/*PP* 100–5; *PhP* 317/*PP* 279; *PhP* 491–94/*PP* 451–55). Consciousness does not mentally constitute the world, but its intentional directedness is sustained by subjective structures like habit, motor skill, and temporality.

This motivates a subsidiary criticism: *Phénoménologie*'s theoretical impasses are supposedly "due to the fact that I maintained a philosophy of 'consciousness'" (*LV* 234/*VI* 183). While concepts like motor intentionality, project, or body schema implicate noncognitive conditions, they still allow that embodied-subjective structures anticipate and prefigure the givenness of objects (*MSME* 45–46). For Merleau-Ponty, this prevents a fuller appreciation of how objectual or worldly conditions sustain intentional relations. More measured criticisms target this problem: "Our corporeality: do not place it at the centre as I did in the *Ph.P.* In one sense, it is nothing but the hinge of a world, its gravity is nothing but that of the world" (BnF VI 222v).

Correlatively, ambiguities plague the importance and role of object-terms. For example, the "Thing" chapter holds that "The unity of the thing . . . is not a substratum, an empty X . . . [but a] unique manner of existing" (*PhP* 374–75/*PP* 333); that "We understand the thing . . . by taking up for ourselves the mode of existence that the observable signs sketch out before us"; and that even if a "thing is constituted in the hold my body has upon it", it remains an independent "structure available for inspection by the body" (*PhP* 376/*PP* 334) and even "an absolute reality" (*PhP* 378/*PP* 336). These remarks accord an integrity and meaning to objects prior to embodied engagement and suggest they prescribe norms to consciousness. This is consistent with the view that perceived structures motivate subjects, that the meaning of experience is a prethematic text, and also reflects an anti-intellectualist orientation.

However, following Husserl, this chapter also suggests that the deeper condition of possibility for objectual motivation or normativity is a synthesis of identity, or a subjective capacity for unifying norm-giving conditions. Synthesis presupposes temporality (*PhP* 388–91/*PP* 346–49), which is a subjective structure independent from objects or the phenomenal field (*PhP* 288/*PP* 250; *PhP* 390/*PP* 348; *PhP* 473/*PP* 434; *PhP* 495/*PP* 456). The "Thing" chapter is arguably unclear about how and to what extent subjective or objectual conditions sustain intentional directedness.

Doubtless, this evidence does not substantiate anything like a break between Merleau-Ponty's early and late projects, or imply the superiority of later formulations. Instead of discussing these contentious issues here, I want to explore the motivations behind Merleau-Ponty's claim that *Phénoménologie*'s goals are "insoluble" and consider where he goes from there. *Phénoménologie*'s construal of subject-object coreferentiality mitigates a philosophy of consciousness but arguably postpones a more fine-grained account of the constitutive functions of intentional relata. A focus on embodied structures could license a privileging of

consciousness, but Merleau-Ponty also stresses the importance of objectual conditions. While intentionality is foundational, it is unclear which of its terms (if any) takes precedence, and how the meaning of pre-reflective experience should be recovered.

One might think these observations miss the point and argue that Merleau-Ponty privileges neither subject nor object.[5] Any putative tension could be evidence of a wholesale rejection of the subject/object or transcendental/empirical divide. Remarks about the ambiguity of perception, for example, intentionally blur subject-object and condition-conditioned relations (*PhP* 390/*PP* 348). This charitable reply overlooks *Phénoménologie*'s relatively sustained tendency to identify the temporal structure of consciousness as a fundamental condition for the possibility of experience. It makes little sense of explicit claims that *Phénoménologie* details subject-object relations, that a "revision" or "reexamination" of this account is needed (*LV* 41/*VI* 22–23; *LV* 47/*VI* 28; *LV* 22–23/*VI* 16; *LV* 35/*VI* 18), and that later writings "renounce" the prevailing version of consciousness-object relations and redefine perceptual foundations (*LV* 184/*VI* 141; *LV* 41/*VI* 23; *LV* 191/*VI* 147).[6] And concepts like 'ambiguity' are less explanations in their own right than instances of what needs explaining.

This state of affairs leads Merleau-Ponty to refine his framework for detailing subject-world relations. Two key commitments point beyond earlier impasses: (1) in experience, relations are more fundamental than relata; (2) a metaphysical condition irreducible to subject or object constitutes the structure of intentional relations. These positions profit from his engagement with Hegel, which I explore below. Attending to Hegel's influence on Merleau-

[5] Morris argues that Merleau-Ponty in practice attempts to overcome the subject-object dichotomy (Morris, *Sense of Space*, 59; see also Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 206). This tracks claims to the effect that "Neither the object nor the subject is *posited*" (*PhP* 289/*PP* 251). While Merleau-Ponty rejects traditional views of subject-object relations, he defends a non-cognitive version. Besides the evidence above, the text's theoretical distinctions (reflected/unreflected, objective/pre-objective, empirical/transcendental) suggest a fidelity to the division.

[6] Compare definitions of the prereflective domain of experience (*PhP* 76–77/*PP* 52, *PhP* 96/*PP* 69; *PhP* 317/*PP* 279; *PhP* 299/*PP* 262; *PhP* 376/*PP* 334) with denials that experience has a "preconstituted" meaning that consciousness recovers, which presupposes "prior contact" between subject and object (*LV* 55–56/*VI* 34).

Ponty sheds new light on his self-criticisms and clarifies the philosophical stakes of his later work.

3. Hegel on Experience

Besides well-known discussions of socio-political, humanistic, and proto-existentialist topics, Merleau-Ponty's research in the mid-1950s also engages epistemological and metaphysical themes in Hegel. The "Introduction" to Hegel's *Phänomenologie*, which develops his account of phenomenal knowledge and experience, is of special importance (*PG* §§81–82/*PS* 39; *PG* §§85–86/*PS* 40–41). These sections touch on the criterion problem, which arises from an apparent circularity in attempts to identify epistemic standards. To determine if a particular knowledge-claim is warranted, a criterion for knowledge is needed. But since any epistemic criterion can only be tested against some existing knowledge-claims, testing an epistemic criterion presupposes that one already knows what knowledge is.

Different interpretations of the problem and Hegel's solution have been advanced.[7] Some commentators suggest Hegel fails to meet the circularity challenge.[8] Heidegger claims that Hegel identifies being with representation or subjective thought.[9] Merleau-Ponty's later treatment of Hegel obliquely engages Heidegger's but does not adopt his interpretation. Building on insights from a 1955–56 seminar, Merleau-Ponty reads the "Introduction" in a phenomenological vein: it develops the "Hegelian equivalent to intentionality" (*NC* 298; *NC*

[7] For a coherentist interpretation see Westphal, "Hegel's Solution"; for a particularist interpretation see Yong, "Consciousness and Hegel's Solution."
[8] See Heidemann, "Substance, Subject, and System," 13–20.
[9] See GA 5: 132–33; GA 5: 154–55. For the Heidegger-Hegel connection see Lindberg, *Heidegger contre Hegel*. For a critique of Heidegger's reading of Hegel see Mabille, *Hegel, Heidegger, et la métaphysique*, 55–76; 123–50; 152; 210.

290).[10] Before considering this interpretation, a review of Hegel's view of subject-object relations is in order.

(1) Hegel challenges theories of cognition on which subjects presuppose a medium (Humean impressions, Kantian representations) to know objects. Unlike traditional approaches, Hegel's account of experience does not presuppose the subject-object divide, or a "*distinction between ourselves and this cognition*" (*PG* §74/*PS* 36). Instead, subject and object categories subsequently emerge in experience:

> To be precise, consciousness *distinguishes* from itself something to which it at the same time *relates* itself; or, as the expression goes, there is something *for consciousness*; and this determinate aspect, the *relating*, or the *Being* of something *for a consciousness*, is *knowing*. But from this Being for another we distinguish *Being-in-itself*; what is related to knowing is also distinguished from knowing and posited as *being* outside this relation as well; this aspect, the in-itself, is called *truth*. (*PG* §82/*PS* 39)

In pretheoretical experience, subject and object are inseparable. Consciousness soon discovers that the entity it knows is unlike it. This basic observation generates the category of a "being-in-itself" or an object. This distinction might be taken to suggest that consciousness could only cognize objects by adopting an extra-subjective or external standpoint. But Hegel stresses that any object is always an object for consciousness and implicitly refers to a subject. Anticipating a claim that Merleau-Ponty develops, intentional categories are internally related: subject and object are numerically distinct but conceptually and functionally interdependent. Any object is for some subject, and conversely: qua epistemic

[10] This paper focuses on first-personal subject-to-world directedness, postponing discussion of intersubjective experience. Merleau-Ponty accepts that Hegel's account of experience (like Husserl's view of transcendental subjectivity) has social import. An analysis of subject-to-subject relations would develop features described in section 5. For reasons of economy I omit the details.

categories, consciousness and object mutually entail and limit one another. In Merleau-Ponty's estimation, for Hegel the emergence of the object is also the "advent" (*l'avènement*) of the subject (*D* 47).[11] This does not entail an internalist epistemology, or that a subject's grasp of objects is necessarily veridical. Rather, it points to an elementary division that establishes the basic schema of intentionality, upon which claims to truth, correctness, or knowledge become evaluable.[12]

