Merleau-Ponty in Praise of Philosophy

Kelly Dean Jolley—Auburn University

October 9, 2012

> ...[P]hilosophers have arrived at a definition of philosophy as the interrogation of its very own meaning and possibility. "What I seek under the name of philosophy," writes Husserl, "as the goal and the field of my labor, I know naturally. And yet I do not know it. Has this 'knowledge' ever been sufficient for any true thinker? Has philosophy ever ceased to be a riddle to him in his life as a philosopher?" –But this problem, this astonishment before one's self, and the unhabituated and unhabitual vision which is its result, are precisely philosophy... –Merleau-Ponty, "Philosophy as Interrogation"
>
> What he expresses cannot, therefore, be the translation of a clearly defined thought, since such clear thoughts are those that have already been said within ourselves or by others. "Conception" cannot precede "execution". Before expression, there is nothing but a vague fever, and only the work itself, completed and understood, will prove there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be found there. –Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt"
>
> Nothing of important can really be said simply–simply and safely; and by 'safely' I mean so as to ensure that the whole intuited apprehension striving to find itself, to discover what it is in words, is duly served, and not thwarted. It takes a context, often a subtly and potently creative one, to do that. –F. R. Leavis
>
> But the soul of each manifestly thirsts for, from the other, something which there are no words to describe, and divines that which it seeks, and traces obscurely the footsteps of its obscure desire. –Aristophanes, Plato's *Symposium*

1 Introduction

I find that I am always educating myself in front of others. There is, I suppose, an effrontery in this: I admit I feel ashamed somewhat in so doing. And I realize you may wonder what I take myself to be doing, since, "Surely," you might mutter, "he ought to tell us something he knows or takes himself to know, something he has learnt, not something he is learning". But I confess I understand philosophy to be a matter of educating oneself, of coming into knowledge, and not a matter of having knowledge that is then simply or complicatedly imparted. At least since Socrates, philosophy has countenanced a distinction between loving wisdom and being wise, and has chosen the first as the better part, or at least as its, as philosophy's, part. A philosopher is someone who is crucially concerned with his own becoming—and in particular with his own becoming-a-knower. Thus is ignorance always internal to philosophy, and the recognition of his own inner disorder internal to any philosopher's sense of himself as a philosopher. I

write this out of my own inner disorder, my own ignorance of what to say about philosophy. —Can I speak for philosophy?

When I was asked to give this talk, I was asked to present "something that's accessible and 'life-relevant' to...majors and would-be majors", not an easy assignment. My thoughts turned to those pieces of philosophy that seem to me to have "life-relevance"—and I interpret "life-relevance" to mean *protreptic*, exhorting the reader or hearer to live the life of philosophy. What came to mind immediately was Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "In Praise of Philosophy", a short text that has long held a place in my own thoughts; and a text that I have used, in excerpted form, in a variety of classes, sometimes on Phenomenology, sometimes on the work of Stanley Cavell. But like any genuine piece of philosophy, even though it is addressed to an audience of philosophers and non-philosophers, approaching it is uneasy—in the sense that the piece makes certain fairly stern demands on its audience's understanding and in the sense that those demands, once understood, are unsettling. That said, I want to make an approach to the piece, to try to understand Merleau-Ponty's praise of philosophy and to come to terms, at least in small part, with that understanding.

Perhaps the place to begin is with a terminological comment. What Merleau-Ponty ultimately has in mind to praise is philosophy as a way of living, a kind of life. He is not excluding from that a concern with the writing of philosophy or even with writing decked out in stern formalisms or abstruse vocabulary. Nonetheless, when, late in the essay, Merleau-Ponty turns to describing what he calls "the total function" of the philosopher, he turns to Socrates, and so to someone who, Merleau-Ponty underscores, wrote nothing at all. You may think of this as manifesting Merleau-Ponty's existentialism, his concern with the concrete person and the *in situ* life of the philosopher, and not just with his writing. You may think of it that way. But to do so would be to miss what I will call the existentialism of Socrates. And it is to miss more importantly the way in which Socrates, while not a writer of philosophy, is not exactly a non-writer of it. For Merleau-Ponty, Socrates' lived life does not contrast in that sense with a life of writing. No, for Merleau-Ponty, a philosophical life is, must be, expressive. Socrates' certainly was. So instead of contrasting Socrates the non-writer with a writing philosopher, and so contrasting an inexpressive philosopher with an expressive one, Merleau-Ponty is contrasting Socrates' lived expression of philosophy with written expressions of philosophy, and so is contrasting one mode of philosophical expressiveness with another. Socrates' life speaks: Merleau-Ponty would help us to listen to what it says.

That takes me a bit ahead of my story, however. So let me start again. Merleau-Ponty's lecture—for lecture it was, given as his Inaugural Lecture when he took the chair of philosophy at the College de France in mid-January, 1953—his lecture begins by isolating strains in the philosophizing of his immediate predecessors in the chair, Lavelle and Bergson. He finds in their work adumbrations of themes that are important in his own, particularly in Lavelle's understanding of our relationship to the world, and in Bergson's of intuition and expression. He uses an incident in the life of Bergson to shed light on what he take to be the way in which a philosopher participates, as an actor,

in real events. He segues from that incident into a discussion of his greatest (unchaired) predecessor, Socrates, whose life he sees as showing over and over the same structure of involvement in real events that the incident in Bergson's foretells. In the discussion of Socrates, he elucidates the total function of the philosopher. That elucidation allows him to have his final say on philosophy.

