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FRANK CHOURAQUI

THE PARADOX OF POWER

“The weighing or pondering of Zeus is also his judgment”

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

I. Introduction: Ontology and Politics

Categorical thinking in politics

One of the most important traits of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is its refusal to think according to pre-established categories. This is well known. A more philosophically interesting aspect is his consistent effort to *account* for the false categories which he wishes to liberate himself from: although they distort experience, they are also derived from it, and as such, they disclose it. In his words, this makes them “secondary truths.”¹ This nuanced attitude towards categorical thinking should be seen as a sign that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy could be put to important and directly practical use in times such as ours, times in which the links between categorical thinking and violence have become (even more) impossible to ignore in spite of the fact that non-categorical thinking is linked to violence too. What we now need is a middle course, and Merleau-Ponty's work can provide it.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself framed his political contributions as an alternative to categorical thinking in politics. His motivation was explicit: categorical thinking leads to terror. Indeed, he begins the last chapter of *Humanism and Terror* with an attack on Kant, by recalling Hegel's quip that “the French Terror is Kantianism put into practice.”² In other places, Merleau-Ponty himself confronts Kant's categorical imperative and accuses it of breeding either passivity or ultra-violence. As he claims forcefully in one passage, the bridge from categorical thinking to violence is operated by a certain fetish for “consistency.”³

The nexus that connects categorical thinking, violence and consistency is an appropriate model to examine our times, torn between political violence (or terrorism) and populist fascism. But what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he places the blame for this kind of violence on Kant is also a well-known paradox: that the project of human brotherhood leads into ultra-violence. This is because the project of universal brotherhood is grounded a priori and as such, its ambition to minimize violence falls short, for it misses the nature of violence, which is not dependent on intentions (from the point of view of which the categorical imperative is beyond reproach), but on consequences: non-violent intentions justify violence in more than merely accidental ways. This is,

Merleau-Ponty says in response to Sartre, due to the fact that on the one hand categorical thinking in morality recognizes the value of the human, and that taking a human as an end involves necessarily (not accidentally) making their concrete experience a stake of our own action. On the other hand, categorical thinking fails to see that this concrete experience involves a thickness and an opacity which Merleau-Ponty regards as a form of adversity, one that, as such, cannot be satisfied from without or a priori. Any a priori attempt at satisfying it will only satisfy a disembodied figure, not a man of flesh, let alone an entire class, nation or human species. Such categorical thinking, by failing to address human “aspirations,”⁴ winds up ignoring human happiness and replacing it with the myth that humans are objectively happy even if they don’t know it or experience it.

This paradox through which categorical moralism ignores those it takes as its ends is dramatized in what Merleau-Ponty calls “ultra-Bolshevism,” the view that the unhappiness of the proletariat cannot serve as an objection to the regime implemented by the Party: if the party represents the proletariat, then the party by definition always satisfies the proletariat and therefore any unhappiness on the part of the workers is a sign of some internalized bourgeois prejudice on their part. This may be because happiness itself is a bourgeois concept or because an unhappy proletarian in a revolutionary regime is just a happy one who is unaware of it. In the first case, one is left asking what acting on behalf and for the sake of the proletariat even means, if it is not for the sake of their happiness (Merleau-Ponty sometimes hints at a communist mysticism which might support the view that there is a transcendent end which is indifferent to happiness, leading to other problems). In the latter case, happiness is reduced to an objective situation in which the subject of the purported happiness is not an authority on their own happiness. In both cases, we collapse into a bad kind of objectivism. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty aims the same criticism at capitalism, which is, in his view, another kind of materialism insofar as it too sees the salvation of mankind in a certain kind of economic superstructure. In the preface to *Signs*, De Gaulle is reproached for placing “standards of living” above the “nation’s aspirations.”⁵ What the promised perfect society offers is an objective, non-human, happiness; it collapses into impotence.

The objectivism which characterizes what Merleau-Ponty calls the “old world” (the world organized by the Cold War) is rejected on the basis of his anthropology of the lived body (and his ontology of the flesh which emerges initially in his political texts) for simply ignoring that life is a qualitative experience. This is why Merleau-Ponty opposes it with an appeal to the embodiment of action, to life and to the flesh. Avoiding such objectivism becomes a requirement which categorical thinking and the correlated deontological moralism fail: categorical thinking has no time for the qualitative experience of the other, and its appeal to treat the other as an end has hollowed itself out: the other has become a cardboard figure and the only beneficiary of the treatment of this cardboard figure as an end is the moral agent themselves,

or as Merleau-Ponty says abruptly: the agent (Sartre in this case), “is only trying to achieve innocence.”⁶

