

Heroism and history in Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology

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Abstract Whereas *Phenomenology of Perception* concludes with a puzzling turn to “heroism,” this article examines the short essay “Man, the Hero” as a source of insight into Merleau-Ponty’s thought in the early postwar period. In this essay, Merleau-Ponty presented a conception of heroism through which he expressed the attitude toward post-Hegelian philosophy of history that underwrote his efforts to reform Marxism along existential lines. Analyzing this conception of heroism by unpacking the implicit contrasts with Kojève, Aron, Caillois, and Bataille, I show that its philosophical rationale was to supply experiential evidence attesting to the latent presence of human universality. It is a mythic device intended to animate the faith necessary for Marxist politics by showing that universal sociality is possible, and that the historically transformative praxis needed to realize it does not imply sacrifice. This sheds considerable light on Merleau-Ponty’s early postwar *political* thought. But inasmuch as the latter cannot be severed from his broader philosophical concerns, the prospect is raised that his entire phenomenological project in the early postwar period rested on a myth. Not necessarily a *bad* myth, but a myth nonetheless.

Keywords Merleau-Ponty · History · Heroism · Marxism · Politics · Myth · Saint-Exupéry · Sacrifice · Phenomenology

It is well-known that Merleau-Ponty’s major work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, concludes on a note of “heroism,” deferentially citing some cryptic lines from

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Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 1942 book, *Pilote de guerre*.¹ Scrutiny of the latter text, however, reveals a profound antipathy toward embodiment that would seem to confound the main thrust of Merleau-Ponty's work. Although the quotation (or a portion thereof) is frequently invoked in the literature on Merleau-Ponty, its actual meaning is invariably glossed over.²

Phenomenology is not unique among Merleau-Ponty's works in terms of ending with heroism. It is also the case that Merleau-Ponty crowned *Sense and Non-Sense*, a collection of writings published in 1948, with "Man, the Hero" ["Le Héros, l'Homme"], a short essay which took up this theme explicitly.³ Although this piece has an obvious potential to shed light on the ending of *Phenomenology*, it has received negligible scholarly attention. Even the relatively detailed treatment (nearly two paragraphs) recently given to it by Bernard Flynn still skirts the basic question as to the philosophical significance of heroism for Merleau-Ponty.⁴

In this paper I undertake a close examination of "Man, the Hero" as a source of insight into Merleau-Ponty's thought in the early postwar period.⁵ The discussion is framed by the original intentions behind the essay, which had to do with Merleau-Ponty's efforts to rethink Marxist praxis on the basis of an existential attitude *vis-à-vis* post-Hegelian philosophy of history. Unpacking the implicit contrasts that Merleau-Ponty drew with respect to other positions (Kojève, Aron, Caillois, Bataille), I analyze his rejection of traditional understandings of heroism, and then examine his account of what he called "the contemporary hero." What emerges is that Merleau-Ponty intended this sense of "heroism" to supply experiential evidence attesting to the latent presence of human universality. It is a mythic device intended to encourage the militant faith needed for the political project of a universal society, by showing that such a project is indeed possible, and that the transformative political praxis required need not imply agonistic sacrifice.

This sheds considerable light on Merleau-Ponty's *political* thought in the years immediately following the war.⁶ If it is true, however, as Diana Coole has recently—and, I think, correctly—affirmed, that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as such is "profoundly and intrinsically political,"⁷ then it would turn out that his early postwar philosophical project as a whole rests on a myth. Not necessarily a *bad* myth, but a myth nonetheless.

¹ Merleau-Ponty (PhP, p. 520/456).

² See Bryan Smyth, "On the Problem of Exupérian Heroism in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*" (Dissertation, Department of Philosophy, McGill University, 2006).

³ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, pp. 323–331/182–187).

⁴ Flynn (2007, pp. 136f).

⁵ I shall refer to other texts as well, of course, but emphasis is placed on this text on account of the relative lack of critical attention it has received.

⁶ And, by implication, the largely self-critical developments in his later political thought—in particular, *Adventures of the Dialectic*—a sound comprehension of which presupposes a more thorough understanding of the earlier positions.

⁷ Coole (2007, p. 123).

1 The existential attitude

“Le Héros, l’Homme” was originally published under the title “Le Culte du héros” [“Hero Worship”] in the pro-PCF (Communist Party of France) weekly *action* [sic] in February 1946.⁸ Aside from a few words quoted in the editorial preface (signed by Francis Ponge) that accompanied its publication in *action*,⁹ no documentary evidence is available to explain exactly why Merleau-Ponty submitted this piece to this particular publication.

However, it is reasonable to say that this submission was linked to Merleau-Ponty's active efforts to publicly promote the political credentials of existentialism. For *action* was not a dogmatic organ of PCF policy. In fact, following the end of the European war, *action* was (along with *Les temps modernes*) an important forum for debate between Marxism and existentialism. Of particular interest to Merleau-Ponty with regard to his existentialist proselytizing were relatively open-minded intellectuals within the PCF. Among these, Merleau-Ponty's “privileged interlocutor” was Pierre Hervé, a leading figure in the party who was at the time “at the very centre of a liberalizing movement within the party,”¹⁰ a movement that aimed, as did Merleau-Ponty, for a broad unification of the Left in France.¹¹ Most importantly, Hervé was the director of *action*. Thus, in the context of his active promotion of existentialism, the key reason why Merleau-Ponty sent his essay on heroism to *action* was because it formed a moment in his on-going political dialogue with the milieu of Marxist thinkers sympathetic to existentialism.

The general claim that Merleau-Ponty aimed to establish in this dialogue was that as a practical project of proletarian self-emancipation, Marxism was less a body of truth than a method for interpreting political phenomena,¹² and that with respect to subjectivity and consciousness, what its advancement required could be supplied by existential phenomenology. “A living Marxism should ‘save’ and integrate existentialist research instead,” as was its tendency, “of stifling it.”¹³ If Marxism is still true, “then we will rediscover it on the path of present-day truth and in the analysis of our time.”¹⁴

⁸ *action* 74 (1. II. 1946, pp. 12–13). The bibliographic information given at the end of the English translation of *Sense and Non-Sense*, which claims that “Man, the Hero” was “especially written” for this volume, is false. It was reprinted from *action* unchanged.

⁹ This preface is reprinted in Smyth, “On the Problem of Exupérien Heroism in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception,” pp. 201–2.

¹⁰ Whiteside (1988, p. 211). Merleau-Ponty's essay “Faith and Good Faith,” also published in February 1946, refers positively to the relative openness and honesty of Hervé's Marxism (SNS, pp. 318–321/179ff), although he had criticized Hervé the previous month in his editorial article “Pour la vérité” (SNS, pp. 274f/155).

¹¹ See Poster (1975, pp. 110f).

¹² In this Merleau-Ponty was broadly following Lukács' 1919 essay “What is Orthodox Marxism?” (1971, pp. 1–26). Ironically, Lukács (1948, pp. 198–252) was a fierce polemical critic of Merleau-Ponty's in the early postwar years.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 143/82).

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 303/171). Cf. Merleau-Ponty (NI, p. 63 [153]), where with respect to French existentialism Merleau-Ponty said that “we don't have the feeling of doing sectarian work, but of taking up research to the point where it is carried by our time.”