So here is what I will do. I will begin by discussing our relationship to the world, then discuss intuition and expression–really the central topic of my lecture because the central topic of Merleau-Ponty's. I will describe the incident in the life of Bergson and Merleau-Ponty's understanding of it. I will then turn to Socrates and to the total function of the philosopher. There will be various issues and difficulties along the way, some perhaps of more importance than the topic in the addressing of which they arise: we will need to wrestle with the relationship between knowledge and ignorance in philosophy, between good and bad ambiguity; we will need to get a hold on the relationship between the philosopher, the truth, and others; we will need to try to pin down Socratic irony. Finally, we will need to grasp the relationship between the philosopher and the non-philosopher. I warn you that the discussion has the shape of a length of old rope, frayed on this end, but more tightly braided on that end, at the end.

2 The World, Intuition, and Expression

As he begins his discussion of Lavelle, Merleau-Ponty states what he takes to be the definitive trait of the philosopher.

> The philosopher is marked by the distinguishing trait the he possesses inseparably the taste for evidence and the feeling for ambiguity. When he limits himself to accepting ambiguity, it is called equivocation. But among the great it becomes a theme; it contributes to establishing certainties rather than menacing them. Therefore it is necessary to distinguish good and bad ambiguity.

I want to linger over this. The philosopher's distinguishing trait is that he possesses inseparably the taste for evidence and the feeling for ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty stresses 'inseparably'. Why? Presumably because these are two things normally possessed separately; or, better, these are two things normally operable in us in separation. We may all have both the taste and the feeling, but we do not indulge the taste and have the feeling at the same time and about the same objects. But the philosopher does. The taste and the feeling are yoked together, working toward the same end. That is an accomplishment. Consider, for just a moment, the famous image of the soul as chariot in Plato's *Phaedrus*. One horse in the chariot is black, one white; the black pulls downward, the white upward. But in the best soul, the waywardness of the black horse is brought under control; the black horse becomes docile. Only then can the charioteer drive the chariot. Now, while Merleau-Ponty is not moralizing about the taste and the feeling, neither is black or white, it is clear that the thinks of them

as typically separate because they tend in different directions, or to eclipse one another. Keeping them both in play, engaged with the same object, and in such a way that neither eclipses the other, is hard work. But it is the hard work of the philosopher. Notice that Merleau-Ponty also issues a warning. If a philosopher limits himself simply to accepting ambiguity, he equivocates. And so, to avoid equivocation, ambiguity is not to be accepted, but rather problematized. Presumably, it is problematized, at least to some degree, by being coupled with the taste for evidence, since that taste will inhibit the simple acceptance of ambiguity. But the problematizing is also the result of the resolutely distinguishing between good and bad ambiguity, of being challenged by the first while seeking to eliminate the second. While Merleau-Ponty says little explicitly to help with this distinction, I take his comment—about ambiguity that contributes to establishing certainties—to be implicit help. Good ambiguity is ambiguity that leads the philosopher on, the sense he has, among other things, that his cup runs over, that there is always a teeming margin of the real beyond the lines of his thinking. Gabriel Marcel puts the same idea, or a similar one, like this:

> . . . I am convinced that I can be creative as a philosopher only for so long as my experience still contains unexploited and unchartered zones.

Good ambiguity leads the philosopher on, but also confronts him with his limitations qua philosopher. His taste for evidence, rightly indulged, results in knowledge. His feel for good ambiguity results in acknowledged ignorance. Merleau-Ponty continues:

> Even those who have desired to work out a complete positive philosophy have been philosophers only to the extent that, at the same time, they have refused the right to install themselves in absolute knowledge. They taught not this knowledge, but its becoming in us, not the absolute but, at most, our absolute relation to it, as Kierkegaard said. What makes a man a philosopher is the movement which leads back without ceasing from knowledge to ignorance, from ignorance to knowledge, and a kind of rest in this movement.

To be a philosopher is never to be such that the taste for evidence finally eclipses the feeling for ambiguity.[1] It is true that there is a demand, a relentless demand, in philosophizing; and, it is true that the demand relates to knowledge. But the relentless demand is for the philosopher always and everywhere to remain

[1] What philosopher, other than Merleau-Ponty himself, is a reasonably clear example of an inseparable taste for evidence and a feeling for ambiguity? One answer is: Wittgenstein. I believe we see the union of the taste and the feeling across the length of his later work (in fact, we might understand the primary differences between the so-called earlier and later work as the results of the strengthening of Wittgenstein's feeling for ambiguity, and of its becoming inseparable from his taste for evidence). One quick, exemplary quotation: "What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words." PI, p. 227. I note that I also consider Ralph Waldo Emerson and Stanley Cavell as each an example of such a philosopher—the philosopher who will below be called "a philosopher of expression".

in relation to the absolute, not to install himself in it. The taste for evidence and the feeling for ambiguity, when inseparable, create movement from the pillar of knowledge to the post of ignorance and back again, and back again. The movement expresses the refusal of the absolute and the acceptance of an absolute relationship to it. But even though the movement is relentless, is is also, for the philosopher, restful—the philosopher finds a kind of rest in the movement. What does this mean? It means that there is no rest at pillar or at post, at knowledge or at ignorance. Philosophy is not simply a form of knowledge. Philosophy is not simply a form of ignorance. Philosophy is, to borrow a phrase from Nicholas of Cusa, a learned ignorance[2], or, if you will, a knowing ignorance.

