

# The Passivity of Institution in Merleau-Ponty: Pandemic Thinking

*Rajiv Kaushik\**  
rkaushik@brocku.ca

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's lectures on institution and his lectures on passivity. I argue that the relationship depends on Merleau-Ponty's internal critique of institution as outlined in Husserl's oeuvre. That is, institution is not only human institution, which rests on temporality and time-consciousness (and so concerns memory, history, culture, etc), but also animal, biological and even virological, which rests on a certain, non-euclidian space of the body. Merleau-Ponty's focus in the course is animal institution: animal morphology, menstruation, puberty, etc. These are what tie institution and passivity together, and especially the passivity that Merleau-Ponty calls the "symbolic matrix", the touchstone of which is the "implex". While the paper discusses Merleau-Ponty's critique of Husserl and the consequent understanding of a passivity *in* institution, it opens the possibility that the virological may be yet another kind of passivity that has instituted a new trajectory in human institution. This is highlighted in the very word "pandemic",

## 1. Introduction

This age of the novel coronavirus should have once and for all settled the question of *whether* a public sphere intervenes into the interior life of the personal subject. We measure our personal wellbeing in terms of vaccination rates; we're all aware, I think, of something called "covid brain," a disruption in even our powers of concentration; our sense of time is not what it used to be. It is a curious problem: in a pandemic, our life is so guided by monotony – *sameness* or *continuity* – that it leads to a certain fuzzy-headedness. How is it possible that unperturbed consciousness is itself the occasion for disruption?

\* Brock University, Canada.

The very terms, public and personal, prevent us from clarifying how this might be. This clarification is however the task of Husserl's phenomenology, especially in his later considerations of *Stiftung* or *Ur-Stiftung* – “institution,” “establishment” or “primal institution,” “primal establishment.” For Husserl, *Stiftung* concerns normativity formation. It functions below the surficial level of intentional correlation, at the original stream and genesis of this correlation in the lifeworld of the phenomena. That is, in a world with which we are practically engaged and in which we live unreflexively. This is still a transcendental, he argues, even a more radical transcendental, although it has a meaning not of our own individual making and is inter-subjective or even historico-cultural. These inter-subjective and historico-cultural meanings “make up a single indivisible, interrelated complex of life”<sup>1</sup> without which there would be nothing more than “dead sediments.”<sup>2</sup> That is, were it not for the entire complex of subjective life, history and culture would dead and inactive. They would not be at all. According to Husserl, then, it would be impossible to conceive the sedimentation of meaning over the course of history except as something within the entire complex of subjectivity; and this subjectivity betrays its own time and happens according to its own original-stream. Here, institution is a temporal rather than spatial notion for Husserl; in fact, because of this temporality the space of things and their historico-cultural meaning are accomplished. On this basis, we can say that, for Husserl, all institution is human institution.

On the other hand, the above pandemic phenomena are in some sense not only human institutions. They of course involve a virus, and ultimately it is this virus that sets everything into place. Even a “pandemic,” a disease or illness that spreads over a whole people, marks a shift of human institution according to a non-human event. It is significant that, toward the end of the published working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, in describing Euclidean geometry – famously itself a moment of institution, according to Husserl – Merleau-Ponty says that “perception masks itself to itself, makes itself Euclidean.”<sup>3</sup> He says later in the same note, “*The key is in this idea that perception qua wild perception is of itself ignorance of itself, imperception,*

<sup>1</sup> In *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. Walter Biemel, *Husserliana VI* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1954) p. 149

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) p. 213. Henceforth referred to as *VI*.

## The Passivity of Institution in Merleau-Ponty

tends of itself to see itself as an act and to forget itself as latent intentionality, as *being at* —Same Problem: how every philosophy is language and nonetheless consists in rediscovering silence.”<sup>4</sup> And earlier, he says: “What I maintain is that: 1. there is an informing of perception by culture which enables us to say that culture is perceived —There is a dilatation of perception, a carrying over of the *Aha Erlebnis* of “natural” perception to instrumental relations (for example chimpanzees) which obliges us to put in continuity the perceptual openness to the world (*logos endiathetos*) and the openness to a cultural world (acquisition of the use of instruments).”<sup>5</sup> Here, Merleau-Ponty has very casually inserted a critique of human institution. To take the great example of our age again, the pandemic is a human institution brought about by a natural institution, but this natural institution is precisely what is missed in Husserl’s conception. The natural institution is the “silent” “being at” within the human one. It is however a mistake to think that Merleau-Ponty is resorting to a biological essentialism. If, according to him the public sphere is not only human institution, then natural institution does not have a teleology independent from the human or to which the human submits. Part of this thesis can be found in Merleau-Ponty’s nature course lectures, which are dedicated to outlining a thesis of natural “development” without utility.<sup>6</sup> It is also explicitly expressed in the institution course, where he critiques both human institution and animal institution.<sup>7</sup>

The natural and animal institutions may not be clearly distinguished by Merleau-Ponty – a virological institution may not exactly be an animal one. However, Merleau-Ponty’s use of “animal” to relate to the “implex,” which, as we will see, includes the heart and lungs and their own beatings and undulations, is quite clear. Distinguishing these belongs to a project beyond the scope of this paper. More importantly, I think, in the institution course the convergence between human and animal institution is a “symbolic” dimension according to which the public and the personal are oriented as well as made distinct from one another. It is just this critique and this dimension I want to consider here.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, translated by Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003). Henceforth referred to as *N*.

