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Article

Healing Schneider: On Merleau-Ponty's Ethical System of Play

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Abstract: The recent publication of Merleau-Ponty's work from the late Forties contributes valuable material for those interested in reconstructing a specifically Merleau-Pontian theory of value. In this paper, I examine how, in these texts, Merleau-Ponty's political concerns show themselves to expand upon the famous analysis of the case of Schneider in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This retroactively offers an opportunity for a normative reading of the case of Schneider and for identifying Merleau-Ponty's practical philosophy as concerned with preventing and healing agnosia in politics and ethics. On the basis of this negative hypothesis—that the ethical project is to oppose agnosia—it becomes possible to formulate a positive ethics. There, the unpublished texts also expand upon *the Phenomenology of Perception*: they propose a humanism which relies on the notion of hermeneutic freedom as the chief practical virtue and elaborate, somewhat unexpectedly, an analysis of play as the existential attitude that corresponds to this virtue. I conclude with a meta-ethical assessment of the merits of this ethical construction.

Keywords: agnosia; hermeneutics; politics; play; Merleau—Pontian ethics

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has undergone a major leap from a niche concern of historians of phenomenology, to the status of an insurgent figure and finally, to a full-fledged household name and a full representative of the phenomenological movement, alongside figures like Husserl and Heidegger. More impressive, this resurgence of awareness of Merleau-Ponty's work underpinned a solid and articulate response to those, in the wake of criticisms from Foucault and Deleuze and their followers, who declared phenomenology dead or too soft to be ideologically palatable. This came with its share of enthusiasm, debate, and—characteristically for phenomenologists—a powerful reach outside of the field of technical and so-called professional philosophy. With Merleau-Ponty, we have a philosophy that survived obstacles and seemed to achieve freshness as it aged. This movement, as is natural, brought along with it renewed scrutiny as new sorts of questions became asked of Merleau-Ponty's work, questions motivated technically from the side of professional phenomenologists (“does Merleau-Ponty truly overcome transcendental idealism?”), but also questions that cross the boundaries between technical philosophy and thought at large. It seems to me that, broadly speaking, the reception of Merleau-Ponty's work has now entered yet a new phase characterized by a concern for normativity. If Merleau-Ponty is so right about intentionality, the genesis of meaning, the structure of history, and the nature of being, what are we to make of this astounding theoretical performance in our practical lives? The history of philosophy shows that asking such normative, sometimes even moral—or moralistic—questions, is a natural, almost an unavoidable consequence of any philosopher's success, and the Merleau-Ponty scholarship should wear it as a badge of honor. As the literature concerned with extracting ethical



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insights from Merleau-Ponty's philosophy attests, this very often involves some creative reconstruction: Merleau-Ponty's works themselves leave many gaps that need filling in. There is good news however, for in recent years, many of these gaps have been filled by the publication of previously unreleased working notes, lecture notes, and drafts. Together, they place us in a much better position to address the question of Merleau-Ponty's ethics.

In this paper, I hope to offer an update to the reconstructions of Merleau-Ponty's ethical views by mapping out the consequences of some of the new elements introduced by the unpublished works, as well as the recent scholarship that established ways of using Merleau-Ponty's later ontology as a lens through which to read his earlier work. I shall focus on the work of the mid Forties, roughly corresponding to the aftermath of the *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945, until the time of *Humanism and Terror* in 1948–1949. I will focus on three points that gain salience in the newly published materials and which, taken together, offer some important perspectives on the ethical context of Merleau-Ponty's work in PP:

- First, that Merleau-Ponty comes to treat agnosia as a normative paradigm: the project of a Merleau-Pontian ethic and politics is to oppose agnosiastic tendencies and heal them. This is what I call "healing Schneider." (Section 2).
- Second, that this project is bound up with the elaboration of a hermeneutic ontology (Section 3.1).
- Third, that the existential stance that results from this realization is best characterized in terms of play (Section 3.2)

2. Agnosia as a Normative Counter-Ideal

In this section, I focus on two areas in which Merleau-Ponty's analysis has fairly obvious normative implications. The first is the analysis of Schneider's agnosia in PP [1,2]¹, and the second is Merleau-Ponty's critical analysis of Soviet Communism in HT (and to a lesser extent later too). I wish to show that in both cases, Merleau-Ponty identifies the same pathology—agnosia—and, by contrast, implicitly proposes a normative standard according to which it can be examined, countered, and healed.