(2) To know any object, consciousness need not adapt to pregiven objective conditions, or "alter its knowledge to make it conform to the object":

> The object, admittedly, seems to be for consciousness only as consciousness knows it; . . . However, the very fact that consciousness knows of an object at all already involves this distinction: *to consciousness* something is the *in-itself*, while another moment is the knowledge, or the Being of the object *for* consciousness. . . . In the alteration of the knowledge, the object itself alters for it too, for the existing knowledge was essentially a knowledge of the object: along with the knowledge the object too becomes another, for it essentially belonged to this knowledge. Hence consciousness finds that what it previously took to be the *in-itself* is not in itself, or that it was *in itself* only *for consciousness*. (*PG* §85/*PS* 40)

Consciousness acquires knowledge through progressive discovery or education, which transforms incipient subject and object roles. Hegel is especially interested in cases where seemingly well-founded principles or conceptual schemes are shown to be limited and dependent on conditions they ostensibly exclude.[13] In such cases, an object appears other than

[11] Citations to Merleau-Ponty's unpublished manuscripts refer to the Bibliothèque nationale de France's pagination.
[12] Yong's interpretation is consistent with a phenomenological account (Yong, "Consciousness and Hegel's Solution," 286; 296–98). He suggests that epistemic criteria, while internal or immanent to consciousness, depend on a "unique" kind of self-knowledge, "the what-it's-like character of consciousness as a particular instance of knowledge" (Yong, "Consciousness and Hegel's Solution," 300).
[13] See e.g. accounts of sense-certainty (*PG* §90 ff./*PS* 43 ff.) or empiricism (*EL* §38).

we thought, and our assumptions about it (and the world) are disconfirmed. But this demonstrates that subjective assumptions circumscribe objects' intelligibility. What consciousness recognized as an extra-subjective standard was really contingent on its epistemic stance. In Hegelian parlance, epistemic disconfirmation reveals that the in itself is really for us. As an object's intelligibility conditions shift, so do the criteria for veridical cognition. Consciousness thereby acquires a "new object" that it integrates into a refined epistemological standpoint (*PG* §87/*PS* 41).

(3) These considerations motivate the following definition of experience:

> This *dialectical* movement which consciousness exercises on itself, on its knowledge as well as on its object, *insofar as the new, true object emerges* from it *for consciousness*, is really what is called *experience*. … Consciousness knows *something*, this object is the essence or the *in-itself*; but it is also the in-itself for consciousness; with this the ambiguity of this truth comes in. We see that consciousness now has two objects: one is the first *in-itself*, the second is the *Being-for consciousness of this in-itself*. (*PG* §86/*PS* 40)

The dialectical character of experience pertains to the interplay between two attitudes or stances within consciousness. Consciousness discovers that its grasp of an object (the "*in-itself*") is inadequate, due to a discrepancy between its epistemic stance and its referent(s). This gap is filled by a dialectical procedure whereby consciousness tests and modifies its view of both terms. This generates an epistemically superior outlook, which Hegel calls 'science.' While epistemic criteria are internal to consciousness, the dialectical character of experience furnishes consciousness with critical resources that it uses to measure the distance between the truth and its own outlook.

4. Experience as Dialectical Movement

A critical reading of the account above helps Merleau-Ponty refine his view of intentional infrastructure. Key to this are Hegel's claims that consciousness and object are relative and that *Erfahrung* is essentially dialectical. I first sketch the contours of Merleau-Ponty's reading and then consider its applications.

Some commentators argue that Hegel does not make a positive contribution to Merleau-Ponty's attempt to reformulate consciousness-object relations.[14] While Merleau-Ponty may profit from Hegel's socio-political or proto-existentialist tenets, Hegel's view of consciousness requires "an absolute reduction to immanence, where all that *is* is consciousness conscious of itself as the sole and unitary origin, preserver, and destiny of all things."[15] But "it is just this overcoming of difference . . . that Merleau-Ponty rejects."[16] This estimation recalls Heidegger's reading, on which Hegel is an arch-rationalist who completes Descartes's project of subordinating the meaning of entities to their significance for consciousness.[17]

Whatever one makes of this interpretation, it is not Merleau-Ponty's considered view. For him, the view of consciousness sketched above is not just another version of

[14] Saint-Aubert contends that like Marx or Sartre, Hegel's thought is "faussement dialectique, car elles adoptent la position de survol du concepteur du labyrinthe, et s'exceptent du mouvement qu'elles décrivent" (Saint-Aubert, *Vers une ontologie*, 175). Merleau-Ponty doubtless registers this criticism, but as I show below, it does not inform his entire reading of Hegel (this also applies to his reading of Marx).
[15] Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology,* 163.
[16] Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology,* 163. For Dillon, any "initial compatibility between Hegel and Merleau-Ponty should not lull us into ignoring fundamental differences between them. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty will characterize Hegel's dialectic in plain terms as 'bad dialectic'" (*Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 267n80). This identifies the so-called 'negativist' elements that Merleau-Ponty locates in Sartre with Hegel tout court (*Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 211), but ignores Merleau-Ponty's considered view, on which a "dialectical definition of being" does not subordinate being to subject or object (*LV* 128/*VI* 95). Dillon notes the importance of self-mediation for Merleau-Ponty but ignores its Hegelian origins (Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 211–12).
[17] See Heidegger, "Hegels Begriff." On Heidegger's reading, for Hegel being depends on subjectivity, and reality is essentially subjective (GA 5: 146; 154–55). Hegel understands experience in terms of representation or presence ("Parousia") to a subject (GA 5: 132–33), the "being of beings" only ever appears under a subjective guise as consciousness (GA 5: 186–87), and the meaning of world in Hegel's "Introduction" is equivalent to that given by "Subjectivity" (GA 5: 203). For Merleau-Ponty's distance from Heidegger in the mid-1950s see Saint-Aubert, *Vers une ontologie,* 154–56.

intellectualism. The "Introduction" to "Hegel's *Phenomenology*" advances a more nuanced view of "a self that is not consciousness, and in which experience is progressive discovery" (*D* 55). Here, the term 'consciousness' refers to constitutive functions typically accorded to subjectivity on intellectualist models of mind (consciousness qua *Sinngeber*) (*NC* 301). Instead, Hegel describes a subject that "alienates" or divests itself as sovereign meaning-giver. To be clear: Merleau-Ponty rejects totalizing tendencies in Hegel's thought and laments that he sometimes suppresses more promising elements in his account of experience.[18] But these shortcomings are only one part of the story.

In Hegel's account, consciousness is characterized by 'openness' (*ouverture*) to what lies outside it (*NC* 307–8n; *D* 36; *D* 46; *D* 72; *D* 91). This feature is also captured using the term 'transcendence,' and proves important for Merleau-Ponty's later goals.[19] Before any links to objects are established, consciousness must be minimally disposed to receive and engage with entities in its milieu. Openness is a precondition for the activity described in section 3.1.

An object comes into view through an externally directed movement. Following Hegel, Merleau-Ponty uses the term '*mouvement*' to describe the incipient, elementary intentional relation identified in section 3.1 (*NC* 301; *D* 28–30). This term suggests directionality without further assumptions about intentional termini or their roles. As Merleau-Ponty reads Hegel, dialectical movement has two stages. First, for any entity to come into view, consciousness must suspend assumptions that could block a proper grasp of it. This is described as 'externalization' or 'alienation' and is consistent with a view of consciousness as openness to the non-subjective sphere. With the term 'externalization,' Merleau-Ponty signals that subjective conditions are insufficient to fully grasp objects. A

[18] See *NC* 308 or *RC* 82–83, which decry Hegel's tendency to sacrifice the negativity of dialectic for its positive systematicity.
[19] Understanding "*l'ouverture au monde*" is a fundamental task of Merleau-Ponty's later thought (*LV* 59/*VI* 38; *LV* 47/*VI* 28; *LV* 76/*VI* 51).

second stage is described using the terms 'internalization' or 'recollection' (*D* 57–58).[20] The claim here is that consciousness can integrate novel insights it acquires about objects into a refined epistemic standpoint, which sustains a more nuanced view of experience.

Recall that the "*dialectical* movement" of experience reveals an "ambiguity" (*Zweideutigkeit*) in consciousness (*PG* §86/*PS* 40). This is central to Hegel's account, and entails that consciousness and its objects are "double" (*NC* 301, 304). Consciousness is double because it is defined by "reciprocal action" between "noesis-noema" or subject-object (*NC* 301). To grasp any object, consciousness must modify its outlook in by re-estimating what it is directed to. Consciousness comes to grips with something by comparing its construal of an object with the object's genuine qualities, or, by contrasting internal and external sense-making stances. Hegel shows that these stances are codependent, and that intentional experience is a bidirectional "double movement" (*D* 57, 64, 80). Alternatively, experience is dialectically articulated: dialectic is fundamental to the "structure of consciousness" (*NC* 301).

If consciousness is "double," then it is irreducible to subject- or object-poles: "Consciousness is neither subject nor object, but the work [*travail*] of one against the other" (*NC* 303). If what Hegel calls 'ambiguity' is "essential to dialectic and to *Erfahrung*, since it is through ambiguity that object passes into subject and *vice versa*", then externally directed intentional movement is also guided by objects (*NC* 301). Directedness to the outside presupposes that an object "works [*travaille*] on [us]." Subjective assumptions must be curtailed for objects to manifest their proper features. This requires that active intentional modalities be guided by intended objects: "to think the other [object] is to be thought by it" (*NC* 305).