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954-1955)* translated by Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010). Henceforth referred to as *IP*.

## 2. Institution and its Latent Passivity

Early in the institution lecture notes, Merleau-Ponty says that “time is the very model of institution.”<sup>8</sup> Very often this comment is taken as a guiding principle that orients all our readings of the course. That explains why the literature on institution in Merleau-Ponty focuses on the relation between institution and memory, culture, or history, all conceived primarily in terms of their temporality. The apparent primacy of time in *Stiftung* obfuscates, in my estimation, the originality of Merleau-Ponty’s adoption of the term from Husserl, and makes it difficult to fathom what, in these same early remarks of the course, he means when he says that institution is a “projection-introjection,” an intersubjectivity that is also a “symbolic field,” and has “[s]ense as divergence, difference, not closed.”<sup>9</sup> These comments signal that, though time might be the very model of institution, the *time of institution* demands something exceeding it. If, in institution, time is “not closed” but a “divergence” or “difference,” we can wonder what the time of institution opens out onto and what ruptures or disrupts it. In fact, since institution is “not closed” and of “difference,” we can speculate that space disrupts and yet is not in contradistinction to it. And, since institution is an “projection-introjection” or a “symbolic field,” we can also point out that, since this space disrupts and yet internally constitutes institution, it is a space impossible to be accessed directly or through an act of consciousness. It is not a coincidence, then, that Merleau-Ponty’s institution course is coupled with his passivity course; passivity is in the background even in the opening remarks of the institution notes.

The simple equation between temporality and *Stiftung* would however capitulate to Husserl’s introduction of the term in the later writings such as *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, “Origins of Geometry,” and manuscript notes like such as the one on the originary-ark of the earth-ground. *Stiftung* is central to the project of *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, for example. The notion of objectivity – the idea that thought overlaps with the thing about which it thinks – is an established notion. Whereas phenomenology pursues the insight of “coincidence” (*Deckung*) as what establishes this notion. The institution of objectivity is in other words underwritten by precisely the intentional correlation between consciousness and world that Husserl wants to uncover. Here, every consciousness is at the same time a manifestation of the being of the

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 7

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 6-7

## The Passivity of Institution in Merleau-Ponty

world as it is and not just as a mere appearance. This correlation is lateral in the sense that it is not subject to any further conceptual or propositional order. Just the opposite: the awareness of the world involves a direct apprehension of the given without higher level intellectual acts like mediating representations or images. We should not take oft-repeated phrases like “mental acts” or “acts of consciousness” to imply the spontaneous inventions of an ego but rather to refer to the given and to its genuine uncovering. Husserl already warns in the *Logical Investigations*, “we must steer clear of the word’s original meaning: all thought of activity must be rigidly excluded.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, where there is a lack of invention, or a lack of representation, this is precisely where Husserl finds a logic to the perceptually given (*Deckungssynthese*).

Such perception is passive rather than objective, and in it lies a continuous synthesis between consciousness and world unfolding according to essential laws. Husserl shows that this is hardly controversial. For example, on consideration, I see things as spatial objects because I am presented with one side together with its non-presented sides and I am situated in relation to both sides at once. I must be able to move around the thing for its non-present sides to go from hidden to perceived. Thus, a double movement: on the side of the spatial thing, the thing is distended into a horizon which must constantly move into view; on the side of the consciousness, there is some aspect of its life opened out into that same distended horizon for it to then become thing-oriented. Nothing here is given as a sequence of “now-moments” because such a sequence would not permit the constitution of a continuous unity, neither of the spatial thing nor of the stream of consciousness. This is why Husserl declares a “field of passive doxa” where world and experience are treated together as the “horizon of all possible judgmental substrates.”<sup>11</sup> There is, in other words, a horizational structure to both the being of consciousness and the being of the world; and only in this horizon can consciousness “hold” on to the world. The appropriate response to the change in horizon, as I move around the spatial thing, is not a change from one mental representation to another but a shift in “holds” within that experience. Husserl even speaks of an “affective allure” to

<sup>10</sup> Hua 19, 393 (V § 13)