2.1. The Case of Schneider as an Axiological Case Study

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the case of Schneider, first described by Goldstein and Gelb, takes place in the context of his claim that "consciousness is ordinarily not an 'I think that,' but rather an 'I can.'" [1] Merleau-Ponty's point is primarily that Schneider is experiencing a pathology to the extent that his mode of intentionality is that of a "there is." Schneider sees the world as a series of facts, and thereby, he extracts himself from it and makes it difficult for himself to take action in it. Schneider suffers from visual agnosia but Merleau-Ponty promptly shows how this is the source of a broader kind of blindness to the nature of the world as a set of possibilities that invite action, and which he thinks, are characteristic of the Schneiders of the world. He is, Merleau-Ponty argues, unable to "inhabit" the world and therefore unable to proceed to any "motricial acquisition of signification": he cannot use his body to produce meaning. All of this is well known, and it does not need rehearsing. What I wish to point out, however, is that this analysis of Schneider constitutes the basic ground of all subsequent normative language in Merleau-Ponty's work: Merleau-Ponty's ethical and political analyses are all aimed at diagnosing the Schneiders of the world (here Sartre [3], there Trotsky [4] and Lenin [5,6], whom I discuss below, as well as Descartes [1], 205 ff. and [2] 241, ff. and Piaget [1], 371, although I do not discuss them here) and that his political and ethical project is polarized by this one goal: healing Schneider. This is, of course, because it becomes clear to Merleau-Ponty as his

work develops that the kind of agnosia he identified in Schneider was the most basic of all forms of intentional disturbances.

But all of this presupposes one thing: that there is something normative at play in the case of Schneider. Bluntly put, that it is better not to suffer from agnosia. We must ask in what sense of “normal” it is “normal” to not have agnosia, and why this notion of normality has any normative content. In particular, does it expose Merleau-Ponty to some charge of able-ism? [7–9]. All of this is addressed effectively by one methodological point Merleau-Ponty places great emphasis on when he argues that “one cannot deduce the normal from the pathological.” ([1] p. 110, [2] p. 138). This is because nothing is intrinsically pathological, and there is no external (objective) criterion of pathology. Rather, he argues that “illness [...] is a complete form of existence.” [1] p. 110². This does not mean that Merleau-Ponty denies that this complete form of existence can be a heuristic tool for understanding “normal” existence, but this heuristic is not direct. In the later [10] (published in English by Talia Welsh in 2010), Merleau-Ponty expands on this methodological choice, which he inherits from Goldstein: what we must do is “study the facts, not in order to verify a hypothesis that transcends them, but in order to give an interior sense of the facts themselves. Most important is the rigor with which we embrace the totality and detail of certain facts.” ([10] p. 7). This means that the notion of pathology is at risk of collapsing under the notion of difference: after all, if illness is a total form of life to only be examined internally, how can we differentiate a pathological form of a normal form of life from an altogether different form of life? Merleau-Ponty concludes that it is not the pathology that gives us insight into the normal but the compensations with which the patient responds to these pathologies [11]. What allows Merleau-Ponty to still talk about pathology is therefore an examination of the internal tensions at work in the patient. What makes the patient ill is not that he behaves in ways so-called “normal” individuals do not, it is rather that his form of life is built around a series of compensations and “substitutions,” [1] p. 110 [2], p. 138, which are themselves aimed at overcoming the pathology. It is these compensations which, as compensations, express the organism’s discontent with its own condition and its projection of a normality it seeks to achieve. One cannot, therefore, describe the normal as the opposite of the pathological, but one can draw some constant structures of existence from the difference between the functions abandoned and the functions substituted for. The functions compensated for, it is expected, will have a privileged relation with the world: they are a response to a relatively unescapable set of demands. In a nutshell: living as if the world was a set of facts and not of possibilities makes life itself difficult for any organism, and so we must conclude that the demands of life and the demands of the world plead in favor of a sensorimotor account which would integrate cognitive, imaginative, and sensorimotor faculties. This is the only way to account for the need to substitute them and for their joint deficit in cases such as Schneider’s³. This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty returns to any sort of objectivism, but rather, it simply suggests that Schneider’s condition is pathological because it is internally contradictory: Schneider’s condition contains enough commitment to the world of meaning that his inability to engage with it at this level is experienced as an obstacle to be overcome. Schneider is in the middle of the bridge. Were he more disabled, were he unable to even wish to engage with the world of meaning, were he, for example suffering from an extreme form of locked-in syndrome [13], he would be, strangely, less “pathological.” One would be more inclined to regard his form of life as obeying other norms altogether. In Merleau-Ponty’s immanent notion of pathology, it is the experience of contradiction that counts as pathology, and therefore, he escapes charges of ableism to the extent that his account of pathology does not rely on a prior decision about what constitutes the normal. Schneider himself still wishes to perform the tasks he always did, and his ability to perform them has decreased due to his illness. This does mean