Existential research and analysis as such, however, are not what the essay on heroism offered. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty stated in the cover letter that he sent to *action*, its task was more specific: to define “the existential attitude (as a general phenomenon of our times, and not as a school of thought),” and to do so “positively and on the basis of examples.”¹⁵ The aim of the essay was to offer this “existential attitude” as an heuristic principle of orientation in the neo-Marxist political hermeneutics called for by the postwar situation.

2 Traditional and ideological heroism

Merleau-Ponty defined the “existential attitude” by personifying it in what he called “the contemporary hero.” Because he did so by way of a critique of what I will call *traditional* and *ideological* views of heroism, I will first examine Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of these before turning in the next section to the account of contemporary heroism itself.

2.1 Traditional heroism

Merleau-Ponty claimed that “hero worship” has “always existed,” but identified Hegel as the key turning-point in its history. Previously, the idea of the hero was essentially that of an “agent of a Providence,” paradigmatically the (Christian) saint. Here heroic action is understood as self-sacrifice in the name of certain transcendent, other-worldly goals. This changed when Hegel brought heroism down to Earth by conceiving it in terms of “the individuals of world history.”¹⁶ In this view, heroes are particular concrete individuals who gain an awareness that their social world “has no future,” and who take it upon themselves to intervene, in effect, on behalf of historical progress. They were “the new race [*la race nouvelle*] that already existed within the old.”¹⁷ World-historical individuals are the state-founding agents of the *Weltgeist*, inchoately grasping the needs of History and acting accordingly. “They have a presentiment of the future, but of course they have no knowledge of it [...] They forsake happiness and by their deeds and their example create a new law and a moral system in which their time will later recognize its truth.”¹⁸

The Hegelian hero is thus an historical individual who, based on a vague sense of universal history, acts *against her own time*. Retrospectively, such action could be seen as a matter of historical wisdom. But *only* retrospectively. Such heroes are in general *not* heroes for their contemporaries. For the latter come too soon to benefit from the world-historical actions in question. Hegelian heroism consists in “having

¹⁵ Quoted in the editorial preface.

¹⁶ Without directly citing it, Merleau-Ponty paraphrases and quotes from the introduction to Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (cf. NI, p. 130 [64]). See Hegel (1956, pp. 30f).

¹⁷ Quoting Hegel: “die nächste Gattung, die im Innern bereits vorhanden war.” In Sibree’s rendering: “the species next in order [...] which was already formed in the womb of time.”

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 324/183).

worked out [...] what will *afterwards* seem the only possible future and the very meaning of history.”¹⁹

In contrast to this Hegelian view, which dialectically embeds the hero in the unfolding of universal history, Merleau-Ponty also extracts a view of heroism from Nietzsche's account of the *Übermensch*. The idea here is of being situated outside of both providence and historical reason—there is no meaning or logic in history, no non-arbitrary substantive goals to aspire towards. This Nietzschean idea of heroism thus involves a rejection of *any* overarching framework as a condition of historical action. So whereas the Hegelian hero sacrifices happiness and personal well-being for the sake of achieving historical order, the Nietzschean hero “is beyond everything that *has been or is to be done*; he is interested only in power itself.”²⁰ That is, this figure is situated beyond history, and is thus concerned solely with the assertion of pure power *against others*. There can be no constructive exercise of power here, for there is nothing to do: there are no historical tasks to fulfill, and there is no dialectical framework within which the exercise of power could be sublimated as sacrifice and deployed in a transformative way. Conquest alone remains meaningful, and in particular the conquest of death, “the most powerful opponent of all.” The Nietzschean hero is thus ultimately caught up in the impossible quest for “a life which really integrates death into itself and whose free recognition by others is assured once and for all.”²¹

Merleau-Ponty reverted to Hegelian terminology in this reading of Nietzsche. As he described it, the Nietzschean hero, seeking unreciprocated recognition, finds himself precisely in the existential impasse of the Hegelian “master.” The contrast is thus posed in an unexpectedly simple way: the Nietzschean hero is the Hegelian “master” [*Herr*], while the Hegelian hero is the Hegelian “slave” [*Knecht*], that is, the one who has “chosen life and who works to transform the world in such a way that in the end there is no more room for the master.”²²

There is clearly little exegetical rigor in these interpretations of Hegel and Nietzsche. Although they might prove defensible, were they to be developed more carefully, that was not Merleau-Ponty's purpose. Rather, as was his wont, he was primarily interested in outlining certain philosophical tropes that would serve his own argumentative purposes. It is in simultaneous contrast to both the so-called Hegelian and Nietzschean figures of heroism that he presented his own account of “the contemporary hero.”

But we would overlook the significance of what Merleau-Ponty was doing if we fail to recognize that these tropes *do* represent opposed orientations with respect to Hegelian philosophy of history among which Merleau-Ponty found himself at the time compelled to stake out an interstitial position. “There are,” as he said elsewhere, “several Hegels,” and “interpreting Hegel means taking a stand on all the philosophical, political, and religious problems of our century.”²³

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, pp. 324f/183, emphasis added).

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 325/183).

²¹ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 326/184).

²² Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 326/184; cf. SNS, pp. 118f/68f).

²³ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 110/63f).

First, the view he attributes to Hegel himself is the “triumphant” view that maintains that there can no longer be heroes because all of the tasks of universal history have been fulfilled.²⁴ This “Hegel” is more accurately associated with Alexandre Kojève, some of whose lectures on Hegel in the 1930s Merleau-Ponty had attended. According to this interpretation,²⁵ the “end of History” had been attained—that is, human consciousness had become the Concept, thus concluding the movement by which it had sought to overcome the opposition between thought and being. We need not enter into the details of this view here.²⁶ It suffices to point out that the linchpin of Kojève’s view is his assertion of the possibility of a “fully self-conscious consciousness.” This is what Kojève termed the “Sage”:

the Sage is a man who is capable of answering in a *comprehensible* or satisfactory manner *all* questions that can be asked him concerning his acts, and who is capable of answering in such a way that the *entirety* of his answers forms a *coherent* discourse. Or else, what amounts to the same thing: the Sage who is *fully* and *perfectly self-conscious*.²⁷

This is crucial because it is only on the basis of the total historical knowledge thereby implied that one could legitimately claim of historical heroes, not only that they did in fact attain a partial glimpse of the universal truth, and thus did in fact engage in genuine heroic activity; but also that as a whole they have been rendered obsolete, that is, that History, the domain of the hero, has ended.

However, in *The Structure of Behavior*, completed in 1938, Merleau-Ponty had demonstrated that Kojève’s Sage is not humanly possible, by showing that the integration constitutive of acquired self-consciousness “is never absolute and it always fails.” In fact, the impossibility of “complete integration”—i.e., Sagely wisdom—is precisely what Merleau-Ponty aimed to substantiate in that work, by showing that “all integration presupposes the normal functioning of the subordinated forms, *which always demand their own due*.”²⁸

Second, with regard to Merleau-Ponty’s trope of Nietzschean heroism, one might be tempted to think of Georges Bataille, with whom Merleau-Ponty was likewise personally acquainted. Bataille was a major proponent of Nietzschean ideas in France—yet this was primarily because he accepted Kojève’s thesis that human society was entering a terminal stage of universal homogeneity in which human negativity had nothing to do. In his terms, this gave rise to the problem of “unemployed negativity,” and in particular to the problem of securing recognition for it as such.²⁹

²⁴ Cf. Hegel (1967, p. 245).

