

# THE SARTREAN MIND

*Edited by*  
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## SARTRE AND MERLEAU-PONTY

*Florence Caeymaex and Grégory Cormann*

*Translated from the French by Maren Daniel*

Born in 1908, Merleau-Ponty was three years younger than Sartre. They first met at *École normale supérieure*. In 1929 Sartre passed the competitive exam *Agrégation*, the same year as Beauvoir, Nizan and Hyppolite, and a year after Aron. Merleau-Ponty passed it in 1930. They belong to what can be called a generation (Sirinelli 1988). Although it is made up of numerous figures, the group stands out as a *generation per se* through its breaking away from national philosophical traditions, and also from the prominent figures of the time, among whom were Brunschvicg and Bergson. Despite their opposition, these two figures embody the "spiritualism" that French philosophy nurtures (Worms 2009), and the close link which still bound philosophy to psychological sciences back then. The new generation considers German phenomenology, in which the terms "consciousness" and "existence" prevail, a subversive and radical branch that shifts the center of gravity of philosophical discourse and clears up the connection with empirical psychology.

### The 1930s: Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and phenomenology

For Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the dismissal of French "spiritualism," be it its idealist (Brunschvicg) or realist (Bergson and the psychologists) version, makes way for Husserl's idea of intentionality. They were first introduced to this concept through Emmanuel Levinas' *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (1930) as well as in *Ideen* and *Méditations cartésiennes*. They seized upon the idea that the phenomenon, far from being the mere appearance of reality *per se*, represents on the contrary some self-giveness, "in-person," so to speak, to consciousness, or even, conversely, the idea that a conscious act is both the particular and modalized appearance of something "in the flesh." Such a view offers philosophy an approach that is both descriptive and eidetic (the description of phenomena should lead to the inventory of the different ways of giving that Husserl compares to a process of meaning and intentions of meaning), and a proper field of investigation different from that of empirical psychology. But the radical nature of this approach can only be accessed through a particular strategy that adopts the specific method Husserl calls "phenomenological reduction," that is, the suspension of natural attitude, i.e. the neutralization and comprehensive explanation of its spontaneous realism (Bourgault 1999). If in Husserl this method authorizes a transcendental investigation and the implementation of a Phenomenology of Reason that maintains, at the heart of intentionality, the privilege of the *theoria*,

then the young Sartre and Merleau-Ponty made a different use of its implications. Here, the phenomenological reduction liberates the fact of consciousness, the "lived experience" (*le vécu*), from its assignation to a psychological or physical reality, as it also dismisses in the same method the old problem of representation, that is to say, the rapport that the spirit is supposed to have with reality, or the rapport between interiority and exteriority. "Consciousness," as Sartre says, "has no 'inside'" (Sartre 1970b: 4–5). Likewise, Merleau-Ponty insists that "there's no inner man" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: xii). Liberating consciousness from its representational function allows them to get beyond the phenomenology of primacy that it still accords to the theory of knowledge and science, and also to affirm the equal phenomenological dignity, not just of the proper truth of imaginative or perceptive acts, but also that of the affective, volitional, and axiological dimensions of experience. Thus, the call to "go back to the things themselves," as it were, can take on the meaning of the experience of our being-in-the-world à la Heidegger, of a philosophy for which phenomenality extends to the "environment in which our concrete life plays out" (Merleau-Ponty 1997: 67).

Yet another motif attests to the affinity of Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's renditions of phenomenology and explains the "existential" inflection, firmly anti-intellectualist, that they imprint on the phenomenological *cogito*. In *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1937), Sartre was the first to cast doubt on the possibility of a reflection that provides philosophy with the possibility of constituting itself as a science of consciousness. According to him, the absolute character of consciousness is not that of knowledge, but of a spontaneous existence that is presence to itself, a relation to the self not transparent and strictly coextensive with phenomenality—that is, to the relation which consciousness has with transcendent objects. The reflexive modification presents, relative to this pre-reflexive absolute, no other specificity than that of positing as a transcendent and relative object, and Ego and a Me—without in any way being constituted, as the reflexive philosophies presuppose, in knowledge or in adequate representation of the self. It is in reflection that the reflecting consciousness, as a pre-reflective absolute, posits itself as a transcendent and relative object, an Ego and a Me. Such a theory is an attack, in the name of phenomenology itself, against the heart and soul of the Husserlian enterprise, but it is also a revolution concerning the powers of the philosophical *cogito* in general, which is a central theme in Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception*. The explicit *cogito* (spoken or reflexive) is not the conquest of a position of *survol*—"from above"—in relation to the lived experience and the world that reveals itself in it, but an imminent modification of the experience. According to Sartre, it is not an intellectual method, but a "pure event of transcendental origin and an ever possible accident of our daily life" (Sartre 1991: 103). As Merleau-Ponty puts it, it is not the eruption of an absolute spirit capable of "ridding the world of its opacity and of its transcendence" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: xiii), but an existential ordeal where the tacit *cogito* discovers itself in its effort to make itself a speaking subject (*ibid*: 469–470) and realizes "its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all" (*ibid*: xvi).

