

Did Merleau-Ponty succeed in «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history»?

Josep Maria Bech
(University of Barcelona)
jmbech@ateneu.ub.edu

Articolo sottoposto a *double blind peer review*

Abstract: In a Working Note to *The Visible* from May 1959, Merleau-Ponty condensed some of his enduring philosophical concerns. His commitment to «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history» stands out, which confirms his belief that the history of thought prefigures the larger issues posed by any wide-ranging historiography. This paper attempts to appraise whether, and to what extent, Merleau-Ponty's thought fulfilled this life-long aspiration. It explores his peculiar approach to the historiography of thought, stressing his views on the interdependence of all philosophies, their diacritic and perception-like relationship with each other, and above all the heterological mindset that commands his inquiry. Then the focus shifts to the sweeping holistic standpoint that supports his postulate of a «primordial historicity», proving that his forays into the history of thought reverberate in his account of history at large. Though in an unsystematic way, Merleau-Ponty's philo-perceptive compromise resurfaces in the enigmatic synchronism evinced by the thought of all epochs and whose ultimate origin is the embodied faculty of meaning-giving.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, history of philosophy, history of thought, theory of perception, heterology, holism, total meaning, vertical history, *das Unge-dachte*; *l'impensé*, the un-thought thought, primordial historicity, historical synchronism.

1. *The un-thought thought*

In a Working Note appended to *Le visible et l'invisible* (*The Visible and the Invisible*), written in May 1959, Merleau-Ponty summarized his life-long aspiration to linking the history of thought with the wide-ranging historiographic issues that were prominent in his time:

Show that there is an absolute, a philosophy, which is immanent in the history of philosophy, and which nonetheless is not a re-absorption of all philosophies into one sole philosophy, nor eclecticism and skepticism either. *One sees it if one succeeds in*

Josep Maria Bech

*making philosophy into a perception, and the history of philosophy into a perception of history. (On le voit si l'on arrive à faire de la philosophie une perception, et de l'histoire de la philosophie une perception de l'histoire.)*¹

Anticipating this late recapitulation, Merleau-Ponty had begun his philosophical trajectory by focusing on the specific historicity of the philosophical tradition. Convinced that a philosophy becomes historically dead when it no longer fosters innovative thought, he devised a procedure altogether different from, and irreducible to, extant historiographic approaches. Its target should be the «shadow» (*ombre*) cast by the never-taken-into-account ideas that form the «*impensé*» or «un-thought thought» (so labeled by Merleau-Ponty following a hint from Heidegger²) linked to the work by the major philosophers of the Western tradition.

A detailed scrutiny of the canonical texts, according to Merleau-Ponty, reveals that key aspects of what past philosophers thought have resisted a proper articulation. These unstated features, however, gave their work its sense and its direction. The thought of canonical authors unwittingly displays their respective «*impensé*» because all significant philosophies have bred this elusive but crucial supplement. The thinking of past times, in conclusion, asks «to be thought anew».

This «un-thought thought» is warranted by the historical texts when they are understood in accordance with their latent meaning. After all, according to Merleau-Ponty «now we know that, to find the very source of thoughts, we have to seek beneath the statements»³. What a thinker does say, indeed, points to «an overall view that he [*sic*] seems not to have been able to articulate himself», in Sean Kelly's words.⁴ This «overall view», in short, directed the thinking, which nevertheless was never completely thought.

Conversely, Merleau-Ponty asserts as well that an «objective» approach to past thought, committed to «just what was said or directly implied» by the thinker,

would only be plausible if [the thinker's] thought was simply a system of neatly defined concepts, of arguments responding to perennial problems and solving them forever. [Otherwise,] we could not approach a philosopher's thought solely in terms of what he achieved; we would have to focus on what his thought until the very end was trying

¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, ed. C. Lefort, Gallimard (col. *tel*), Paris, 1964, p. 242.

² In Heidegger's view (M. Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, Neske, Pfullingen, 1957, pp. 123-124), the real contribution of a thinker bears no relation with the bulk of his or her writings because it is assessed by the «*ungedachte*» (the «un-thought thought») they convey: «*The greater the work of a thinker – which in no way coincides with the breadth and number of writings – the richest is what is un-thought in this work, [that is,] what only with the aid of his writings appears before us as 'yet-not-thought-in-former-times', and which of course should not be taken as the thoughts that the thinker did not think hard enough*».

³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1960, p. 29.

⁴ S. Kelly, *Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty*, in: T. Carman and M. B. N. Hansen (eds.), «The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty», Cambridge U.P, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 74-110, p. 74.

Did Merleau-Ponty succeed in «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history»?

to think. [Therefore, the texts] must be understood through their lateral implications as much as through their manifest or frontal meaning.⁵

Thus, Merleau-Ponty locates the core meaning of canonical philosophies in contentions that their historical authors never explicitly endorsed. The ideas openly embraced by these thinkers may contradict the essence of their thought.