A new ontology of the political field

So much for the critique of categorical thinking, but we started off by emphasizing that Merleau-Ponty’s attitude towards it was “nuanced” because it granted to the illusions it unmasked the status of “secondary truths.” The two are related insofar as the project of overcoming categorical thinking in politics led Merleau-Ponty to the elaboration of a metaphysics of history and of political agency which is meant to account for the resistance that the political field opposes to categorical thought (this resistance is called “adversity”) as well as the recognition that the falseness of categorical thought doesn’t prevent its ability to produce (dire) consequences. The motivations for the introduction of “secondary truths” are therefore political. As outlined above, Merleau-Ponty’s political project is motivated by the intuition that bad political philosophy has had political consequences, sometimes because it *leads into* such consequences (in materialism and cynicism), sometimes because it ignores consequences altogether (in moralism—by which Merleau-Ponty means deontological morality). Either way, illusion must be conceived as danger, and what needs explaining is the concrete efficacy of such illusions.

The motivations are also partly ontological: it is a matter of accounting for *all* phenomena, and any philosophy which places as much stock as Merleau-Ponty’s does on its critical moment must account for the existence of illusion. The political motivation, of course, is not incompatible with the ontological one, it is not even distinct from it. As pointed out in the preface to *Signs*, the notion of the efficacy of philosophy itself (which will be elaborated later in terms of hyper-dialectic) violates the “old-world” (the world organized by the Cold War in which the two alternatives were materialistic) parallelism between the material and the spiritual, and therefore relies on an alternative ontology.⁷ This suggests that the question of ontology and the question of politics are interwoven closely. For Merleau-Ponty, this is simply because history, which is the milieu of politics, is also the milieu of philosophy: history is a field of meaning which establishes the continual interchange between facts and our reflection over them, an interchange called “advent.” Yet, our reflection over facts follows, at least formally, the rule of truth: the meaning-making that all historical subjects produce is motivated by a search for truth. Philosophical agency, which is the agency of a truth-discourse, is therefore to be regarded as a kind of political agency: Merleau-Ponty declares that there are two kinds of political action: “seeing and doing”; “unveiling” (which is philosophical as per the Heideggerian reference) and “governing.” Indeed, *each* political act contains both elements: governing on the side of “power” and “unveiling” on the side of “truth.”⁸

Power and truth have long had an ambiguous relation, and most often, this ambiguity was of the bad kind. This bad ambiguity is exemplified in Plato's polemic against the Sophists, where he argues that power is less safe when propped up with lies than it is when propped up with truth. Plato goes on to argue that the real power lies in truth and, therefore, that power should subject itself to truth. The last step of this Platonic argument is self-defeating however, as it is motivated by a fact that it recognizes but cannot explain: that the Sophists do in fact have the power, so much so that Plato needs to counter them. In the case of the Sophists at least, power doesn't depend on truth. Here Plato encounters bad ambiguity: by reducing power to truth, he becomes unable to account for the *phenomenon* of real power derived from false discourses. The identification of power and truth is too strict to even make room for the efficacy of political lies. As is well known, this is a problem Plato confronts directly in the *Sophist*, and one which takes him far into the deconstruction of his own philosophical system. The ambiguity is bad because it is a foreign element in a theory that doesn't allow for it. The badness of this ambiguity therefore lies in the *relationship* between this ambiguity and the theoretical framework intended to account for it.

To turn it into a good ambiguity, it is this relationship that needs changing: we need a theoretical system into which ambiguity is inscribed in such a way that phenomena which merge truth and power do not appear as anomalies. This is most urgent. The political lies of the Sophists are now replaced by the phenomenon we are now hastily trying to define as post-truth politics. We could carry on in the old way, and dismiss such phenomena as anomalies in the hope that they will fall on the sword of their own contradictions, or we could take them seriously. This is probably a calculation of the kind that Merleau-Ponty engaged in when confronted with another expression of this bad ambiguity, the one he chronicles at length in *Humanism and Terror*. It is also easy to be convinced that such problems have a distinctly Merleau-Pontian stamp: ambiguity is the Merleau-Pontian theme *par excellence*. This paper attempts to trace the Merleau-Pontian response to the challenge of turning the bad ambiguity into a good ambiguity, which is to say, his attempt to erect the constant interaction of power and truth into a fundamental fact which should not be accommodated by any theory, but should, rather, inform any possible theory.

This leads to four preliminary hypotheses:

Firstly, political action is some sort of mix of unveiling and governing. That is, it is polarized by truth and by practical concerns at once.

Secondly, power is not indifferent to truth, and truth is not indifferent to power: they motivate each other.

Thirdly, and consequently, ontology and politics are intertwined, and the reciprocal motivation of truth and power suggests that neither has absolute

precedence over the other. His ontology of power is therefore an ontology that at once *says* what power's being *is* and an ontology that *determines* being as power. It is not, in any case, a reduction of power to being. Most probably, we shall come to consider that power and being are themselves only derivations of one common ground which is reluctant to being accounted for either ontologically or politically.