[20] Merleau-Ponty claims that these terms track '*Erinnerung*' and '*Entäusserung*', typically translated as 'recollection' and 'alienation' (Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary,*144; 186 and 35–38; cf. *D* 59; *D* 68). The terms do not, however, appear in Hegel's "Introduction," but cf. *PG* §§804–8/*PS* 319–21.

In Merleau-Ponty's estimation, this has important ramifications for the functions of subject- and object-terms. The first two features of Hegel's account (detailed in sections 3.1–3.2) entail a "relativization" of intentional poles (*NC* 300, 319; *D* 63).[21] What holds for consciousness holds for objects: any phenomenon appearing to consciousness is not strictly external to it; the dialectical structure of experience reveals that "I form my knowledge according to the object, and I model the object according to my knowledge, because there is no knowledge that is purely knowledge and no object that is purely an object" (*NC* 303). Subject-object relativization entails that the formative functions typically accorded to subjectivity can also be accorded to objects, and that the passivity attributed to objects also characterizes perceivers. Intentional experience is better understood as an exchange or recalibration of intentional roles, and features "reciprocal relativization…[and] mutual intertwining [*Ineinander*]" of subject and object (*NC* 304). Accordingly, consciousness is a "subject-object" (*S* 210/*ST* 166; cf. *LV* 72/*VI* 48). Experience comes to be defined as the "hidden frame [*membrure*] of the 'subject' and 'object'" (*NC* 297).

In turn, subject-object relativization motivates a "calling into question of our criteria themselves [*de nos mesures elles-mêmes*]" (*D* 53; *PG* §85/*PS* 40). On Hegel's account, consciousness fails to definitively grasp external objects from its perspective. But access to a purportedly extra-subjective ground is in-principle unattainable. Neither subject-centric nor object-centric criteria, then, can take priority. In experience, "the object measures the subject as much as the subject measures the object" (*NC* 300, 300a).

5. Dialectic, Intentionality, and Reversibility

[21] This challenges Kruks's claim that Merleau-Ponty interprets Hegel's dialectic in dualistic terms (Kruks, "Merleau-Ponty, Hegel, and the Dialectic," 104–5).

This evidence shows that Merleau-Ponty is more positively disposed to Hegel's view of consciousness and experience than is often assumed. But it has more significant implications. A careful look shows that Merleau-Ponty deploys insights gleaned from his reading of Hegel when developing his view that consciousness is openness, that intentionality is a bi-directional (or double) movement, and that experience transforms relations of priority between subject/object or reflective/pre-reflective modalities, all key features of reversibility. The significance of his Hegel-interpretation is also confirmed by explicit statements.

It is widely accepted that Merleau-Ponty's later writings appeal to reversibility and related terms (flesh, chiasma) to detail consciousness-world relations and rectify the supposed shortcomings of his earlier approach. Reversibility attempts to describe intentionality without presupposing the subject-object distinction (*LV* 70/*VI* 46–47; *LV* 179/*VI* 138). It proposes that terms like 'seer' and 'seen' substitute their roles in experience (*LV* 155/*VI* 118; *LV* 187/*VI* 144; *LV* 200/*VI* 154). Intentionality, on this view, is not a unidirectional relation, whereby perceivers give form to objects, but a bidirectional one, whereby perceivers' intentional acts are guided by objects' proper structures.

For example, if I remember my favourite song, the qualitative character of my remembering is helped along by the song's characteristics (its melody, rhythm, the singer's voice, etc.). But qua remembered object, my grasp of the song is also coloured by the thoroughness of my recollections, and by the degree to which I recall its features. Intentional directedness is guided by its objects; the latter, in turn, take shape *as* objects of a determinate kind through a subject's intending acts. As lived in experience, intending and intended terms mutually condition one another: they are interdependent, relational terms.

Merleau-Ponty even claims that reversibility is an "ultimate truth" and a general feature of experience (*LV* 201/*VI* 155). Despite its wide range of applications and conceptual progenitors, he claims that its core features were first articulated by Hegel. Prior to Husserl's

Ideen II, Hegel showed that "consciousness is this reversibility, this exchange" (*NC* 298). Hegel anticipates the findings of "Modern phenomenology and the discovery of latent or operative intentionality" and demonstrates that "reversibility" between self/other or subject/object obtains in any intentional modality (*NC* 306). In Merleau-Ponty's seminar on dialectic, the bi-directional or "in and out" (*dedans et dehors*) structure of *Erfahrung* is described as a "dialectical reversal" (*renversement dialectique*) (*D* 48, 50). This suggests that reversibility is a conceptual heir to a dialectical relation. While Daly, for example, rightly observes that reversibility is "non-mechanistic" or "dialectical," its specifically dialectical features have yet to be sufficiently explored.[22] And while Dastur concedes that reversibility "returns" to earlier discussions of expression in Hegel, the direct links between Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Hegelian *Erfahrung* and important tenets of reversibility remain unacknowledged.[23]

5.1. Openness

As in his reading of Hegel, Merleau-Ponty notes that reversibility presupposes that a perceiver (in classical terms: subjectivity or consciousness) is defined by "openness" (*ouverture*) to object, world, or being (*LV* 53–61/*VI* 34–39, *LV* 64–5/*VI* 42, *LV* 71/*VI* 48; *LV* 76/*VI* 52; *LV* 84–86/*VI* 58-9; *LV* 120/*VI* 88). Openness is a radical dispositional receptivity to entities in one's milieu, and a formative precondition for an outlook that does not construe objects solely in subjective terms. Perceptual acts engage their objects, but this requires that subjects' intentional stances are not coloured by substantive theoretical assumptions that inhibit sensitivity to objects' qualitative features. Merleau-Ponty suggests that this attitude characterizes our everyday pre-theoretical perceptual outlook.

[22] Daly, "Reversibility Thesis," 165.
[23] Dastur, "Merleau-Ponty et Hegel," 40–41.

5.2. Dialectical Movement

Merleau-Ponty uses the term '*mouvement*' to describe intentional openness. Recall that this term was used to describe Hegel's view of *Erfahrung* (section 4). In experience, any relatum "becomes what it is through movement, [and] it's the same for each term to pass into another or to become itself, to leave itself or to return to itself" (*LV* 122/*VI* 90–91, *LV* 104/*VI* 169). '*Mouvement*' is a dialectical concept that clarifies how subject and object roles emerge. Prior to any subject-object division, "the engendering of a relation [*rapport*] starting from the other" must first obtain, one sustained by a "single movement" between its two terms (*LV* 122/*VI* 90). As for Hegel, the terms emerging from intentional movement do not "precede experience": the "I think" or subjective self-awareness does "not indicate a prior possibility from which it emerges" (*LV* 68/*VI* 45). An exchange of positions, or a structure of reciprocal reference, is "constitutive" of seer and seen (*LV* 176/*VI* 135). Subject and object are not fixed but relationally-generated dynamic categories.

5.3. Bidirectionality

As this suggests, *mouvement* is bi-directional. Another concept from Merleau-Ponty's Hegel-interpretation helps him detail intentional movement: intentionality ("contact" with "being") presupposes "the double reference, the identity of returning and exiting oneself [*du rentrer en soi et du sortir de soi*], of lived experience with distance [*de la distance*]" (*LV* 162/*VI* 124; *LV* 174/*VI* 134; *LV* 154/*VI* 117). This entails that embodied consciousness

> is a being of two leaves, on the one hand a thing among things, and on the other what sees and touches them; . . . it unites [*réunit*] these two properties within it, and its double belongingness to the orders of the 'object' and the 'subject' reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. (*LV* 178/*VI* 137)

This text invokes the term 'double' (encountered in Hegel's claim that consciousness and object are ambiguous) to define intentional relata. In Merleau-Ponty's estimation, prereflective experience does not show that perceivers meaningfully animate inert objects. Instead, it is a gradual refinement that progressively constitutes the qualitative character of experience and individuates its terms. But if subjects' intentional stances depend on external conditions that obtain for perceivers, then intentional relata enjoy a "double belongingness" to roles traditionally reserved for a single term; experience thereby becomes "one sole movement . . . in two phases" (*LV* 179–80/*VI* 138).[24]

If experience is a "pathway" (*un chemin*), then its content can be anticipated only in outline. While relata are co-dependent and substitute their roles, and while intentionality in any of its modalities "is a reversal (*Umkehrung*)" or a "movement" whereby "concept and in-itself exchange their roles and truth manifests itself", these are only *minimal* conditions (*NC* 310). They underdetermine the specific qualitative, normative, and intentional structure of experience.