In summary, Merleau-Ponty's claim that the meaning of a philosophical text is never a positive entity grounds his stance on the historiography of thought. Philosophical tenor, in his opinion, can never be cut down to its literal manifestations. Any attempt to register or paraphrase a thought content, and likewise any effort to demarcate the claimed truth, will necessarily end in failure. Merleau-Ponty could never accept that «the meaning of a philosophical work [corresponds to] an inventory that records what is in it and what is not»⁶. The supporters of a philosophical project worthy of this name cannot fulfill it by merely thinking up the issues they set out to embrace. Instead, they are compelled to perform an endless interrogation. The resulting thought, therefore, cannot be reduced to a cluster of texts.

This is a way of saying that, in Merleau-Ponty's view, philosophical discourse cannot in fact coincide with itself. Its authentic meaning, therefore, is unattainable. The historiography of philosophy should focus on the «shadow» cast by the un-thought thoughts that respectively supplement all philosophies (they go together with any meaningfully stated thought) and which also have been (and in a way still are) their concealed generative principle.

Among many possible exemplifications, the notion of «operative concept» furnishes a telling instance of this «shadow». As is well known, in a celebrated paper Eugen Fink proved that all philosophies convey an array of «operative concepts» along with the «thematic concepts» whose superposed strata of meaning, more or less concealed, the historians of thought struggle to elucidate. Fink's insight was clear-cut. On the one hand, every philosophy intentionally determines its thematic concepts, using them as tools to ground its procedures and justify its outcomes. On the other hand, a closer scrutiny reveals that the examined way of thinking is in fact directed by these alternative concepts. Their usually unsuspected intrusion, in short, decides how thematic concepts function. The adjective «operative» designates their opposition to being «thematized», though they form the background that determines the actual reach of a given philosophy. In Fink's words, those «abstract mental schemata resist being objectively determined» and compose «a horizon that remains opaque to the author of each doctrine» thanks to their ineffable character.⁷

⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours. Collège de France (1952-1960)*, Gallimard, Paris, 1968, pp. 159-160.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 202.

⁷ E. Fink, *Operative Begriffe in Husserls Phänomenologie*, in: «Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung» 11 (1957), pp. 321-337, p. 325.

The evanescent profile of this «un-thought» amply justifies Fink's use of the term «shadow», later adopted by Merleau-Ponty: «the 'operative concepts' are the shadow of any philosophy, and its instinctive use feeds all varieties of thought»⁸. In a word, the operative concepts are the instrument that allows all thematizations, and yet they resist every effort at being themselves thematized. The label «operative» alludes to the conceptual efficacy they bestow to properly thematic contents, which at the same time blocks any attempt at outlining them objectively.

Merleau-Ponty's concern with the history of philosophy, however, led him to results even more outstanding than this insistence on the «*impensé*» shadowing all significant thinking. In fact, his scrutiny of past thought involved a persistent holistic commitment whose three main aspects will now be explored.⁹

2. A «vertical» history

Merleau-Ponty's views on the history of thought *in toto* entailed that all philosophies, their disparate views notwithstanding, are interdependent by virtue of their shared pursuit of truth. Even the most diverse ways of thinking depend on one another. The philoperceptive slant of his approach cannot be denied: philosophies communicate among themselves in the same way that different perceptions intermingle when obtained from an identical reality. According to Merleau-Ponty, the laws of perspective govern every approach to canonical thought: «There is transcendence between philosophies, they are not reduced to a sole level, and yet they refer to one another in a gradual perspective, for they are dealing with the same reality»¹⁰.

These historiographical claims led Merleau-Ponty to what he called a «vertical» approach to the history of philosophy.¹¹ (This appeal to the metaphor of verticality, fostered by Merleau-Ponty's holism, should be kept apart from his *lateral* preference for the heterological view of past thought, as will be discussed below.) He envisaged the entire history of philosophy as «a 'vertical history' (on equal footing with 'objective' history)» of a unique «*impensé*» or «un-thought thought»¹² (not to be mistaken for the «*impensé*» eventually attached to any significant thinker). The

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty's approach to the historiography of philosophy ripened alongside the evolution of his thought. In the phase centred on *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty contended that the truth of a philosophy is not an essential, immutable, all-governing intuition that the historian ought to reconstruct with accuracy. On the contrary, this truth is a paradoxical «total intention» that can never be positively determined, and which is fated to alter when it attempts a self-reliant representation of itself. Eventually, this early advance gave way to groundbreaking insights for a historiography of philosophy. They are scattered in his last published texts and his notes for courses and lectures. There he set forth a procedure whose chief target was to elucidate the specific historicity of the philosophical tradition.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 239.

¹¹ *Ivi*, pp. 239-240.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 239.

Did Merleau-Ponty succeed in «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history»?

thought of past times, in short, had been governed by «an absolute, non-eclectic, and non-skeptical philosophy immanent to the history of philosophy»¹³. This «absolute», according to Merleau-Ponty, far from being «the fusion of all philosophies in one», actually spanned the whole history of thought.¹⁴ Philosophies, from this viewpoint, «refer to each other through their unfathomable scaffolding» and their reciprocal «perceptive or transcendent relationship»¹⁵. Only if historical thought becomes «integrally *questioned*»¹⁶ can relativism be kept at bay.