This shared background should not mask the originality of Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's respective philosophical trajectories and the asymmetry of their relationship. Throughout his works from the 1930s to the year he died, Merleau-Ponty did not stop testing out his own theories in light of Sartre's, in an explicit dialogue, admiring and critical at once. The echo of Merleau-Ponty's thinking in Sartre's work, however, is largely implicit and therefore requires reconstruction. The laudatory review of *The Imagination*, written the same year it was published in 1936, touches the heart of the argument, namely, the phenomenological theory of the image as criticism of the classical assumption of the interiority of consciousness, but expresses reservations as to the treatment reserved for Bergson's conception of the image and also as to the favor given to the Husserlian distinction between hyle and morphe (Merleau-Ponty 1997: 45–54). It gives us a glimpse of the manner in which Merleau-Ponty will try, throughout this work, to dia-

jectize dualities. For example, in *The Structure of Behavior*, originally published in 1942, Merleau-Ponty draws upon *The Transcendence of the Ego* and adopts gestalt theory and phenomenology in an original way to support an anti-behaviorist theory of behavior. Maintaining the impossibility of assigning experience either to pure subjectivity or to pure objectivity, he emphasizes "the ambiguous structure of perceptual experience" (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 219).

### Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's existentialism in 1945

Published in 1943, *L'être et le néant* was immediately the object of impassioned study. In the middle of a war whose ending was still unknown, the book appeared to a generation of young readers as an act of liberation. There is much evidence of this, as Misrahi, Deleuze, Pontalis, Lanzmann and others commented on the wave of freedom that this book represented. Reinforced by the first production of *The Flies* during the war, which got past German censorship, and by his participation in the clandestine *Lettres françaises*, Sartre's fame had grown rapidly by the time of Liberation. Indeed, existentialism was causing a scandal, as existentialist freedom came under great suspicion. The (Catholic) right accused Sartre of defending a freedom that relativized all values; it attacked Sartre's immorality even more virulently as he was not seeking a university position. With existentialism, *everyone's* and *anyone's* life is at play. The Marxist left was not to be outdone. It accused existentialism of merely being (bourgeois) posturing that cultivates a "quietism of despair," far removed from collective emancipatory action (Sartre 1970a).

In his review of *The Flies*, published in 1943, Merleau-Ponty brilliantly defends a Sartre whose conception of freedom – "flaw in the world's diamond, splinter in nature's skin" (Merleau-Ponty 1997:63) – falls in line with Nietzsche who shows "the basis of terror and cruelty on which the Greeks made freedom appear" (ibid: 64). This short review foreshadows the many articles of the period from 1945–1960 that will take Sartre's and existentialism's side, against critics of all persuasions. These efforts contribute to the specification of the contemporary stakes of existence: a commitment to think about our "insertion in the world," and "our corporeal and social ties" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 72).

Merleau-Ponty's defense of Sartre is also always a philosophical discussion, of *Being and Nothingness* in particular. We also see, in different texts, a rebound of the critique carried out in the last chapter of *The Phenomenology of Perception* concerning freedom. There, Sartre's dualities (we do not say "dualisms") of phenomenological ontology themselves are questioned and followed even into their ethical implications.<sup>1</sup> As the rest of the story will show, the status of the *negative*, of the negativity in lived experience, is what is immediately at stake, not in the sense of evil or error, but more originally, in the sense of its radical finitude. That is to say, it is consciousness's inability to make total sense of the world, as evidenced by its contingency and facticity.<sup>2</sup> The idea of intentional correlation unfolds in Sartre's work as in Merleau-Ponty's as a *demand* to think from an original difference, rather than from under the empire of the positivity of The One, or the identity (God, Reason, Nature, Being). But *how* is this done?

