

**Merleau-Ponty and Enchantment:
Living and Thinking with the Grain of Being**

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What is the truly real world, the lived, living world of experience? A phenomenological account of the lived world will be freed from common sense, on the one hand, and explanations and theories, on the other. It is a world we already know, but often do not know that we know. All of Merleau-Ponty's work is concerned with helping us be in touch with this world, not only cognitively, I will suggest, but also existentially and ethically.

Merleau-Ponty uses the theme of wildness as an essence, perhaps the fundamental essence, of human experience. But perhaps a better name for this essence is to say that the nature of experience for Merleau-Ponty is always *enchanted*. We live a life of enchantment in an enchanted world.

Enchantment in the late 1990s and the decade and a half after was a key topic for philosophers, political theorists, and theologians. Prominent figures such as William Connolly, Jane Bennett, and Charles Taylor wrote about the enchantment or disenchantment of the modern world.¹ So it is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty's world of experiencing, which includes the experiencer and the experienced, can be interpreted as an exciting, enchanted world.

What are the essences of Merleau-Ponty's dangerous, enchanted world—what he calls this “basic experience of the world” (ix)? In the “Preface” to *Phenomenology of Perception* we see a story being developed within and across themes to give voice to the nature of this world. Several quotations will highlight this story. Merleau-Ponty notes that “mystery defines” the

experienced world (xxiii) and “reveals that world as strange and paradoxical” (xv). The experienced world’s being and truth “is inexhaustible” (xix). The reality of the world is a dynamic “upsurge” (xv) defined by “opacity and . . . transcendence” (xiii). Experience and its world therefore are always to some degree forcing disbelief in us vis-à-vis our previous understandings: “The real . . . does not await our judgment before incorporating the most surprising phenomena, or before rejecting the most plausible figments of our imagination” (xi). Therefore “wonder” is the only proper existential and epistemic orientation to this primordial, surprising, and implausible world of experience (xv) because experience in this world is for all these reasons akin to a “miracle” (xxiii). What a story!

This world described is our first experiential world, and this language of mystery, inexhaustibility, opacity, transcendence, surprise, and implausibility *just is* our first tongue, so to speak, in how we learn and know the world. (Here we can think of one of Merleau-Ponty’s favorite terms: “ambiguity.”) The problem, though, to reiterate, is that we forget this mother tongue—and so Merleau-Ponty is trying to put us back in touch with it. When he says, famously, that we are “condemned to meaning” (xxii), it is *this* meaning as enchantment that he is addressing, meaning or essence that comes before all others.

This world of meaning can be wonderful. The world’s upsurges and transcendences can include welcoming a new beloved baby, a new friendship, a new spouse; entering new vistas of passion and truth in art, music, and literature; enjoying one’s body in new ways; discovering fresh depths in the natural, intersubjective, and cultural worlds. We love these enchantments.

But this world is also dangerous, threatening, opaque, paradoxical, and strange. The world can be, of course, dangerous and threatening when it is destructive. So if newness can be a gift, it can also be a curse. A baby and a tumor are both upsurges in being. If the new strangeness

of experience can open up new, more vital ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, it can also force us into debilitating forms of chaos and loss. If the world is always an upsurge transcending what it used to be, this transcendence can be a boon or a bane. We fear these enchantments.

What ultimately needs to be said, however, is that the world of experience as transcendence, upsurge, becoming, and strangeness—eliciting wonder in the face of the miracle of it—remains dangerous in every dimension. Experience that is enchanted recognizes the many ways in which meaning is *not ever* present. Renaud Barbaras claims that Merleau-Ponty's work lets us "grasp the being of the world as the veiling of sense, as wild *logos*," and one way of taking this remark is to see the world as enchanted, for enchantment always gives sense even as it hides it and denies it in other ways.² Enchanted experience can and will threaten the sense of myself, the sedimentations, plausibilities, and anticipations of my experience to which I am accustomed. New experiences in art, literature, philosophy, and music can upend my sense of what is beautiful, good, and true; new experiences of my body, pleasurable or painful, can be disruptive to my identity; new experiences of others, friends and enemies, can reorient my passions, loves, and hates. Every enchanted experience that is revolutionary, strange, and paradoxical—which is to say *experience, tout court*—is dangerous and threatening in its own way, because enchantment is the opposite of sedimentation and its coherences. This world of experience is shot through with paradox, strangeness, miracle, becoming, transcendence, and upsurge—enchantment over which we have little control—that is properly encountered when we adopt a posture and attunement of wonder and respect.