Merleau-Ponty's scrutiny of singled-out canonical thinkers contains a vestige from this approach. His chief aim was to demarcate a sort of «philosophical field» determining the tasks that needed to be tackled but which until now have remained virtually unaddressed: «To think does not mean to possess the objects of thought. It means to demarcate the field that has to be thought, but which we do not yet manage to think»¹⁷.

The surmise of a philosophical «*impensé*» shadowing all significant thought reappears in this commitment to an «un-thought field» because it sets the boundaries for the ideas that any philosopher will be able to hold. Small wonder, therefore, that Merleau-Ponty insists on the need «to bear in mind that a philosophical work is the latent web spanning the asserted ideas». In his view, this «web» consists in a kind of filigree, watermark or articulation that has not been made manifest. Overcoming «the problem posed by the historiography of philosophy» involves remembering that «no thought consists in straight ideas»¹⁸.

3. *The «total» meaning*

According to Merleau-Ponty, the internal differences that can be pointed out in every philosophy supply the «total meaning» of the history of thought. Otherwise put, past thinking displays startling diacritical features when it is perceived as a organized whole. Merleau-Ponty viewed the hinges or articulations within the stated thought of the canonical thinkers as effective «inner disparities» capable of bestowing philosophical depth. A crucial statement clarifies this baffling insight:

Just as the perceived world endures only through the reflections, shadows, levels, and horizons between things [...] so the works and thought of a philosopher are also made of certain articulations between things said, [...] which are not objects for thought and become annihilated if analysed or classified.¹⁹

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 242.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 239.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 253. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis.

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 202.

¹⁸ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Notes de cours sur L'origine de la géométrie de Husserl*, in: «Recherches sur la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty», ed. R. Barbaras, PUF, Paris, 1997, pp. 14-15.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 202.

The lived experience of human beings (philosophers not excluded) is rooted in patterns of commitment that open around them a specific field of both possibilities and resistances. In Merleau-Ponty's view, this servitude explains the dramatic reversals we often encounter in the history of philosophy, occasionally located *within* the doctrinal evolution of a single thinker. For «even if we study only one philosopher, we will notice that his (*sic*) thought is full of internal differences and that only those central conflicts allow us to determine the 'total' meaning of his thought»²⁰.

The «total meaning» of a philosophy was therefore Merleau-Ponty's chief target, correlative to his attempt to elucidate the history of philosophy *in toto*. This holistic commitment led him to contend²¹ that «to 'understand' a doctrine» amounted «to taking in the total intention», that is: not only «the 'ideas' held by the doctrine» but above all «the unique mode of existing» that becomes «expressed in all the thoughts of a philosopher».²² Yet the sought-after «total meaning» cannot be a last and unchangeable truth because, as we have seen, according to Merleau-Ponty thought can never be approached by way of coincidence. He never detracted from the claim that the truth of a philosophy is a paradoxical «total intention» and *not* a sort of essential, immutable and supremely self-adequate entity offered to the reconstructive zeal of the historians.

4. *Multiple truths*

Merleau-Ponty approached traditional thought from a philo-perceptive standpoint because he sensed the relativist danger posed by the «multiple truths» entailed by his views on the «un-thought thought» (there would have been as many truths as concealed «*impensés*»). This is why he maintained that the philosophies of the past communicate among themselves like the successive outcomes of any perception. He was led thus, as already pointed out, to defend a «perceptive or transcendent link among philosophies»²³. The philosophies of the past communicate among themselves not unlike the intertwined aspects through which a unique reality is perceived.

²⁰ *Ivi.*, p. 165.

²¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard (col. *tel*), Paris, 1945, p. xiii.

²² But does it make sense, as Merleau-Ponty attempts to do in the present context, to account for the «lateral universals» (in contrast to «overarching» ones) as an emergence from the mere «going together» of particulars? In his view, a «lateral universality» can only be articulated by way of encounters between different but not mutually accessible realms of meaning. However, is there in the philosophical texts of the past a kind of finitely local coherence which yet cannot be transported elsewhere? Is the plausible cohesiveness of connected meanings a solid enough ground for extracting a universal of sorts out of an array of particulars? Is it possible, as Merleau-Ponty believes, to recover an absolute in the relative? Not to over-extend the present paper, these queries will be addressed in another occasion.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., pp. 239-240.

Did Merleau-Ponty succeed in «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history»?

Can one pose *our* problems to a philosophy and the problems immanent in it? There is but one solution: to reveal that there is transcendence, certainly, between philosophies, that they cannot be reduced to a unique plane [*à un plan unique*], but that, in the depth of this tiering [*dans cet échelonnement en profondeur*], they nevertheless [*quand même*] refer to one another, [for they] are about the same Being.²⁴

Merleau-Ponty accomplished thus the first part of the twofold task he had embraced: «making of philosophy a perception, and of the history of philosophy a perception of history». His core belief on this issue was that «perception, like the encounter with natural things, is the archetype of the original encounter», which is renewed «in the encounter with the past, with the imaginary, with ideas».²⁵ Perception is archetypal because we know that we do not see what we see, and instead we see what the background horizon makes us see. «Visible things, and the visible world with them, are always behind what I see of them (*sont toujours derrière ce que j'en vois*)»²⁶.