<sup>11</sup> I am borrowing the phraseology from § 9 of the 1929–1930 manuscripts, in which Husserl appears to have first treated passivity and which were published in 1939 as *Erfahrung und Urteil*. See Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe (Hamburg: Meiner, 7th ed., 1999)

which consciousness continually attends, without which there would not be consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, this also means that perception has an inherent normative dimension which prefigures its previous and futural attentions. There is a certain kind of awareness within the pre-given that becomes evident in how we behave, in the way we anticipate the perceptual world to be and in all the ways I access it – in my gait, posture, stance, etc. In all these, there is a reference point that surpasses both my consciousness and the world. I am always trying to go to the “thing itself,” and this “thing itself” becomes a norm in that engagement. In fact, in addition to “the horizon of all possible judgmental substrates,” Husserl refers to this level of passivity as a “totality of typification (*Totalitätstypik*)”<sup>13</sup> and describes it as a “concrete a priori.”<sup>14</sup> The norm is an a priori because it lies in the essence of my practical engagements with the world to transcend the specific perceptions I have in those engagements. Meanwhile, my specific engagements must be more or less appropriate modes of attempting to reach this a priori and bring it into appearance. Take for example Husserl’s discussion of “round” as a “type” of thing. There may be many disparate things that share this type – wheel, clock, rock, etc. The acquisition of the type, “round,” from different things demands what Husserl calls the “praxis of variation.” I can begin to discern that, though the wheel, clock, and rock have many incomparable qualities, they nonetheless have similar “limit-shapes.” That is, they have similar outer

<sup>12</sup> Bernet is mostly speaking of the notion of affectivity that arises from a claim like Husserl’s about the “field of passive doxa” above. Husserl writes, for example, “affection primarily follows the constitutive process of becoming.” Edmund Husserl, *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten* (1918–1926), ed. Margot Fleischer, Husserliana XI (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1966), 153. Husserl goes so far as to distinguish between a primal “affective allure” of the object’s subsoil and the object’s givenness, in which “the ego complies with the allure and has turned toward it, attentively laying hold of it.” p.162. Since the now-presentation is always already pregnant with an affective tendency that is bonded to the very latency and unfolding of the phenomenon, there is no such thing as neutrality in givenness. Affectivity is inescapably compulsory and contractual with an appearance in its appearing. Thus, according to Bernet, there is an “intentionality without an object in Husserl.” If so, he continues, this intentionality belongs not to “impressional self-manifestation” and “could scarcely be said to belong to a life of subjectivity.” Instead, affectivity plunges the subject into a paradox: “sensible revelation arises from within a withdrawal and concealment that benefits the massive and visible presence of the things of the world; and here the subject finds itself at a distance from itself, coinciding with this withdrawal and concealment” Bernet, Rudolf. “An Intentionality without Subject or Object?” *Man and World* 27 (1994) pp. 250, 251, 249.

<sup>13</sup> Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil* §8, p. 36

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## The Passivity of Institution in Merleau-Ponty

contours that distinguish them from the dissimilar things around them. These limit shapes, through the practice of “perfecting ‘again and again’,” become understood as “pure” and “invariant.”<sup>15</sup> Note that, here, “invariant” does not mean “necessary.” It is just that, in the pregiven world, there must be a process of delimitation with which my practical behaviour coincides and makes explicit. It is a mistake to turn these explicit delimitations into necessities. The “totality of typification” provides an a priori that is concrete in the sense it makes things what they are, but not necessary because, here, things are what they are in the context of experience.

Moreover, this totality of typification and its concrete a priori is not mine alone. The same horizontal dimension that continually unfolds in my experience also implies alien perspectives that I do not now see. There are always other points of view in the typified world that I do not, and cannot, take up, so that this world will appear with all its delimitations and invariants according to which I behave. This means intersubjectivity precedes both the appearing of the thing as an object as well as myself to myself, the transcendental condition for both subjectivity and the object world to appear. Here, typification also goes by the name of *Stiftung* as “institution” or “establishment.” Thus, intersubjectivity establishes or institutes some notion of a necessary a priori out of its concrete a priori orientation. It is because of intersubjectivity that I experience typicality as inviolable, and especially the typicality of objectivity. The whole life of subjectivity both produces the very norms that the subject also experiences as external to it. When I act in a typical way, I re-establish typicality in general. In fact, “institution” describes the entire structure of reciprocity: an *instituting* act produces and re-establishes the norm as an *instituted* one. I internalize a set of norms, reproduce them, and at the same time I exteriorize and take them to be independent from me.