It is easy at this point to comment: "Oh! I get it. All Merleau-Ponty is saying is that philosophers are not dogmatic." But, no. That is not all that he is saying. He is saying something stronger, something harder to explain. Nicholas of Cusa, just mentioned, titles the opening section of his book, On Learned Ignorance, "How it is that knowing is not-knowing". I do not want to descend to the details of his answer, a worthy pursuit for another day, but I do want to hold onto his section title, since it, taken interrogatively, pinpoints the difficulty of what Merleau-Ponty is saying. Merleau-Ponty thinks that a philosopher's knowledge is internally related to his ignorance. It is not just that a philosopher knows some things and is ignorant of some things and acknowledges that such is the case. What the philosopher knows is figure on the ground of his ignorance. And while he may, over time, turn some of what was ground into figure, the relationship of figure and ground always remains. What we know as philosophers we know only against the backdrop of our ignorance. Absolute knowledge would be knowledge that did not appear against any backdrop of ignorance.

I want to slow here for a moment. As some of you may know, other than by phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty is deeply influenced by Gestalt Psychology. We do not have time to measure the depth of that influence or fully to explain it, but I do want to mention the role I take it to play in the remarks I just made about knowledge and ignorance. Merleau-Ponty takes human perception to be always perspectival, always structured by figure/ground. Indeed, I believe he takes all of human experience to be so structured, perception, intellection, desire, will. So what we know, what we have thematized or rendered explicit, stands out on a background of what is not known, unthematized, implicit. For Merleau-

[2]"Both the precise combinations in corporeal things and the congruent relating of known to unknown surpass human reason to such an extent that Socrates seemed to himself to know nothing except that he did not know. And the very wise Solomon maintained that all things are difficult and unexplainable in words. And a certain other man of divine spirit says that wisdom and the seat of understanding are hidden from the eyes of all the living. Even the very profound Aristotle, in his First Philosophy, asserts that in things most obvious by nature such difficulty occurs for us as for a night owl which is trying to look at the sun. Therefore, if the foregoing points are true, then since the desire in us is not in vain, assuredly we desire to know that we do not know. If we can fully attain unto this [knowledge of our ignorance], we will attain unto learned ignorance. For a man-even one very well versed in learning-will attain unto nothing more perfect than to be found to be most learned in the ignorance which is distinctively his. The more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be." Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*

Ponty, the philosopher's knowledge includes, in some sense, this background of ignorance. As a result, the philosopher knows that what he knows he knows ignorantly: what he knows is always vulnerable to dialectical re-appropriation, to subordination to new premises (think of what we might call the Ramsey Maximizing of what is known), to aspectual shifts, to changes in importance or relevance, or enclosed within a new and undreamt of circle.[3] This does not mean that what is known is not really known, as if it were rather a mere belief, or a dogmatic (subjective) certainty. It means that what is known is known in the midst of the unknown, in the midst of ignorance, and that that cannot, for the philosopher, ever be forgotten. But it also should never be deplored: it is not an imperfection of our knowledge, it is what knowledge is. In a remarkable passage, Merleau-Ponty claims that God himself knows perspectivally. —Now, to be fair, Merleau-Ponty often says something else about God, namely that he knows non-perspectivally, that he enjoys the view from nowhere. Nonetheless, I want to note the more striking claim, because it seems to me to reveal something of the depth of Merleau-Ponty's commitment to perspective. But I need to quicken my pace again. First, a little on Lavelle.

Merleau-Ponty plunders Lavelle for the claim that the relationship between ourselves and the world is reciprocal. Merleau-Ponty reads Lavelle as ultimately arguing that there is a way in which the world needs me and I need the world. This need is not biological, but philosophical. The world does not just exist, just as such, over and above me, supremely indifferent to what and indeed to whether I am. But then again, neither do I just exist, just as such, over and above the world, supremely indifferent to what and indeed to whether it is. The world is not transcendentally real; I am no Cartesian ego. As Lavelle understands things, the world and I are passible partners in an activity which ideally perfects both the world and my consciousness of it. We step out together; we date each other.[4] Obviously, there is much here that may be nervous-making.[5]However, I

[3]"Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens." Emerson, "Circles".

[4]A characteristic passage from Lavelle (from his *Of the Act*):

> There is no longer any [question of a] world that might be posited [as primary] and that would produce within us the picture we have of it through a kind of action upon our consciousness.4 [Rather,] it is by inscribing ourselves in the total being through an act [of our own] that we give birth to a world which always surpasses our current representation (as realism rightly maintains) but which [exists] only by way of this representation (as idealism brings to light) and which we always strive to equal through an activity that ever remains unequal to it.

[5]Here is Merleau-Ponty, addressing his reasons indulging in such nervous-making claims:

> Nothing is more foreign to perception therefore than the idea of a universe which would produce in us representations which are distinct from it by means of a causal action. To speak Kantian language, the realism of naïve consciousness is an empirical realism—the assurance of an external experience in which there is no doubt about escaping 'states of consciousness' and acceding to solid objects—and not a transcendental realism which, as a philosophical thesis, would posit these objects as the ungraspable causes of 'representations' which alone are given.

have quickened my pace and will for now keep moving apace. On to Bergson.

The plunder from Lavelle plays a crucial role in what Merleau-Ponty does with Bergson on intuition. To understand what he does, it will help to consider the following passage from James Collins, in one of the few English-language articles on Lavelle. Collins is describing Lavelle's conception of the given:

> The given is primarily a challenge which evokes a response, and which overflows more than limits the act of thought. There is an unsuspected fertility about the given: it is intensely charged with surplus. Instead of being exhaustively comprehended by an act of human intellect, it reveals hidden reserves which beckon the mind to further conquests.