Merleau-Ponty points out, besides, that the fit between thought and the circumstances of its origination replicates our bodily immersion in the world. The holism inherent to perception is built into (and is inseparable from) the process of thinking. It was «invisible» to the interpreted thinker, but the historians can discern this normative outline enmeshed in (and indivisible from) the very thought they attempt to explain.

The parallel between the processes of perceiving and thinking culminates in Merleau-Ponty's view of «the history of philosophy as perception of other philosophies»²⁷. This holistic standpoint discloses the descent of his focus on the much discussed «*impensé*» and explains why he assigns it a puzzling preponderance in the output of great thinkers. In analogy with perception, where «things and aspects of things display themselves by actively concealing the others»²⁸, what was manifestly thought by an historical author involves other ways of thinking that she actually did not endorse (thus, it drastically differs from merely un-expressed thought) but which nonetheless may be articulated by somebody else if rooted in the adequate historical setting. Hence the preponderance given by Merleau-Ponty to the «shadow» cast by canonical thinkers, *i.e.*, the watermark pattern that can be made out in the hinges relaying the thetic contents of their thinking and which should be, as discussed at the outset, the chief target for the historian of thought.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 239. Emphases in original.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 210.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 29.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 251.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 29.

5. Heterology

In his mature conception of the history of thought, Merleau-Ponty contends that to understand a philosophical text is «to grasp [it] by coexistence, laterally»²⁹. Indeed, he advocates a «lateral» commitment (in harmony with his distrust of «overarching» reports)³⁰ that buttresses an anti-contextualist, heterological tenet. For he directly endorses heterology: philosophy has meaning *only* outside its historical context.

Let us examine in some detail this unexpected standpoint. Above all, Merleau-Ponty's historiographical approach implies a paradoxical diachronism. Belittling «a history of what has been lived and expressed», he favored instead «a history that renders the meaning of that past according to what has happened thereafter and in the light of our questioning». He illustrates this diachronism with a counterfactual assumption: «If a Cartesian questioning is our only way to approach Descartes, then there is nothing in common between Descartes and us, and therefore philosophy is impossible»³¹.

The main reason for Merleau-Ponty's embrace of heterology, however, was his commitment to uncovering discursive features that the scrutiny of past philosophies has persistently overlooked. He believed that their exposure would uphold the genuine contents of canonical thought:

a philosophy, like a work of art, is an object that can arouse more thoughts than those that are 'contained' in it, [...] retains a meaning outside its historical context, even has meaning only outside of that context (qui garde un sens hors de son contexte historique, qui n'a même de sens que hors de ce contexte). [...] It is not necessary to distinguish their problems [i.e. those addressed by canonical authors] such as they thought them and the problems that really move them, and that we formulate.³²

Bluntly stated: a philosophy has meaning *only* if suitably de-contextualized. This assertion, of course, clashes with our current doxa, but Merleau-Ponty was adamant in his claim that thought is actually meaningful solely outside of its originary context. Only heterologic presuppositions (that is, unconnected to the concrete advent of the doctrines under scrutiny) give access to the thought of past times. If the meaning of a philosophical work is ancillary to an «*impensé*» that only the intrusion of a wayward reading can discern, telling the content upheld by the author from the supplement brought in by the reader might be a hard task.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 242.

³⁰ For this reason, this «metaphor of laterality» should be kept apart from the «metaphor of verticality», aimed at reflecting the interdependence of all philosophies.

³¹ In a Working Note probably written in the autumn of 1957 and transcribed in: E. de Saint-Aubert, *Le scénario cartésien. Recherches sur la formation et la cohérence de l'intention philosophique de Merleau-Ponty*, Vrin, Paris, 2005, p. 20.

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 253, stresses added.

Did Merleau-Ponty succeed in «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history»?

This heterological standpoint is in fact congruent with Merleau-Ponty's earlier philo-perceptive approach. As referred in the precedent section, he contended that philosophies communicate among themselves as different perceptions intermingle. In consequence, this interdependence makes redundant any recourse to context when attempting to understand them. Contexts, therefore, are viewed as an unwelcome interference.

In the present approach surfaces also the commitment to «non-coincidence» that is ubiquitous in Merleau-Ponty's thought. For instance, he contends that «my contact with myself is but 'partial coincidence'» because «we don't know neither the totality of our remembrances nor the density of our present time»³³. He argues, indeed, that we are «beings for whom coinciding with ourselves, which would happen if we were things, is far from satisfactory»³⁴. That a similar circumstance affects our thoughts, however, is a decisive factor in our present discussion. The history of philosophy is soaked in paradox: our ideas are never adequate to themselves.³⁵ Their future consists in alterity:

each new idea becomes different from what it was for its inceptor [and] even when the ideas have gotten themselves almost universally accepted, they have always done so by also becoming different from themselves (*même quand [les idées] se sont fait recevoir presque universellement, c'est toujours en devenant aussi autres qu'elles-mêmes*).³⁶

According to the later Merleau-Ponty, an ingredient of transcendence (a notion which, as usual, he submits to a metaphorical variation, for it appears randomly refracted as «absence», «emptiness», «deficit», «lack» and «negativity») infiltrates any reality, be it past or present, cognitive or sensible. This account grounds an overall perception of history:

the present, the visible counts so much for me and has an absolute prestige for me only by reason of this immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere, which it announces and which it conceals (*qu'à raison de cet immense contenu latent de passé, de futur et d'ailleurs, qu'il annonce et qu'il cache*).³⁷

It is beyond question, therefore, that Merleau-Ponty could succeed in making of thought a perception-like process. Whether he manages to make of the history of philosophy a perception of history, as his recapitulative sketch explicitly claims, is the issue that now will be addressed.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 231.