So how to inhabit this word? If enchantment describes the theme of experience, its most general essential structure, then how does the task of description that means to draw us into

enchantment work? Can description itself remain the same? The answer is no. The philosophical work of description has to become enchanted itself. What could it mean for it to do so?

Here remember Charles Taylor's point that all philosophies, even the most abstract, have existential purposes—or, to push the point, existential natures or essences. Taylor has himself shown the “ethics” that are latent in Descartes's cogito or Locke's epistemology.³ For Merleau-Ponty, one of the major essences of traditional thinking, one of its major existential natures, has been timelessness. What this means is not only that, for example, Descartes intended the cogito as an unchanging reality or that Leibniz argued that reality *is* previously, presently, and futurely monadologically constituted. Rather, the idea in traditional philosophy was that truth could be fully stated in the present. Because there is always a cogito, there is now a statement “there is the cogito” that was fully true—or at least aspired to be.

Phenomenological description is crucial because it puts us back in touch with enchantment, while much of previous philosophy tried to thwart enchantment. Merleau-Ponty's philosophical description is presenting us with a enchanted world of experience to inhabit. This world is strange, paradoxical, enchanted, inexhaustible; defined by becoming, not being; manifesting mystery and miracle, and transcending perpetually our every settled conception of it. In this world we are always to some extent in the dark: its unrelenting surprises and implausibilities repeatedly cause us to lose our expected footing, to be alienated from any habitual or familiar patterns of meaning or anticipation. It is a dangerous and difficult world because our inherited and contemporary identities and patterns of experience are always being threatened by the experiential world's defiant mutability. Into this dangerous world of experience Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers us an invitation.

Merleau-Ponty's work to invest us in enchantment through phenomenological description means that we are no longer trading in a philosophy, such as Kant's, that, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "makes the world immanent in the subject, instead of being filled with wonder at it" just as it is (*PhP*, xv). The way I would parse this remark is to say that we are no longer in a world defined by what present sedimented experience and its anticipations and plausibilities will allow or comprehend. Rather, phenomenology turns us to a perspective of "attentiveness and wonder" and "awareness" (xxiv). We take up a posture of letting experience be what it is—enchanted—and refusing to manipulate it, reconstruct it, or master it. And we have to note that Merleau-Ponty is not speaking only of our thinking about the world but of our *being in* the world.

This is why *pensée de survol*, as a form of metaphysics, is so problematic: first, because it does not let our experience be what it is; second, because it does not move us to participate in the "anonymous," fundamental stream of experience.⁴ Because concrete experience is dangerous—it is, we have seen, a world mysterious, inexhaustible, opaque, transcendent, surprising, implausible, a world that is enchanted and, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in his later work, *wild*—this world of experience threatens our identities and self-motivated aspirations.⁵ So fear pushes us to avoid the dangerous contours of concrete experience by erecting defensive forms of thought to suppress, control, and predict the future of our world of experience. And this control is exactly what *pensée de survol* and its metaphysical reconstructions purport to deliver.