This passage, I should note, sheds light back on Merleau-Ponty's comments about the taste for evidence and the feel for ambiguity, for the object of the two is what the philosopher intuits, the given. —But now consider the passage in relation to what Merleau-Ponty says of Bergson:

> Perhaps Bergson began by understanding philosophy as a simple return to what is given, but later on he saw that this secondary, laborious, rediscovered naiveté does not merge with a previous reality, does not identify us with the thing itself, without any point of view, without symbol, without perspective. Formulas like "sounding", "auscultation", "palpitation", which are better, make it sufficiently clear that intuition needs to be understood, that it is necessary for me to appropriate to myself a meaning in it which is still

---

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of these issues can be treated as broadly Kantian. One way of understanding Merleau-Ponty's willingness to side with Kant's transcendental idealism/empirical realism is this: Merleau-Ponty sees that Kant's best thought here is that choosing the transcendental idealist/empirical realist side of the issue is a way of earning the right to treat experience as openness to the world—and it is such treatment of experience above all that Merleau-Ponty wants to earn the right to. Choosing the transcendental realist/empirical idealist side of the issue is a way of losing experience as openness to the world, and instead of treating it as a form of closed causal transactions with the world (closed by the given representations, beyond which, to solid objects, experience cannot reach). It may help further to see that, again on Kant's best thinking, choosing the transcendental idealist/empirical realist side of the issue is a way of treating experience ultimately first-personally. To choose the other side would be to treat experience ultimately third-personally. The distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves is a different distinction, functions differently, first-personally than it does third-personally. Merleau-Ponty's treatment of experience is resolutely first-personal. –I will add that I believe Merleau-Ponty (for his purposes) would charge the standard interpretation of the transcendental idealist/empirical realist//transcendental realist/empirical idealist distinction with flat-footedness. The distinction is not adequately represented only by shifting 'idealist' and 'realist' around the stationary 'transcendental' and 'empirical', but requires also a shift of emphasis: transcendental idealist/*empirical realist*//*transcendental realist*/empirical idealist. For Merleau-Ponty the distinction has a greater logical multiplicity than the standard interpretation allows. (The change in emphasis marks a shift in primary desideratum.)

> captive. What precisely is intuitive in intuition? Bergson admits that most of the time it is present to the philosopher only in the form of a certain "power of negation" that excludes theses which are insufficient.

I will call this conception of the given the negative conception. Arguably, the positive conception of the given is the one presented as Bergson's past view, and it is familiar from the work of Wilfred Sellars and John McDowell, for each of whom it is philosophical prey. The positive conception is one that allows the given somehow to function as a premise in inferences. The negative conception is one that allows for the given somehow to function as a touchstone of theses. This negative conception of given, and its complementary negative conception of intuition, is crucially importance for Merleau-Ponty. The intuition of the given is full, charged with surplus. It reveals hidden reserves which beckon the mind on. The intuition of the given is a challenge.

But to what it is a challenge? Merleau-Ponty finds the answer again in Bergson, but it was already in view in Lavelle. The intuition of the given is a challenge to expression; the response it provokes is expressive. And Lavelle understands expression not as the faithful image of an already realized interior being, but as the very means by which it is realized. Continuing to explain Bergson's view of the intuition of the given, Merleau-Ponty asks,

> Should we suppose a positive and already made view which underlies these negative appearances and sustains them? This would be to give way to the retrospective illusion...The global view which he calls intuition orients the whole effort of the philosopher, but it does not contain it in abridged form...We would be wrong in believing, though Bergson said so, that the philosopher speaks all his life *for want of* being able to say this "infinitely simple thing" forever concentrated "in a single point" of himself. He also speaks *to say it*, precisely because it demands to be said, because it has not been achieved before it has been said. It is perfectly true that each philosopher, each painter, considers what the others call his work as the simple rough sketch of a work which still remains to be done. This does not prove that this work exists somewhere within themselves and they have only to lift a veil to reach it.
>
> The secret and the center of a philosophy does not lie in a pre-natal inspiration, but...it develops as the work progresses, ...it is a becoming-meaning, which builds itself in accord with itself and in reaction against itself, ...a philosophy is necessarily a (philosophical) history, an exchange between problems and solutions in which each partial solution transforms the initial problem in such wise that the meaning of the whole does not pre-exist it, except as a style pre-exists its works, and seems, after the fact, to announce them...[W]e can say in general of philosophical intuition [that] [i]t is proper to intuition to call forth a development, to become what it is, because

> it contains a double reference to the mute being which it interrogates, and to the tractable meaning which is derived from it. It is the experience of their concordance; it is, as Bergson happily said, a reading, the art of grasping a meaning in a style before it has been put into concepts.[6]

I quote here at length so that the hang of Merleau-Ponty's thinking about intuition can become clearer. I cannot comment on all that I have quoted. What I want to comment on is this developing theme of intuition as calling for development, as calling for expression. For Merleau-Ponty, there is, we might say, a moment of obligation in intuition, a call that intuition makes to us and on us to express it, to speak. But that to which we give expression comes to be what it is in expression, so that there is no way of treating what I express as predating its expression, even if I find myself moved to expression by my intuition. We could borrow phraseology from Emerson here, and say that expression is the tuition of intuition. The philosopher struggles to read his intuition, and to read it, as it were, aloud. This activity is funded at bottom not by any self-will on the part of the philosopher, but rather by the demands made by intuition itself. Spontaneity is somehow on the side of intuition, receptivity, or an answering spontaneity, on the side of the philosopher.