At first glance, this also forms the basis for Merleau-Ponty’s remarks from *The Visible and the Invisible* concerning an “openness to a cultural world (acquisition of the use of instruments)...” Famously, the instituting act of “proper” utensil use reproduces the instituted norm. It also seems to be in this context that Merleau-Ponty makes his early comment from the institution lecture course that institution is a matter of introjection and projection, a matter of interiorization and exteriorization of norms and typical behaviour over the course of history. But in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty also speaks

<sup>15</sup> Husserl, *Krisis*, p. 149

of the “dilation of perception” that carries over the “*Aha Erlebnis* of ‘natural’ perception to instrumental relations.” It should also make us curious that, in the institution course, he borrows terminology belonging to Freud rather than Husserl. Later, again in *The Visible and the Invisible*, in a working note on the original stream of consciousness and reflection, Merleau-Ponty draws a connection between *Stiftung* as a “time of the body” and calls this connection a “model of symbolic matrices.” This is the same note in which he describes Husserl’s notion of institution as an original temporal stream of the retention of pasts into the present, and says that all phenomenological reflection, including reflection on the original stream, is “a peculiar case of sedimentation.”<sup>16</sup> That is, reflection is itself an institution; it has both an instituting and an instituted aspect. The question thus arises as to what is *instituting* in Husserl’s conception of institution. The apparent reciprocity between instituting and instituted in Husserl’s conception is not self-enclosed circuit. My thesis here is that Merleau-

<sup>16</sup> This is an extremely important 1959 Working Note to *The Visible and the Invisible* titled “*Einströmen* – Reflection.” It reads: “The *Einströmen*: a particular case of sedimentation, that is, a secondary passivity, that is, of latent intentionality -- it is Péguy’s *historical inscription* -- It is the fundamental structure of *Zeitigung*. *Urstiftung* of a point of time --- [Through?] this latent intentionality, intentionality ceases to be what it is in Kant: pure actuals, ceases to be a property of consciousness, of its “attitudes” and of its acts, to become intentional life -- It becomes the thread that binds, for example, my present to my past in its temporal place, such as it was (and not such as I reconquer it by an act of evocation) the possibility of this act rests on the primordial structure of retention as an interlocking of the pasts in one another plus a consciousness of this interlocking as a law (cf. the reflective iteration: the reflection reiterated ever anew would give only ‘always the same thing’ *immer wieder*) -- Husserl’s error is to have described the interlocking starting point from a *Präsensfeld* considered as without thickness, as immanent consciousness: it is transcendent consciousness, it is being at a distance, it is the double ground of my life of consciousness, and it is what makes there be able to be *Stiftung* not only of an instant but of a whole system of temporal indexes --time (already as time of the body, taximeter time of the corporeal schema) is the model of these symbolic matrices, which are openness upon being.” And in an especially key remark, it continues: “Because there is *Einströmen*, reflection is not adequation, coincidence: it would not pass into the *Strom* if it placed us back at the source of the *Strom*.” VI 173 This note was partially the subject of the Introduction to my book, *Merleau-Ponty between Philosophy and Symbolism: The Matrixed Ontology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2019), pp. xiv-xvii. I have subsequently written further about this in two articles: “The secondary passivity: Merleau-Ponty at the limit of phenomenology.” *Continental Philosophy Review* 54, 61–74 (2021); “Where is Negation in Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology? Symbolic Formation and the Implex”. *Research in Phenomenology* 51 372–393 (2021). In these works, I explore Merleau-Ponty’s internal criticism of Husserlian institution and phenomenology in general, and examine whether, after this criticism, phenomenology remains a descriptive philosophy. This has implications for the more profound sense of passivity in Merleau-Ponty: it is no longer an origin to which we return but an event that can only be evented by the method itself.



## The Passivity of Institution in Merleau-Ponty

Ponty's account of institution demands something allochthonous<sup>17</sup> to Husserl's – something unsedimented that originated from a distance or outside from its present position – and remains unaccounted, even accountable, and yet far from “dead.” Therefore, Merleau-Ponty says institution in Husserl involves a “symbolic matrix.”

### 3. The Human and Animal Institution Matrix: The Symbolic Matrix

Merleau-Ponty makes clear in his 1959-1960 lecture course on “Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology” that the very impossibility of returning to origins is not a drawback but precisely what allows the origins to accompany the “open community” and to work itself through what he also calls “apparatuses of knowledge (words, books, works).”<sup>18</sup> His thought is to break through “the telos of meaning that conceives temporality only ever as a confirming future perfect and of every event of sense as doubling something already present...”<sup>19</sup> There are reverberations in the institution lectures of this very theme. The question of the symbolic matrix is one of relation between human institution and non-human institution that does not itself rely on a telos of meaning but is nonetheless doubled in that telos. One only needs to read the lecture headings of the institution course to notice that, for Merleau-Ponty, although human institution is always implicated, not all institution is human institution. It also includes biochemical occurrences such as in puberty, menstruation, animal morphology, etc.