Fourthly, and until such a ground is uncovered, the unity of unveiling and governing and the unity of seeing and doing presents us with a paradox: in politics, the theoretical and the practical are unified although they can only be conceived of as separate from each other. The rest of this paper seeks to address the first three hypotheses by way of the fourth.

II. *The Paradox of Power*

Let me begin by briefly reconstructing a problem inherited by the tradition of Western political philosophy. This will serve to frame Merleau-Ponty's contribution in terms of that tradition and, therefore, to highlight the value of his solution for political thought in general. Let us define power as anything that *motivates* obedience⁹ (by contrast, force will be defined as that which *causes yielding* and authority as that which *deserves* obedience¹⁰), a definition broad and vague enough as to be uncontroversial. Taken in this sense, power is affected by a paradox: it generates obedience from those that *make* it. On the one hand, power is identical with the power of those who obey it, on the other, those who obey it do so on the basis that it is independent from them. Whatever democratic theory wishes to do to ease this paradox (by asserting that there is no obedience but self-obedience, for example) is short-circuited by the mere fact that self-obedience is an alienating experience (it transfers the hierarchical relation into an internal relation, typically between the universal reason within and particular interests) and that all theories of power include a theory of institution, be it the State, the Prince or the Party.

The tradition gives us the first premise of the paradox: power is derived from the subjects of power. As noted above, Plato founds Western political philosophy by pointing out the fact that the Sophists' power is derived from the more fundamental power of the public, and it is therefore only as strong as the public's unchallenged faith in the speaker. The Sophists are vulnerable to truth because their power is not their own, but derivative. In Merleau-Ponty's language, "reasons can be opposed to other reasons and respect is lost."¹¹ In this case, respect means the forgetting of the fact that the power we obey is derivative of our own.¹²

La Boétie makes the point explicit: without our obedience, the prince is nothing but a "hommelet."¹³ For Marx, the problem of respect as forgetting resurfaces where the revolution is premised on (and identical with) the Proletariat's remembering their objective place in the power structure. In the process, Hobbes, Spinoza and Shakespeare make the same point in their own

ways. And as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, Machiavelli regards power as an “appeal to freedom.”¹⁴

The point made here leads into another: that power is the convergence of a realist motivation and a normative one. Rousseau expresses this best: it is in order to establish and maintain power (the realist motivation) that legitimacy must be sought (the normative motivation). “The strongest is never strong enough as to always be the strongest unless they change might into right and obedience into duty.”¹⁵ This certainly makes legitimacy an instrument of domination, but it doesn’t subject the normative principle to the realist one. For legitimacy is *effective* only when it is not *just* such an instrument, only when it is *true* legitimacy. So this convergence must be taken seriously: neither side must yield to the other. For legitimacy without power is like freedom without embodiment: it is nothing. Politics is the realm in which the opposition between matter and meaning collapses. Power remains a relation to the real, but the definition of the real has now become a hermeneutic object; the real is that which humans live in: a world of material facts, aspirations, values and possibility, a world of meaning.

This allows us to formulate the paradox of power: the phenomenon of power involves two sub-phenomena:

a) The phenomenon of recognition: the entity’s power is recognized *if perceived as given*.¹⁶

b) The phenomenon of constitution/institution: the entity’s givenness is dependent on recognition.

The paradox lies in the fact that both of these sub-phenomena are taken to be independent from each other. Therefore, this paradox may be expressed by a circle: recognition makes institution possible and institution makes recognition possible. Denying this circle would involve granting one or the other of the terms a fundamental position. Place recognition first, and all power becomes reduced to force, and obedience is only the result of the threat of force. Place institution first, and obedience is lost, for power becomes identical with the subject’s action.

The paradox of power is therefore preliminarily clarified: it is not a flaw, it is not that there is a paradox in the notion of power which requires a new, presumably non-paradoxical notion, but rather, power is this paradoxical structure itself. Power is the unity of the recognition and the institution of power. Without being both instituted and recognized by us, power collapses. Yet, we recognize it because we forget that it is instituted by us and take it as given, thereby granting it the authority of fact, and we institute it on the basis of this very recognition. In other words, power is not only the unity of institution and recognition, it is the self-forgetting of this unity (Merleau-Ponty calls this forgetting “respect”¹⁷). Indeed, without this self-forgetting, that is to say, without the illusion that recognition and institution are different, obedience would collapse. This leads into a further, more serious paradox: we need both, and we need to think of them as distinct. This second paradox is the core of Merleau-Ponty’s political problem.

In the rest of this paper, I will attempt to clarify Merleau-Ponty's solution to this paradox and to follow some of its implications. I will largely follow an analogical argument, in which perceptual faith as an ontological principle is shown to have the same structure as power properly defined. I then argue that when one operates at such an essential level, dealing with the essential structure of power and of being, the structure/content distinction ceases to apply, and therefore the structural analogy between the two denotes an essential identity. I conclude that, for Merleau-Ponty, being and power are one and the same, and their unity allows us to understand further the relations of theory and practice.