³⁴ *Ivi.*, p. 285.

³⁵ «Nowhere does Merleau-Ponty recommend intuition, coincidence or fusion with things. [...] The philosophies of coincidence and reflection, the intuition of Being or its over-flight, in his eyes can only be two forms of positivism, two ways of ignoring our inherence in the world». C. Lefort, *Sur une colonne absente. Écrits autour de Merleau-Ponty*, Gallimard, Paris, 1978, p. 26.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 284.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 153.

6. *A shaky sense*

Initially, Merleau-Ponty's approach to history disavowed the Cartesian mind-set. In his view, «the movement of history resembles the irruption among us of the sensible world: overall there are meaning, dimensions, figures, well beyond the eventual outcome of each 'consciousness'»³⁸. A steady surplus of meaning causes the riddle of history, and this is why it resists rudimentary categories like true/false or cause/effect. Cartesianism, therefore, must be abandoned. Historical reality does not consist in mutually exclusive spheres of immanence (a sovereign, constituting consciousness, subjectivity, being-for-itself) and transcendence (things, objectivity, being-in-itself), nor do the resulting dichotomies (nature/society, inside/outside, subject/object, agency/structure) retain any validity. Merleau-Ponty distrusted the background premises of traditional historiography as well, for in his opinion they were ancillary to a Cartesianism close to exhaustion. Their dualist outlook is unmistakable: sometimes autonomous agency prevails upon outside constraints (internalism), while on other occasions the outer world decides, wholly unconcerned by subjective attitudes (externalism).³⁹

Merleau-Ponty's earlier thought saw the cultural and social environment in which we move as a fabric of historically sedimented traditions. Any specific action, individual or collective, required spelling out the meaning, and meeting the requirements, of the corresponding social and cultural world. The expansion of his political awareness, however, led to an involvement with Marxism, and as a result Merleau-Ponty's approach to history became altered as well. During a short time, he claimed that history had an overall meaning and the self-consciousness of the proletariat would ensure its advance towards a classless society.

Still, under the pressure of political developments like late Stalinism, Merleau-Ponty had to amend the extreme views held in *Humanism and Terror*, published in 1947. Already the essay *Around Marxism* («*Autour du marxisme*»), issued in January 1946 and later included in *Sens et non-sens*, had attempted to understand history beyond the alternative of mecanicism and finalism. Merleau-Ponty focused on the clusters of embryonic meaning that unify events in their making, but which easily fall back into insignificance. Historical becoming had to be deciphered by way of its immanent trends. It lacked an all-embracing «sense», a term which in this context denotes both «meaning» and «direction».

Merleau-Ponty's *Adventures of Dialectic*, however, displays the fiercest disparagement of Marxism. The main charges brought there to Marxist thought are blindness to the ambiguities of the historical world and unconcern for

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 28.

³⁹ In Dan Zahavi's view (*Husserl's Legacy*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2017, pp. 116-17), Merleau-Ponty breaks with Cartesianism, acts as a «methodological socialist» (*sic*), seems to endorse a form of externalism and dispenses with representations in favor of a direct opening onto the world.

Did Merleau-Ponty succeed in «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history»?

the interrelatedness of activity and passivity, conformity and resourcefulness, freedom and coercion. In short, Merleau-Ponty no longer viewed history as a monolith working toward some unequivocal *telos*. The belief in an overall direction had vanished, which contrasts with the view held eight years earlier in *Humanism and Terror*, where history had been regarded «a holistic system moving towards a state of equilibrium»⁴⁰. In *Adventures of Dialectic*, on the contrary, history seems to make a shaky sense because whole worlds of meaning have been superimposed onto brute, unstructured reality. «History is always history, and this is why we cannot deny it, at least, a fragmentary meaning»⁴¹. The next sections examine how Merleau-Ponty appraises this «fragmentary meaning».

7. History's dilemmas

Merleau-Ponty believed that a holistic approach could overcome the quandaries posed by history, and particularly the enigma of its embattled meaningfulness. Is there a brute, unstructured historical reality, in itself meaningless, though apt to acquire meaning on account of «history's intelligible nuclei»⁴² discerned by the interpretive activity of successive generations? Or, on the contrary, does historical reality ultimately determine the actual networks of meaning we seem to bestow upon it? Merleau-Ponty wavered between two opposite approaches. Sometimes he wanted «to catch the meaning of the world or of history in its burgeoning state (*saisir le sens du monde ou de l'histoire à l'état naissant*)». Yet on other occasions he claimed that «we only find in history what we ourselves put into it (*on ne trouve dans l'histoire que ce qu'on y met soi-même*)», which implies that meaning is to be thought of as transcendence.⁴³

He surmounted this perplexity by uncovering a succession of what could be termed «synchronic historical holisms». As a result, history comes into view as a process in which meaning «advents» because individual actions come together and develop a totality. Meaning, for this reason, though «linked to individual practices, to interiority»⁴⁴, transcends the circumstances of its origination. Merleau-Ponty exemplified this claim with often-quoted cases: the Cartesian cogito, geometry's foundational meaning as construed by Husserl, the French Revolution, or the historical impact of great painters. What we call an «historical event», therefore, is but a «thoroughly virtual» center in a network of relations.⁴⁵ This allegiance to totality, however, in no way belies Merleau-Ponty's proverbial

⁴⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et terreur*, Gallimard (col. *idées*), Paris, 1947, p. 237.