When Merleau-Ponty sees in the cardinal notions of the in-itself and the for-itself the expression of an antithesis, right where a "living link" should be seized, an exchange between the "I" and the world, it is all as if Sartre, in seizing the for-itself as a nihilation, failed to think truly about *action*. Of course, both are concerned with refuting the idea of an objective causality of behavior and, at the same time, a metaphysical freedom (will or free will). But if freedom is the idea of a for-itself whose rapport with being and the world is at first an uprooting, does it not go back, *in fine*, to a sovereign decision concerning the sense of the situation? Is it really about the actual terms of free action? Even though it is inseparable from the situation, even though it is carried by it, such a freedom, Merleau-Ponty affirms, is "under all actions." Free

action does not only signal itself by the eruption of a new meaning, but also by the reactivation of "significations that trail between ourselves and things," of "an autochthonous sense of the world" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 523, 512, modified translations) that forms for a consciousness all the thickness and opacity of motivations and gives form and singularity to its action. Very obviously, the centrality of bodily experience, that is to say of the lived or one's own body (*le corps propre*), made Merleau-Ponty decide, starting with *The Structure of Behavior*, to think about the duality of experience under the regime of ambiguity, and to explore preferentially the zones of experience "in which being and consciousness coincide" (*ibid.*: 492), meet and interact<sup>3</sup>. Hence there is some reservation, once again, concerning the Sartrean conception of temporality. If this conception admits that the present *is not*, that my presence in the world is split by an original negativity (one that gives to the imaginary, to absence, and to the future all of its importance), then Merleau-Ponty, agreeing with Bergson on this point, affirms, with the "primacy of perception," the privilege of the present, the primordial character of presence (Caeymaex 2005a).

There is no reason to see in this analysis the simple anticipation of a critic called to dismiss Sartrean philosophy later on. *The Phenomenology of Perception* was published in 1945, during what Merleau-Ponty called "The Battle over Existentialism," and the writings of this period show him thinking about himself through a Sartrean lens, exploiting for himself the tensions that create difficulty in Sartre's thinking. With the article that bears this title, published in the second issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, in November 1945, Merleau-Ponty seizes *Being and Nothingness* to respond to those who only see in Sartre's book a "poison" against which it is necessary to erect "a quarantine" ("un cordon sanitaire") (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 71). Killing two birds with one stone, he responds to right-wing critics who criticize Sartre for his materialism, as well as left-wing ones who see in Sartre's thinking a "residual idealism" (*ibid.*: 77), by maintaining that Sartre's problem is that of the "man's relationship to his natural or social surroundings" (*ibid.*: 71). The ephemeral experience of the Resistance group "Socialisme et Liberté" (1941) brought Sartre and Merleau-Ponty together and constituted, in Sartre's view, the "purest moment of our friendship" (Sartre 2010a: 1055). Merleau-Ponty saw Sartre's thinking evolve under the weight of existing circumstances as he attempted to take the "problem of the collective" into account. As he speaks of Sartre's evolution:

when he came back to France after mobilization, the Battle of France and captivity, he definitely hadn't changed; he was surely the same, but there was nevertheless this: it seemed more and more necessary to him to find a point of view in philosophy where the collective is not purely and simply a part of the unreal. It seemed necessary to him to integrate the fact of relationships with others into his philosophical thinking.

(Merleau-Ponty 2016: 188–189)

Sartre's thinking passed then from the anti-humanism on display in *Nausea* to what Merleau-Ponty called a "difficult" humanism (*ibid.*: 239).

Merleau-Ponty certainly regretted that Sartrean ontology was "antithetical," with its oppositions between the in-itself and the for-itself, and also between the for-itself and the for-others. But he finds in that ontology a double movement: on the one hand, Sartre uncovers a radical freedom in consciousness as nothingness; on the other hand, though, by affirming that consciousness is only nothingness, consciousness is, for Sartre, carried by the being that it is not and, thus, does not stop "communicating" and "interacting" with that being. As Merleau-Ponty points out,

*L'être et le néant* is first of all a demonstration that the subject is freedom, absence, and negativity and that, in this sense, nothingness is. But that also means that the subject is *only* nothingness, that it needs to be carried in being, that he can only be thought of

against a background of the world, and, finally, that he feeds on being like the shadows in Homer feed on the blood of the living. We can therefore expect all manner of clarification and completion after *L'être et le néant*.

(Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 72–73, modified translation)

Moving beyond the critique of Sartrean dualism, Merleau-Ponty draws implicitly on the "Introduction" to *Being and Nothingness* to identify the first elements of a "theory of passivity" (ibid: 77) that Sartre places at the beginning of the unfinished business of 1943. Invoking the intentional structure of consciousness, Sartre maintains that all consciousness is the consciousness of something else. As he observes, "consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself" (Sartre 1984: 24). In these same pages, reread with the Freudian motif of the *Nachträglichkeit* in mind, Daniel Giovannangeli uncovers the motif of the "lateness of consciousness" (Giovannangeli 2001). According to him, on the fact of being's precedence over consciousness, Sartrean ontology becomes "hantology," because Sartre ends *Being and Nothingness* by defining consciousness as a "relative non-being" (Sartre 1984: 618), which lays out the demand of another type of thinking based on negativity (Giovannangeli 2001: 17).

#### 1945–1950: Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and *Les Temps Modernes*

It was with the founding of *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945 that the friendship between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty became a true "common enterprise" (Sartre 2010a: 1116). A founding member, Merleau-Ponty was also the (anonymous) editorialist until the beginning of the 1950s. Better prepared than Sartre to write about politics (ibid.: 1068), he brought his friend to writing and political engagement with the publication of *Humanism and Terror* in 1947. Up until that point, Sartre prudently remained at a theoretical criticism of dialectical materialism and the Marxist vulgate (Sartre 1946).

The positioning of the journal bears the mark of a rich and difficult line of thinking, without concession to simplification. Merleau-Ponty's first article, "The War Has Taken Place," takes a lesson in history and politics from the collective and individual experience of the war. It is not a philosophy of history or a political doctrine, much less a political perspective, but a task for thought and writing which is meant to be a form of bold engagement. In line with criticisms of the *pensée de survol* (thinking "from above"), engaged writing sees itself as an *experience* that confronts the uncertainty of meaning, and assumes for us "not just our intentions—what our actions mean for us—but also the external consequences of these actions, what they mean in a historical context" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 145, translation slightly modified). This resulted in the proliferation of an extraordinary variety of texts (literary, philosophical, political—as many ways of writing *for his time*) that, on a political level, held the position that resolved not to give in to dualisms that marked, very quickly after the Liberation, the beginning of the Cold War. As Claude Lefort wrote in his posterior introduction to *Humanism and Terror*, in a moment when "hopes of social upheaval" were surging up and at the same time, "the forces of the old society" were reestablishing themselves (Merleau-Ponty 1980:13), the book sought to understand the Moscow Trials differently from Koestler's perspective in *Darkness at Noon*. Careful not to abandon the proletariat's cause or the Marxist revolutionary project, and careful, too, not to disqualify completely the experience of "effective communism," Merleau-Ponty attempted a critical defense of the USSR. He was trying to show that, before making any conclusive judgment, it made sense to understand that terror and violence go back to the unfolding of history that must be confronted. The text, which owns up to its "wait-and-see" attitude, was coldly received on

all sides, including by the PCF. Led into politics during this chain of events, Sartre's experience at the heart of the RDR (Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire) between February 1948 and the summer of 1949 reflects in its own way certain of the journal's ambitions, namely, the will to unite, without bureaucratic apparatus or doctrine, the forces committed to fighting in Europe for social revolution, democracy, and freedom, without allegiance to specific camps. It would be a sort of undetermined third force that the militaristic and imperialistic dynamics of the East and the West, relayed by the national parties, with the PCF and the SFIO at their head, nipped in the bud (Birchall 2011:169).

Just after this episode, *Les Temps Modernes* opened its columns to debates generated by the Russian work camps and economic system, where not only divergent positions were expressed (e.g., those of Victor Serge and Claude Lefort), but also views different from those of the journal's directors, who intervened in the famous January 1950 editorial, entitled "The Days of Our Lives." It was written by Merleau-Ponty and approved by Sartre, and is also known by the title "The USSR and the Camps" (Merleau-Ponty 1964c: 263–273). This text shows the will to take a radical socialist position, one that defends communist "values" without aligning itself with Stalinism, Trotskyism, or social democracy. In short, it is an attitude that expresses the "ethical" demands, so to speak, of the philosophies of existence. However, it also betrays this position's fragility (in fact without solid support in Marxist theory) at a conjuncture marked by the Cold War's intensification. Sartre makes a lucid diagnosis of this in "Merleau-Ponty Living," emphasizing how much "Merleau's voice has become clouded," exposing the "deceptions, the wearing away of his hopes" (Sartre 2010a: 1078) that would turn him away from "daily politics" (ibid.: 1083). Merleau-Ponty would eventually end up abandoning Sartre in the fray and, beginning in 1953, the editing of the journal.