Merleau-Ponty begins with an axiom, "the fact is never an excuse, it is your assent that makes it irrevocable," he says in *Humanism and Terror*.¹⁸ As noted above, he later declares that "power is not without an appeal to freedom."¹⁹ Power, therefore, should be regarded as a circuit in which the authority produces a politically significant result via the freedom of its subject. This notion of the freedom of the political subject therefore contains the paradox which motivates Merleau-Ponty's political reflection. How can one be both subjected to power and free? One is subjected insofar as the result is an act determined by the authority. Whether it is in the interest of, or intentionally wished for, by the authority is another story (some rulers don't know what's good for them, Machiavelli notes, and Merleau-Ponty recalls). So it seems that intentions and interests are not relevant tests to define what makes an act into an act of obedience. The subjection of the subject, rather, is determined by the fact that it is initiated outside of the subject, by another (perhaps abstract or institutional) subject. Her freedom remains because the act of the authority needs the subject's assent in order to use it as its conduit. Here, one either has to say that the assent is entirely free, and therefore the authoritative dimension of the act is removed, and we are no longer dealing with obedience, or else that it isn't, in which case it seems we cannot account for it except by postulating some sort of voluntary slavery. Agency, in this framework, increases as we move towards the initial term of the act, and passivity increases as we come to the end result. A mixture of freedom and subjection suggests a mixture of being at the beginning and at the end of the process. In short, let's think of obedience as a circular structure in which the subject initially freely gives authority to another (abstract or institutional) subject, and in turn obeys it once this authority is established. In typically Merleau-Pontian fashion, we see how the paradox of obedience requires that we overcome the false alternative of passivity and activity.²⁰ This structure can only combine precession (freedom) and succession (obedience) in the required manner if we bear in mind that the initial moment is itself secondary to a preliminary one, *ad infinitum*. For without a preceding moment, what would motivate anyone to lend authority to the other, that is, to delegate her own authority to another in such a complete way that she agrees to let them use it on her?

This moment should be seen as having two aspects. As a second moment, it has the aspect of recognition: it recognizes the authority contained in the preexisting object. As a first moment, it constitutes that object as authoritative.

The combination of freedom and obedience which defines what Merleau-Ponty calls “power” relies on the fact that neither moment can be said to precede the other with a priority greater than that by which the other precedes it. As such, this might be enough to undermine the standard assumption which makes assent derive from recognition alone. This circularity should be enough to undermine any easy account of legitimacy, but it doesn’t follow that Merleau-Ponty’s project is purely critical. On the contrary, as is his custom, Merleau-Ponty wishes to investigate how to still talk about politics and how to do politics while taking this circularity to be a primary fact.

II. *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*

Merleau-Ponty asks about the relations of philosophy and non-philosophy. But we would be mistaken to think of such relations as bilateral. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s examination of this problematic leads him to recognize three, not two, regions of being. The first is non-philosophy, that is, the world that philosophy is about. The second is philosophy itself, which, as “*philosophie de survol*,” is that which is *about* the world. It counts as a region of being insofar as it takes place in the world and has causal influence on it. The fact that it itself cannot recognize this fact is what leads Merleau-Ponty into a new kind of philosophy. The third region, however, Merleau-Ponty calls intra-ontology, and sometimes even “*metaphysics*,”²¹ and its function is to provide an account of the *interactions* between the latter two and of the inherence of “*philosophie de survol*” in non-philosophy.

But this structure makes things very complex: if the world were truly the object of philosophy, there would be, by definition, nothing left for philosophy to investigate besides the world, and, therefore, there would be no need for intra-ontology. Except that “*philosophie de survol*” cannot account for its own place in the world. Therefore, it fails in accounting for the *whole of* world. It is the job of intra-ontology to finish this account. By the same token, however, intra-ontology becomes unable to account for itself, and so on *ad infinitum*. This forces two conclusions: first, the job of intra-ontology cannot be determined in terms of its *content*: its contents are infinite in principle, for they are transformed by being observed, and they are always one step ahead of the theory that accounts for them, be it only because theory changes the world as it describes it. Secondly and consequently, any stable intra-ontological account will be *formal*. In other words, intra-ontology can only provide any final account if such an account is *structural*²²: its theme is the structure of infinite regress itself, the structure which it motivates and takes part in. As such, intra-ontology no longer fails itself, for its transformative influences only confirm the structure it describes.²³

But this leads to a new problem: we know that the contents of the world are affected by philosophical and intra-ontological accounts *ad infinitum*. We know that philosophy, precisely because it is part of the world, and insofar

as it has an obverse that is not transparent to it, is a thing in the world. This means that intra-ontology must have a *second* theme: not only infinite regress but the structural aspect of this infinite regress which allows it to overcome the opposition of theory and world, knowledge and action.