²⁵ Kojève (1947).

²⁶ See Cooper (1984); cf. Fukuyama (1992).

²⁷ Kojève (1947, p. 271).

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty (SC, p. 227/210, emphasis added).

²⁹ This is expressed in “Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel...,” an incomplete letter addressed to Kojève dated 6.XII.1937. In Hollier (1988, pp. 89–93). A revised version was published as an appendix in Bataille (1944).

For Bataille, however, the end of History was rolled together with the death of God in a way that at once opened up and radically undermined the possibility for genuine subjectivity. This yielded the paradoxical or “impossible” situation of “sovereignty” that was central to Bataille’s thinking. In this sense, he was not so much a follower of Nietzsche as someone who aspired to *imitate* Nietzsche. He took up Nietzsche as a sacred “hero” of non-conformism, but this precisely in his tragic, mad solitude—it was a matter, so to speak, of an *imitatio anti-Christi*. This is why, in his works from the war years, Bataille stated that his aim is “to invent a new way to crucify myself.”³⁰ He made of his existence a “combat” [*bataille*] that incarnated sacrifice by trying to mimic the sacrifice of God.

This effort on the part of Bataille was the result of his having accepted—and having tried to live out the consequences of—the basic premises of *both* the Hegelian and Nietzschean tropes of heroism. This made Bataille himself the focal point of their underlying conflict. Thus, while his uptake of Nietzsche was infused with the themes of war and violence, it was primarily directed inwards in a self-destructive way that does not conform to the model of self-assertive mastery sketched by Merleau-Ponty. So although Bataille was one of Merleau-Ponty’s covert interlocutors, (he will resurface below), he does not, as we might be tempted to think, represent the trope of Nietzschean heroism.

To capture the contrast that Merleau-Ponty wanted to establish with Kojève, our attention should rather turn to Raymond Aron, someone who was sharply critical of Kojève. Aiming to directly refute him, Aron wrote in 1938 that “the traditional philosophy of history is completed in Hegel’s system. *Modern philosophy of history begins with the rejection of Hegelianism.*”³¹ He went onto develop a decidedly skeptical position concerning the limits of historical objectivity, which regarded historiography as inescapably based on subjective *mises en perspective*. To be sure, this view shares a certain measure of common ground with Merleau-Ponty’s own disagreement with Kojève. But Merleau-Ponty thought that Aron went too far in the direction of perspectivism.³² *At least in theory*. Although he does not name him directly, Merleau-Ponty was undoubtedly referring to Aron when he wrote the following:

It has not been sufficiently noted that, after demonstrating the irrationality of history, the skeptic will abruptly abandon his methodological scruples when it comes to drawing practical conclusions. [...] A skeptical politics is obliged to treat, at least implicitly, certain facts as more important than others and to that extent it harbors an embarrassing philosophy of history—one which is lived rather than thought, but which is no less effective.³³

³⁰ Bataille (*Œuvres*, 5:257).

³¹ Aron (1969, p. 15, emphasis added).

³² Although Merleau-Ponty does not name Aron in his published work at this time, he did develop an explicit critique of him, as Whiteside (1986) has convincingly shown.

³³ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 297/168).

Merleau-Ponty was alluding to the increasingly Gaullist and pro-imperialist political views that Aron defended after the war.³⁴ Merleau-Ponty reasoned that Aron's practical pragmatism stemmed from the fact that his theoretical scepticism was based on an at least tacit acceptance of Kojève's overly strong criteria concerning what would count as historical objectivity.³⁵ Correctly rejecting the possibility of this sort of absolute knowledge, he thus wrongly rejected historical objectivity as such, leaving his practical assessments with no principled basis beyond sociological facts. Hence Merleau-Ponty's claim that "historical scepticism is always conservative, although it cannot, in all strictness, exclude anything from its expectations—not even a revolutionary phase of history. Under the pretext of objectivity it freezes the future and eliminates change and the will of men from history."³⁶

Although Merleau-Ponty contrasts the Hegelian and Nietzschean tropes of heroism, we can see that because they are rooted in the same absolute view of historical objectivity—the one accepting it, the other rejecting it—the conceptions of subjectivity they respectively embody actually share a fundamental infirmity: each is oblivious to concrete historical praxis. What Merleau-Ponty noted of Aron's skeptical position applies equally well to Kojève's post-historical view: he sees "neither true subjectivity, which is never without motives, nor true objectivity, which is never without evaluation, nor the junction of the one with the other in Praxis."³⁷ There is in neither case any recognition of historical tasks to be performed, either on the grounds that they have all been accomplished (Kojève), or else because there never were any to begin with (Aron). For what goes unperceived in both cases is the present's being oriented towards and predelineating a future that is "*à faire*," to be made. Both Kojève and Aron consequently exhibit a conservative acquiescence in events that is antithetical to historical subjectivity and agency concretely understood. This is why neither offers a suitable framework for a neo-Marxist hermeneutics.

What is lacking, according to Merleau-Ponty, is *living contact with the present* as the germinal origins of the future. "Our only recourse lies in a reading of the present which is as full and as faithful as possible, which does not prejudice its meaning, which even recognizes chaos and non-sense where they exist, but which does not refuse to discern a direction and an idea in events where they appear."³⁸ This "reading of the present" is the central plank of Merleau-Ponty's proposed political hermeneutics. In a sense, his is not a philosophy of history, but a *perception* of historical phenomena that calls philosophies of history into question.³⁹ The reform of Marxism that Merleau-Ponty had in mind would thus extract it from all such frameworks. The course he tried to steer between Kojève and Aron, between abstractly one-sided views of history in either objective or subjective terms, was

³⁴ See Whiteside (1986, pp. 147f).

³⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (NI, pp. 347f [103f]).

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 298/168).

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty (NI, p. 348 [104]).

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 299/169).

³⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (NI, pp. 352, 350 [107, 105]).

intended in part against the background of long-standing disputes within Marxism between evolutionism and voluntarism.

Although Merleau-Ponty associated his approach with Marx, he did so only inasmuch as Marx could be read in conformity with Merleau-Ponty's own (idiosyncratic) reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁴⁰ This reading rejects the gnosiological understanding of absolute knowledge that forms the reference point for both Kojève and Aron. Merleau-Ponty's account of the "contemporary hero" will aim to bring about an *Aufhebung* of the Hegelian and Nietzschean tropes in order to account at once for what is held artificially separate in this distinction, namely, objective historical progress as an agentive possibility *and* the subjective motivation to pursue it. It is thus meant to flesh out an alternative view of absolute knowledge, understood as a "way of living" [*manière de vivre*] wherein "consciousness at last becomes equal to its spontaneous life and regains its self-possession."⁴¹

As traditionally understood this is not a matter of knowledge at all. But that is the case only inasmuch as the tradition fails to recognize knowledge as a normative practice of embodied perception. *And this includes historical knowledge.* Merleau-Ponty thus made historical objectivity relative to practical participation in the project of realizing human universality. Such participation consequently possesses epistemological privilege. Citing the perspicacity of Trotsky's analysis of the Russian Revolution, for example, Merleau-Ponty affirmed that "the greatest objectivity is often the subjectivity of he who lived it."⁴² The point is not that all lived experience carries equal epistemological weight. It is rather that, even if it cannot be captured discursively, the object of individual lived experience *can* be the "the total intention" of society, "the Idea in the Hegelian sense."⁴³

Merleau-Ponty's broader point was that this possibility could underwrite a common framework within which all those engaged in history as the process of fulfilling "the promise of humanity" could be reconciled. The idea is that substantive ideological disagreement is superficial and that it stems from a prior epistemological agreement—exemplified by Kojève and Aron—concerning objectivity which stipulates what would count as substantive agreement in a way that actually renders it impossible. In occluding the living present, this common theoretical prejudice prevents people from seeing that what ultimately motivates genuine historical engagement is *not* a matter of ideological profession.