Let me reach back for one other notion from the long quotation. Merleau-Ponty implicitly compares what the philosopher does with what a painter does. I want to consider this, since it will also help to make this clearer. Imagine a painter who is painting a picture, but not painting by making use of any (animate or inanimate) model or photograph. Imagine further that if we ask him what he is painting, he is, if not wholly inarticulate, still plainly tongue-tied. "I don't know, exactly. I have this, well, vision, and I want to capture it on the canvas." You respond to him by saying, "Well, then it is just a matter of allowing your vision to guide your painting, as you might allow a model or photograph to do so." At this point, he becomes peevish. "Look, you don't understand. It is true that I have a vision I am trying to paint. But my seeing of that vision, if you will allow me to put it this way, is my painting the vision. The vision is not surveyable by the eye of my mind ahead of its becoming surveyable by my fleshly eyes. I paint in order to see what I, well, see. The painting realizes my

[6]Since I mentioned McDowell and Sellars earlier, and since Merleau-Ponty's mention of concepts here makes the issue more or less unavoidable, let me note that I judge treating Merleau-Ponty as an advocate of non-conceptual content, as that has been understood in debates between McDowell and Peacocke, and McDowell and Dreyfus, to be a mistake. I would rather say, although I hate to intrude a new term into what is already a debate abuzz with terms, that Merleau-Ponty is an advocate of fore-conceptual content, of content that, while non-conceptual, is to be realized as conceptual content, is destined to be conceptual content (even if its destiny is interfered with or unachieved). This fore-conceptual content is not, as non-conceptual content in the standard debate is, such as to resist conceptualization, or unconceptualizable. One other feature worth noting is that in the standard debate, non-conceptual content is taken to be determinate content, but not conceptually determinate content. But for Merleau-Ponty, the content that is non-conceptual is not only not conceptually determinate, but rather radically indeterminate. It is unclear whether there is any dimension of assessment on which the content is determinate.

vision. Until I have painted it, my vision is not an achieved vision. You might call my vision a challenge to paint."

Now, switch for a moment from imagination to memory. Recall some moment in your past when you underwent an experience that made a tremendous impression on you. Perhaps the experience was joyous, perhaps grievous, perhaps neither—but it needs to have mattered to you. Now recall attempts you might have made to express the meaning of the experience, to say why it mattered so to you. My guess is that you will find that at the time—and still—you feel a gap between the experience and your attempted expressions. That is, you felt—and still feel—that the experience has meaning that outstripped your expression of its meaning. But—and here is the especially tricky part—it is crucial to see that the meaning of the experience, although undeniably there, there in the experience, does not announce itself, otherwise there would be no real difficulty in expressing it. By means of the experience you have grasped a meaning, but that meaning demands that you express it; it does not give expression to itself. In that sense, the meaning is not an achieved meaning. And yet, and curiously—and as again I believe you will remember—even though the meaning you grasp in the experience is not an achieved meaning, you can nonetheless employ it so as to reject specific attempts to express the meaning as failures to do so. "What was so important was... What made such an impression on me was... No, neither of those is quite right. Let me try again."

Make one final switch, back from memory to imagination, but this time to writing, not to painting. Here is a line from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*:

> The book of unknown signs within me (signs in relief it seemed, for my attention, as it explored my unconscious in its search, struck against them, circled round them like a diver sounding) no one could help me read by any rule, for its reading consists in an act of creation...[7]

The struggle of Proust's narrator, the lack of rules of guide him, the strangeness of a reading that is an act of creation, all these underscore the difficulty of expressing intuition. So what is the difference between these examples and what the philosopher does? Not too much. The difference, if and when there is one, is primarily one of degree, not of kind. The philosopher (at least as opposed to the non-painting, non-literary non-philosopher) is more sensitive to the call of intuition, more obedient to the demands it makes on him: he hears the call and responds, struggles toward expression. Most of us mostly give up struggling for expression, even when we hear the call, and most of us mostly do not listen to it.

[7] Merleau-Ponty quotes this line in *Themes from the Lectures*, p. 26.

3 The Philosopher, the Truth, and Others: Bergson's Non-Conversion

In 1937, Bergson testified that he had, on all fundamental points, come closer and closer to Catholicism. Even so, he refused to convert, to be baptized, and he refused until death. He died unbaptized, outside Catholicism. But why? Here is what Bergson said: "I would have been converted if I had not seen for many years the beginnings of the fearsome wave of antisemitism which was about to break out in the world. I have wished to remain among those who tomorrow will be the persecuted." Bergson would not sacrifice his ties to his fellow Jews.

Merleau-Ponty takes this to pose a problem. Why would Bergson not convert if he did basically accept the fundamental points of Catholicism? Why would his ties to his fellow Jews hinder him from being baptized? Merleau-Ponty understands Bergson's refusal to be converted as showing how Bergson understood the philosopher's relationship to the truth. To see what this means, we need to recur for a moment to the notion of expression. Merleau-Ponty claims that expression presupposes three conditions: (1) someone who expresses; (2) a truth which he expresses; and, (3) others before whom he expresses himself. Further, any philosophy of expression, like Merleau-Ponty's, postulates that it is possible simultaneously to satisfy all three of the conditions. Merleau-Ponty then notes that for a philosophy of expression, "Philosophy cannot be a tete-a-tete of the philosopher with the true. It cannot be a judgement given from on high on life, the world, history, as if philosophy was not part of it–nor can it subordinate the internally recognized truth to any exterior instance of it. It must go beyond this alternative." Bergson went beyond this alternative.