Once this question is asked, the constraints have already been set, in drastic terms: any philosophy that believes itself to be removed from the world will be dismissed as “philosophie de survol,” and any philosophy that thinks of itself as united with its object will be unable to account for the dynamic influence of philosophy, which structures the infinite regress. In short, we must establish a ground for *both* the *unity* of theory and reality, *and* their *distinction*.

III. *Perceptual Faith*

This ground, I argue, is what Merleau-Ponty calls “perceptual faith.” In the Preface to *Signs*, written in the exact same weeks that Merleau-Ponty was writing his ontological account of perceptual faith in *The Visible and the Invisible*, faith is presented as the object of a “profession of faith.” Merleau-Ponty writes:

One day, one declares oneself a Christian, a Communist. What does anyone mean by that exactly? One is not entirely changed in one instant, simply, in *recognizing* an external cause to one’s destiny, man receives permission, and even mission, to live within the faith of one’s natural life.²⁴

Although I take the religious readings of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of faith to be a red herring, this passage takes a religious example to tell us something profound about faith, religious or not: that it unifies recognition and institution and makes them indistinguishable from each other. For Merleau-Ponty, a profession of faith makes one into a Catholic, and yet it is uttered in the declarative mode normally used for the recognition of a *fact*: “I am a Catholic.” Its distinct character is emphasized by the fact that all subsequent utterances of the same declaration will only take place under a regime of truth: it will be informative. The first statement of the chain is different, however: it enacts what it declares. In it, the *recognition* of what is and its *institution* are undistinguishable. The saying and the doing are one. (Note that this doesn’t make professions of faith or, further, perceptual faith into any kind of speech-act, as what distinguishes it is that its illocutionary force is aimed at the institution of itself as its own truth-maker).

In the opening chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty presents perceptual faith, this time from the ontological perspective. Perceptual faith is characterized by a fundamental ambiguity: one is never certain as to whether it defines perception or truth. The very first sentence of *The Visible and the Invisible* establishes this ambivalence: “we see the things themselves, the world is what we see.”²⁵ We believe what we see: is this a definition of what

we believe, namely that what we believe is defined as what we perceive? Or is it a definition of the world of perception, namely, that it is defined as what we believe in? In the first case, perceptual faith is a formula of recognition; in the latter, it is the formula of institution. As one might expect, this is not a vicious ambiguity, but rather this ambiguity is the subject of the book that follows. It is what Merleau-Ponty is seeking as the fundamental ground of his intra-ontology. Perceptual faith, as a result, denotes the unity of institution and recognition. It is perceptual faith that institutes reality, and it is perceptual faith that recognizes it: “Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it.”²⁶ This is not a statement of idealism *de survol*, for if we create being, it is only under the impulse of being itself, which requires it. In any case, once it is created, we experience it, and it gains its independence by way of our forgetting that its origins lead back to ourselves. This makes perceptual faith the primary and unitary ground of ontology. More importantly, it is the primary and unitary ground of intra-ontology too. This is because the only mode of existence of perceptual faith is activity: it is, after all, recognition, institution, or both. But what do recognition and/or institution *do* first of all? They recognize/institute the *difference* between institution and recognition. Their very first act is to ground “la philosophie de survol” (making it a secondary truth). Examining how it does this—how the unity of recognition and institution can support the illusion of their divorce—becomes the central, unifying theme of intra-ontology.

Intra-ontology is therefore occupied with the fact that perceptual faith is always-already projected towards what it emphatically is not: the distinction of institution and recognition. In this sense, we can return to Merleau-Ponty’s famously defiant statement that he is “for metaphysics”²⁷, which is to say, he believes that ontology will always fail if it fails to be *about objects* (and in the Heideggerian context alluded to in this text, the science of objects is called metaphysics). Intra-ontology as “metaphysics” is and must be about how the non-objective, undifferentiated ground of perceptual faith always *institutes* a world of objects to be *recognized*, and does so merely by *recognizing* them. In short, the object of intra-ontology is a chimera, which is non-objective at the back and objective at the front, it is, Merleau-Ponty writes, a “half-thing.”²⁸

So, perceptual faith tells us that recognition grounds institution and institution grounds recognition. What it tells us too, is that neither of them grounds *itself*. The problem of legitimacy in philosophy – that is to say, in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, the problem of truth – comes to the surface here: The instituted and the recognized both legitimize themselves with reference to each other: it is because the real is recognized as such that it is the arbiter of truth, and it is because meaning is instituted that the real can be recognized as the arbiter of truth. In so doing, both the instituted (meaning) and the recognized (reality) subject themselves to the demand for legitimacy, endlessly look for this legitimacy in each other, and therefore fail to achieve any legitimacy. Recognition is legitimate with reference to reality, but of course, reality is legitimate only with reference to instituted meaning. Any ontology (or intra-

ontology) that begins with the primary and unitary phenomenon of perceptual faith will have to deal with the paradoxical groundlessness and mutual grounding of institution and recognition.