2.2 Ideological heroism

Concerning historical action, Merleau-Ponty was gripped by the phenomenon of uncompromising engagement, especially on the part of Communists, where there was little or no expectation that the goals pursued would be realized during the agent's own lifetime. Let's call this "ideological heroism." In contrast to the

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty (HT, p. 110/101f): "There can be no definitive understanding of the whole import of Marxist politics without going back to Hegel's description of the fundamental relations between men."

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 112/64).

⁴² Merleau-Ponty (NI, p. 18 [6]); cf. Whiteside (1988, p. 122).

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty (PhP, p. xiii/xviii).

traditional Hegelian hero, whose vision of human universality is inchoate and whose projects contribute to it only inadvertently, the ideological hero clearly imagines the universal and sees that there is an unfulfilled historical objectivity, on behalf of which she acts self-consciously. But Merleau-Ponty did *not* think that this offered a viable model for political agency. In “Man, the Hero,” where he hinges his discussion on selected literary examples of communist political action, his strategy is to parlay a critique of the *roman à thèse* as a “self-defeating genre”⁴⁴ into a broader critique of political ideology as a motivating force. The problem with the *roman à thèse* is that its political didacticism necessarily involves a closed teleology—heroes are modeled on pre-given prototypes, with the result either that the political message is delivered ventriloquially, or else that it is actually overshadowed by characters’ subjective deviations from orthodoxy.⁴⁵ Either way, ideologically motivated heroic action remains an abstract idea that is not brought into *living* connection with particular individuals.

For instance, Merleau-Ponty considers Hemingway’s Robert Jordan (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*), the idealistic American college professor who volunteers to fight for the Loyalist cause against the fascists in Spain, and who ultimately gives his life in doing so. Unlike Hemingway’s earlier protagonists, who tended to be detached and individualistic, Jordan is strongly socially-oriented and concerned with communion and fraternity.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, as Merleau-Ponty notes, in risking his life for the “interests of humanity,”⁴⁷ “Jordan cannot manage to make the society of the future the sole motive for his sacrifice. This is desirable to him only as the probable guarantee, for himself and for others, of the freedom he is exercising at that very moment.”⁴⁸

Turning to Malraux’s Kyo Gisors (*La condition humaine*), a leader of a failed socialist insurrection in Shanghai, Merleau-Ponty notes that here the same question is confronted “at the *very core of Marxism*.” The problem is that with respect to political action, in principle there cannot be any *a priori* determination of when to cede to the objective momentum of history and when to subjectively “force its hand,” as it were. Either way, it seems to be an inescapably subjective decision. Merleau-Ponty draws the same conclusion concerning the “paradoxes of liberty” from Roger Vailland’s 1945 work *Drôle de jeu*.⁴⁹ The idea is that Communist discipline results from a free choice to limit free choice for the sake of effective collective action, but that this basic choice itself cannot be objectively determined.

Merleau-Ponty wanted to show that this basic “choice” should not be understood as an intellectual decision, but rather in terms of *existential style*. Merleau-Ponty used the example of Hemingway’s Jordan to illustrate this. Wounded behind enemy lines, and having urged his comrades to go on, Jordan remains with them in spirit, prepared until the very end to do what he could to protect them. As he says,

⁴⁴ Tane (1998, p. 11).

⁴⁵ Tane (1998, p. 453).

⁴⁶ Smetana (1965, pp. 124ff).

⁴⁷ Hemingway (1940, p. 11).

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 327/184).

⁴⁹ Cf. Lloyd (2003, pp. 165f).

“there is something to do yet.”⁵⁰ But does Jordan truly believe the ideological rationale he gives himself for his actions, and is this what actually motivates him? Is it the case that “right up to the end [*jusqu’au bout*], he will satisfy the highest demand: ‘uphold through action the honor of being a man, and do something *useful* for the others’”?⁵¹ Is heroism a matter of *service* to the “interests of humanity”?

Merleau-Ponty answers firmly in the negative. According to his interpretation of Hemingway’s Jordan, “the man who is still living has no other resource—but *this is sovereign*—than to keep on acting like a living man [*un homme vivant*].”⁵² In continuing to act, in particular, by not taking his own life, Jordan was just living out his existential style—*just being himself*. He was wounded, but alive, and so, however short it might be, there was still a future to be made to which he would belong. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, this evinces *sovereignty*, not *service*. This is why it is not the society of the future that is the key to understanding Jordan, but rather “the freedom he is exercising at that very moment.” And this is why it is immaterial whether he was actually able to do anything for the others.

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, heroic action is not a self-sacrificial matter of one’s reflective ideological commitments tragically piloting one’s body into a lethal situation. That is to say, in the terms drawn from the first chapter of Part I of *Phenomenology*, it is not a matter of a temporal dislocation in which *le corps actuel* fatally detaches itself from *le corps habituel*. For Merleau-Ponty, to say that heroic action is a matter of existential style is to affirm that *the locus of heroic action is the habitual body*. Hence inasmuch as ideology informs heroism, it does so only as a kind of corporeal sedimentation. But again, this does not mean that heroic action is a matter of sedimented ideological commitment fatally compromising *le corps actuel*. Rather, Merleau-Ponty’s view is that heroic action precisely instances the coincidence of *le corps actuel* and *le corps habituel*. This is the condition of absolute knowledge, “the point at which consciousness finally becomes equal to its spontaneous life and regains its self-possession.”⁵³

To clarify this, Merleau-Ponty turns to Saint-Exupéry, who, significantly, was a real person, not a fictional character (even if his stories are highly stylized).

3 The contemporary hero

The idea behind the contemporary hero is that “our time,” as Merleau-Ponty frequently put it, appears as a time neither of faith nor of reason, but rather of a world out of joint. Events exhibit no clear overarching pattern, and in particular the schemata of Marxism are unable to account for them.⁵⁴ It is thus a time when “duties and tasks are unclear,” for there are no absolute reference points for historical action. Not even utility. Merleau-Ponty seizes on the fact that the flight

⁵⁰ Hemingway (1940, p. 470, italics added).

⁵¹ Smetana (1965, p. 126); citing Astre (1959, p. 153, emphasis added).

⁵² Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 329/186, emphasis added).

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 64/112).