### Estrangement before the falling out: Merleau-Ponty at the beginning of the 1950s

Without a doubt, Jean Hyppolite best expressed Merleau-Ponty's way of practicing philosophy. In 1961, in a lecture entitled "The Evolution of Merleau-Ponty's Thinking," Hyppolite was not so much looking to describe an evolution as he was to identify, as he put it, an "original inflection" (Hyppolite 1991b: 706). Hyppolite was referring to the curvature that Merleau-Ponty's thinking imprints on Husserl's philosophy toward an *impensé*, toward an irreducible remainder that does not exclude thought and reason but instead represents the obstacle that all reasonable inquiry must constantly confront. According to him, "we must always be cunning with things (and people) because we have to bring out of them an order that is not given with them" (ibid.: 720). In speaking of readings and influences, Hyppolite brings to light the specific relationship that unites Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. He emphasizes that "the difference that separated these two men [...] sometimes allowed them to switch positions with the other" (ibid.: 719). Merleau-Ponty is thus just as capable of wearing a mask as Sartre is.

Recently, Emmanuel de Saint-Aubert developed this reading grid in his vast inquiry into Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, namely, that

Merleau-Ponty disguises, wears costumes, and willingly attributes to others what he himself has done on the pretense that he is interpreting others' work according to his own intuitions. One finds these phenomena in his rapport with Husserl and Heidegger but also with Machiavelli, Montaigne, Bergson, and many others ... even Sartre, sometimes re-clothed in the least expected clothing.

(Saint-Aubert 2011: 60)



For Saint-Aubert, this art of disguise determines in Merleau-Ponty a series of scenarios (Cartesian, Sartrean, etc.) that must be scrupulously followed if one wants to “restore Merleau-Ponty’s freedom,” perhaps even “against his will” (Saint-Aubert 2004: 39). In *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l’être* (*From the links of beings to the elements of Being*), he showed how, between 1943 and 1949, Merleau-Ponty secretly ate away at Sartre’s ontology and anthropology under the appearance of camaraderie. Studying the unedited manuscripts of this period, Saint-Aubert uncovers Merleau-Ponty’s strategy, which involved “turning Beauvoir against Sartre” by playing on “what still remains non-Sartrean” in Beauvoir (ibid.: 31, 77; Cormann 2008). Starting in 1945, Merleau-Ponty leaned on the reading of *The Blood of Others*, which passes as the first novel about the Resistance, in order to uncover the concept of *empiètement* (encroachment (trespassing, encroaching)). Beauvoir writes, “I cannot blot myself out. I cannot withdraw into myself. I exist outside of myself and everywhere in the world. There is not an inch of my path that does not trespass on the path of someone else: there is no way of living that can prevent me from overflowing out of myself at every moment” (Beauvoir 1964: 115–116).

*Humanism and Terror* can thus develop a reflection on violence, a reflection that Merleau-Ponty lent a few years earlier to the author of *The Flies*. He writes,

In this there is a true *regression* of political [democratic] thinking, in the same sense that doctors speak of a regression toward childhood. One wants to forget a problem which has troubled Europe since the Greeks, namely, that the human condition may be such that it has no happy solution. Does not every action involve us in a game we cannot entirely control? Is there not a sort of evil in collective life? At least in times of crisis, does not each freedom encroach upon the freedom of others?

(Merleau-Ponty 1969: 38)

Beauvoir allows Merleau-Ponty to distance himself from the Sartrean conception of relations amongst consciousnesses. The trespassing of consciousnesses is not the consequence of an original conflict between incompatible consciousnesses, but it provides the opportunity to constitute a communal situation “where others and I pass one into the other” (Saint-Aubert 2004: 65).