IV. Power and Perceptual Faith

The “Note” puts forward four theses:

Let me now move to explore the relations between this notion of perceptual faith and the question of power. Let’s begin by drawing out some analogies between the way Merleau-Ponty treats perceptual faith and the way he treats the concept of power. Merleau-Ponty locates the very same ambiguous relationship to groundlessness, and the very same mutual grounding between the instituted and the recognized, at the heart of what he calls “le problème du pouvoir.”²⁹ The problem of power, in his view, lies in the fact that authority requires obedience, but that obedience is a kind of belief. This is where Merleau-Ponty declares that “power belongs to the order of the tacit.”³⁰ It falls apart once it is made explicit, functions only as long as it’s forgotten, or takes place in the mode of forgetfulness (described above as “respect”). Notably, this reference to the “tacit” is language he reserves for his discussions of pre-reflective being and perceptual faith in *the Visible and the Invisible*.³¹ All of this begins to be elaborated in 1949’s “Note on Machiavelli.”

Firstly, power should be defined as that which dissolves itself in “contempt.” (as opposed to “respect”).

Secondly, and relatedly, power is a matter of representation: the Prince’s only lever to avoid contempt is self-representation, i.e., prestige, decorum and ritualization. In another context, Huizinga declares that prestige is “a fundamental value, comprising both might and right.”³² And, in 1954, Merleau-Ponty suggests that “history and politics always contain something of a ceremony.”³³

Thirdly, “power is not without an appeal to freedom”: the Prince appeals to the freedom of their subject in order to be granted their power and to retain it. As per the previous thesis, self-presentation is the mode of this appeal. Decorum is a form of seduction (eroticism “is always there in power”³⁴) meant to “appeal” to the subject.

Fourthly, and consequently, the freedom in question is of a certain kind only. Namely, it is hermeneutic freedom, that is to say, the freedom of the interpreter enabled by the hermeneutic circle when it is applied to representation: the contemptible character of the Prince will be determined by the circular relation between the decorum with which they present themselves and the context in which this takes place. In this sense, avoiding contempt is never guaranteed on the part of the Prince who cannot control both the text and the context, and it ultimately remains up to the subject to decide whether the given appearance makes the Prince ridiculous or majestic. This is because every interpretive act contains an arbitrary decision that breaks the hermeneutic circle. This arbitrary

is the sovereign possession of the hermeneutic subject, who is also the subject of power.

As a result, the Machiavelli text proposes a phenomenological sketch of the subject's relation to authority: how does it feel to obey, to be faced with, and entangled in, power? Merleau-Ponty declares: "there is no power that is absolutely grounded. All there is is a crystallization of opinion. Opinion tolerates power and takes it for granted. The problem is to avoid the dissolution of this agreement."³⁵ That no power is absolutely grounded amounts to saying that no power is fully given, and therefore that legitimacy can never be based on recognition alone. On the contrary, legitimacy is given by the subjects of power themselves: they institute it, but they only do so as long as they remain under the illusion that the legitimacy that they *institute* is in fact the legitimacy that they *recognize*. "Tolerance" for power is proportional to the "taking for granted" of that power. That is why appearance is crucial in politics, to Machiavelli and to Merleau-Ponty equally ("it is therefore a fundamental condition of politics that it unfolds itself within appearance."³⁶): recognition and institution ground each other and demand grounding *from* each other.³⁷ Further, Merleau-Ponty confirms the analogy between his treatment of perceptual faith and his treatment of power when he transfers the third determination of perceptual faith to his account of power: perceptual faith and power are both pre-cognitive: "the relations between subject and power, just like those of the self and the other, are united at a level deeper than judgment."³⁸

Indeed, such thinking is not confined to the texts from the 1940's. It is found repeatedly in the Preface to *Signs*, which concludes a discussion of the unity of recognition and institution³⁹ with an appeal to "*virtù*," in Italian⁴⁰, and in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, which Merleau-Ponty himself describes as "an exploration on the impossible unity of the real and power, which insists on their circularity and connivance and on the impossibility of their encounter."⁴¹ It is there that Merleau-Ponty regards political philosophy as unable to "break the circle of knowledge and reality," so that it is, rather, "a meditation about this circle."⁴²

This might be enough to show that Merleau-Ponty seems to provide a parallel treatment of perceptual faith as the ontological ground, and of power as political ground. However, this connection should not be regarded as a *mere* analogy:

First of all, one should note that the analogy in question is an analogy between two *structures*. The weakness of arguments by analogy is that they ignore differences in contents in favor of structural parallels. At this level however, which is the level of the ground, the form *is* the content, or to speak like Merleau-Ponty, the ground is structure only.⁴³ This is something I take to be accepted when it comes to perceptual faith: as I have argued above, it is the fundamental (unitary and primary) ground of intra-ontology.