These defensive forms of thought range widely: the biology purporting to reveal the specific neurotransmissions underlying depression; the psychology claiming to discern human behavior's real motivations; the economics telling us how markets really work; philosophies like Leibniz's or Aristotle's offering definitions of being and beings. Each approach trades in what Merleau-Ponty calls "reconstruction" (x). He continues: "The world is there before any possible

analysis of mine, and it would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to different perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior reality” (xi). While *pensée de survol*, metaphysics, and science claim to deliver the ultimate nature of reality, they are actually forms of defensive fiction; they take the stream of fundamental experience and break, bend, and pull it into new shapes more amenable to current identities and wishes. Analysis is not a way of going deeper into truth—it is, perhaps counterintuitively, a way of escaping from truth into a realm of constructions and abstractions that serve a defensive purpose. Such knowledge is abstracted, derived, and schematized from pre-reflective experience (x). Schematizing, abstracting, and deriving are all forms of reaction and manipulation: recoiling from an undesirable phenomenon and trying to turn it into something different that will be more salutary to understand and more malleable to shape.

What these diverse forms of thought share is a common resistance: resistance to “the basic experience of the world” (ix). Whereas primordial experience is mysterious, defensive thought seeks only definition, clarity, and precision. Whereas concrete experience is unpredictable and implausible, defensive thought seeks only the predictable and plausible. Whereas pre-reflective experience approaches the inexhaustibility of being in a posture of wonder, defensive thought seeks to engage being only in order to control it for the sake of preserving our current identities and advancing our present wishes.

Now, it is true that Merleau-Ponty never explicitly elucidated the way in which much previous thinking in philosophy and the sciences has operated via an ethics of resisting and defending against the strongest grains of concrete experience. But we can recall how he lays out a radical dichotomy between the logic of the world of science and *pensée de survol*, which he

describes in terms of artifice and mendacity, on the one hand, and the world of experience, which he describes in terms of mystery and miracle. So it seems difficult to deny that he is making an argument against the value of one form of life and for the value of another: his argument is, like Freud's was, an ethical argument for living a certain kind of life, phenomenological life.

Approaches such as empiricism, rationalism, and idealism/intellectuality are problematic not only because they shield us from knowing the experiential plan; they are problematic because we use them as defenses for avoiding *living* within the experiential plane. Merleau-Ponty's use of phenomenological description to critique forms of *pensée de survol* means to show that the phenomenological way of *life* renounces transcendent metaphysics as so many defenses that would tempt us to evade or manipulate the actuality of immediate, spontaneous experience to avoid its dangers or strangeness.

The kind of life Merleau-Ponty recommends, the life of experiencing the world as mystery and miracle, is the opposite of manipulation: it is a life that respects "the aseity of things," the way things go of their own accord, and not as human will refashions them to be (xvii). This life of experience makes a confession: "The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making" (xi–xii). He insists, for example, that one's self is not a causally understandable entity—we cannot discern its scientifically available "biological, psychological, or sociological" causes and effects and think we have done with it (ix). The world in its otherness, a world whose law(s) we cannot ever fully know, must remain—and it does remain, when we stay in the realm of phenomenological life rather than refusing this life defensively. The world sustains its miracles and its mysteries, its surprises and implausibilities.⁶

The secondary literature bears this reading out as well. Romand Coles writes of the way that "Merleau-Ponty seeks to explore the world as it is given to us in our primitive experiential

contact with being,” an exploration in which being is necessarily permeated with “depth” which makes our experience of the world “a continual questioning engagement” of a world of being we never fully possess.⁷ In a more recent study Emmanuel Alloa speaks of the experienced world as “being-at-a-distance...as an obstacle to the grasping of being with no remainder.”⁸ For Alloa’s Merleau-Ponty, confronting this world of experience entails our perpetual “unlearning what we believed we knew.”⁹ Hence the experienced world is not only on what Alloa calls “the side of presence.”¹⁰

Now it might seem, again, that this other form of life, the one Merleau-Ponty endorses, takes shape as an intellectually self-sacrificing return to the pre-reflective. But to say so would be a mistake. Merleau-Ponty wants us not to own, control, or masterfully possess the world but, rather, to be in relationship with it: “I am open to the world. . . . I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it” (xix). Merleau-Ponty does not want merely to restore us to the pre-reflective register but, rather, to a place where we are in communication with the pre-reflective world. The life of this kind of communication is phenomenological life, and the practice of investing ourselves more deeply in it is phenomenological description. Here philosophy still has a profound role to play in helping us live authentically—not by analyzing or reconstructing artificially and mendaciously but, rather, rather by the work of clarifying and illuminating *description* for life. Philosophy as description carries with, is in relationship with, experience in its enchantment just as it goes, without defenses or resistances (or with as few as possible). This philosophy would take a kind of nonviolent approach to describing, an approach both patient and without presuppositions (as much as possible).