In his courses at the Sorbonne between 1945 and 1952, it was precisely to these relations with others that Merleau-Ponty dedicated his attention (Merleau-Ponty 2001). This time he in some ways pitted Sartre against himself. In particular, Merleau-Ponty insisted on the importance of “The Child’s Relations with others” (“Relations avec autrui chez l’enfant”) that Sartre’s phenomenology of emotions brought to light, *in extremis*, in a reference to Alain, when Sartre wrote that “man is always a sorcerer to man and the social world is primarily magical” (Sartre 2002: 56). Merleau-Ponty thus looked to hold together the French philosophical tradition, represented by Alain and Sartre, and the theoretical contributions of Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, both marked by Freudian psychoanalysis (Cormann 2006). Pushing the moment of rupture back even more, his last course at the Sorbonne, devoted to “the Other’s Experience,” ended with a thinly veiled reference to *Saint Genet, actor and martyr* that Sartre had just published. As Merleau-Ponty writes,

In Sartre’s recent writings, there is a certain tendency to think that all facts in us come from others. He would agree, then, in a way, with Alain’s famous analysis of love that adopts Pascal’s idea: “‘One never loves anyone, we only love qualities.’ [...] The subject’s freedom fascinates itself in delivering itself to the image of itself that it gave the other by way of words (Macbeth dominated by the idea: ‘You will be King’).

(Merleau-Ponty 2001: 565)

Merleau-Ponty's statement was not without prudence or reserve, both perhaps accentuated by his own recent discovery of *Saint Genet*, but we easily recognize here the "You will be a thief" that sealed, according to Sartre, the future writer's destiny. And there is no question that Merleau-Ponty understood that Sartre's existential biography was a response to "authors of the school of structuralism" (ibid.: 569) to whom he himself seemed to leave the last word.

### The 1950s: The Cold War of philosophy and politics

In the summer of 1950, the Korean War started. Merleau-Ponty lost his last convictions concerning the USSR and withdrew into a skeptical silence. Sartre only exposed himself to politics indirectly by writing *The Devil and the Good Lord*, which examines a revolutionary leader figure, and *Saint Genet*, which became a public scandal because of his views on homosexuality. Once again, the two works earned Sartre the hostility of the Stalinists of the PCF. The Henry Martin affair broke out in 1951. Condemned for his protests against the Indochina War, the soldier received support from the PCF, from Sartre, and from other non-Communist intellectuals. Then events happened quickly: May 28, 1952, on the occasion of the American General Ridgway's visit to Paris, a protest was organized by the PCF against the Korean War and American intervention. Jacques Duclos, then Secretary of the PCF, was arrested. As part of its protest, the PCF called for a strike on June 4, which turned out to be a dismal failure. The Right triumphed in the face of the working class's disavowal of the Party. Sartre was overcome with anger: "I either had to write or to suffocate. I worked, day and night, on the first part of *Communists and Peace*" (Sartre 2010a: 1093). It was an attack of anti-communism, of the Left and the Right, and a defense of the Party, less as an apparatus than as an active way of organizing the proletariat as a fighting class, as a revolutionary class. As Sartre observes, "In one word the Party is the movement itself that unites workers by helping them to take control [...]. It is true that it is nothing outside of it [the working class], but if the party disappears, the class will become dust" (Sartre 1964: 249–250).

Merleau-Ponty said nothing about this contribution, while Sartre, recruited by the PCF which was looking for external allies at the time (Birchall 2011: 210–211), declared himself a "fellow traveller" (un compagnon de route). Let us emphasize nevertheless that, parallel to successive editions of the text of *Communists and Peace* (from 1952 to 1954), the journal continued to publish articles representing the anti-Stalinist left and hosted a vigorous discussion with Lefort on *Socialisme ou Barbarie* that led to a brutal confrontation. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty had a falling out when Sartre, without informing Merleau-Ponty, did not publish a "caveat" Merleau-Ponty had written about a publication by Pierre Naville that he did not approve. Merleau-Ponty took Sartre's decision quite badly and resigned from *Les Temps Modernes*. As Sartre describes, "he handed his journal over to my incompetence" (Sartre 2010a: 1102).

As Sartre refused to express their disagreement publicly in *Les Temps Modernes*, an exchange of letters followed in which Merleau-Ponty's resignation became the pretext of a bitter discussion. For Sartre, it meant that Merleau-Ponty was retiring from politics *in favor of* philosophy. Legitimate as an individual and subjective gesture, this retreat needed no political justification, and certainly not by criticizing those who kept themselves on *objective* political ground. To do so would be to play into the hands of the Right *objectively* against the Left. "A socialist," writes Sartre, "can criticize the conception of the PCF. But no one has the right to do so in the name of the phenomenological epoché" (Merleau-Ponty and Sartre 2000: 138). In his response, Merleau-Ponty refused the alternative, using an at once philosophical and political justification. To resign is to write no longer with urgency. He maintains that "the event can only be appreciated in the big picture of a politics that changes its meaning," hence it should not be confronted

in our imagination “as if it were decisive, unique, and irreparable” (ibid.: 145–148). Merleau-Ponty insists on anchoring in an undetermined and open present, and reproaches Sartre for projecting a future, a ready-made History, from which he fixed the meaning of the present situation.