that there is a privilege of the normal over the pathological, but the normative advantage of the normal is not given, as in the more toxic forms of ableism, from the point of view of some objective assumption, but from the internal logic of Schneider's intentional life itself. Schneider still wishes to work in the factory, he still wishes to enjoy sexual relations with his wife, and he still wishes to engage with the symbolic makeup of his life as a war veteran and former soldier, but his ability to achieve this has been impaired (although not destroyed), and what once was effortless now requires compensatory efforts. Merleau-Ponty is virtuously parsimonious there. In fact, there is only one function that the patient cannot let go of, one feature of the world that his mode of existence, however complete (although narrowed down to the most immediate set of concerns), cannot withdraw from: that the world is an "I can". This gives us the kind of normativity that animates Merleau-Ponty's argument: it is normatively desirable for anyone to enactively insert themselves into the world. So, there is the first approach to a normative criterion in Merleau-Ponty's thinking: the normativity contained in the notion of health, which is—parsimoniously—defined as a certain repugnance to existential contradiction.

2.2. Agnosia in Politics

Now, let us turn to the second task: I promised to show how even though Merleau-Ponty uses a different language to talk about right and wrong in later texts, he is still aiming, in his political philosophy, at the disorders he has diagnosed in Schneider. The language Merleau-Ponty uses to describe agnosia has some resonances with both normative language in general, and with his analyses of politics in other texts too. Paying attention to these is also a way of paying attention to the ontological basis for Merleau-Ponty's normative commitments. After all, if I am right in thinking that he finds the same faults in Soviet Communism and in Schneider's agnosia, it is because there is something wrong that remains across contexts (from say, the clinical to the political), and whose wrongness is not contextual. Let me focus on two areas of discussion that Merleau-Ponty pursues in both textual contexts, the existential context and the ontological one.

The first key extension of agnosia in both health and politics has to do with the notion of agency. For Merleau-Ponty, agnosia is an obstacle to freedom, action, and creation. In [10], Merleau-Ponty returns to Schneider and emphasizes that in contrast to what we see in agnosia patients, "we must place emphasis upon *the productivity of language*" ([10] p. 47), that is to say, on the fact that language does not only reflect states of affairs but also creates them. Agnosia patients, by contrast, are not free because their speech is not creative: they do not intervene into the world. In the case of Schneider, this is well known: he cannot refer to what is only a *possible* object. In other words, the linguistic disturbances observed in agnosia patients are a symptom of a deeper, ontological, disturbance: they are committed to an objective world which is external to them, which has the initiative, and which is unwelcoming to their intervention: their thought or language can be responsive to it, but it cannot take the initiative over it. For the agnosia patient, activity and passivity are neatly distributed, and our linguistic capacities are passive responses to a world which imposes itself on them, and on which they cannot impose themselves. These patients cannot take possession of the freedom that is rightfully theirs, the freedom of choosing how to interpret a certain reality, what "I can" draw from it:

Thus individuals who suffer from agnosia are incapable of improvising in conversation, and they lack any initiative, or freedom, in sexual conduct. They are incapable of structuring and handling a given element under different conditions, and of varying their point of view" [10], p. 47⁴.