V. Power as Ontological Principle

Let me make some steps towards showing how power, as the unity of institution and recognition, is indeed the fundamental concept of politics, and, therefore, is a structure.

First of all, we must understand the relations between power and force on the one hand, and between power and morality on the other. As both force and morality are the traditional candidates for an essential (i.e. non-structural) ground for politics, such a move is necessary if we are to establish that power is indeed the fundamental concept of politics (and therefore a structure).

As regards the relationships of force and power, Merleau-Ponty argues in several places that they are distinct, and that force is less fundamental than power. He makes this case for example in the Machiavelli text and in the preface of *Humanism and Terror*, but, most importantly, it follows from his polemic with Sartre. Merleau-Ponty agrees with Sartre's weak thesis, namely, that one is always free. Sartre's strong thesis however, which is that freedom is absolute, is the point of disagreement. As mentioned above, Rousseau himself accepted the first, weak thesis. What threatens the supremacy of the stronger is the irreducibility of the freedom of its subjects. Rousseau's account should count as phenomenological: the weakness of the politics of force is that in force, recognition is grounding recognition: "Obey the powers that be. If this means yield to force, it is a good precept, but superfluous: I can answer for its never being violated."⁴⁴ *Ad absurdum*, Rousseau emphasizes that *things* cannot ground themselves, that we experience dissatisfaction before such kinds of grounding, that it is always the *other* that grounds. In this case, the other is freedom: freedom grounds power, and, even more, freedom strengthens force by transforming it into power, and politics should always keep freedom within its field. This is what makes politics the field of power, and not of force, since power distinguishes itself from force insofar as it is a management of freedom. Merleau-Ponty declares: "power is not without an appeal to freedom."⁴⁵ In short, a thorough understanding of power reveals that power is both instituted by freedom and recognized by the understanding.

However, insofar as it is instituted by being "taken for granted," "tacit" and "before judgment" (insofar as its institution only succeeds if it erases itself through the kind of forgetfulness called "respect"), it is also *instituting*, and insofar as it must recuperate the freedom in its subjects, it is recognizing. For Merleau-Ponty, this irreducibility of freedom, formulated by Sartre, should lead us in an opposite direction than the one Sartre himself followed. This is because Sartre was not content with the weak thesis, and contended that freedom was not only irreducible, but also absolute. Sartre, Merleau-Ponty complains, is committed to "a world of men and things"⁴⁶ where the two stand face-to-face without mediation. This makes the political field impossible to account for, except as an extension of morals or as an extension of science (in materialism). Injustice makes men into things, justice makes things into men, or at least, it spiritualizes things by subjecting them to human purposes.

Sartre's response to injustice, Merleau-Ponty claims, is "Pure action... which, like it, reaches its aim from a distance. We are in the magical or moral universe."⁴⁷ Strangely, Merleau-Ponty continues, Sartre's hypermoralisation of politics leads to an hypermechanization of political praxis, for it transfers the categorical imperative into the duty to the Party: it requires absolute loyalty, and therefore a total relinquishing of one's freedom. The all-or-nothing alternative of justice and injustice, of men and things, leads to an all-or-nothing view of political commitment, one which ignores consequences, and, as a result, Sartre's hyperbolshevism "gives up all points of reference and sinks into the revolution as into a delirium."⁴⁸ This is what Merleau-Ponty calls Sartre's paradoxical "pragmatism in politics" (where pragmatism is meant in the etymological sense⁴⁹).

Sartre presents us with the strange alternative, without mediation, between moralism and cynicism. With Rousseau however, we learn, against Sartre, that one must reject such "pragmatism": things are grounded in non-things. With Machiavelli, we learn that we must reject a "magical" politics of morals. In the Machiavelli text, Merleau-Ponty complains about the idea that humanism should necessarily imply "a philosophy of the inner man... which replaces political culture with moral exhortation."⁵⁰ In short, neither the objective pole of things and force, nor the subjective pole of persons and morals, can ground the political. They are not foreign to its grounding however, and the tradition was right to make them the two main candidates. Simply, they are but signs of the deeper structure from which they both derive, that of the circularity of institution on the side of morals and recognition on the side of force. Finally, Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Machiavelli and Rousseau suggests that the proper field of politics is the field of the circular grounding relation between things and meanings, between necessity and freedom, between recognition and institution.