In this context we can understand even more deeply the nature of philosophy for Merleau-Ponty. He wrote: “Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art,

the act of bringing truth into being” (xxiii). This way of speaking might make some readers think he is recommending a certain kind of romanticism or doxastic voluntarism, but he is not. Rather, he is reminding us that thought that only reflects the preexisting truth of the world is thought that only reflects what we now take to be the truth of the world. This thinking would seek to eliminate the being of the world’s potential and the reality of future becoming. Just as the truth of being is always coming-into-being in unpredictable and implausible ways, so philosophy has to be intrinsically, not just historically, coming-into-being.

Thus Merleau-Ponty is enacting phenomenological life through phenomenological thinking—as it was written and as it is read. Through our phenomenological reflection we are invested into phenomenology as a way of life, because it is our phenomenological life that expresses, as one of its modes of being, phenomenology as reflective cognition. So we can see why in the “Preface” Merleau-Ponty insists on “conceiving the subject as a process of transcendence towards the world” (xv). This work of “conceiving” is the work of the writing of the “Preface” and indeed will define Merleau-Ponty’s entire project in *Phenomenology of Perception*. The subject—of concrete experience *and* reflective experience—is coming into participation in the phenomeno-logic of the world.

What is remarkable is that Merleau-Ponty’s “Preface” is self-implicating for both its writer and its readers. That is, it is not only that the words and the thoughts Merleau-Ponty wrote and we read, first, communicate a way of thinking that invites us into, second, a way of being. Rather, in writing phenomenology Merleau-Ponty was already living phenomenologically, and as we read so do we. To say so certainly does *not* mean that reading or writing phenomenology is a sufficient participation in the world’s phenomenological being, much less the only way in which phenomenological life is lived. But it is one way to do so. Indeed it is perhaps the way that

Merleau-Ponty himself had to do so, since it is a philosophical way into phenomenological life—even more, a philosophical way *as* phenomenological life—fitting for a philosopher seeking to be more in touch with and attuned to experience and its dangerous dimensions.

This whole vision is nicely summarized in a passage whose full meaning can now become clear. Merleau-Ponty says: “consciousness itself as a project of the world, meant for a world which it neither embraces nor possesses, but towards which it is perpetually directed” (xx). Consciousness, including reflective philosophical consciousness, is a creation of the world that is a means of investing us in the world. This world, as Merleau-Ponty has taught us just in this “Preface,” is a world we experience as mysterious and inexhaustible, implausible and unpredictable, paradoxical and strange, and a world we will continue to experience in these ways. Writing phenomenology was a therapeutic way for Merleau-Ponty to participate in the experience of the world, and his writings provide a therapeutic way for us to do the same. He says: “phenomenology’s task was to reveal the mystery of the world and reason” (xxiv). Phenomenology is a mysterious reflection that participates in the mysterious world. Because of his awareness of “the world as strange and paradoxical” (xv), Merleau-Ponty confesses, “the world . . . I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible” (xviii–xix). Our experience of the world is abundant, possessed of a fullness of truth that our concepts, even our phenomenological concepts, can only run behind to catch fragments of experience’s truth and reality. Philosophy itself has to be done strangely, paradoxically, mysteriously. Phenomenological reason does not supplant the mystery, so to speak—it deepens the mystery as it deepens our wonder before the mystery of reality.¹¹

We thus might call the philosophical and existential ethos Merleau-Ponty is proposing a nonviolent practice of philosophical description arises from and returns to a more nonviolent

participation in being. To be sure, this life is not unviolent in every way, but it is unviolent in the sense that it follows and carries with enchanted experience in the experiential world in all its vicissitudes and surprises, welcome or otherwise.