Consider Merleau-Ponty's example of (mistakenly) seeing a rock on the beach. This instance of perceptual illusion reveals something fundamental about intentionality: "I thought I saw a piece of wood polished by the sea, but *it was* a clayey rock" (*LV* 62/*VI* 40). The first appearance cannot be dismissed as mere illusion. Perceptual evidence in general gives itself as an "in itself," that is, as veridical or "real." Illusion, Merleau-Ponty suggests, comes to light amid a general sense that perceptual acts successfully engage their objects. This assumption is controverted only when a more persuasive appearance (that the wood is really

[24] Although I cannot explore this here, these remarks suggest basic affinities between Merleau-Ponty's view of hyper-dialectic, which privileges movement or difference over finality or synthesis, and features of dialectic he locates in Hegel (*LV* 126–28/*LV* 93–95). They undercut the suggestion that Hegel's dialectic does "not escape from the general frame of the critique" Merleau-Ponty levels against Sartre (Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon,* 138n). They also show that hyper-dialectic's import extends beyond methodological correctives to totalizing thought, and concerns the very structure of reality (Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon,* 137–38).

a rock) disconfirms the first. But the veridicality of the latter presupposes the partiality of the former. In intentionality, "there is no *Schein* without an *Erscheinung*, [and] every *Schein* is the counterpart of an *Erscheinung*" (*LV* 63/*VI* 41). As for Hegel, a refined standpoint is "*always further beyond*": experience is a "progressive approach", never achieves finality or definitive clarification, and admits of a fundamental "fragility" (*LV* 63/*VI* 42). From within the flow of conscious life, how and why some intentional stance proves modifiable cannot be anticipated.

Here one might reasonably object: is this not what *Phénoménologie* defends (*PhP* 17/*PP* lxxxi; *PhP* 493/*PP* 454)? Merleau-Ponty again invokes the "prereflective and preobjective unity of my body" (*LV* 184/*VI* 141), accepts that reflection "returns" to the unreflected (*NC* 299; *D* 47), and maintains that experience enjoys an "ultimate ontological power" (*LV* 146/*VI* 110). He even modifies *Phénoménologie*'s rock example (*PhP* 40–1/*PP* 17–18).

Despite retaining core tenets of his earlier account, there are nontrivial differences. An appeal to "world" is one significant shift: "what each perception (even false) verifies is each experience's belongingness to the same world, their equal power to reveal it, as *possibilities of the same world*" (*LV* 63/*VI* 41). Merleau-Ponty, standardly likens world to being and observes that multiple and sometimes diverging "perspectives on the same familiar Being" obtain. The perspectival character of being is not explained by conditions like the body schema. The partiality and incompleteness of intentionality is ultimately due to nonsubjective metaphysical conditions, not first-personal or epistemic ones; I return to this in section 6. Even if one does not take Merleau-Ponty at his self-critical word, attending to these novel points of emphasis reveals something new about his account of consciousness-world relations.

5.4. Reversibility and the Primacy of Perception

Attending to a related shift will bring relevant differences into greater focus. Recall that while *Phénoménologie* is unclear about whether subjective or objective conditions take precedence when describing prereflective content (section 2), as for Husserl or Kant, an appeal to transcendental conditions like temporality was thought to be necessary (*PhP* 423–24/*PP* 382). *Le visible* still attempts to detail the structures of pretheoretical life, but the unreflected or prereflective does not enjoy an equally foundational status. While *Phénoménologie* holds that reflection and unreflected stand in a complementary "two-way relation," its arguments and methods arguably privilege prereflective content (*PhP* 454/*PP* 414; *PhP* 91/*PP* 65). *Le visible* identifies the study of prereflective experience as an important task, but denies that this amounts to a return to an ultimate clarificatory ground. Experience cannot be divided into "originary" and "derived" content (*LV* 55/*VI* 35; *LV* 163/*VI* 124), "condition" and "conditioned" (*LV* 55–56/*VI* 34–35; *LV* 39/*VI* 21), or founding and founded. These distinctions no longer designate relations of semantic, explanatory, or ontological priority.[25]

Among other sources, insights from subject-object relativization in Hegel are catalysts behind this shift. If reversibility characterizes all intentional modalities, then it also governs the reflective (descriptive-phenomenological) stance. The originary content of prereflective experience, then, cannot be retrieved as *Phénoménologie* proposes. Standards or "measures [*mesurants*] for Being" do not enjoy an extrareflective independence: we cannot "situate our levels, measure our standards" or ask "where is the world itself?" outside of intentional movement (*LV* 138–39/*VI* 103–4; cf. *NC* 313). This does not entail that lived experience has no determinate meaning, but that the latter is neither identical across time nor normatively or descriptively privileged. Any attempt to describe it necessarily implicates an occurrent

[25] See Saint-Aubert, *Vers une ontologie,* 32 for terminological shifts from the primacy of perception view.

intentional stance (recall the claim that object "measures" subject and vice versa) (*LV* 163/*VI* 124).

On Merleau-Ponty's later view, reflection traces the "divergence" or "difference" between experience and emerging "norms" (*LV* 138/*VI* 103). It is "the practice of this measure", without assuming that discrepancies between modalities of experience should be resolved by recourse to a more basic norm or criterion, namely, the primary text of perception. Merleau-Ponty now willingly accepts the in-principle provisionality and inadequacy of the descriptive stance, and seeks a view of reflection that "descends toward the world as it is instead of returning to a prior possibility of thinking it–which would antecedently impose conditions for our control over it" (*LV* 60/*VI* 39). Controversial claims that experience cannot be divided into empirical or transcendental levels, or that reflection does not produce extra-subjective criteria, aim to resist models of phenomenological description that prefigure the givenness of phenomena, locate their conditions of possibility in consciousness, or presuppose stable foundations for descriptive activity (*NC* 306).[26]

These positions suggest a novel view of phenomenological methodology and of what is primary in experience. Intentionality is still "the total situation that philosophy must account for," but it can be clarified "only by admitting the double polarity of reflection and that, as Hegel said, to return to oneself is also to leave oneself" (*LV* 73/*VI* 49). Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of dialectical relations weakens the self-referential or internalist tenor of Hegel's account of epistemic criteria-generation but adopts his view that reciprocal relativization or bi-directional movement governs the appearance of sense to consciousness (*PG* §84/*PS* 39–40). This structure is now seen as fundamental. Accordingly, an account of intentionality must study the "reversal of relations" (*le renversement des rapports*) between

[26] The contrast is less stark if transcendental philosophy is simply a non-naturalistic, materially irreducible, reflective stance that takes the world as a "theme" (*LV* 46/*VI* 26–27). Merleau-Ponty typically associates it with thicker commitments about formal and subjective conditions for the possibility of appearances.

subject and object and philosophical and prephilosophical stances (*LV* 122/*VI* 91; *LV* 302–3/*VI* 253).

Merleau-Ponty's unfinished projects provide only a glimpse of what these prescriptions entail. As formulated, they are open to criticisms: they provide little practical guidance for how description might succeed, nor do they offer any guarantee that reversibility overcomes earlier worries. Rather than condemn its potential infelicities, I want to highlight deeper connections with Hegel that follow from the conclusions above. These further clarify the direction Merleau-Ponty was charting in his later writings and reveal unexpected implications.

6. Experience and the Absolute

Evidence above suggests a commitment to two basic principles: that relations are more fundamental than relata; and that intentional relations reflect the underlying structure of being or world. These claims announce deeper shifts in Merleau-Ponty's strategy for describing experience. If intentionality is irreducible to first-personal structures, and if the subjective stance really is derivative, then the goal of disambiguating perceivers' contact with the lived world has greater chances of success if it can show how relations generate relata. In his view, this requires that phenomenology adopt specific metaphysical commitments that weaken the boundaries between ideal conditions and perceived structures. Accordingly, *Le visible* proposes that the visible or sensible world is structured by invisible or ideal conditions (*LV* 193–99/*VI* 149–54). Bidirectional relations enable the givenness of sense to consciousness but are never themselves objects of perception. A distinctive claim of Merleau-Ponty's later thought is that any description of lived experience must be informed by extra-perceptual metaphysical principles. As evidence shows, his reading of Hegel shapes his understanding

of the basic ground that sustains consciousness-world relations. Before seeing how, I want to address two preliminary points.

First, one might think an identification of the ideal with the invisible is too quick: if Merleau-Ponty thought the invisible (which includes concepts, language, cultural products, and even history) were ideal, why did he not say so explicitly? Evidence suggests he does. The "experience of the visible world," like that of literature or music, depends on the "invisible," which he likens to the realm of "ideas" (*LV* 193–94/*VI* 149). To study this relationship is to enact an "exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas." In a qualification repeated elsewhere, he notes that the "idea" in his sense is not a "*de facto*" or "absolute" "invisible"; like the invisible, it "inhabits" the perceived world as an "interior" condition of possibility (*LV* 196/*VI* 151). And the flesh, a prime example of visible-invisible coextensivity, is defined by "a strict ideality" (*LV* 197/*VI* 152). These claims will become clearer below. For now, the point to retain is the close association between invisibility and ideality, in Merleau-Ponty's positive sense.

We also encounter this commitment in a related discussion of the fact-essence relation. For Merleau-Ponty, "facticity" and "ideality" are undivided and intersect with one another (*LV* 154/*VI* 116–17). This claim partly aims to undermine the longstanding view that the domain of universals or essences is separate from particulars or facts.[27] An earlier observation about the relation between ideas and things applies here: "ideas are the texture of experience" (*LV* 157/*VI* 119).

The identity also surfaces in Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy of language. Linguistic expression unfolds in space and time but relies on the ideal domain (convention, syntax, word-meaning), which it transforms into something sensible and perceptually accessible.

[27] The flesh is "individual" and "universal" or "identity" and "difference" (*LV* 185/*VI* 142).