Schneider, Merleau-Ponty claims, is "bound" to the actual, and he "lacks" the "freedom" that consists of the general power of placing oneself in a situation ([1] p. 137)⁵. One

of the symptoms of Schneider's pathology is therefore a new kind of agency, or one should say, a new, suspicious relation to agency, a tendency to ignore, disregard, or repress one's ability to act. It is a kind of selective blindness: the inability to recognize the reality of the possible. In this sense, Schneider is caught in the contradictions of the univocal view of being. For him, only what is actual is at all, and so there is no other object (say imaginary or potential reality) which can be acknowledged. As a result, taking the initiative is now made impossible at the ontological level. This is certainly what "the general power of placing oneself in a situation" means: Schneider never really is in a situation, because a situation correlates to a power of action; a situation is a set of "I can's." This is why, Merleau-Ponty says, "There is something meticulous and serious in all of his behavior." [1] p. 137, [2] p. 168⁶. For in a world of objects and subjects, the real presents itself with an absolute authority and overwhelming force, before which personal agency, subjectivity, spontaneity, and initiative are not only futile but never legitimate.

This theme of seriousness, as the opposite of freedom, is not new in the tradition, but in the context of Merleau-Ponty's treatment, it allows us to come close to the core of Merleau-Ponty's worry about both agnosia in pathology and in politics: namely, that agnosia is committed to the self-identity of the subjective and of the objective and therefore, to their absolute separation. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a section of the recently published Lectures in Scandinavia of 1947, Merleau-Ponty twice cites Simone de Beauvoir's remark to the effect that

Being and Nothingness is largely a description of the serious man and his universe"—Sartre: freedom without action = "dried up branch". *Abstract independence and authentic freedom—Perception* as mediation between the in-itself and the for-itself. *Not to will but to exist—Existence as spontaneity—Independence and freedom.* [14], Vol. 1, p. 296⁷.

Rather, as Merleau-Ponty argues in the same newly published texts, by citing Stendhal, "true freedom" [liberté vraie] is "non-seriousness." [14] Vol. 1, p. 287. This adds a political dimension to the case of Schneider: agnosia is a problem of freedom. This also adds a broader ethical dimension to it: agnosia is a problem of existence. Schneider, because he is so serious and lacks spontaneity, *is*, but he does not *exist*.

The first polarity in which the theme of political and individual agnosia becomes discussed is therefore the polarity of the actual and the possible. Because the agnosiac reduces the possible to the actual, freedom becomes, at best, an inexplicable miracle and, at worst, an impossibility. This freezing of freedom, which the unpublished texts connect to the theme of agnosia, is also well-known as the dialectic of the Yogi and the Proletarian that constitutes the heart of *Humanism and Terror*—a text elaborated at the same time as the Scandinavia lectures cited here. As we know, Merleau-Ponty's main charge against the Soviet regime in *Humanism and Terror* (and this remains so, despite many differences otherwise, in *the Adventures of the Dialectic*) relates to the fact that it fails to unify the subjective and the objective in the way that true Marxism would aspire to:

All of this proves that communism fails in its intention to overcome the antithesis of the objective and the subjective [. . .]. The problem bureaucracy-masses, = the problem spontaneous history-voluntary history, revolutionary freedom- revolutionary discipline, proletariat in fact-proletariat in right or in idea. Have either of these two ever coincided apart from some very short periods? In any case the actions of Lenin and Trotsky already showed that the balance was difficult to achieve. [14], Vol. 2, 341.

This allows us to connect the ontological problem explicitly discussed in HT, namely the problem of the interaction of the subjective and the objective, to the problem of agnosia.