Here philosophy as description is an improvement over any philosophies or work of negation and manipulation. It is a kind of nonviolent, receptive philosophy that strives to let the being of experience, the world of experience, the world that experience experiences, to be in its enchantment—in all the ways described. The real currents of experience are allowed to be known as real in all their becoming before we attempt to understand experience's underpinnings causally or metaphysically (empiricist or idealist) and before we attempt to manipulate experience into something more amenable to or controllable within our sedimented and anticipatory horizons. Whereas traditional philosophy and science involve the attempt to construct and reconstruct experience, description is a way of nonviolently accepting experience, knowing it just as it manifests itself in time to our intuition and our vision of its essences and, concurrently with and as our knowing, our going more deeply into the dimensions of enchantment, a project of living that is both the soil and the aim and the flower of our work of description.

In sum, Merleau-Ponty's work offers a therapy for assisting us in living more deeply into the often hazardous plane of experience. While this plane may initially be anonymous—a kind of experience that we paradoxically do not experience ourselves experiencing in our actual psychological life—Merleau-Ponty is trying guide us into alignment with this anonymous but always present grain so that it is not so anonymous anymore. Experience is always already difficult, dangerous, disturbing in many ways—enchanted—but we resist these structuring, constitutive essences of our experience with their own strange momentums. The experience that

is closest to us threatens us, so we try to live out of sync with the impulses to these most true grains of experience. We try to protect ourselves from experience. So my current psychological experience may not feel as if its “experiencing” and “experienced world” are enchanted or unviolent. But here, again, Merleau-Ponty would think that we are here trying to live against the truest grain of experiencing that life is always moving us towards. To live against this fundamental grain of experience is to live a lie.

Here I note that Husserl seems to have thought of his own phenomenological project as an ethical project. That is to say, Husserl offered not only a phenomenological ethics, but phenomenology as an ethics. Here Husserl is in a late remark: “Perhaps it will even become manifest that the total phenomenological attitude and the epoché belonging to it are destined in essence to effect, at first, a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion, which, then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to mankind as such.”¹² I have sought to bring out Merleau-Ponty’s own conception of how the practice of phenomenology involved such a radical personal and existential transformation—indeed perhaps the most important kind of such transformation. Phenomenology aims not only to help us know experience; it aims to help us enter experience, to experience experience itself. This existential transformation is the telos of Merleau-Ponty’s work.

Thus Merleau-Ponty tries to help us overcome this self-protective but inauthentic sense of self so as to acknowledge and somehow live within the terms of experience—living unviolently and taking time with all of experience’s difficult, dangerous, disturbing dimension—with its enchantments. He wants life to be able to live wildly, wants the world of experience to be able to breathe in all its wildness. And Merleau-Ponty knows that the decision to enter into this way of

life, wild and enchanted, is “a decision on which we stake our life” (xxiii). This decision, further, involves “a violent act which is validated by being performed” (xxiii), a violent act against all that would protect us from the kind of non-violence I have tried to describe. To make this violent decision to make the anonymous the known, the resisted the embraced, the wild more at home while sustaining its wildness, the complacent and ordinary into the enchanted—this project is Merleau-Ponty’s.

¹ See William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

² Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 67.

³ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 143–76.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty speaks of experience’s “anonymity” in several places in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

⁵ See, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible, Followed By Working Notes*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 170.

⁶ See Christopher Ben Simpson, *Merleau-Ponty and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁷ Romand Coles, *Self/Power/Other: Political Theory and Dialogical Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 107 and 108.

⁸ Emmanuel Alloa, *Resistance of the Sensible World: An Introduction to Merleau-Ponty*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 86.

⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹⁰ Ibid., 98.

¹¹ See Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) for more reflections on the relationship between wonder and philosophy.

¹² Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 137. I thank Alessio Rotundo for calling this matter to my attention.