The first appearance of the phrase “symbolic matrix” in the course is quite early, when Merleau-Ponty introduces the relationship between human and animal as a “negative explanation.”<sup>20</sup> It is “not that the human *does not* have animal institution, but because of *the use he makes of it* and that usage transforms genuinely.”<sup>21</sup> The human institution is in effect a usage of an animal institution that, in its employment of the animal institution, becomes a human institution and displaces the latter. For example, Merleau-Ponty says, the

<sup>17</sup> As opposed to the “autochthonous,” a word more often associated with Merleau-Ponty's ontology.

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty. Maurice. *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, edited by Bettina Bergo and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002) p. 58

<sup>19</sup> Alloa, Emmanuel. *Looking Through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media*, translated by Nils. F. Schott (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021) p. 202

<sup>20</sup> *IP*, p. 19

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p 18

“human codifies it, legalizes, creates social symbols.”<sup>22</sup> There are conducts in animals. Merleau-Ponty gives the example, cited from Raymond Ruyer’s “*Les conceptions nouvelle de l’instinct*,” of the male jackdaw bird, purchased by Lorenz when it was already an adult, who was then treated exactly like the female of the species – the bird would try to draw Lorenz into its nest as, wooing him by pushing grains of bread stuck together with saliva. In the note concerning this example, quoted from Ruyer, Merleau-Ponty has in mind the “efficaciousness of the supra-normal triggers, especially the social triggers,” which “explains very probably the effects that people attribute to sexual or intra-species selection.” Here, there is an “expressive signal,” a “sense that is inherent in the signal.” We cannot just think of these conducts as part of a usefulness towards some evolutionary end. They are *themselves* expressive, and this fact is missed in the conception of their evolutionary utility.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, when these same conducts are found in the human, they become iterated as human codes of behaviour and, from the sole point of the view of the human institution, are thought as decidedly human and *not* animal. In that case, they are viewed, or can be viewed, as useful towards some social end. The immediate question is how, or according to what, does the human institution that seems teleological ignore its intersection with the animal institution that is not teleological? What exactly is the “negative explanation”? Actually, Merleau-Ponty says that the use and transformation of animal institution in human codes of behaviour “is not the *first* difference” between them. This “first difference” is precisely what he calls the “symbolic matrix” between human and animal. It stands in need of a “*recherche*” in the

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Merleau-Ponty makes the same argument in the nature lectures when examining animal instincts. For example, he warns against making utility the criterion for the reality of evolutionary mimicry. The point is that a multivalent, creative, and deceptive place of appearances prevails throughout nature, in fact is nature. In his examinations of natural mutations like the ones in mimicry or in his analyses of the microstoma, the point is to open up a new conception of being that accords with these descriptions. Natural events may happen *within* nature but nature is *nothing beyond* these natural events. Moreover, when discussing the eidetic method of early phenomenology, which distinguishes between the reflected and the unreflected as *Wesen* and *Tatsache*, he asks whether or not this distinction is “still maintained in [Husserl’s, R. K.] unpublished texts where, for example, sexual instinct is considered ‘from the transcendental point of view’. Does that not mean that non-representational ‘acts’ have an ontological function?” *VI*, p. 238 He answers that these non-representational events, such as instincts, cannot be actional so much as they are the ontological foundation of them, without which acts would be erased and hence not be at all.

## The Passivity of Institution in Merleau-Ponty

sense of Kafka's *Recherche d'un chien* (the French translation of *Forschungen Eines Hundes*) wherein "the image sensitizes itself."<sup>24</sup>

Kafka's short story is key. In it, the unnamed narrator, a dog, tells a number of episodes from its past and uses various quasi-scientific and rational methods to solve questions about its existence, like: "Whence does the Earth procure its food?" These apparently absurd descriptions express the dog's misapprehension or confusion about the world, because it relies on dogkind's apparent inability to realize the existence of its human owners. The image the dog has of itself is, in other words, sensitized to itself. It produces itself and fails to give an image of its own existence. Merleau-Ponty is saying here that the same is true in reverse, that human institution involves a self-image sensitized to itself and unable to realize the existence of its "animal owners." This is Merleau-Ponty account of Freud, describing the animal "haunting" the human and acknowledgeable only to the extent that the human makes the animal a "substitute" for herself:

We think about animals in order to disguise the human, as we think about the upper half of the body in order to disguise the lower...Animality as variant of humanity (Husserl)—La Fontaine: disguise the criticism. In order to take account of the positive interest, one must not conceive [the] animal [as] machine and [the] human [as] consciousness, nor even [the] animal [as] instinct and [the] human [as] consciousness [plus] instincts. We must conceive animal temporality as being already open to a future (domestic animals), therefore providing an image touching on the human, an image of the human who does not understand, weak human. [Therefore] the gentleness of the superego toward him, the humor of animality as parody of humanity. Thereby [think] not the animal-human, not the human-animal, but truly the one being the alter ego for the other, because we do not have the one *inside* time and the other *outside* time. The surpassing preserves. Kinship of finitudes. Our displacement onto the animal reflects the animalization of the human by the animal.<sup>25</sup>