As they ended their friendship, the writing of *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955) was, for Merleau-Ponty, the opportunity for a public explanation that never happened. The chapter entitled “Sartre and Ultra-Bolshevism” goes back to the philosophical roots of Sartre’s communist involvement. Merleau-Ponty essentially says that Sartrean freedom, because it is thought of as pure negativity, proves itself to be a “pure power of signifying, [...] a centrifugal movement without opacity or inertia, which casts history and the social outside, into the signified, reducing them to a series of instantaneous views, subordinating doing to seeing” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 198). Condemned to pure action, to “instantaneous interventions in the world,” Sartre’s engagement is just “action at a distance,” and “a way of putting ourselves right with the world rather than entering it” (ibid.: 192–193, translation slightly modified). Such freedom is deprived of the power to invent new and embodied political possibilities, and protected from risk, as luck, from becoming what it does. Any philosophy that takes the for-itself for the subject’s pure presence to itself cannot avoid the immediacy of the object, of facts, as a confrontation to enclosed meanings, which explains the close association of the Party with revolutionary freedom. How, under these conditions, can history become anything but “the immediate result of our volitions” (ibid.: 97–98)? How can action be anything but an “action without criteria” (ibid.: 101) that does not allow any mediation between the “pure” fact and the decision, oscillating between objectivism and subjectivism? Sartre never did see that revolution would emerge from the particular determinations of the past, but from the future, that is to say, *from the non-being where the man of action projects himself*. But for Merleau-Ponty, to put revolutionary action off until the future is to subject it to the “ought” (“devoir-être”) (ibid.: 107, modified translation); it is moralism and deliberate pullout. In Sartre’s work, the freedom that presents itself under the name of *praxis* is a radical, vertiginous freedom; it is the “magic power that is ours to act and to make ourselves whatever we want” (ibid.: 132).

### The 1960s: Sartre after and according to Merleau-Ponty

Should we see in this critique the final truth about Sartre’s thinking and his political erring in the 1950s? This critique, a very harsh one, contrasts with the way Merleau-Ponty, up until his death in 1961, exploited, on his own behalf to develop his thinking for himself, the fecundity of the *tension* that inhabited Sartre’s philosophy from the beginning. It must not allow us to forget the “living and uninterrupted dialogue” (Hyppolite 1991a: 687) that he entertains with his philosophical tension<sup>4</sup>. It all happened as if the force and the contingency of History – a conjuncture where politics finds itself subjected to the logic of war, even if it is a cold one, and class struggles, commandeered in the dual confrontation of the two sides – had blown up, so to speak, the fecundity of this philosophical tension. After all, Merleau-Ponty’s work only discusses the excessive side of *Communists and Peace*.

It is also significant that this critique of Sartre is placed under the emblem of a “dialectic,” aside from the fact that it bears the mark of a semiotics by which Merleau-Ponty was trying at the time to overcome his own dualisms in the direction of a new ontology. This claim of a dialectic drawn from its ideological manipulations is the new formulation of an old demand to think, to act, and to write *from* the difference between consciousness and being, *from* an original negativity without overcoming it by asserting an ultimate identity or truth, even if it is historical or metaphysical (Caeymaex 2005b). If Merleau-Ponty’s death prevented him from finishing his ontological reflection on the negative (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 1964a), there is no doubt that his voice echoes in all of Sartre’s work beginning in 1956, when he abandoned the problems of

communism in favor of both a theorization of history inspired by Marxism and a reestablishment of dialectical and political interventions marked by concern for mediations.

Upon Merleau-Ponty's death, for the first time in his life Sartre was unable to write. He took several months to write an obituary that appeared in *Les Temps Modernes* in October 1961. Sartre was worn out from writing the *Critique* (1960) and from political combat. With Merleau-Ponty, he saw yet another friend die, after Boris Vian and Albert Camus. In his homage, Sartre speaks of their lost friendship, and unwaveringly, he mixes life and philosophy. There is not one example, not one anecdote that does not suggest a fundamental moment in Merleau-Ponty's thinking: taken at random, contingency, phantom limb, institution, childhood, pre-maturation, intentionality, anchoring, body, wild being, event, fold. In the first version of the obituary, he sought to capture Merleau-Ponty's method:

Merleau-Ponty originally refused the status and the privileges of the observer, he became his own aphasic double, his penguin double, he lived *in himself*, falsifying his vision and grappling with the phantoms, their disarray, and their patient re-adaptation until he felt himself in them what was our space: a place of crowds, crossroads, an undefined plurality of the dimensions that surround us, stretch us thin and press us, that we produce by living in it.