⁴¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard (col. *tel*), Paris, 1945, p. 512.

⁴² M. Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1955, p. 25.

⁴³ These contradictory requests are ubiquitous in Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre, but their *locus classicus* is the *Avant-Propos* of *Phenomenology of Perception*.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 312.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 154.

rejection of «overflying thought»: «The immediate is at the horizon and must be thought as such; it is only by remaining at a distance that it remains itself (*ce n'est qu'en restant à distance qu'il reste lui-même*)».⁴⁶

These insights were later developed by Claude Lefort. In his view, history is «a diversified and yet self-developing field, sensitive to itself in all of its sectors», where «the genesis of sense must be deciphered with no end in sight». Only accounting for «the way in which the antagonisms that come up in a given range of experience manage to move to a different range»⁴⁷, therefore, can provide a thorough understanding of historical phenomena.

8. A primordial historicity

Merleau-Ponty endorsed Max Weber's views about the human drive «to endow the world with meaning and significance», which we usually apply to «a closed segment abstracted from the infinity of events»⁴⁸. The resulting «intelligible nuclei of meaning» that dwell within history (though projected there by the human meaning-giving impulse) ensure «a primordial historicity». Not only «the true history draws its life wholly from us (*l'histoire vraie vit toute entière de nous*)»⁴⁹ out of our incitement to bestow meaning, but even knowledge boils down to «a particularity of certain historical wholes»⁵⁰.

The cornerstone of Merleau-Ponty's approach are the self-regulating patterns, resulting from the human assignment of meaning, that he calls «history's intelligible nuclei» and which organize the «untamed region» of history. (Merleau-Ponty calls this history «untamed» on account of the infinite interpretations it allows.) He had stated earlier⁵¹ that «the body's sense-giving powers» are «able to cast a significance which comes to it from nowhere». In a later time he claimed⁵² that in the «field of history» we deal with «knots of meaning» which «eventually will be un-knot and again, but differently, will be re-knot in a new network of knowledge and experience».⁵³

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 164.

⁴⁷ C. Lefort, *Écrire. A l'épreuve du politique*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1992, pp. 71-72.

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique*, cit., p. 25.

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 93.

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 145.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, cit., p. 513.

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 178.

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty's sources are unambiguous. His contention that meaning «advents» in history not unlike the way it emerges in a linguistic community was inspired by Saussure. «[W]e are in the field of history in a way that does not differ from the way we are in the field of language» (*Ivi*, p. 28). Speakers give life to rules they ignore but which they use and, at the long run, manage to modify. Encouraged by the theory of the Gestalt, in the *Structure of Behavior* he refined this «adventism». In the natural world, independent forms organize themselves by their own means, giving rise to the pre-human proto-meanings that later support the historical meanings bestowed by successive collectivities.

Did Merleau-Ponty succeed in «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history»?

In short: out of the «suggestions» supplied by the world⁵⁴, the historical processes compose significant articulations (*vid. infra*). These patterns, according to Merleau-Ponty, amount to a primordial expression brought about by the intersection of individuality and universality, necessity and contingency, activity and passivity. This paradoxical pairing of history with meaning is diversely labeled by Merleau-Ponty: «primordial historicity (*historicité primordiale*)»⁵⁵, and also «depth history (*histoire des profondeurs*)», «vertical» or «inner history», «transcendental historicity» and «history within history».

9. Temporal location

History appears a «shady setting (*un milieu louche*)», according to Merleau-Ponty⁵⁶, because our temporal situatedness entails that in history everything matters. The inertia of objective conditions coexists with world-making self-determination. Any incongruity between free will and external constraint is thus ruled out. Understanding historical phenomena, as a result, demands an endless interpretive effort. In history, indeed, «there is no last analysis»⁵⁷. Necessity is brought back to the contingency of events, the aspiration to truth is refracted by historical chiaroscuro, the equivocity of the *doxa* thwarts accuracy.

This is why Merleau-Ponty asserted that in history «everything hits the mark, everything matters (*en elle tout porte, tout compte*)»⁵⁸. In other words, history accomplishes «an exchange between all orders of activity, so that none of them attains the dignity of an exclusive cause»⁵⁹. As Xavier Guchet points out⁶⁰, Merleau-Ponty's «theory of symbolic meaning-giving sees structures (*Gestalten*) everywhere». This ubiquity enables him «to acknowledge all historical paradoxes without destroying them, breaking up both with the philosophy of *a priori* constructions and the idea of an 'objective' process». Human meaning-conferring, in Merleau-Ponty's view, gives rise to a «world as such»,⁶¹ at once coherent and open, visible and invisible. At the same time, our historical situatedness allows us to retrieve these «unities of meaning»⁶² because their identity is diacritically determined by all other meaningful historical arrangements.⁶³

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, cit., p. 513.