This is a remarkable passage. Merleau-Ponty is pointing to the inadequacy of thinking the human as a special kind of animal with self-reflection or the animal as a creature without the self-reflection of the human. The problem is one of addition and subtraction. The demand for a "displacement onto the animal" that "reflects the animalization of the human by the animal" is critical. This is actually a rejection: the human sees herself as an animal because, in the animal,

<sup>24</sup> *IP*, pp. 18-19

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20-21

she sees what she denies as essential to her humanity, for example, irrationality, instinct, unreflexivity. In effect, the “animalization of the human by the animal” means that the relation between human and animal is not one of conflict between opposing categories, not inter-conflictual, but intra-conflictual. There is, in other words, a more profound criss-crossing between human and animal, and each has the other inasmuch as each also negates itself. Neither animal nor human is the starting point for their relationship and neither is itself a self-enclosed term. Yet there is no “third” term between human and animal that sublates them. Instead, as Merleau-Ponty says here, “the surpassing preserves” and there is a “kinship of finitudes.” In order that the human and animal can categorially and abstractly oppose one another, already within both terms there is a primordial and non-abstract conflict in which none of the terms are closed but rather open.<sup>26</sup>

If both human and animal are open rather than closed terms it is precisely this openness that forms the basis for both categories. Yet this openness is impossible to think because the categories of human and animal are in fact inherent to that thought. It gets organized as “consciousness and nature,” “the for-itself and the in-itself,” etc. There is a matrix here, however, since the impossibility of some synthesis between human and animal is precisely what internally constellates both terms. This makes the matrix symbolic and spread throughout both human and animal. The symbolic is in effect equally on the side of the human as well as on the side of the animal. It is in this sense displaced. That is, displacement remains irreducible to any or all of the terms in the relation it produces and thus is dehiscent and promiscuous. This displacement is however concrete in an important way.

#### 4. The Implex as Symbolic Matrix, the Passivity in Institution

Thus, Merleau-Ponty does give this displacement: the “Implex.”<sup>27</sup> He gets this word from Paul Valéry, along with the phrases “the voice of no one” and “the

<sup>26</sup> See also my “Where is Negation in Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology? Symbolic Formation and the Implex”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 47 There is very little in the secondary literature on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of “implex.” However, with the fairly recent publication of Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on literary language, this has started to change, notably, in the very recent book co-authored by Mauro Carbone, Emmanuel de Saint Aubert and Galen Johnson called *Merleau-Ponty’s Poetic of the World: Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020). Galen

## The Passivity of Institution in Merleau-Ponty

animal of words,” and of course “chiasm.”<sup>28</sup> The “chiasmus” is the intercrossing of the optic nerves on the body of the sphenoid bone so that, in binocular vision, the left and right eye function in equal measure. I cover one eye, and I have one point of view. I cover the other, and I have another point of view. The body is not itself a singular standpoint, then, but the possibility of two points of view that are only apparently one and the same. Actually, Merleau-Ponty says, the body is “the advent of difference” and even the “possibility for separation (two eyes, two ears: the possibility for *discrimination*, for the use of the diacritical).”<sup>29</sup> There is, he says elsewhere, a “sort of dehiscence [that] opens my body in two.”<sup>30</sup> A chiasm is also a rhetorical structure in which two clauses are balanced against one another and then again appear in reverse order (e.g., “the fair is foul, and the foul is fair”). These clauses do not only intercross but also balance and reject one another. A chiasm is in effect neither a synthesis nor a pure opposition but an entire matrix formed through counter and inter-positioning that usually remains unnoticed in the dynamic of opposition. The chiasmus of the optical nerves is an implex for Valéry. It is thus not simply what is invisible to or in my vision. It is rather the site of intra-conflict between the right and left eye. In fact unplaceable along the right eye and the left eye or along what I see and the thing that I see. The chiasmus is, in other words, the very spatialization of the relation between the interior and the exterior. Because this implex is unplaceable and yet sets into place the interior and the exterior, it is also for Merleau-Ponty a symbolic matrix, and especially the symbolic matrix between the human and animal. It is what is

Johnson’s contribution makes clear, for example, that for Valéry the implex is not an activity of the body but its “capacity.” “Valéry illustrates: the implex of a muscle is very limited, either to stretch or contract; the implex of the retina is a certain range of lights and colors.” (91-92) This musculature, which is not per se consciously activated, is where language resides and is thus also called “the animal of words.” The connection between the implex and the animal of words is also discussed in my *Merleau-Ponty Between Philosophy and Symbolism*. I argue there that the implex is a concrete, bodily, moment of signification, inside that signification but impossible to be directly referred by that signification; and names the repression-expression struggle (pp. 95-96).