Linguistic experience "prolongs [us] into the invisible" (*LV* 156/*VI* 118).[28] Speech is one instance of the double relationship that defines the basic structure of reality, where ideality constitutes the inner fabric of things.[29] As I suggest below, this position is a version of Hegel's thesis that the finite is ideal (section 7).

Second, my decision to read his ontology as a metaphysics might raise eyebrows: is Merleau-Ponty really doing metaphysics? If so, why does he not call it by name, preferring instead to use the term 'ontology'?

The motivations, sources, and arguments informing Merleau-Ponty's ontological research are too complex to thoroughly explore here.[30] My decision is informed by three basic considerations. First, Merleau-Ponty's ontological research emerges amid a broader engagement with the "classical questions of metaphysics" (*PD* 47).[31] While he eventually favours the term 'ontology,' partly for its supposed novelty, this project grapples with traditionally "metaphysical" topics like world, being, sense, and nature.[32] Terminological differences are no sign of resistance to metaphysics; they signal an attempt to reimagine traditional metaphysical categories and distinctions. Merleau-Ponty is clear: "I am for metaphysics" (*LV* 300/*VI* 251).[33] Second, viewing his later projects as a species of general metaphysical inquiry avoids unhelpful assumptions that circumscribe its aims, for example, that his ontology is a successor or rival to Heidegger's or Sartre's (compare *MPR* 387). Ontology harks back to phenomenological predecessors and late scholastic or Enlightenment

[28] See also the identification of sedimented content, central to culture, art, and language, with "ideality" and the "invisible" (*LV* 284/*VI* 235).
[29] For relevant discussion see Apostolopoulos, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Language*, 253; 265; 270; 274.
[30] See Saint-Aubert, *Vers une ontologie*, and Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon*. For a recent interpretation centred on the genesis of sense see Morris*, Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*.
[31] See testimony from Merleau-Ponty's candidature for the Collège de France (*PD* 47–48). In Barbaras's estimation, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates an "acknowledged continuity with the spirit of classical metaphysics" (Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon,* xxxii).
[32] See *SnS* 188/*SNS* 94, *SnS* 188n1/*SNS* 94n13. For discussion of these concepts see *LV* 299–300/*VI* 251; see also BnF VI, 11–14; BnF VI 98–99; BnF VI 106. Saint-Aubert observes that 'ontology' becomes a standard moniker from 1957 onwards (*Vers une ontologie,* 167–88).
[33] For an allied interpretation see Haar, *La philosophie française*, 32–33.

traditions, while metaphysics in the more neutral sense is an inquiry into the nature or basic components of reality, which need not invoke the categories of Heideggerian fundamental ontology or Husserlian regional ontology. Third, by maintaining initial definitional neutrality, we can better appreciate why an interpretation of Hegel's absolute is important for Merleau-Ponty's accounts of being, sense, and experience. This concept offers a strategy for defining being and experience fit for reversibility and other commitments of his later thought.

The basic entity that Merleau-Ponty calls 'being' or 'flesh' is unlike traditional terms designating metaphysical fundamentality (substance, cause, first principle, and so on).[34] One definition of flesh, the "universal" (*LV* 185/*VI* 142) "incarnate principle" at the heart of being (*LV* 182/*VI* 139), describes it as "the formative context [*milieu*] of object and subject" (*LV* 191/*VI* 147). Being is prior to both categories. If reversibility is ultimate, then the "structure of being" "is not identity, nor non-identity, or non-coincidence, there is inside and outside [*dedans et dehors*] turning one around another" (*LV* 312/*VI* 264; *LV* 246/*VI* 195). Being is defined by a bidirectional, relational structure. Finally, being is encountered in intentional experience. While perception cannot exhaust its meaning, perceivers enjoy a "prereflective . . . openness upon Being" (*LV* 76/*VI* 52) and a lived, "fundamental relationship with Being" (*LV* 167/*VI* 128; *S* 206/*ST* 163).

Merleau-Ponty is also clear about a basic goal of his later projects: a "relation to Being is needed that would form itself *within Being*" (*LV* 265/*VI* 215; see also *LV* 122/*VI* 90, *LV* 83/*VI* 58; *LV* 313–14/*VI* 266). An account of intentionality (a "relation to") remains a key desideratum. As this text suggests, it will be developed starting from conditions immanent to experience. The claim that experience opens onto or is situated "within Being" hints that this account will rely on extra-subjective conditions.

[34] A succinct statement identifies overcoming of the "ontology of the object" as grounds for rejecting these concepts (*MPR* 388).

Textual evidence shows that Hegel's absolute offered Merleau-Ponty a model for the extrasubjective condition that undergirds the structure of intentionality. The absolute idea is the culmination of Hegel's system. He sometimes likens it to God, or to an ultimate ground of intelligibility.[35] In absolute knowledge, "concept corresponds to object and object to concept" (*PG* §80/*PS* 38–39). Alternatively, absolute knowing realizes a perfect identity between thought and its objects. The absolute is also defined as "the unity of the subjective and the objective idea" (*EL* §236), which has recently been interpreted as an argument in defence of in-principle possibility of ultimate or complete modes of explanation.[36]

Unsurprisingly, Merleau-Ponty rejects theological definitions of the absolute, and resists anthropological interpretations that substitute humanity for God (*LV* 126/*VI* 93). He criticizes the "conciliation" brought by the positively rational or speculative moment, and its systematic implications, as formulated in Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* (*NC* 320; *NC* 313). The quest for absolute knowledge overcomes the open-ended negativity of *Erfahrung*, substitutes "difference" for "identity," and Hegel's transition from phenomenology (experience) to logic (system) flirts with a "violent dogmatism" (*NC* 309; *NC* 317).

Nevertheless, Hegel's absolute offers Merleau-Ponty unexpected philosophical resources, as evidenced by his own revisionary interpretation.[37] He takes Hegel's resistance to epistemological models that separate consciousness from object seriously and endorses his attempt to weaken the distinction between experience and science or philosophy (*PG* §74/*PS*

[35] For theological dimensions in Hegel's account see Tolley, "Hegel's Absolute Idea."
[36] See Kreines, *Reason in the World*.
[37] This reading succeeds a reception-history that defines Hegel's absolute as a mediating, dynamic "synthesis of subject-object relations" (Niel, *De la médiation*, 66–67). For Hyppolite, the absolute is a "concrete identity, unity extended to duality, the being inside [*au-dedans*] of self in the being outside of self, the being outside of self in the being inside of self" (Hyppolite, *Logique et existence*, 127). Fink's phenomenological interpretation also attempts a reconciliation between Hegel and Husserl, describing the absolute as "the *infinite unity of the constant passage of one 'moment' (constitution) into the other (world)*" (Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation,* 146; 141 ff.) and as the "comprehensive unity of *the existent as such and the preexistent* [Vorseiendem] (of *mundane and "transcendental"* being), of *world and world-origin*" (*Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 143). Merleau-Ponty also stresses the absolute's relational character, but locates it in the perceptual field, and rejects Fink's view that the absolute is coextensive with the transcendental onlooker's self-elucidation (*Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 147; 158–59).

36). In Merleau-Ponty's view, *Phänomenologie*'s absolute is not beyond experience but coextensive with and "immanent" to it (*D* 78). It marks the "withering away [*dépérissement*] of the separated absolute" (*NC* 318a). Against Heidegger's interpretation, the absolute is irreducible to the For Itself or In Itself, and is not an independent relatum represented to an all-knowing "*Bewusstsein.*" Instead, it is the "frame" (*la membrure*) of subject and object and (invoking a term used to describe *la chair*) "the context [*le milieu*] of experience" (*NC* 319). On Merleau-Ponty's reading, the absolute is located in the "thickness [*l'épaisseur*] of experience, which encompasses a relativized subject and object" (*NC* 319).

While experience is an intentional "relation to being that is preobjective," it is not constituted by either consciousness or by object alone (*NC* 305). Recall that Merleau-Ponty attempts to articulate a non-subjectivist and non-objectivist view of relational intentionality, which "form[s] itself *within Being*." Emmanuel de Saint-Aubert has argued for the wide-ranging implications of Merleau-Ponty's thinking about relations (as *lien, rapport, empiétement*, *transgression*, and so on) for his development of an "indirect" ontology.[38] In Saint-Aubert's estimation, however, Hegel's absolute does not offer much by way of positive resources for this project.[39] A central limitation concerns the primacy Hegel ostensibly accords to intellect, which "exempts itself" from the dialectical structure of experience and surveys it from a detached epistemological standpoint.[40]

While Merleau-Ponty registers this criticism (*D* 82), he also contends that Hegel offers a more nuanced account of "the dialectical relation [*du lien dialectique*]" (*D* 65).[41] For Hegel, experience is essentially relational (*D* 63). While Merleau-Ponty criticizes Hegel's tendency to subordinate bi-directionality to subjectivity, or to a "philosophy" that "guides"

[38] See Saint-Aubert, *Du lien de êtres*, 313–20.
[39] Saint-Aubert, *Vers une ontologie*, 67–68.
[40] Saint-Aubert, *Vers une ontologie*, 175; 156.
[41] Merleau-Ponty describes dialectical movement using the important technical terms '*transgression intentionnelle*' and '*empiètement*,' both central to his later view of experience (*D* 37).

experience towards speculative "truth," he contends that Hegel's account of *Erfahrung* also sustains a view on which dialectical relations are irreducible to and metaphysically prior to relata (*NC* 307).