Perhaps the best way to understand this is to note that Merleau-Ponty thinks that the danger of philosophizing is the danger of idolizing one or another of the conditions of philosophy. When we do this, we give that condition sway over the other two, make ourselves answerable only to it. The obvious danger for most philosophers is idolizing the truth. So long as we are answerable to it, we might say, we need not be answerable to ourselves or to others. It is all-too-easy to turn philosophy into a tete-a tete with the truth, everything else be hanged. But Merleau-Ponty rates that as fraudulent, as abandoning the truth by abandoning our proper relationship to it as philosophers. Bergson's non-conversion illustrates this. Bergson was not willing to cut his ties to others, to break off his human relationships with life and history, simply for the sake of the truth. This does not mean that the truth did not matter to Bergson, but rather that it mattered in the right way. As Merleau-Ponty memorably and movingly puts the point, "Our relationship to the true passes through others. Either we go towards the true with them, or it is not towards the true that we are going." The truth should not be idolized, and not at the expense of others. But neither should others be idolized: we are not necessarily going towards the true simply because we are going with others. Of course, you might at this point again find what Merleau-Ponty is saying nervous-making, fearing likely that his three conditions will result in some form of skepticism or relativism. Merleau-Ponty

is quick to deny that. He says that we are, as it were, on a revolving wheel, but not the skeptic's:

> It is true that in the last result there is no judge, that I do not think according to the true alone, or according to myself alone, nor according to the others alone, because each of the three has need of the other two and it would be a non-sense to sacrifice any one. A philosophical life always bases itself on these three cardinal points. The enigma of philosophy (and of expression) is that sometimes life is the same to oneself, to others, and to the true. These are the moments which justify it. The philosopher counts only on them. He will never accept to will himself against men, nor to will men against himself, nor against the true, nor the true against them.

Summarizing, we might say that the philosopher exists in a tense context of three dimensions: himself, the truth, and others. To remain real as a philosopher, he must be present simultaneously in all three dimensions. To be present only in one, or in two, is to be unreal, one- or two-dimensional. It is to fail as a philosopher. But the three-dimensionality of the philosopher differs from the three dimensionality of the non-philosopher. The philosopher wishes to be ubiquitous, everywhere at once, in all three dimensions, and as a result risks never being wholly anywhere. When he opposes something, the opposition is not aggressive–too often, for the philosopher, aggression is a form of surrender. He is unwilling to be so invested in external enterprises as to be pulled by them beyond the meaning he finds in them, and so he often seems not really committed to any external enterprise. By struggling to be present in the dimensions of himself, the truth, and others, the philosopher becomes a disquieting person: he is rebelliously gentle, pensively engaged and intangibly present. The detachment of the philosopher is really the result of his trinity of attachments, of his unwillingness to let lose of any of the three cardinal points of his philosophical life.

4 Socrates and the Total Function of the Philosopher

My hope is that what I just said, like much else that I said before it, reminded you of Socrates. Everything I have said is Socratic memorial. That was my intention because it was Merleau-Ponty's intention. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, "We must remember Socrates." Socrates makes us uneasy, as he made the Athenians uneasy. He is a quixotic figure. It is not that he zigs when we or the Athenians would zag, or that his Yes is not Yes, his No not No. It is rather that he zigs differently than we or the Athenians, that he says, and means, Yes and No in a way different than we do or they did. His motives are different. He believes in himself, and in the Gods, and in us and in the Athenians, but not as we or they believe.

> [Philosophy] does not exist as a sort of idol of which [Socrates] would be the guardian and which he must defend. It exists rather in its living relevance to the Athenians, in its absent presence, in its obedience without respect. Socrates has a way of obeying which is a way of resisting...Always to blame by excess or deficiency, always more simple and yet less abstract than the others, more flexible and less accommodating, he makes them ill at ease, and inflicts upon them the unpardonable offense of making them doubt themselves. He is there in life, at the assembly of the people, and before the tribunal, but in such a way that one can make nothing of him. He gives them no eloquence, no prepared rhetoric. By entering into the game of respect, he would only justify the calumny against him. But even less any show of defiance! This would be to forget that in a certain sense the others can hardly judge otherwise than they do. The same philosophy obliges him to appear before the judges and also makes him different from them. The same freedom which brings him among them frees him from their prejudices. The very same principle makes him both universal and singular.

Socrates thus lives out in his entire life what Bergson lived out in one incident of his. Consider, for example (although Merleau-Ponty does not dwell on this), Socrates' refusal to escape from prison when it was clear that he could have done so (and even perhaps that it was hoped he would do so). Socrates will not budge. He will remain in Athens, drink the bitter cup. Like Bergson, he will not loose himself from his ties to others so as to serve himself only, or the truth only. Socrates is a philosopher, and to be such is to remain in contact with others, to go toward the truth through them, not without them or against them. He exists as a philosopher only in his living relevance to the Athenians; to leave Athens would be to cease to exist as a philosopher. He will obey the Laws—but how much his obedience looks like resistance, non-defiant, to be sure, but like resistance still. He obeys. But his obedience is a motivated obedience, motivated in such a way that it seems either not to be obedience, or to be obedience to something other than the Laws. Something similar of course occurs in his defense of himself at his trial. He believes in the Gods. But his belief smells of unbelief. *He believes in the Gods as none of his accusers do.* Fine: but note the studied ambiguity of that line. Does it mean he believes more than they do? How could he know that? Or does it instead mean that he believes differently than they do, that the nature of his belief is different from the nature of theirs, even if the two beliefs have in some sense the same object? He will sacrifice a cock to Asclepius. Again, fine: but what does it mean for Socrates to sacrifice to Asclepius? The Athenians rightly sensed that it was unclear that it meant for him what it meant for them. Healing, yes. But for whom, and from what, and how?