The yogi, Merleau-Ponty argues, is unable to make his mark on the world because he is fetishistic about his subjectivity and refuses to compromise it. On the objective side, the Commissar is able to take action but without any subjectivity, without agency: mechanically and cynically. He reduces himself to a force of nature, a cog in the machine. What they both have in common with each other and with Schneider, Merleau-Ponty charges, is their inability to combine a relation to the possible (agency) with a recognition of the real. Although they fall on either side of this divide, they both take the divide itself for granted. This is a recurring theme in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the standoff between Stalin and Trotsky, in the late-Forties. In his lectures in America on March 1949, he comes to define the political problem of Trotsky in terms of Schneider's own predicament: "how far must one take discipline and how far free judgment" [14] Vol. 2, p. 308⁸. In fact, it is worth dwelling a little on Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the figure of Trotsky in this context. There, Merleau-Ponty's approach is broadly sympathetic precisely because he regards Trotsky as attempting to cure the agnosia of the Soviet State, as if it was the State itself this time, that suffered from a shrapnel wound. Merleau-Ponty returns throughout this period to what he calls "Trotsky's horse," that is to say, to Trotsky's remark that "one learns to ride a horse by mounting a horse" ([14] Vol. 2, 305). He glosses the remark thus:

Subjectivity, in this case [means] violence and not the spontaneous course of things. Compromise and violence. Lenin: against leftism of provocation, one must know how to retreat—before the facts what must be done? Brest-Litovsk, Marxist theory—but this can be costly. And besides: how far must one take party loyalty?

([14], Vol. 2, p. 305)⁹

In other words, it is good politics to recognize reality but not to the point that one places oneself in a passive position towards it. Similarly, it is good politics to act, but not at the expense of a realistic sense of the possible. On the contrary, Trotsky's analogy of the horse tells us that action can neither follow nor precede knowledge of the facts: good political action *coincides* with knowledge. "One learns to ride a horse by riding a horse—One follows the direction of history by taming history" ([14] Vol. 2, p. 340)¹⁰.

3. Humanism: Hermeneutics and Play

This should give us enough indication that Merleau-Ponty built agnosia into a multi-layered counter-ideal covering the clinical, the political, the existential, and the ontological realms. This negative approach is also complemented by some attempts at a positive one: if by definition, the opposite of agnosia is the "normal," Merleau-Ponty makes some approaches to a substantial description of what is entailed by it. In the unpublished texts of 1949, he proposes a certain number of positive concepts that stand as political ideal. It is a matter, he argues, of resolving the "problem of compromise" ([14] vol. 1. p. 513), of restoring the "meaning of the subjective" ([14] vol. 1, p. 206), and "therefore the impossibility of the pure interior or the pure exterior. And the blend between the two which represents the political challenge. Tension between the universal and the particular, of the objective and the subjective, of the internal and the external, of the fact and the act." ([14] vol. 1, p. 219)¹¹.

We have here, therefore, a first attempt at the establishment of a political ideal: finding the "equilibrium", "compromise", and "blend" between the subjective and the objective, the project of living in the best way with the "tensions" that characterize their relations. All of these, Merleau-Ponty finally subsumes under the term "humanism", as a wish for the advent of "humanity" ([14] vol. 1, p. 221–223), that is to say, the establishment of a community of "existents", agents who live in a world of possibilities and meaning, not a world of facts and subjects. But this ideal now formulated remains merely a catchphrase. It

needs to be fleshed out. In this section, I wish to show that whatever else can be said about it, the evidence points to an understanding of humanism in terms of hermeneutics and in terms of play.

3.1. *Meaning-Making as the Nature of Politics*

Let me begin with hermeneutics. Schneider's inability to combine concrete and abstract movement amounts to a pathological annihilation of "subjectivity", which corresponds to the loss of "freedom" described above ([1] p. 114). But it also involves a failure to recognize "objectivity" ([1] p. 106). The reason is that Schneider is unable to precisely exercise the hermeneutic freedom necessary for moving from the facts to their meanings (what Merleau-Ponty still calls "the symbolic") and, because, after all, the objective itself is symbolic: it is the imaginary sedimentation of the concrete, the introduction of a highly abstract *Weltthesis*. As a result, Schneider is caught between taking things to be what they are and taking them to not be anything. Agnosia is caught between sovereign objectivity and sovereign subjectivity. What we need is their unity, or as Merleau-Ponty argues, we need a way between the "adoration of history" and the "ignorance of history" ([15] p. xxxi). The hermeneutic model presents itself because interpretation contains two moments. First, a moment of recognition: recognition of the object to be understood, as a standard for our interpretation. Second, an active moment of interpretation (Merleau-Ponty increasingly says "institution"). The resource which Merleau-Ponty seeks to tap in hermeneutics is its ability to combine these two moments without contradiction. This is what makes hermeneutics an attractive model for achieving the blend of subjectivity and objectivity that communism, with its agnosia, failed to achieve.