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 288/162f; cf. pp. 216f/123).

described in *Pilote de guerre* was, as Saint-Exupéry's account of it likewise emphasized, *objectively useless*.⁵⁵ "What sense did it make" to fly that mission? "How is [Saint-Exupéry] to serve if service is useless?"⁵⁶

The answer, of course, is that he was not *serving* anything. Not unlike Jordan, Saint-Exupéry was "sovereign" *because* his action was useless, *because it made no sense*, that is, because it was not intelligible according to existing parameters of rationality.⁵⁷ But Merleau-Ponty added that this was not a demonstration of a morbid fascination with death or a cavalier contempt for it in the manner, for example, of Montherlant's *Service inutile* (1935). "It is not death that I love, said Saint-Exupéry, but life."⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty thus interpreted Saint-Exupéry's death in this way:

Saint-Exupéry throws himself into his mission because it is an intimate part of himself, the consequences of his thoughts, wishes and decisions, because he would be nothing if he were to back out. He recovers his own being to the extent to which he runs into danger. Over Arras, in the fire of anti-aircraft guns, when every second of continuing life is as miraculous as birth, he feels invulnerable because he is *in* things at last; he has left his inner nothingness behind, and death, if it comes, will reach him right in the thick of the world.⁵⁹

Incarnating pure human productivity and eschewing all circumstantial compromise, Saint-Exupéry melded with the world, thereby achieving the organically complete agentive integrity characteristic of absolute knowledge.

For Merleau-Ponty, heroes are those who "really were outwardly what they inwardly wished to be" and thus "became one with history at the moment when it claimed their lives."⁶⁰ Equivalently, the hero is someone who "lives to the limit [*jusqu'au bout*] his relation to men and the world" by enacting, for example, an affirmative response to the question: "Shall I give my freedom to save freedom?"⁶¹ Subjectively, the hero is fully invested in the realization of freedom, *understood in universal terms*. Owing to her tacit acceptance that true freedom knows no singularity, the hero gives the *appearance* of a wholehearted readiness for personal sacrifice. This just means that heroic living embodies an uncompromising commitment to life considered universally—the hero is an individual who lives out her own vital particularity *as* human universality. The hero is thus an exemplary *vivant*, or living person,⁶² whose thinking and acting are fully saturated with that

⁵⁵ Not only was the mission extremely perilous, but it was understood that due to the state of the French forces at the time, no reconnaissance information could be put to use anyway.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 328/185).

⁵⁷ Cf. Bataille (*Œuvres*, 8:651n): "A sovereignty which serves no purpose is at once the coming apart and the completion of the human being."

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 330/186). Although he does not cite this, Merleau-Ponty may have been referring to Saint-Exupéry (1939, p. 176): "It is not danger that I love. I know what I love. It is life." This line was also referenced by Gusdorf (1948, p. 247).

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 328/185).

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 258/146).

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty (PhP, p. 520/456).

⁶² Merleau-Ponty (SNS, pp. 328f/185f; cf. HT, p. xli/xlv).

“love of life” that is irreducible to biological existence. This fulfills Merleau-Ponty's claim that “man is capable of situating his proper being, not in biological existence, but at the level of properly human relations.”⁶³ It kills us, but we *can* do it.

Paradoxically, then, the hero is pathologically alive. Merleau-Ponty endorsed Hegel's idea that human beings are “sick animals.”⁶⁴ That is, *normal* human existence is constitutively “sick” on account of the schizoid duality of being-in-itself and being-for-itself to which anthropogenetic reflective self-consciousness leads. Through his complete internalization of the negativity of death, the hero effectively *heals* this split by achieving a self-coincidence that amounts to a condition of pathological health. Subjectively, this parallels the Marxist account of the proletariat that Merleau-Ponty presented in *Humanism and Terror*. The contemporary hero is likewise a de-humanized—which is to say, de-particularized—agent of the species, *but without the objective social conditions*.

The case of Saint-Exupéry thus addressed the motivational problem of how human universality can be concretely realized *without sacrifice*. This is because, as Merleau-Ponty put it, his self-giving resulted, not from pursuing this or that ideological goal, but rather from living out the “loyalty to the *natural* movement that throws us toward things and toward others,”⁶⁵ something Merleau-Ponty implied is equivalent in the hero's case to remaining “poised in the direction of his *chosen ends*.”⁶⁶

What were those ends? Simply to leave “his inner nothingness behind” and to “recover his own being.” Whatever his real military contribution may have been, what *he* was doing was living out his subjectivity, “recovering his being” by personally incorporating the centrifugal thrust of natural spontaneity. Attaining the condition of sovereignty, the hero becomes a kind of *natural purposiveness*, a living embodiment of humanity's being its own highest end.

Unlike the Hegelian hero, who, in working *against* her time, suffered a pronounced dislocation between habitual body and *corps actuel*, the contemporary hero simply *lives her time*—this is the sense of her “contemporaneity.” The heroic achievement is to subjectively exist one's corporeality as a prototype of one's socio-historical milieu. For Merleau-Ponty, this means that the hero lives out explicitly the universality that Hegelian heroism realized only to the point of latency. He thus argued that it is “by living my time,” “by plunging into [*m'enfonçant*] the present and the world [...] that I am able to understand other times”⁶⁷—i.e., accede to the universal.

Merleau-Ponty held that the disordered and contingent appearance of “our time” harbored a “logic of history” that could be taken up and realized. By a “logic of history” Merleau-Ponty meant (a) that history is an integral whole, “a single drama” in which all events have a human significance; and (b) that the phases of this drama do not follow an arbitrary order, “but move toward a completion and conclusion.”⁶⁸

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty (SC, p. 190n1/246n97).

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 116/67).

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 330/186, emphasis added).

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 330/185, emphasis added).

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty (PhP, p. 520/456).

⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 212/121).

The distinctive feature of a Marxist view, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that it makes the completion of history dependent upon contingent acts of revolutionary agency; it “admit[s] that history is both logical and contingent, that nothing is absolutely fortuitous but also that nothing is absolutely necessary.”⁶⁹ In other words, for Marxism the logic of history is just one possibility among others.⁷⁰ But this would seem to reduce it, when the class struggle wanes, to the conjured product of revolutionary ideology. In a disordered world, can there be any evidential basis for upholding the Marxist hypothesis?

For Merleau-Ponty, the hero provides such evidence. Although the hero incarnates a historical period that is to all appearances one of disorder, the hero himself, his *manière de vivre*, is not at all disordered. “Today’s hero is not skeptical, dilettantish, or decadent.” Rather, “it is simply the case that he has experienced chance, disorder, and failure [...] He [thus] has a better experience than anyone has ever had of the contingency of the future and the freedom of man.”⁷¹ The hero thus surpasses the theoretical failure of abstract discourses of history. Committed to universality and accepting that freedom knows no singularity, the practical lesson that he draws from this experience is to detach from freedom in its given forms and to enroot his commitment within a deeper, transhistorical level of being. The hero thus withdraws to the sovereignty of “absolute knowledge”—a move which, through a transgression of existing rationality, places the hero in the extra-historical realm of *non-sense*. While this makes of the contemporary hero, not unlike the Hegelian hero, a “junction of madness [*dérailson*] and reason [*raison*],”⁷² it is precisely in virtue of this departure from history that the hero is able to play an evidentiary role with respect to its logic.

By incarnating human productivity, and despite being paradoxically lethal, heroic self-realization evidences history’s being a dramatic, teleological whole driven by contingent human agency. It thus presents a *mise en abyme* of the possible self-realization of humanity. If we accept the account of Saint-Exupéry’s death that Merleau-Ponty offers, then we have grounds for positing a natural spontaneity that is in harmony with our aspirations to the realization of concrete universal reconciliation. This rationalizes the need Merleau-Ponty felt to rank this possibility as more than just one among many. The heroic spectacle legitimizes the privileging of fulgurant moments of transgressive communication by seeing them as based in and expressive of “that very movement which unites us with others, our present with our past, and by means of which we make everything have meaning.”⁷³ This movement is what Merleau-Ponty later described as the “spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole,” and which thus “accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements.”⁷⁴ To be clear, being a matter of

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, pp. 211f/120).

⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 213/121).

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 330/186).

⁷² Merleau-Ponty (SNS, pp. 324f/183; cf. p. 9/4).

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 330/186).

⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty (Prs., pp. 47f/10).

extra-historical non-sense, the action of the contemporary hero does not itself accomplish such results. It doesn't accomplish *anything*. Rather, its significance lies solely in its bringing to phenomenological self-givenness the natural teleological purposiveness that (*possibly*) stands behind those achievements. In this way, the contemporary hero motivates and rationally substantiates the militant faith of a neo-Marxist historical praxis.

This militant faith is what Merleau-Ponty meant by "the existential attitude." To renew Marxism, which is weakest "when faced with concrete events taken moment by moment,"⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty wanted to trace the molecular emergence of transformative political consciousness from the "living present" up. This presupposes the heroic manifestation of humanity's intrinsic purposiveness. The evidentiary value of heroism is thus perceptual, not theoretical. By providing an appropriate new perceptual background, it supports a Gestalt shift that discloses historical significance in the seemingly insignificant phenomena of everyday life. It enables us to see, in other words, that even "the least perception, the slightest movement of the heart, the smallest action, bear incontestable witness" to human universality.⁷⁶

4 Merleau-Ponty's myth of man

Without question, Merleau-Ponty's is an unusual conception of heroism, one that verges on anti-heroism. Indeed, he began "Man, the Hero" by echoing Marcel's distrust of heroism. And he is clear that heroism does not offer a viable model for action. His intervention is intended to effectively *dissolve* the discourse of heroism by, on the one hand, rendering what is crucial to it a quotidian phenomenon; and on the other hand, by raising its exceptionality to the level of humanist myth—"the idea of the healthy man is a myth."⁷⁷ He thus concluded "Man, the Hero" by identifying the contemporary hero with this mythic "man." But he did so by way of contrast with two other mythic figures: "the contemporary hero is not Lucifer; he is not even Prometheus; he is man."⁷⁸ Untangling the meaning of this dual contrast will shed further light on Merleau-Ponty's humanist myth.

Prometheus and Lucifer have, at least in modernity, often been seen as closely allied, the latter (often as Satan) being portrayed as a kind of Christianized version of the former. This is prevalent in Romantic literature, but it is also the case in German Idealism.⁷⁹ The general sense shared by these Promethean and Luciferian figures is that of a spirit who liberates humanity from ignorance, one that seeks to enlighten humanity against the wishes of the prevailing powers to maintain humanity in a state of servile enthrallment.

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 217/123).

⁷⁶ See Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 121/70).

⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 116/67).

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty (SNS, p. 331/187).

⁷⁹ See Balthasar (1947).

But Merleau-Ponty evidently discerned a noteworthy difference between Lucifer and Prometheus, one that was relevant to his account of heroism. Although he offered few clues as to what exactly he had in mind, a sound account can be pieced together.

4.1 Lucifer

Although the theme surfaces in other relevant ways,⁸⁰ concerning Lucifer I submit that we are dealing with an allusion to Roger Caillois. In connection with his idea of militant orthodoxy,⁸¹ not only was Caillois *the* proponent of Luciferian thinking at the time, but he also had a related interest in Saint-Exupéry.

Caillois presented Lucifer as a mythic prototype of knowing, “the incarnation of a new epistemological spirit,” the figure of an “aggressive” and “conquering” vision of knowledge.⁸² As the “demon or angel of lucidity,” Caillois “viewed Lucifer as the truly effective rebel.”⁸³ In this way, Lucifer superseded nineteenth-century Romantic Satanism—here Caillois made an important distinction. For Satanism was ultimately ineffectual with respect to dealing with the sources of the alienation to which it was opposed. “Satanic rebels emanating from Romanticism foresee no recourse other than ongoing profanation or an inevitable identification with other marginal or disenfranchised groups.”⁸⁴ In contrast, the figure of Lucifer represented a more transgressive, albeit elitist, individualism which, based on scientific and Nietzschean self-mastery, is able to maintain the critical demands of Romantic Satanism, but with an intensified lucidity and practical consequence.

Calculating and conquering, [Lucifer] did not believe that revolt was sufficient in and of itself, nor that bursts of instinct always led to victory. His lucidity, which he viewed as his primary and most powerful weapon, gave him a coolly detached and sometimes cynical indifference, which made him an accurate accountant of reality.⁸⁵

In this way, “Lucifer is entirely focused on what is possible and undertakes it without delay. He is Satan in action; an intelligent Satan; and, in a certain sense, a courageous Satan.”⁸⁶

This movement from the Satanic to the Luciferian “supposes a certain education of our sense of rebellion, that would take it from riotousness to a broadly imperialist

⁸⁰ For example, *Lucifer* was the original working title of Sartre’s *Les Chemins de la liberté* (Sartre 1971, p. 27).

⁸¹ Caillois (1936). Reprinted in Caillois (1938, pp. 209–222) as “Pour une fonction unitaire de l’esprit.”

⁸² Massonet (1998, p. 74).

⁸³ Caillois (2003, pp. 166, 144).

⁸⁴ Richman (2003, p. 36).

⁸⁵ Caillois (1937); cited in Caillois (2003, p. 171).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

attitude and would persuade it to subordinate its impulsive, unruly reactions to the necessity for discipline, calculation, and patience.”⁸⁷ Caillois asserted that “the Luciferian spirit” corresponds “to the moment in which rebellion turns into a will for power and, losing none of its passionate and subversive character, attributes to intelligence, to the cynical and lucid vision of reality, a role of prime importance for the realization of its plans. It is the passage from *agitation* to *action*.”⁸⁸

Key to this “passage” is the move from empty profanation to founding acts of sacralization. The latter were a preoccupation of much post-Durkheimian sociology in France, in particular for Caillois, whose main concern was with the oppressiveness and alienation wrought by social disorder. Thus, notwithstanding the Nietzschean themes, Caillois’ Luciferian hero also bears similarities to Hegelian world-historical individuals. In each case it is a matter of establishing order in the world. A crucial difference from the Hegelian view, however, is that what Caillois describes is ultimately arbitrary—there is no sense in which the civilization to which Luciferian praxis leads is in any way part of a larger rational scheme. That is, it cannot be justified transcendentally. At any rate, such is how Caillois saw Exupérien heroism. As a literary man of action, Saint-Exupéry represented the post-Satanic, mythic hero who “conquers and brings order to a domain of nascent and still feeble civilization.”⁸⁹ “Saint-Exupéry, as writer and aviator, best conveyed Caillois’ new cult of individual heroism.”⁹⁰

Merleau-Ponty clearly saw Exupérien heroism otherwise. Although in specific contexts he could valorize the Luciferian traits of cool aplomb, cerebral lucidity, and calculated practical intervention, what interested Merleau-Ponty in Saint-Exupéry was the complete *absence* of these traits. Specifically, the fact that Saint-Exupéry was so *un-Luciferian* that with an absolutely naïve idiosyncrasy he directly manifested the universality in terms of which political situations can be perceived as such in the first place. This is the sense in which Merleau-Ponty placed the heroic act outside politics and history. To be sure, Merleau-Ponty shared with Caillois a militant concern for bringing order out of disorder. But in his view, these are not states of affairs that can be objectively manipulated from above. Rather, they concern intersubjective phenomena of human relationality and communication, to which historical productivity is internal. There is no disjunction between ends and means—sociality is not separate from its founding moments. In this way, Merleau-Ponty took more seriously Caillois’ own militant postulate of “an ideal *unitary* undertaking, that would take as its task to set the *whole* of man’s being to work, in such a way as to make its different functions converge in a *continuous process of living creation*.”⁹¹

⁸⁷ Cited in Hollier (1988, p. 36).