The parallel between perceptual faith and power is now, I hope, clearer and stronger: the ground of intra-ontology—perceptual faith—and the ground of politics—power—are fundamental in the sense of structural, and they share the same structure: the identity of recognition and institution which recognizes and institutes their opposition and crystallization. Perceptual faith and power become two expressions for the same thing, and we now find, I think, a proper grounding for the unity of philosophy and its outside, a true ground that escapes the theory/praxis opposition. Politics and ontology both serve the purpose of hinting at their common origin, which is the unified structure that determines their subsequent distinction. Does this mean that Merleau-Ponty is committed to an ontology of power or to a politics of being? The question loses its meaning. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself declares that this divorce of philosophy and politics is induced by the *pensée de survol*. The preface to *Signs* is exactly structured around an understanding of the ways that moving from *pensée de survol* to intra-ontology affects the relations of thought and praxis: it grounds it. The question therefore loses its meaning, but it does some work: the work, I think, of teaching us to rethink our political concepts in an

ontological light and our ontological concepts in a political one. Returning to Hegel, who Merleau-Ponty regarded as the founder of the problematic of non-philosophy, we might note how this intra-ontological grounding, when seen as power, becomes the hermeneutic means for understanding the relations of authority and being: the fact that we experience the real as authority and authority as the real, which Merleau-Ponty has traced in both Hegel and Freud (but this would take another paper), attains the status of a fundamental principle in Merleau-Ponty's hyper-philosophy.

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NOTES:

- 1 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary, 1964, Northwestern University Press, 11.
- 2 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror, An Essay on the Communist Problem*, Eng. trans. by John O'Neill, Boston, Beacon Press. 1969, p. 119.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 4 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Eng. Trans. by Joseph Bien. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 175 (French, idées, Gallimard, Paris, 1955, p. 256, from now on, *Aventures*).
- 7 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit., p. 4 (*Signes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1960, p. 11).
- 8 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures*, op. cit., 142 ff, *Aventures*, 209 ff.
- 9 A. Kojève, *La Notion de l'autorité*, (from now on, *Autorité*) Paris, Gallimard, 1984, p. 84. Kojève defines power as the "conscious and deliberate forfeiting of our 'reactions'." (my translation)
- 10 Such a distinction between authority and power remains unclear in Kojève, *Autorité*, op. cit.,
- 11 M. Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, Eng. trans. by John Wild, James Edie, and John O'Neill, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970, 38 (translation modified). See also, M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit., p. 212 (*Signes*, 345) and 324 (*Signes*, 521). On the notion of respect as the abusive priority of recognition over institution, see also F. Chouraqui, "A Principle of Universal Strife; Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty's Critiques of Marxist Universalism, 1953-1956," *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, 76:3, 2015, pp. 486, ff.
- 12 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Praise*, op. cit. p. 36.
- 13 E. de la Boétie, *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*, Paris, Boscand, 1922, p. 54.
- 14 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit. p. 215 (*Signes*, 350); see also p. 213 (*Signes*, 346).
- 15 J.-J. Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Eng. Trans. George D. H. Cole, Mineola, Dover, 2003, Part I, section 3.
- 16 This is a pretty common view, see for example A. Kojève, *Autorité*, op. cit., pp. 61, 62, 79, 84.
- 17 See note 11 above.
- 18 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, op. cit., p. 66.
- 19 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit., 215 (*Signes* 350).
- 20 Pace A. Kojève, *Autorité*, op. cit., 57.

- 21 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Eng. trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968. p. 251.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 24 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit., p. 23 (*Signes*, 50), my emphasis.
- 25 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, op. cit., p. 17.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 29 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit., p. 221 (*Signes*, 359).
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 See for example, M. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, op. cit., p. 41.
- 32 J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, London, Routledge, 1980, p. 94.
- 33 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, Edited by Jérôme Melançon, 2016, Paris, Verdier, p. 88.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- 35 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit., p. 212 (*Signes*, 345).
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 216 (*Signes*, 352).
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 214 (*Signes*, 348).
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 216 (*Signes*, 346), see also M. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures*, op. cit., pp. 10, 37, 46 (*Aventures*, 18, 58, 71).
- 39 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit., p. 23 (*Signes*, 50).
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 35, *Signes*, 61.
- 41 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures*, op. cit., p. 16 (*Aventures*, 27-28).
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47 (*Aventures*, 29); see also p. 63 (*Aventures*, 40).
- 43 Unlike Kojève, *Autorité*, op. cit., p. 52.
- 44 J-J. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, op. cit., I, 3 (translation modified).
- 45 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit. p. 215 (*Signes*, 350).
- 46 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures*, op. cit., pp. 139 ff (*Aventures*, 204, ff.).
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 154 (*Aventures*, 225).
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 154. (*Aventures*, 225).
- 49 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit., p. 31 (*Signes*, 55), p. 215 (*Signes*, 350), and *Adventures*, op. cit., pp.133 ff. (*Aventures*, 195 ff.).
- 50 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit., p. 363 (*Signes*, 223).