A note contemporaneous with *La philosophie dialectique* points to an interpretation of Hegel's "absolute" consistent with "phenomenology" in the post-Husserlian sense, on which the absolute is "the double movement of interiorization and exteriorization so that there is as little of absolute self as there is absolute Being, [and] as little of a subjective absolute as there is an objective absolute" (BnF VI 127/73). Similarly, the dialectic course hints at a "fluidified" interpretation on which "the absolute is interiority [*l'intériorité*] in exteriority [*l'extériorité*]" (*D* 64). In his 1961 seminar, Merleau-Ponty maintains that the absolute, which he thinks Hegel identifies with experience itself, is a

> relation to a being in which we are *begriffen* [grasped], that is, taken or thought [*pensés*]. . . . [Experience] is not *unsere Zutat* [our contribution]*, Sinngebung, für uns* only, since it is the self-movement of preobjective and presubjective content [*l'automouvement du contenu préobjectif et présubjectif*]. For experience is *reine Zusehen* [pure observation], vision, *erscheinende Wissen* [the appearance of knowledge] inside of an outside [*dedans d'un dehors*], "linked" [«*lié*»] inside, and would be nothing of the kind if it were immanence. (*NC* 305; *D* 50)[42]

Key to the speculative gloss in this formidable passage is the view that a relational structure, more fundamental than subject or object, governs the appearance of sense to consciousness. On this reading, experience is something that subjects undergo, but any explanation of its content and form will implicate extra-subjective conditions. By placing the constitutive

[42] Cf. Heidegger's claim that the "inversion" in experience is "our contribution" (GA 5:189). Merleau-Ponty denies that Hegel's account of self-consciousness entails that all shapes of experience are those of consciousness: "La verité n'est donc pas *seulement*: il y a *Selbstbewußtsein* mais aussi il y a *Selbstbewußtsein* apparaissant dans l'autre qu'elle-même et qui n'est qu'en s'y dévoilant" (*NC* 318).

burden on a more basic term, Hegel's approach retains a role for subject- and object-terms while explaining their emergence in a philosophically novel way. While Husserl locates the absolute in the transcendental ego, Merleau-Ponty seeks a non-subjective condition given his worries about the reduction of sense to consciousness (Hua. 6, §26).[43] Properly understood, Husserl's analyses of double-sensations and transcendental-empirical or mind-nature relations in *Ideen* II, which Merleau-Ponty reads as precursors to his own position, point to a "third dimension in which this distinction [viz. between subject and object] becomes problematic" (*S* 205/*ST* 162). Like others who challenge classical formulations of subject-object relations, "Husserl rediscovers that identity of "returning to oneself" and "exiting oneself" that, for Hegel, defined the absolute" (*S* 204/*ST* 161).

Instead of a subject or object, Merleau-Ponty reads Hegel's absolute as a relation irreducible to the terms it individuates.[44] For him, Hegel's absolute is a constitutive condition coextensive with experience. It is not beyond the phenomenal field: experience is shorthand for intentionality, which is a bidirectional, relational structure. Intentionality, then, is phenomenology's absolute. As previous remarks suggest, this bedrock is not identical to the body schema's embodied capacities. For these capacities are only deployed in response to some determinate mode of objects' appearance. The latter, however, does not reflect finite subjective conditions. Perceptual experience needs a third term that mediates between perceivers and things. Accordingly, a double or reversible relation individuates intentional relata. Like the alliance between universal and particular in Hegel, this relation is irreducible

[43] For a "non-metaphysical" interpretation of Husserl's absolute see Zahavi, "Husserl and the Absolute," 83. As Arnold argues, Husserl resists but cannot escape the implication that the absolute is an object, since anything thematized is also objectified (Arnold, "The Object(s) of Phenomenology"). Instead, Husserl's absolute becomes a thematic topic or a non-reified object. Merleau-Ponty recognizes a similar problem but tries to overcome the limits of the category of objecthood through an account of dialectical relations.

[44] Specifically, the claim that the "absolute is subject" (*PG* §23/*PS* 12–13) does not identify the absolute with consciousness: "The true subject is the subjectivity of the subject and the object" (*NC* 304; cf. Hyppolite, *Logique et existence*, 91). Here, 'subjectivity' is shorthand for '*mouvement*,' a relation where "subject becomes object and inversely" (*NC* 304), which allows "the transformation of one into the other" (*NC* 319). See also *NC* 301; *D* 29–30.

to its instances but is only ever grasped in some concrete modality. It is not a constitutive accomplishment of subjectivity or objectivity, but an independent "autoconstitutive" feature of reality that enables sense-making activities (*LV* 126/*VI* 93).

This argument entails a commitment to the primacy of relations over relata (objects or mind). While Merleau-Ponty resists anthropomorphizing, theological, or transcendent interpretations of the absolute, he is indebted to Hegel's reinterpretation of experience, which puts relations front and centre. The dialectical structure of experience effects a "*movement of content*, of experience, . . . of a new ontological context [*milieu*] that is *l'Erscheinung*" (*NC* 306). Intentionality presupposes an immanent, autoconstitutive, and relational ground that is metaphysically fundamental: "dialectic is not the property of consciousness; rather, consciousness is the property of dialectic." This condition, variously named in Merleau-Ponty's later texts, is "a paradox of Being, not a paradox of man" (*LV* 178/*VI* 136).

7. Phenomenology, Metaphysics, and Systematicity

I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Hegel's account of experience helped him overcome what he saw as impasses in *Phénoménologie*'s parsing of intentionality. To conclude, I want to explore broader implications and consider two objections.

(1) Evidence shows that Merleau-Ponty was a more assiduous and original reader of Hegel than many commentators take him to be. While he eschews Hegel's totalizing tendencies, his mid-1950s research leads him to creatively appropriate and deploy Hegelian concepts to reformulate his own accounts of intentionality and experience. His willingness to reimagine links between the phenomenological and metaphysical dimensions of Hegel's thought distinguishes Merleau-Ponty's interpretation from those of his humanist contemporaries like Koyré, Kojève, or Sartre, who stress its spiritual dimensions.

(2) This choice bears upon how we should understand the kind of project Merleau-Ponty pursues in post-*Phénoménologie* research, its metaphysics, and its relation to the transcendental and idealist traditions.

Evidence from earlier writings suggests that Merleau-Ponty accepts Husserl's view that consciousness and world are inseparable, coreferential terms:

> to this open unity of the world, an open and indefinite unity of subjectivity must correspond. (*PhP* 469/*PP* 429)
>
> my existence as subjectivity is identical with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, . . . the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and from this particular world. (*PhP* 470/*PP* 431)
>
> The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject who is nothing but a project of the world; and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world that it itself projects. (*PhP* 493/*PP* 454)

Interpretations of Husserl's universal a priori of correlation, and of Merleau-Ponty's claim that the body is a "project" of the world, are anything but uncontroversial. These formulations, however, clearly aim to modify Husserl's view of subject-world correlation by stressing its embodied, open-ended, or indefinite character. Merleau-Ponty advances the spirit of Husserl's original thesis but denies that "world" gets its "meaning and mode of being" from "subjective *accomplishments*" (Hua. 6: §46, 163), or that it is a "construct" of subjectivity (Hua. 6: §29, 113).

Merleau-Ponty's later view, on which subject-world relations rest on structures of being and not consciousness, does not overturn these commitments. Still, one of its central claims is that the principle underlying consciousness-world relations outstrips a transcendental idealist framework: contra Kant, it is not a formal a priori condition in the mind; contra Husserl, mind-world correlation presupposes an auto-constitutive ground

outside the ego's immediate jurisdiction. Adapting a phrase from Hegel's *Differenzschrift,* this variously named structure of being is a unity of "identity and difference" (*LV* 185/*VI* 142) or "absolute" and "relative" (*NC* 304).[45] A relational structure underlies all modalities of experience, individuates subject- and object-terms, and produces differences (like that between consciousness and object) that are fundamental preconditions for sense and sense-making (see the formative role accorded to the *écart*). Despite retaining some transcendental claims, unlike traditional transcendental approaches, Merleau-Ponty explains subject-world correlation by appealing to a condition more fundamental than (embodied) consciousness.

This view of consciousness-world relations is strikingly similar to an earlier line of argument developed by Schelling and Hegel in response to a challenge raised by Reinhold, namely, that of identifying the principle that grounds transcendental consciousness.[46] This debate proves decisive for the reception of transcendental philosophy, and as Luft argues, it is alive in Husserl, who identifies phenomenology's absolute with transcendental intersubjective constitution.[47] Merleau-Ponty's response can be understood as an alternative to Husserl's, though one that, as I have argued, aims to vindicate its original spirit.