⁸⁸ Caillois (1938, p. 199).

⁸⁹ Caillois (1971). This was originally the Preface to Saint-Exupéry (1953). As Saint-Exupéry himself stated of Aéropostale: “I do not admire men for serving the postal line, but I uphold the myth of the postal line because it forms such men” (1975, 69).

⁹⁰ Claudine Frank, in Caillois (2003, p. 37); cf. Caillois (1946; 1947).

⁹¹ Caillois (1938, p. 221, italics altered).

4.2 Prometheus

Caillois' "La naissance de Lucifer" was published alongside Bataille's "Van Gogh Prométhée,"⁹² and the contrast between Lucifer and Satan in terms of a constructiveness that goes beyond disruptive insubordination—a view to which Merleau-Ponty was sympathetic—reflects important disagreements between Caillois and Bataille. Because of the importance of the issue of sacrifice, consideration of Bataille's view of Van Gogh will, oddly enough, help shed light on Merleau-Ponty's view of Prometheus (and hence "man").⁹³

Bataille related contemporary cases of self-mutilation, in particular that of Van Gogh, to human-divine relationships in archaic religion, which he took to be mediated by sacrificial mutilation. Such acts, he thought, represented "the desire to resemble perfectly an ideal term, generally characterized in mythology as a solar god who tears and rips out his own organs."⁹⁴ Citing the work of Mauss and Hubert (1964), Bataille noted that unlike many acts of sacrifice performed by humans, which make use of animal avatars, "the god who sacrifices himself gives himself irrevocably. [...] The god, who is at the same time the sacrificer [*sic*], is one with the victim and sometimes even with the sacrificer. All the differing elements that enter into ordinary sacrifice here enter into each other and become mixed together."⁹⁵

Bataille argued, however, that Mauss and Hubert wrongly assumed that this was "only possible for mythical, that is ideal, beings." In his view, in cases of human self-mutilation there remain vestiges of this divine phenomenon. "There is [...] no reason to separate Van Gogh's ear [...] from Prometheus' famous liver."⁹⁶ "If one accepts the interpretation that identifies the purveying eagle [*aetos Prometheus*] with the god who stole fire from the wheel of the sun, then the tearing out of the liver presents a theme in conformity with the various legends of the 'sacrifice of the god'."⁹⁷ For Bataille, Prometheus and the eagle form a single system of self-mutilation, and in this way manifest the deepest significance of the spirit of sacrifice, to wit, "throwing oneself or something of oneself *out of oneself*." This is not fundamentally a matter of expiation or propitiation, but simply of the "radical *alteration*" of the person—self-mutilation epitomizes personal transformation that disrupts the social context. The claim is that this has "the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual."⁹⁸

Thus, for Bataille, Van Gogh is an instance of the sovereign Promethean gesture of self-transcendence, the unity of sacrificer and sacrificed. His self-mutilation is interpreted by Bataille as an expression of the sacrificial impulse at the root of

⁹² Bataille (1937); reprinted in Bataille (*Œuvres*, 1:497–500); translated as Bataille (1986).

⁹³ For present purposes, I will draw on Bataille (1930), an earlier and longer piece; reprinted in Bataille (*Œuvres*, 1:258–70); translated as "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh" in Bataille (1985, pp. 61–72).

⁹⁴ Bataille (1985, p. 66).

⁹⁵ Bataille (1985, pp. 69f).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

human religiosity in general, the aim of which is to overcome individuality by mimicking divine self-immolation. In particular, it exemplifies the “absolute dismemberment”—*déchirement absolu*, *absolute Zerrissenheit*—around which Bataille's reading of Hegel pivots: “Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment.”⁹⁹

Bataille thus rejected the Durkheimian view of sacrificial ritual as primarily reasonable and useful with respect to social order and unity, emphasizing instead its irrational, purposeless, and unassimilably destructive qualities. Whereas for Durkheim, sacrifice forged bonds of social integration, for Bataille it was primarily a matter of disintegration through insubordination, refusal, revolt. It was a subversive, self-divinizing act whereby a disenchanted individual *amputated* himself from the established social order and its values.¹⁰⁰

However, Bataille *did* think that sacrifice thus understood could also have a communally unifying function. Through this violent rupture of her empirical wholeness, the self-mutilator can also experience an ecstatic union with the whole. She can, that is, “come to embody and reflect the larger community, just as Durkheim's person does when [she] engages in sacrificial ritual.”¹⁰¹ For Bataille, sacrifice can generate an affective power that achieves a sort of interpenetration between self and other, such that “the different separate beings [acquire] life by losing themselves in *communication* with one another.”¹⁰²

Notwithstanding such gestures, Bataille's account of sacrifice remained, for Caillois, precisely the kind of Romantic Satanism which he thought should be superseded by the Luciferian spirit.¹⁰³ Fundamentally, this was because Bataille had an overly deathly view of the sacred, to which Lucifer offered a more vivacious alternative. Caillois' position “does not call for crime, transgression, or sacrifice; as the basis of sacred community, he highlights not death but a *reason to live*.”¹⁰⁴ In this way, “the cerebral Luciferian self-mastery” championed by Caillois offered a radical antithesis to the “ecstatic self-sacrifice of Van Gogh's life and work” that Bataille held up as a paradigm of Promethean self-overcoming.¹⁰⁵

Bataille's view of self-mutilation clearly shows the link between Prometheanism and self-sacrifice. Merleau-Ponty always disinclined from the Promethean myth,¹⁰⁶ and thus he did not accept Bataille's view, the upshot of which would be to analogize the proletariat and Van Gogh in terms of the need for self-directed violence. Yet it remains the case that Bataille's account of communication does

⁹⁹ See Bataille (1955).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Bataille (*Œuvres* 1:275f).

¹⁰¹ Stoekl (1992, pp. 51f).

¹⁰² Bataille (*Œuvres* 5:263; cf. 5:37).

¹⁰³ Cf. Claudine Frank, in Caillois (2003, pp. 27, 31, 167).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁰⁶ In reviewing Scheler's *Ressentiment* in 1935, Merleau-Ponty wrote that Promethean humanism is based in hatred, “the hatred of the wisdom and goodness of God. [...] Nature immediately loses in value since man has worth only inasmuch as he separates himself from nature and distances himself from it” (CR, pp. 27f; cf. EP, p. 36/43).

have affinities with Merleau-Ponty's own view. It is just that whereas Bataille invoked death, Merleau-Ponty spoke of vital universality. This puts Merleau-Ponty closer to Caillois, who also sought a more affirmative approach. But Merleau-Ponty rejected the arbitrariness of the Luciferian solution. For Merleau-Ponty, Caillois was not so fundamentally different from Bataille—he just deployed impersonally at the historical level the arbitrary violence that the latter internalized in the individual.