(Sartre 2010b: 1134)

With Merleau-Ponty gone, Sartre owed it to his friend to bring his friend's philosophy to life *in himself*.

Up until the end, even in *The Family Idiot*, Sartre upheld his pledge to make Merleau-Ponty "a prism of our 'intersubjectivity'" (Sartre 2010a: 1116). He did not stop citing what we could call Merleau-Ponty's "Thoughts," mentioned in each of his lectures and in his interviews. However, it was more than a moral obligation that kept Sartre operating in this way, but the demand he felt to *think from an original difference*. Hence it is not surprising that toward the end, Sartre worked tirelessly on what surely constituted in Merleau-Ponty's work the reverse of his own philosophy. In December 1961, at the Gramsci Institute in Rome, Sartre began his lecture on subjectivity with the question of the organism, returning to analyses in *The Structure of Behavior* (Sartre 2013). Later on, in "Morality and History" (1964–1965), he returned at length to the example of torture by which Merleau-Ponty contested Sartrean freedom in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 527). Finally, in his *Flaubert*, Sartre brings up several articles from *Signs*, notably "Man and Adversity." As Sartre writes, "Unlike other animals, Merleau-Ponty essentially says, man is born without equipment. So is the genius according to Flaubert; he is unequipped, unlike other men who have the tools necessary to be a doctor or a lawyer" (Sartre 1988: 1636). Sartre thus ends his dialogue with Merleau-Ponty by going back to *the experience of contingency*, which was the experience of their time period. Merleau-Ponty sums it up in this way:

everything is possible as man's part, and right up to the end. Man is absolutely distinct from animal species, but precisely in the respect that he has no original equipment and is the place of contingency, which sometimes takes the form of a kind of miracle (in the sense in which man have spoken of the *miracle of Greece*), and sometimes the form of an unintentional adversity."

(Merleau-Ponty 1964c: 240; 2007: 204, translation slightly modified)

## Notes

- 1 We notice Merleau-Ponty's originality here. While Simone de Beauvoir and Francis Jeanson look to complete Sartre's ontology with a moral existentialism, *Sense and Non-Sense* extends existentialism in the direction of "a new idea of reason" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 3) that unfolds itself successively in the fields of artistic creation, morality, and, finally, politics.
- 2 This fundamental thesis is indebted to Jean Wahl. In "Vers le concret," Wahl (2016: 51–53) defines dialectic, in a non-Hegelian sense, as an "effort" of thought toward the real, which is "something other than itself" and suggests that this alterity hides "the idea of negation."
- 3 In his study of Sartrean ontology, Roland Breeur (2005) finds in Sartre a passivity that is more profound than Merleau-Ponty's ambiguity. He invokes the *memory of being* (*le souvenir d'être*) that insists beyond the passage of pure transcendence of consciousness to the constitution of a world of meaning, "as its unjustifiable presence in the world" (Sartre 1984: 84). According to Breeur, this "involuntary identity" in itself makes the anguish (thematized starting with *The Transcendence of the Ego*) felt in the face of the ever-present possibility of the rupture of choice comprehensible.
- 4 After the falling out, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty met up again a few times, in Paris and in Italy, the first time in Venice, in March 1956, at a meeting of writers and intellectuals from the East and West (Merleau-Ponty 1997: 174–200); the last time, in March 1961, a few weeks before Merleau-Ponty's death, after a lecture that Sartre gave at the ENS. This meeting ended, according to Sartre, with a "last misunderstanding" (Sartre 2010a: 1116). However, he adds that they also met up a few times "alone," on his own initiative. We know little about these meetings. The two philosophers probably talked about decolonization: "we agreed about condemning the war in Algeria without reservation [...]; maybe we weren't of the same opinion when it came to ways of fighting Algeria; that would come; when it rises, fascism brings lost friends together" (Ibid.). Merleau-Ponty recounts his experience, little known, of a long trip that he took in 1956 in French colonial Africa in his *Interviews with Georges Charbonnier* (2016: 333–391). He talks in particular about the panic of the French people who hosted his lectures on "The Meaning of Race," "Underdeveloped People and the End of History," and "The Psychology and Sociology of Colonialization" (ibid.: 369).

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