(3) These similarities, however, might seem merely coincidental. The experience-grounding principle that I have argued is central to Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of subject-world relations has also been read as a commitment to a view of "generative passivity" or as evidence of a "developmental" ontology.[48] Defenders of these interpretations argue that Merleau-Ponty from the outset attempts to overcome limitations associated with a classical

[45] Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Hegel's gloss of Schelling but does not favour Schelling's reading of the absolute as "indifference, in the night of identity, as pure in-itself" (*LV* 76/51–52; see also BnF VI, 56).
[46] See Beiser, *German Idealism*, 225–28.
[47] Luft argues that Husserl inherits Reinhold's task of formulating transcendental grounds while adopting Fichte's view that the "authentication" of "objective knowledge claims" is executed by socially-situated subjects (Luft, "Phenomenology as First Philosophy," 128).
[48] See, respectively, Beith, *Birth of Sense* and Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*.

picture of mind-world correlation, and pushes (beyond) the boundaries of transcendental frameworks. But they develop very different explanations of how he does that.

On the first proposal, Merleau-Ponty defends a "genetic and generative" conception of sense, which relies on an "inverse logic" of meaning-formation.[49] While generative passivity has many guises, the process of learning, especially in early human development, is a characteristic example.[50] Learning is the acquisition of new competences from existing resources or abilities. The learning process does not feature direct control by the learner and does not adhere to existing constraints. Rather, learning itself "structures a new field of possibilities" and organically "destabilizes and restructures" the subject who develops new skills. Beith maintains that this model, which features active, spontaneous self-creation, is found throughout Merleau-Ponty's account of sense.

On the second proposal, Merleau-Ponty adopts a view of "sense in being", on which meaning is formed by differences irreducible to positive terms.[51] By analyzing accounts of temporality, nature, institution, and passivity, Morris argues that meaning for Merleau-Ponty is autonomous and self-generating. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature, space, and time models a "self-articulating/transformative structure" that generates meaning by leveraging differences in local conditions, producing a sense that exceeds existing terms or conditions.[52] In articulating a developmental ontology, Merleau-Ponty maintains that things (literally) "make sense *their own way*."[53]

These readings are characteristic of a line of interpretation that emphasizes the importance of relational and immanent conditions for Merleau-Ponty's accounts of experience, being, or world.[54] Both accept that Merleau-Ponty attributes autonomous

[49] Beith, *Birth of Sense,* 15.
[50] Beith, *Birth of Sense,* 12.
[51] Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*, 18–19, 44–50.
[52] Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*, 151.
[53] Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*, 125.
[54] Beith, *Birth of Sense*, 7; Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*, 145–46)

meaning-forming qualities to a condition more fundamental than consciousness, but deny that this might depend on or imply idealistic commitments.[55] Neither makes much of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Hegel. This challenges my genetic account and ostensibly undermines arguments for Hegel's influence. If one can reach similar conclusions using different premises, why favour the proposal I defend?

Merleau-Ponty's encounter with Hegel is by no means the sole significant influence on his (re)formulation of consciousness-world relations. Research into empirical psychology, linguistics, art, language, and his reinterpretation of Husserl's concept of *Stiftung*, are some other noteworthy influences. Insights from these inquiries largely complement arguments developed above.

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's reading of Hegel is arguably a special case. It remains constant throughout his career and consistently supports key argumentative moves that help him pivot to new results.[56] It also prefigures and informs concepts claimed by competing interpretations as prime candidate explanations for his reformulation of consciousness-world relations. Consider two characteristic examples.

(i) Merleau-Ponty contends that intersubjective communication, expression, and literature rely on a non-cognitive, relational logic of meaning-constitution. This model applies to and clarifies myriad contexts of meaning-making. What "we call . . . expression," however, originates in "Hegelian dialectic" (*S* 91/*ST* 73). The self-constituting, meaning-forming qualities central to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of expression, he maintains, are anticipated by Hegel: "dialectic is, Hegel said approximately, *a movement which itself creates its course and returns to itself*— a movement, then, which has no other guide but its

[55] Beith, *Birth of Sense*, 6–8, 55, 88; Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology,* 86–88.
[56] This is especially clear in *Structure, Humanism and Terror*, and *Adventures of the Dialectic*. While it is more muted in *Phénoménologie*, evidence demonstrates Hegel's continuing relevance for understanding intentionality, perception (*PhP* 19/*PP* lxxxi), the phenomenal field (*PhP* 349/*PP* 309–10; *PhP* 358/*PP* 317–18; *PhP* 387/*PP* 345–46; *PhP* 389/*PP* 347), subjectivity, temporality (*PhP* 288/*PP* 250), and freedom (*PhP* 519/*PP* 481).

own initiative." Similar features are present in language acquisition, speech, and literary expression. But the structure of meaning-formation they presuppose was first formulated by Hegel.

(ii) The concept of institution is often identified as an outstanding instance of Merleau-Ponty's effort to rewrite constitution and generate a new ontological conception of sense.[57] When sketching the ontological implications of relevant case studies, he notes that instituted meaning-formation is an instance of "determinate negation" (*IP* 136/*IAP* 182).[58] As it appears in memory, history, culture, or perception, instituted sense presupposes an autonomous, self-constituting structure that organically produces meaning by reordering existing conditions. Institution is ultimately a "revision of Hegelianism" (*IP* 126/*IAP* 79). Insights from the "Institution" and "Passivity" courses presuppose a "dialectical philosophy" (*IP* 199/*IAP* 198), a conclusion repeated in programmatic remarks stating that "dialectical philosophy" in its post-Hegelian vein is the philosophical "foundation" for accounts of institution, activity/passivity, memory, and so on (*RC* 72–73).

This is not conclusive evidence for Hegel's *singular* importance for Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of intentionality, experience, or sense. Nevertheless, that Hegelian themes, concepts, and insights continually resurface in inquiries heralded as exemplars of a novel approach to consciousness-world relations should give us pause. Hegel's distinctive importance stems from his formulation of a highly fecund way of thinking about experience and meaning-formation. To be sure, other thinkers, cases, or concepts exemplify its self-constituting, creative, autonomous, and relational characteristics, and often address dimensions of these qualities that (wrongly) remain suppressed in Hegel. Nevertheless, there

[57] Beith likens "generative passivity" to "institution" (*Birth of Sense*, 111; 39). Morris notes that his account of "disparity-enabling change" is prefigured by the sense-making logic of institution (*Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*, 74–57; 175–76).
[58] Anticipating a later claim that also draws on Hegelian concepts, he notes that sense is "divergence or non-identity" (*IP* 136/*IAP* 137).

is good evidence that Merleau-Ponty sees his own position as a critical successor to Hegel's. Even if they do not always name or recognize their Hegelian origins, later thinkers develop what he describes as outgrowths of Hegelian positions. The syncretic character of Merleau-Ponty's thought undoubtedly opens multiple access points to these and similar insights. Seen in the light above, however, alternative interpretations track characteristics that he attributes, through an idiosyncratic interpretation, to Hegel.

(4) I argued that Merleau-Ponty's nonstandard reading of the absolute is anchored in what he sees as concrete lived conditions, and that his innovative response to the task of formulating first principles embraces core elements of the absolute idealist strategy. However, even if some points of contact with this tradition are granted, the possibility that he could seriously espouse idealist theses is considered untenable by most commentators.[59] He seems to exclude it outright: "Idealism," he claims, "is only another form of objectivism" that "objectifies human representations" (*N* 96; see also *IP* 11/*IAP* 14; *PhP* 9/*PP* lxxii; *PhP* 83/*PP* 56). Why then attribute such a position to him?

Everything hinges on what idealism means. Merleau-Ponty rejects subjective versions of idealism that index the meaning of reality to mind, and absolute versions that posit a cosmic mind in history, nature, or things. Already in his early work, however, he embraces a form of idealism that attributes a subject-independent intelligibility, order, and meaning to the world. Key to this view is a thesis about the meaningful organization of reality is it appears to consciousness.

Structure argues that the perceived form or intentional appearance of objects "constitutes . . . itself" in perception (*SC* 241/*SB* 224). Through a radical reappropriation of Gestalt psychology, and by deploying a modified version of Hegel's account of the idea, he

[59] See Allen, "Merleau-Ponty and Naïve Realism"; Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology,* 86–88; 161; Beith, *Birth of Sense*, 5–6; 88.

argues that objects as they appear to consciousness are self-organizing forms: their meaning does not derive solely from the mind's (or body's) meaning-making activity, but from autonomous meaning-forming processes immanent to objects, nature, and world. An idea inheres in any form: the fabric of reality is constituted by an "idea that proffers itself [*se profère*] and is even formed in the chance of existence" (*SC* 227/*SB* 210; *SC* 241/*SB* 224).

For example, *Structure* defines an "organism" as an "ideal unity" (*SC* 165/*SB* 152). Organisms appear to consciousness as intelligibly organized and self-directing; animal behaviour seems to bear its meaning within itself (*SC* 165/*SB* 152). The sense of life derives from "norm[s]" (*SC* 167/*SB* 154) "immanent to the phenomenal organism" (*SC* 170/*SB* 157). Something similar holds for other intentional objects, and for the phenomenal field.