⁵⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'esprit*, Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 13.

⁵⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *La prose du monde*, ed. C. Lefort, Gallimard (col. *tel*), Paris, 1969, p. 192.

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 28.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours*, cit., p. 44.

⁶⁰ X. Guchet, *Merleau-Ponty et le problème d'une axiomatique des sciences humaines*, in: «Chiasmi International», vol. 3 (2001), pp. 103-129, p. 122.

⁶¹ This must be understood as a «total part» or «organ» of the world, in no way «standing for» any of its aspects.

⁶² M. Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, PUF (col. *Quadrige*), Paris, 1942, p. 169.

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty says «unités de signification», i.e. «ce qui rend une chose intelligible».

Notwithstanding the endless interpretive endeavour that, according to Merleau-Ponty, all historical phenomena demand, to the point of dispelling any possibility of «last analysis», nevertheless it seems pertinent to apply the procedural guidelines examined here on his own historical approach. It looks worthwhile, indeed, to outline a reflexive move that would try to identify the philosophical «*impensé*» which governs Merleau-Ponty's views. This would be congruent with his summoning (though in Husserl's wake) of a «phenomenology of phenomenology», a challenging endeavour that a close inspection unmasks. For it depends on an elusive «thorough reduction» and, in Bryan Smyth's words, on «the impossibility of any complete thematization of the operative intentionalities on which phenomenology itself inescapably relies»⁶⁴. Disclosing the «*impensé*» of Merleau-Ponty's manifold account of the history of thought, precisely, would involve a reflexive effort of similar difficulty. Albeit at first sight a natural and legitimate endeavour, it would have to confront the resistance that every «un-thought thought» opposes to its being objectively determined. (This inertia, besides, explains the slow unfolding of the elusive but latent meaning borne by all significant philosophies.) And a further reflexive strategy could consist in stock-taking the «internal differences» in Merleau-Ponty's own thought, because he was persuaded that they would convey its «total meaning». But this would be a gigantic endeavour, encompassing the divergent phases of his philosophical output, and clearly exceeding the aims of the present paper.

10. *An obscure synchronism*

As a result, the political, economic, religious and cultural realms come forth inter-linked. An enigmatic simultaneity correlates all orders of experience among themselves. Any articulation of historical reality, as we have seen, appears correlated to all the others. Small wonder, therefore, if a puzzling contemporaneousness comes out: «History renders interchangeable all orders of activity, and none of them can be singled out as an exclusive cause. The question is whether this cohesion heralds the joint solution of all problems, or it is only a feature of our questioning»⁶⁵.

Merleau-Ponty contends that these articulations of historical reality are co-original because the universe of meaning is anchored in the visible world. It is not surprising, therefore, that «the true meaning of the concept of history» appears prefigured «by the arts and by language», where «any expression is intimately connected to any other expression»⁶⁶. The laws of perspective command all historical approaches because meaning co-emanates with perception. This is why Merleau-Ponty conceives history *in toto*.

⁶⁴ B. Smyth, *Heroism and history in Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology*, in: «Continental Philosophy Review» 43, (2010), pp. 167-191, p. 188.

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours*, cit., p. 44.

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 91.

Did Merleau-Ponty succeed in «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history»?

This synchronic or simultaneist fascination appears diversely instantiated along Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre. It is noticeable in his approach to significant historical events, but above all it is ubiquitous in his readings of individual thinkers, in paradoxical contrast with the exegetical slant demanded by any monography. Though the examples are countless, Merleau-Ponty's commentary on the work of Bergson, written a few years before his death, is especially eloquent because it expresses the intertwining of his views on history and his mature ontological leanings.⁶⁷ This interpretation focuses on the notion of «nascent being» (*être naissant*), which he credits Bergson to have brought to light for the first time. Merleau-Ponty calls attention to this concept because it condenses his own standpoint on both reversibilist-ontological and historical simultaneities:

[The «nascent being»] contains in advance the views, however discordant, however incompatible, that we may take of it (*que nous pouvons en prendre*), it stands before us, younger and older than the possible and the necessary, and, once born, can never cease to have been (*ne pourra jamais cesser d'avoir été*) and will continue to be in the depths of the other presents (*au fond des autres présents*)⁶⁸.

Yet a diachronic feature is also at hand in Merleau-Ponty's approach to history, for the presence of the past within us (any present yields, as pointed out above, an «immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere») is one of Merleau-Ponty's strong views. The «sens» of history is «immanent in the inter-human event»⁶⁹. To the incitements of the world, to the «scattered signs» it emits⁷⁰ («we give history its meaning, but always following its suggestions [*mais non sans qu'elle nous le propose*]»), correspond «the body's sense-giving powers»⁷¹. They originate an «autochthonous» or «native» meaning, «constituted in the exchange between the world and our incarnate existence» and capable, above all, of «grounding any noteworthy *Sinngebung*»⁷².