<sup>28</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Recherches sur l’usage littéraire du langage: Cours au Collège de France Notes, 1953*, (Switzerland: MéisPresses, 2013) p. 103

<sup>29</sup> *VI* p. 224

<sup>30</sup> “When I find again the actual world such as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or my acts. But this does not mean that there was a fusion of coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two.” *Ibid.*, p. 123

left out in all conceptualizations of human and animal even as it internally delimits both and makes them conceivable in opposition to one another. It is at once a concrete limit as well as a limit within philosophy itself and especially the philosophies of human and animal.

Consider this long and important passage from the passivity lectures, which has to do with the implex, the symbolic, the human and the animal, as well as their dispersal and dehiscence:

The description of the oniric structure (impossibility of expressing, dictatorship of figuration, condensation as sole means of expression) would attribute the disguise of latent thoughts as much to the condition of the dream as to [the] censor-repressed struggle—Consequently, latent content not to be represented as thought in the depth of ourselves in the mode of conventional thought, as an absolute observer would represent it. The unconsciousness of the unconscious [is the] unknown; but not known by someone in the depth of ourselves. The unconscious [is the] abandonment of the norms of wakeful expression, i.e., of the symbolic as symbolic of self, direct language, which presupposes distance and participation in the category. But this unconscious is not distant; it is quite near, as ambivalence. The “affective content” is not even unconscious or repressed, i.e., the unconscious as pulsation of desire is not behind our back. . . . [The] unconscious [is the] implex, [the] animal, not only of words, but of events, of symbolic emblems. [The] unconscious [is] unknown acting and organising dream and life, principle of crystallization (*rameau de Salzbourg*), not behind us, fully within our field, but pre-objective, like the principle of segregation of “things.”<sup>31</sup>

I cannot say that the implex is what is inside me. My internal organs, say my lungs, are not entirely mine and are in an important way also external to me, external to my volition. Yet, I also cannot say that my lungs are external to me, what Merleau-Ponty describes in another context as the “dedifferentiated body.” That would be to ignore their peculiarity and the fact that I, and I alone, am dependent on them. The lungs are in this way unlocatable, reducible neither to interiority nor to simple organic matter. They illustrate a “dictatorship of figuration” and are a limit within the very contours of my own figure and body. This limit is not just the unconscious of conscious life and is not simply known by someone in the depths of oneself that can be represented by taking some absolute perspective. It is rather the “symbolic as symbolic of self.” It delimits both waking perceptions from dream perceptions. One can go further here to say that the

<sup>31</sup> *IP* pp. 158-159

## The Passivity of Institution in Merleau-Ponty

lungs are not just a respiratory system but a dimension.<sup>32</sup> In the elegant passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*, for example, Merleau-Ponty writes that, when I fall asleep, “it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside of myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath...”<sup>33</sup> And, in “Eye and Mind,” he famously says there is “inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being...”<sup>34</sup> No longer can we begin from “the rigorous distinction between the ‘sensory’ and the ‘non-sensory,’”<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty says in the passivity lectures, “but rather from “Being and oneirism.”<sup>36</sup> That is, inside both my sensing and the thing I sense is a texture that displaces both and makes everything lack self-identity. The resulting “oneirism” is, then, the very site of a “projection and introjection” and is not just the “operations of a ‘consciousness.’”<sup>37</sup> This invites the profound possibility that both waking and dreaming perceptions, the real and the fictive, are owing to a more confounding constellation between the human and the animal.

Derrida’ does give a slightly different reading of the reading of Paul Valéry and the implex. He treats it as an “absolute limit” in which “self-presence whose dynamic virtuality,” is set against the “contingent, conditional.”<sup>38</sup> This limit, he says, becomes its own limit – a self-intimate limitation. On Merleau-Ponty’s reading, though, the implex has no discernable place and is in fact an internal delimitation to *both* self-presence and contingent things. Therefore, it is not self-intimate. It is neither the self-presence of consciousness nor of things, neither the activity of consciousness nor the passivity of what appears to that consciousness, neither the origin of an intention nor the destination of the world

<sup>32</sup> See chapter Four on “Light—Dark/Waking—Sleeping” in my *Merleau-Ponty Between Philosophy and Symbolism: The Matrixed Ontology*. More recent papers of mine, one forthcoming and the other recently published, concern the sleep and the indirect ontological method appropriate to it, not pure description but expression and literary language. See my “Literature, Ontology, and Iplex in Merleau-Ponty: Writing and Finding the Concrete Limit of Phenomena.” *Humanities* 10 2021. <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/4/118>; and “Gesture and the Primal Scenes of Language: Some Hermeneutical Musings on Merleau-Ponty” in *Studia Phaenomenologica* 22 (forthcoming in 2022)