One of *Structure's* core claims is that the constitutive logic of perceived form originates neither in mental acts nor in material causal processes. Rather, form is a "synthesis of matter and idea" (*SC* 147/*SB* 137), best understood in "its Hegelian meaning", namely, that of a unity-giving and intelligibility-making condition that transcends classical divisions between ideality and materiality (*SC* 227/*SB* 210). Objects take the shapes they do because ideality is immanent to nature and world. Consciousness grasps sense through its intentional activity because it is embedded in an intelligibly ordered world.[60]

So understood, this form of idealism challenges any opposition between mind and matter, affirms the world's subject-independent intelligibility, and locates ideality within the world. It is succinctly captured by Hegel's claim that "idealism" is the thesis that "the finite is ideal", or, that something merely material does not exhaust the real.[61] Objects are constituted by an inner ideal framework, which Hegel calls a concept or universal, that unifies them and makes them what they are: "What philosophy recognizes in the real, the sensuous world, is

[60] See Apostolopoulos, "Nature, Consciousness, and Metaphysics," for an extended defence of this interpretation.
[61] See *EL* §95; Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 21:142–43.

simply the Concept [*Begriff*]" (*PN* §353Z). On this view, the intelligibility of reality is not traceable to our minds. Finite objects or nature are not "idealized . . . merely by us", but are internally defined by their proper structures (*EM* §381Z).

As with other traditions, Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of idealist tenets is eclectic. Despite rejecting the pretensions of absolute spirit, he agrees with Hegel that sensuous objects are intelligible thanks to unobservable conditions, that concrete (visible) and ideal (invisible) conditions are intertwined, and that reality is meaningfully structured. In his later writings the latter position is cashed out as a commitment to the view that meaning emerges from dialectical relations that individuate the fundamental conditions for experience and support subjective sense-making activities.[62] These arguments develop *Structure*'s incipient observations about self-structuring forms by fleshing-out how ideality is immanent in the world. They also transpose the insight that the "relations" constituting objects are "not mechanical, but dialectical" to the very form of intentionality as such (*SC* 174/*SB* 160). Dialectical or reversible relations are elementary to reality, phenomenologically understood. Relations are irreducible to embodied structures and are also invisible or ideal: reversibility sustains perception but is not itself perceived. A sober look at Merleau-Ponty's definitions of being, sense, or flesh reveals his commitment to the claim that appearances owe their sense and form in part to ideal or invisible conditions, that the latter obtain in the world, and that experience takes shape through the confluence of these conditions.[63]

Given these significant similarities, what explains the widespread rejection of Merleau-Ponty's proximity to the idealist tradition? The answer lies in the going definition of idealism. For most commentators, idealism is the view that meaning inheres in mind,

[62] For this theme see Bannon, "Flesh and Nature," and Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology,* Chapter 4.
[63] See claims that being is "negativity" (*LV* 195/*VI* 151) and that an "idea" is the "lining" of the "sensible" (*LV* 193/*VI* 149).

specifically, in the "meaning-constituting activity of consciousness."[64] On a standard interpretation, Merleau-Ponty overcomes *Phénoménologie*'s "idealistic" bent by embracing an "ontological" project that breaks with subjectivism and psychologism, and whose premises "[hold] good for every possible being."[65] His ontology "fulfils" *Phénoménologie*'s intentions and "completes" Husserl's project of a description of the *Lebenswelt*, but definitively breaks from all forms of "idealism" and occupies novel ground compared to the metaphysics of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and his phenomenological predecessors.[66]

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological appropriation of Hegel shows that his attitude to idealism cannot be as uniform as this interpretation requires. The version of idealism just identified refer only to a subjective variety. However, Merleau-Ponty's reading of the absolute resists subjectivism and speculative constructions, but puts its own twist on a position defended by Hegel (and Schelling, though his formulation is not decisive): that the lived reciprocity between consciousness and object presupposes a more fundamental condition, irreducible to either term. In Merleau-Ponty's hands, this claim gets reinterpreted as the basic condition of intentionality. If consciousness-world relations are as descriptions of reversibility suggest, then the attempt to overcome *Phénoménologie*'s limitations requires a commitment to the metaphysical primacy of relations over relata. Merleau-Ponty's revisionist interpretation of this thesis reveals significant debts to Hegel's idealism.

In defending Merleau-Ponty's opposition to idealism *tout court*, interpreters typically presuppose a narrow conception of idealism. This is unfortunate, not only because a non-subjective version of idealism is available to and adopted by him, but also because many commentators unwittingly embrace some of its supporting tenets. Barbaras, for example, accepts that "Being is synonymous with invisibility. [. . .] Invisibility is the very condition of

[64] Beith, *Birth of Sense*, 88; see also Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*, 86–88 and Smith, *Problem*, 273–74n6.
[65] Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon,* 40, xxi.
[66] Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon,* 76–77 and 16, 316.

vision."[67] Beith invokes "a concept of passivity deeper than the levels of passive synthesis in sensibility."[68] Morris defends a conception of "sense" that rests on "a concrete non-givenness through which being hollows out sense-norms from within."[69] These commentators resist all links to idealism, and while they are unlikely to endorse the position I defend, the differences become far less stark if the relevant version of idealism, and basic continuities between invisibility and ideality, are taken into account. This paper proposes an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's conception of ideality that does not succumb to the subjective-idealist pitfalls he avoids. But it does so by showing that he endorses a different set of idealist commitments. More care is needed to distinguish versions of idealism that he accepts from those he rejects.

(5) Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Hegel also leads him to draw significant conclusions about phenomenology's methodology and systematicity. In his view, Hegel grapples with a challenge that phenomenology confronts: how to resist a "disjunction from the order of phenomena" (*NC* 320). When formulated in philosophical language, lived meaning easily "returns to identity, [and] speculation separates itself from dialectic" (*NC* 320; *LV* 125/*VI* 92–93). Despite its limitations, Hegel's dialectical method offers fruitful resources for maintaining the "link between philosophy and experience" and for resisting the subordination of experience to the theoretical sphere (*NC* 320). This is even seen as a distinctively Hegelian achievement: "the very dimension of the absolute is to conceive [*concevoir*] [of experience] unlike the way philosophy has done until now" (*NC* 304). Somewhat controversially, Merleau-Ponty suggests that Hegel's dialectical methodology, "the content in itself, *the dialectic which it possesses within itself*, [and] which moves the

[67] Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon*, 318; see also 237–38
[68] Beith, *Birth of Sense*, 15.
[69] Morris, *Merleau-Ponty's Developmental Ontology*, 125

subject matter forward", can be excised from its systematizing trajectory.[70] While Hegel sometimes undermines this delicate balance, he plants the seeds of a philosophical method that does not control the givenness of phenomena. Hegel's science of experience does not foreground experience with fixed categories or criteria that get ahead of the phenomena. Its immanent descriptions retain minimal theoretical assumptions, allowing categories to be revised. For Merleau-Ponty, to describe experience as Hegel does, or "to reach the absolute is nothing less than to completely unfold [*déchiffrer*] *l'Erscheinung* [appearance]–Absolute knowledge proves itself to be absolute only by manifesting itself and by being born in phenomena" (*NC* 285).

While Merleau-Ponty's later writings only hint at this strategy, basic affinities with Hegel are clear. Like Hegel's *Erfahrung* account, or the beginning of *Science of Logic,* "We cannot know in advance what our interrogation and method itself will be" (*LV* 208/*VI* 158). While this remark was subsequently eliminated from the manuscript, protracted attention to interrogation, reflection, philosophical language, and concept-formation suggests that subsequent research would take this approach. *Le visible* initially makes minimal conceptual commitments and proposes to detail sense as it appears. It observes a symmetry between perceptual and theoretical intentional modalities. Phenomena are partially intended and progressively clarified; similar conditions constrain phenomenological description. Professions of explanatory "circularity" suggest that results from analyses of subjectivity, embodiment, or expression would be renewed "several times" in a theoretical "reversal" analogous to those of first-order experience (*LV* 229–31/*VI* 177–79). This "is not," Merleau-Ponty claims, a return to transcendental "conditions of possibility", but a method of immanent description without systematic terminus (*LV* 229/*VI* 177). An "incorporation of the

[70] Hegel, *Science of Logic,* 21.38/33. For an interpretation compatible with this argument see Houlgate, *Criticism of Metaphysics*, 123–32, 179–80.

seer into the visible" (*LV* 171n/*VI* 131n) maintains an "autocritical" attitude that continually re-examines categories and concepts (*LV* 124/*VI* 92).

This non-systematizing approach to phenomenological methodology is designed to be consistent with the form of intentionality and the condition underlying it. Being is "at a distance [*à distance*], . . . latent or dissimulated" and intentionality blocks any putative identity between consciousness and object (*LV* 135/*VI* 101).[71] Somewhat unexpectedly, by denying that the structure of appearances is explained by subjective conditions alone, this interpretation furthers Husserl's anti-psychologistic and anti-anthropological arguments, while advancing a new account of intentionality, phenomenology's principal theme. In Merleau-Ponty's view, the links between philosophy and experience (or non-philosophy) are best pursued through a synthesis of Husserlian and Hegelian tenets.[72] This project assumes a definition of "phenomenology" as the "mind's self-presentation, an appearance that is not an effect of the absolute but the absolute itself" (*NC* 282).[73]

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[71] See claims that "every being presents itself at a distance" (*LV* 167/*VI* 127), that the sensible is "*being at a distance*" (*S* 212/*ST* 167), and that Hegel's "absolute" is "at a distance" (*D* 52).

[72] For the Husserl-Hegel link see "Phenomenology and Sciences of Man" in *Primary of Perception* and "The Philosopher and his Shadow" in *Signs*; see also *NC* 306, and claims that Hegel's double relation anticipates the "chiasm" (*NC* 286) and "intertwining of subject and object" (*NC* 292).

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