In conclusion, Merleau-Ponty holds that history is more simultaneous than successive (past and future «echo each other»⁷³), and thus he proposes a «vertical» approach: «history is made of *Stiftungen* [institutions], oblivion converted in tradition, reprises, interiority within exteriority, *Ineinander* [intertwining] of

⁶⁷ At first glance, the ontology that supports Merleau-Ponty's historiography of thought announces the death of both externalism (under the sway of reversibility, thought does not look amenable to socio-centered explanation) and the internalist account adopted by some historians of philosophy. Above all, his views appear to rule out causal explanations. The only kind of approach they grant consists in retrieving the «un-thought thought» implied by authors of past times, along with a more or less plausible justification of why they were forced to be totally insensitive to this commanding enhancement of their own thought.

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, 240.

⁶⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Éloge de la philosophie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1953, p. 12.

⁷⁰ Indeed «the historical world is always an inter-world where my views and actions intersect with those of others». Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 116.

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, cit., p. 513.

⁷² *Ivi*, p. 503.

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours*, cit., p. 62.

present and past», rather than «processes, chains of visible events»⁷⁴. This insight, prompted by Merleau-Ponty's inroads in the history of philosophy, reverberates in his oeuvre:

History itself scatters (*imaginatively*, as it were) the elements that someday will correspond to each other. *Then* the system will make sense, in the same way the incipient picture commands the painter's gestures, or the meaning of a spoken sentence summons a cluster of unknowingly converging words.⁷⁵

There is no alternative to «a midway between history understood as sequence of unique facts and the arrogant philosophy that incarcerates the past by way of its categories».⁷⁶ As a result, in James Schmidt's words, for Merleau-Ponty «history has a *sens*⁷⁷ in the same way as individual life». Though «nothing guarantees that a life or a history will have only *one sens* from beginning to end», adds Schmidt, in fact both «lives and histories are, nevertheless, condemned to meaning» because, after all, it is «impossible for them not to express something»⁷⁸.

Our scrutiny of Merleau-Ponty's forays into the history of thought provides a better understanding of his main tenets. *a)* They pose a crucial challenge to a sovereign, constitutive consciousness, a standpoint that Merleau-Ponty deemed unproductive. He likened the history of thought to a bodily gesture that neither a causal account nor allegedly free action can explain, since it results from an indefinite interaction between consciousness and things. The historiography of philosophy, in his view, instantiates «the passage by way of which body becomes gesture, language becomes oeuvre, coexistence becomes truth»⁷⁹. *b)* They elucidate chief aspects of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Faithful to the philo-perceptive model, which equates understanding with «grasping by way of coexistence, laterally»⁸⁰, the historiography of philosophy evinces a considerable amount of Merleau-Pontyan «ambiguity». The necessity claimed by thought is brought back to the contingency of temporal events, and the aspiration to truth is blunted by later assertions to know better. *c)* They confront the enigma of history *in toto* and ascribe it to a surplus of meaning provoked by the liveliness of a development that always exceeds itself and resists categories like true and false or cause and effect. In Merleau-Ponty's view, this primordial expression is the apex of the historical process. It is brought about by the intersection of individuality and universality, necessity and contingency, activity and passivity.

⁷⁴ *Ivi*, p. 83.

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique*, cit., pp. 26-27. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis.

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, p. 29.

⁷⁷ Here «*sens*» indicates that history is meaningful because its dimensions hold a relationship of reciprocal expression.

⁷⁸ J. Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, St. Martin Press, New York, 1985, p. 121.

⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, cit., p. 305.

⁸⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 242.

Did Merleau-Ponty succeed in «making the history of philosophy into a perception of history»?

Above all, our search has attested that Merleau-Ponty's approach to the history of thought was in fact a transitional support to his leading concern: connecting perception with philosophy of history:

Any event is of the type of an historical event [...] the problems of knowing who the subject of the State, of war, etc. is, [are] exactly of the same type that the problem of knowing who the subject of perception is: only solving the problem of perception will [the problem of] the philosophy of history be solved.⁸¹

This overarching connection, however, should not occlude Merleau-Ponty's central thesis. His contention that perception is the guiding thread for making intelligible, well beyond the doxographical level, the historical unfolding of philosophies peaks in his contention that all meaning-bestowing processes scattered along time are interrelated. In other words, the synchronism evinced by the thought of all epochs and whose ultimate origin is the subjective, embodied capacity of meaning-giving reverberates in Merleau-Ponty's account of human history at large. His focal point, however, remains the history of thought. The successive events that compose it have established their meaning «as a claim to a following, as the demand of things to come»⁸² with a force not matched by any other human endeavour. He attempts to neutralize the menace of relativism (concealed *impensés* amount to truths belying one another) by means of the philo-perceptive compromise that resurfaces in the enigmatic synchronism evinced by the thought of all ages. In his typically unsystematic way, therefore, Merleau-Ponty managed to fulfil his lifelong aspiration to «make philosophy into a perception, and the history of philosophy into a perception of history».⁸³

⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 249.

⁸² Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours*, cit., p. 61.

⁸³ I sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers of the *Critical Journal of the History of Ideas* for their helpful comments.