In later texts, Merleau-Ponty approaches this notion of hermeneutics by way of the notion of "sense." There, he censures Mauriac's conservatism for confusing a healthy "sense for reality" [sens du réel] with an unhealthy "respect for reality" [respect du réel] ([16] p. 520). Here is the problem with such "respect": it is ready to "accept *just about anything*" ["accepter *n'importe quoi*"] ([16] p. 520), it reduces itself to pure fatalism, and paradoxically denies the real it respects because it denies the reality of freedom. Sense, in this context, should be associated with expressions like "sense of humor" or "sense of balance" and contrasted with the notion of respect, which applies to Schneider's own reluctance to interfere with the world of facts. The point of boldly opposing sense and respect is to give Merleau-Ponty a handle on the question of agency: if a surfer has a "sense" of balance and a "sense" for the sea, it means precisely that they relate to the sea and to their body and the physical laws involved in surfing as they are. But it also means that this sense can only emerge in their interaction with the sea and the waves. A sense, in short, is the organ that picks up possibilities (later psychologists, under Merleau-Ponty's influence would say, that picks up "affordances" [17])¹². Having "respect" for reality, on the contrary, means refraining from interfering with it. It is, Merleau-Ponty complains, "fatalism." [14], vol. 2 pp. 191 and 205. "Sense", in this context, is the organ that perceives possibilities and opportunities—"I can's." "Respect" is the organ that perceives objects. So, for Merleau-Ponty, this "sense" is always a hermeneutic skill, an ability for reading a "situation," and further, for allowing this act of reading to change its object. It is, as you recall, a "creative" act.

So, we have textual evidence to the effect that Merleau-Ponty regards the move to hermeneutics as necessary to his new humanism. We now need to reconstruct why this is the case. In what sense can the idea of hermeneutics capture a normative model? For Merleau-Ponty, on the side of the moral agent, the idea of a hermeneutic skill, a "sense for reality," comes to take the place that virtue takes in traditional models. On the side of the moral subject, everything takes place as if the ability for practicing our hermeneutic

skill became seen as the essence of our moral aspirations: what makes a politics or an ethics good is their ability to foster the individual's hermeneutic practice. A good life is a life spent lived in and expanding a rich world of meaning, a life spent making meaning. Happiness is the act of world-building. Merleau-Ponty's humanism is the aspiration for the transfiguration of facts into meanings and of beings into existents. He argues that existence is the hermeneutic counterpart to being, that in the realm of existence, it is the unity, not the opposition, of the subjective and the objective that applies, and that humanism is the project of pursuing a truly human life, that is to say, to promote the graduation from being to existence.

This humanism is structured by a fundamental circle. By contrast to agnosia, where there is a juxtaposition and absolute precedence of the objective over the subjective or vice versa, the relations of the subjective and the objective, if well-understood, are circular. This circle means, as I have mentioned above, that the moment of recognition and the moment of institution precede and rely on each other. Hermeneutic virtue yields actions that both conform to reality and create it. And this is not to be understood in the weak sense that actions create future realities. Rather, action is understood as the act that institutes the very reality it responds to. Merleau-Ponty boldly endorses this paradox throughout his writings, both in ontology and politics: consider the declaration from HT to the effect that "[The gravity of politics] obliges us, instead of simply forcing our will, to look hard among the facts for the shape they should take", and that "in politics, truth is perhaps only this art of inventing what will later appear to have been required by the time." [15], xxxv. In spite of many differences, *the Adventures of the Dialectic* also returns to the same theme: "A philosophy of history that is not a historical novel does not break the circle of knowledge and reality but is rather a meditation upon that circle." ([20] p. 29). Finally, in a thoroughly ontological context, the notes for *the Visible and the Invisible* suggest that

"art and philosophy together are precisely not arbitrary fabrications in the universe of the "spiritual" (of "culture"), but contact with Being precisely as creations. Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it."