<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge Press, 1992) pp. 245-246

<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “Eye and Mind” in *Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, edited by James E. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) p. 167

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 154

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p. 155

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982) pp. 295, 303.

that is intended. Rather, the implex is a limit in the middle of both the start of consciousness and the finish of existence – between birth and death, the first breath and the last, the first cry and the last.<sup>39</sup> Such a limit is as much proximate to me as it is distant and delimits my own subjectivity from itself at the same time that it is just as much a “principle of segregation of ‘things’.” It is, as Merleau-Ponty says about the sleeping body in the passivity lectures, “a general capacity to inhabit diverse situations.”<sup>40</sup>

If our present pandemic indeed collapses the public and private distinction at the socio-cultural level, it is only because this intransigent distinction was reflexive to begin with – always internally constellated by something simultaneously irreducible to it. The animal institution is what intervenes or threatens to intervene into human institution at any time. This very constellation between these institutions is moreover possible only because it lacks specific placement or is itself “pandemic.” Thus, a more profound intransigence within the superficial one, itself un sedimented or allochthonous, a primordial passivity that institutes within the otherwise purely human institution. Merleau-Ponty calls this primordial passivity a “symbolic matrix” because it makes the subject thinkable to itself and yet remains a limit within that thought. Moreover, it is symbolic because this limit no longer concerns the singular subject, but a plurality of subjectivities and is therefore also a dilation within the human institution. Yet it is also concrete, even if it has no specific place, and concerns a certain conception of space capable of intervening into the entire complex and life of subjectivity. I note that, especially in a series of notes from February 1959 in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty very bravely suggests an animality within thinking and human culture.<sup>41</sup> The notion

<sup>39</sup> Blanchot would continue to invoke the limit experience of such a cry at a distance from the ideology of language in his *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 262.

<sup>40</sup> “But even in a normal position, if sleep is really heavy, I “lost all sense of place”—in light sleep, therefore, the body holds onto the place—And holding onto the place is also to hold onto personal identity. No longer knowing where I am, I no longer know who I am, I am in nothingness, irremediably . . . the body that we find upon reawakening is not a clearly articulated whole. It is a tiredness which merely has one form, at least as long as it is numb and immobile. As soon as it is ready to move, there is a place, in the form of its attitude, something which announces a time, a place (the body: general capacity to inhabit diverse situations), a house, an openness to total situations, to types of situations (for example, situations comparable for it, and equivalent for it by means of the multiple of space-time).” *IP* p. 213

<sup>41</sup> *VI*, pp. 176-177



## The Passivity of Institution in Merleau-Ponty

remains unsutured, of course, in part because the text is itself famously unfinished. But, here, I have provided a thread of Merleau-Ponty's thought by showing the extent to which the implex, even as a respiratory dimension, is promiscuous: non-local and concrete at the same time, there remains a symbolic limit situation that is, as Merleau-Ponty says in another working note on institution, "farther than India and China"<sup>42</sup>

### REFERENCES

- Alloa, E. (2021) *Looking Through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media*, translated by Nils. F. Schott. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Alloa, E. (2021) *Looking Through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media*, translated by Nils. F. Schott. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1982) *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Husserl, E. (1954) *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. Walter Biemel, *Husserliana VI*. The Hague: Nijhoff,
- Husserl, E. (1999) *Erfahrung und Urteil*, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe. Hamburg: Meiner, 7th ed.
- Kaushik, R. (2019) *Merleau-Ponty between Philosophy and Symbolism: The Matrixed Ontology*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Kaushik, R. (2021) "The secondary passivity: Merleau-Ponty at the limit of phenomenology." *Continental Philosophy Review* 54, 61–74.
- Kaushik, R. (2021) "Where is Negation in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology? Symbolic Formation and the Iplex". *Research in Phenomenology* 51 372–393.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

<sup>42</sup> "The Freudian idea of the unconscious and the past as "indestructible," as "intemporal" = elimination of the common idea of time as a "series of *Erlebnisse*"—There is an architectonic past. cf. Proust: the *true* hawthorns are the hawthorns of the past—Restore this life with- out *Erlebnisse*, without interiority . . . which is, in reality, the "monumental" life, *Stiftung*, initiation. This "past" belongs to a mythical time, to the time before time, to the prior life [*la vie antérieure*], "farther than India and China." Ibid., 243

## Humana.Mente

- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964) "Eye and Mind" in *Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, edited by James E. Edie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1992) *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002) *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, edited by Bettina Bergo and Leonard Lawlor. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2003) *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, translated by Robert Vallier. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2010) *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954- 1955)* translated by Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2013) *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage: Cours au Collège de France Notes, 1953*. Switzerland: MētisPresses.