For Merleau-Ponty, what Caillois and Bataille have in common—and what distinguishes them from the historical apraxia shared by Kojève and Aron—is a genuine orientation toward transformative praxis. But in their respective admixtures of Hegelian and Nietzschean ideas, what they powerfully illustrate are *the impasses to which historical agency is led in the absence of an alternative philosophical interpretation of absolute knowledge*. Merleau-Ponty's construal of absolute knowledge as a possible “way of living” is his crucial (albeit mythic) gambit. For it supports his postulates of latent human universality and purposiveness. Whereas both Caillois and Bataille invoke a violent rupture, the one directing it outward, the other inward, Merleau-Ponty's founding gesture is one of *perceptual violence*.¹⁰⁷ It amounts to the decision to see heroism as an extra-historical manifestation of human productivity, and to make this the background of historical perception, against which vital communication *can* become at once the means and end of historical agency.

4.3 Marxism

Beyond Bataille, Merleau-Ponty's reference to Prometheus was surely also an allusion to Marx. It is well-known that Marx admired Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, and that he regarded Prometheus as a revolutionary figure of Greek mythology, appealing to him as a symbol of human divinity and self-emancipation: “Prometheus is the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar.”¹⁰⁸

It is often raised as a criticism of Marxism that it indulges in an overly strong motif of Promethean self-divinization in ways which could, in principle, be avoided.¹⁰⁹ As Wessell argued, however, beyond being a “mythopoetic symbol in Marx's thinking,” the “salvational archetype” of Prometheus actually provides *the* “mythico-ontological root metaphor” for historical materialism. “The ‘myth’ of the fall, suffering, and ultimate self-redemption of Prometheus constitutes the dramatic model underlying and informing Marx's Marxism.”¹¹⁰ That is, this myth plays a crucial transcendental role by structuring the antepredicative background of Marxism's historical perception. In particular, owing to its dual role in the soteriological myth as Prometheus both bound and unbound, the proletariat in this view comes to embody “an absolute agonal tension”—the “ontological form of the proletariat is *to be* a self-abolishing tension.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (PhP, pp. 415/361; xvi/xx).

¹⁰⁸ Marx (*Collected Works*, 1.31).

¹⁰⁹ Kolakowski (1978, pp. 412ff) makes an argument to this effect.

¹¹⁰ Wessell (1984, pp. 62–64); cf. 22, 38f, 189.

¹¹¹ Wessell (1984, p. 187).

For Merleau-Ponty, such is the main problem with classical Marxism. For it leads to seeing the revolutionary moment as the *self-annihilation* of the proletariat. Although this is meant *qua* exploited class, it still means, as Trần Đức Thảo later put it, that the historical struggle of the proletariat “implies an ultimate form of *sacrifice*.”¹¹² It was precisely to avoid this sort of lethal rupture that Merleau-Ponty sought to ground Marxism in the universal subjectivity of the contemporary hero. Presupposing the agonistic drama of the proletariat not only leads to distorted practical strategies, but it also imposes an ideological structure that conceals rather than reveals genuine political phenomena—most crucially, those of the possible emergence of genuine agencies of universality.

For Merleau-Ponty, the aim of a neo-Marxist hermeneutics would be to “decipher events, discover in them a common meaning and thereby grasp a leading thread which, without dispensing us from fresh analysis at every stage, allows us to orient ourselves toward events.” Far from any utopianism or dogmatic philosophy of history, it would aim “to offer men a *perception of history* which would continuously clarify the lines of force and vectors of the present.”¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty's humanist myth was meant to provide the transcendental horizons for this perception. What is needed is to learn to see the world anew. Generalizing from production to productivity, Merleau-Ponty thus sought to reform Marxism by reconfiguring the perceptual field as the human world *that is to be made*, knowing that this means taking a new perceptual background on faith. “To perceive is to engage in a single stroke a whole future of experiences in a present that never strictly guarantees it—it is to believe in a world.”¹¹⁴ The singular human world as an unfinished historical project is the object of this militant *Weltglaube*—faith in the possibility of the complete realization of which is no arbitrary dream to the exact extent to which Exupérien heroism is accepted as a limit form of *être-au-monde* that evinces the living presence of a universal purposiveness.

5 Conclusion

The pivotal importance of this conception of heroism for Merleau-Ponty's early postwar political philosophy is evident. Just as evident, however, are some of the potential shortcomings with this position. In particular, its recourse to myth is philosophically questionable. Even if we can now see that Merleau-Ponty's heroic myth in effect marginalizes heroism by confining it to a transcendental role, it can still seem as if we are being asked to pull one over on ourselves.

This might not present a significant worry if we can construe heroism as an issue specific to Merleau-Ponty's political thought, and if—as many of his readers are eager to do—we sever that from his philosophical project proper. *But can we do that?* Recall that the motivation to look at “Man, the Hero” was to shed light on the ending of *Phenomenology of Perception*. It is clearly implied on the final page of

¹¹² Trần (1951, p. 318).

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty (HT, pp. 104f/98).

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty (PhP, pp. 343f/297).

that text that “the realization of philosophy”—not of political philosophy, but philosophy *per se*—occurs extra-philosophically. Enter the hero. The hero doesn’t *do* it, of course. Rather, in direct analogy to the political context, heroism provides experiential evidence of the productivity that the philosopher must take on faith.

This is an issue for Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. Specifically, it is a second-order matter of what, following Husserl and Fink, Merleau-Ponty referred to as the “phenomenology of phenomenology.” This relates to his recognition of the impossibility of a “complete reduction”—the impossibility of any complete thematization of the operative intentionalities on which phenomenology itself inescapably relies. Note that this methodological problem is in no way obviated—indeed, it is cast into sharper relief—by Merleau-Ponty’s focus on corporeality. Yet to the extent to which this problem persists, phenomenology remains in an unacceptable state of transcendental naïveté. Merleau-Ponty thus recognized that if transcendental philosophy is to be realized on a phenomenological basis, then it must be the case that the productivity it presupposes is naturally congruent with the goals of the project. Since this cannot be demonstrated in advance, Merleau-Ponty saw the need “to make room for faith,” so to speak, at the heart of his reinterpretation of phenomenology.

As outlined in *Phenomenology of Perception*, this reinterpretation is anchored on a heroic myth of absolute knowing. This is not necessarily a bad myth, and myth in general is not necessarily a bad thing. But it does pose urgent questions that call for further work. For the status of Merleau-Ponty’s *magnum opus* depends on the defensibility of this myth—one cannot legitimately find philosophical merit in the phenomenological analyses contained in this work, nor fully comprehend Merleau-Ponty’s own subsequent self-critique, without first coming to terms with his conception of “contemporary heroism.”¹¹⁵

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¹¹⁵ In addition to the anonymous reviewers at *Continental Philosophy Review*, I would like to thank Philip Buckley, George di Giovanni, and Alia Al-Saji for their comments on an earlier version of this work.

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* Unpublished notes from the late-1940s. Collated, paginated, and transcribed by Kerry Whiteside—see Whiteside (1988, pp. 312ff). I would like to thank Suzanne Merleau-Ponty and Kerry Whiteside for making copies of the originals as well as the transcription available to me. Original pagination is followed by transcription pagination in square brackets. At Mme. Merleau-Ponty's request, it should be noted that these materials were never intended for publication

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