This ability of Socrates to make the Athenians at once dubious of him and dubious of themselves is Socrates' irony. For Merleau-Ponty, Socrates' irony is

> a distant but true relation with others. It expresses the fundamental

> fact that each of us is only himself inescapably, and nevertheless recognizes himself in the other. It is an attempt to open up both of us for freedom. As is true of tragedy, both the adversaries are justified, and true irony uses a double-meaning which is founded on these facts. There is therefore no self-conceit. It is irony on the self no less than on the others.

Socrates' irony needs to be understood. It is not a way of knowing more than others while denying such knowledge. It is no way of winning an advantage in argument. Socrates has neither a surplus of knowledge nor any esoteric knowledge. He knows that he does not know the absolute. But he acknowledges that he is absolutely related to it. His irony manifests his restfulness in the movement from knowledge to ignorance. And knowing that he does not know the absolute but acknowledging his absolute relationship to it opens him, and is his way of striving to open his interlocutors, to the truth. Socrates' desire for definitions and his at-homeness in aporia show his taste for evidence and his feeling for ambiguity.

Socrates lived his philosophy of expression. His life indeed was a philosophy of expression. He wrote nothing but lived it all. Socrates did not merely advance or confront ideas. He incarnated them and understood others as incarnating them. He made them live and saw them alive in others. He knew that he could not know what the ideas were capable of without trying them out or seeing them tried out. The uneasiness Socrates creates in others is something true of the philosopher, something that we have forgotten somewhat. For us, philosophers live in books or they live in the academy, and all too often this means that the exigencies of life are not fully encountered. Although there is nothing wrong with the writing of philosophy, a written philosophy can often resist incarnation, or we resist attempting to incarnate it. And this means that written philosophy can fails to challenge us as it should, fails to make us uneasy. Socrates did not write philosophy and yet he was surely a philosopher. (If there is a good form of the Paradigm Case Argument, this seems to me to be it: If Socrates is not a philosopher, I do not know what a philosopher is.) But he still gave expression to his intuitions; he lived the challenge they presented him. By doing so, he became a challenge to others. He had to be, since his way to the truth led through them, not around them or against them. No wonder he was always looking for someone to talk to. Socrates' philosophy of expression had the protection neither of professorial immunity nor literary distance. No, there he stands, there his philosophy stands, there philosophy stands, barefoot and bug-eyed, unbathed in the marketplace, disposable[8] to anyone and to all.[9]

[8] I use 'disposable' here in its quasi-technical sense, familiar from the works of Gabriel Marcel. Marcel characterizes disposability (sometimes translated as 'availability') as "the ability to yield to that which we encounter, and in so yielding, to pledge ourselves." (*Homo Viator*, p. ?)

[9] Here is a good place to apply to Socrates a line of Merleau-Ponty's about Husserl: "...[F]or him, rationality is no phantom. He bears it within himself and practices it."

5 The Philosopher and the Non-Philosoher

Merleau-Ponty begins the conclusion of his essay with a concession.

> It is useless to deny that philosophy limps. It dwells in history and in life, but wishes to dwell at their center, at the point where they come into being with the birth of meaning. It is not content with what is already there. Since it is expression in act, it comes to itself only by ceasing to coincide with what is expressed, and by taking its distance in order to see its meaning. It is, in fact, the Utopia of possession at a distance. Hence it can be tragic, since it has its own contrary within itself. It is never a serious occupation. The serious man, if he exists, is the man of one thing only, to which he assents. But the most resolute philosophers always wish the contrary—to realize, but in destroying; to suppress, but also to conserve. Always, they have an afterthought.

What Merleau-Ponty does here is to activate the popular, and not-wholly-mistaken impression of philosophy and philosophers. He plays up the way in which the philosopher's convictions lack something massive and carnal that seems to be present in serious men. He notes that the philosopher seems not altogether a real being. And so it may seem that Merleau-Ponty intends to contrast philosophers, non-serious, unreal men, with non-philosophers, serious, real men. There is some such contrast, but Merleau-Ponty does not think that the contrast runs between different men, philosophers on the left, say, and non-philosophers on the right. No, the contrast runs through each man, through each of us. Each of us is divided between that in us which understands and that in us which chooses. No one of us is all of one piece, perfectly philosopher or perfectly non-philosopher. Each of us is both philosopher and non-philosopher, each of us is not serious and not real, serious and real. We all exist, at least in one sense, in the same way. As Merleau-Ponty notes in his final lines,

> And man contains silently within himself the paradoxes of philosophy, because to be completely a man, it is necessary to be a little more and a little less than a man.

So what is the difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher? We all exist in part in the condition of the philosopher, we all exist in part in the condition of the non-philosopher. The difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher is not then a matter of superior intelligence on either side, or a matter of some secret vouchsafed to one or the other; rather, the difference turns on Merleau-Ponty's word, 'silently'.[10] The philosopher, Merleau-Ponty says, is the man who wakes up and speaks. But what he says is always something

[10] Compare this passage from Merleau-Ponty, particularly its concluding lines:

> Those who go by way of passion and desire up to this being know all there is to know. Philosophy does not comprehend them better than they are comprehended; it is in their experience that it learns about being. Philosophy does not hold the world supine at its feet. It is not a "higher point of view" from which

that everyone already knows, and knows well—but as an unachieved meaning, as something unexpressed, an intuition without tuition. We all contain the paradoxes. The philosopher answers the challenge of the paradoxes he contains. The non-philosopher mostly does not answer the challenge; he is mostly listening to other things. And that is understandable: life is sturdy, not critical, and we cannot any of us be all day in expression, all day digging up intuition beneath intuition[11]. But the philosopher is the man who, contrary to appearances, and in spite of all, sees and speaks.[12]

6 Coda: Huh?

At this point it would be perfectly reasonable to ask, "What am I to make of all this?" Sure, it is interesting–in a slightly overheated, all-too-French way. But does Merleau-Ponty mean to be telling me just what he does as a philosopher, or what his philosophical sort do as philosophers, or is he telling me what he aims to do, or what his philosophical sort aim to do; or, is he telling me what philosophers just as such do, or what they aim to do? Is what he is telling me descriptive–and if so, of what, beyond his own work–or is it normative–and if so, of what, beyond his own work?

I said at the outset that I take Merleau-Ponty's lecture to be protreptic. It stands in a line with a tradition of philosophical writing that originates with Socrates' conversation with Cleinias early in Plato's *Euthydemus.* It continues through Aristotle's (mostly lost) *Protrepticus*, Plotinus' *Enneads*, Iamblichus' *The Exhortation to Philosophy*, and so on, down to Merleau-Ponty's lecture. Like most of its progenitors, Merleau-Ponty's lecture is a defense of philosophy in the form of an exhortation to it, a hortatory argument for and about philosophy. Merleau-Ponty is first and foremost trying to make his own philosophizing intelligible to his audience. Merleau-Ponty is a phenomenologist, and phenomenology is notoriously hard to make intelligible to those who are not involved in it. As Merleau-Ponty himself says, in the early pages of *The Phenomenology of Perception*: "Phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological

> one embraces all local perspectives. It seeks contact with brute being, and in any case informs itself in the company of those that have never lost that contact. It is just that whereas literature, art, and the practice of life—creating themselves with things themselves, the perceptible itself, beings themselves–can (except at their extreme limits) have a create the illusion of dwelling in the habitual and the already constituted, philosophy–which paints without colors in black and white, like copperplate engravings—does not allow us to ignore the strangeness of the world, which men confront as well or better than it does, but as if in a half-silence. (*Signs*, p. 22)

[11]The image of digging up intuition beneath intuition is Merleau-Ponty's: "What do these philosophers...positive, and systematically naive, have in common with the cunning philosopher who digs ever deeper beneath his intuition in order to find another intuition there, and who is referred back to himself by every spectacle?" (*Signs*, p. 156)

[12]I owe Emerson and Stanley Cavell apologies for these last sentences. One apes Emerson (a line from "Experience" and a line from "Self-Reliance"). The other is the nearly perfect theft of the final line of Cavell's "Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*".

method." That means, I take it, that to begin to understand phenomenology is to begin to do phenomenology; phenomenology is unapproachable in any other way. This may seem a theoretical impasse; a requirement that we must, in a certain sense, believe in order to understand. But it is not an impasse practically. Phenomenology is taught and learnt–and one of the gifts of the great phenomenologists, like Merleau-Ponty, is their ability to enrapture us in phenomenology without our realizing that we are in fact doing phenomenology, participating in a phenomenological method. A bird learns to fly by being pushed out of the nest, into free-fall: a student learns phenomenology by being seduced into the phenomenological reduction without knowing that that is what is happening. At a certain point, the bird changes its free-fall into flight by taking to wing; and at a certain point, the student becomes a phenomenologist by finding himself in the reduction.

I note all this because what Merleau-Ponty does, at least in part, is seduce his audience into the reduction, into the problematic of intutiton and expression. He wants his audience to gain access to phenomenology through access to his way of doing it. But another part of what he is doing is setting out, as he understands it, the way in which the life of the philosopher ought to be conducted, the way he attempts to conduct his life as a philosopher. Merleau-Ponty thinks of the various philosophies all as expressions of relations to being, expressions of contact with things. So every philosophy has, in its way, someone who expresses, a truth which is expressed, and others to whom it is expressed. But not all philosophies understand this about themselves; some want to attend only to one or two of those three cardinal points, or want to attend to each of them serially, and not all at once. And we all know how easy it is to want these things, how easy it is to forget yourself and who you are as you philosophize, how easy it is to forget others in the midst of philosophizing, how easy it is to want to please ourselves or others and to fail to do justice to the truth we are trying to express.

I do not believe that Merleau-Ponty makes an example of Bergson because he thinks that what Bergson does is the only way of attempting to resolve such situations. He makes an example of him because he tries to attend to all three cardinal points at once. Bergson will not serve only one master; he tries to serve all three simultaneously. What Bergson will not do is to cut his ties to others simply because what he has found to be true they have not found to be true. Perhaps this means that Bergson fails to be a Catholic *and* fails to be a Jew all at once. But perhaps it would be better to say that Bergson succeeds as a philosopher in the mess of his circumstances.