([21] p. 197)

In short, this hermeneutic circle, once it is understood as the living unity of recognition and institution, appears not only as the precise negative of agnosia but also as the milieu of agency, the practical realm. It is also, as it happens, what Merleau-Ponty was after in his meditations on Trotsky's horse ([14] vol. 2. pp. 380, 386, 404; vol. 1, p. 466.). This gives us a more elaborate idea of what this "sense" for reality, what the hermeneutic skill necessary for sound political action, looks like: it is the ability to unify recognition (of what there is insofar as it presents itself as preceding and independent from my act) with institution (of what there is insofar as it is the result of my act) [22].

Let us gather our thoughts: a hermeneutic approach to action presents itself to Merleau-Ponty as the only way to achieve what Schneider and Soviet communism have failed to do: freedom as the unification of the subjective and the objective, and the overcoming of morally devastating fetishism. It is striking how little time Merleau-Ponty spends justifying why the unity of the subjective and the objective is an idea worth pursuing. The main reason for this remains Merleau-Ponty's reliance on the Marxist idea that it is the unity of subjectivity and objectivity which will achieve "truly human relations." ([4] p. 112, [23]). His problem, therefore, is more to establish how this unity can be achieved (i.e., by rejecting the naïve materialism of the Soviets and by exploring hermeneutics as the only way left open) than whether it is desirable. I shall point, in the Conclusion, to another set of reasons why Merleau-Ponty endorses this ideal, reasons independent from Marx this time. Humanism is hermeneutic because it seeks the promotion of a qualitatively human life and defines such a life as a life lived not in objects, but in meanings. This means that the stake of political

projects is not to choose between one set of objects or possible courses and another (say, collectivization or privatization, regulation or deregulation, peace or war) but to choose between certain meanings and others. We will have to return below to the criteria that inform such choices. For now, we need to acknowledge that although Merleau-Ponty seems to make a credible case for this move to hermeneutics, it remains unclear how it amounts to more than a paradox, the paradox of the unity of institution and recognition. How does this paradox work? Although several passages in Merleau-Ponty's published and unpublished works can be adduced to fill in this blank, I propose the shortest way to do this is to return to an examination of the basic phenomenon of interpretation as described by the hermeneutic circle.

The well-known account of the hermeneutic circle can be taken as a phenomenological description of meaning-making, or in the language of PP, it is the shape that the "unmotivated surging-forth of the world" takes ([1], p. lxxvii)¹³. Because it is a circle, there is no fact (either about text or about context) that can determine once and for all which one of the available interpretations is to be settled on. Rather, any meaning-making will have been the result of a violation of the principle of sufficient reason, it will be an arbitrary decision in favor of one of the interpretations that text and context remain able to countenance. Meaning-making is always, in this sense, transgressive and unjustified. Interpretation is always overinterpretation. Even more, the notion of justification is irrelevant to it: it constitutes an unproblematic arbitrary. Not an arbitrary that stands in violation of the demand for justification, but rather, an arbitrary to which the question of justification is irrelevant. This is, in fact, what the reference to an "unmotivated" upsurge of the world in the preface to PP, the idea that fact precedes reason, is meant to capture. This makes it more visible how the hermeneutic model is the systematic opposite of the agnosiac model of Schneider and Lenin: it involves taking responsibility for the conundrum of any politician: indeterminacy matched with a demand for action. This vacuum, the fact that facts always fail to justify interpretive decision and the fact that an interpretive decision is always a leap in the dark, is what Merleau-Ponty calls "adversity." It is precisely this adversity, the fact that freedom is irreducible, that the "seriousness" of Schneider cannot countenance. Agnosia breaks the hermeneutic circle and decides against decision. It evades responsibility for the gap between the lack of justification for action and the need for action. As a result, it is the inability to enter the realm of meaning, a failure to turn being into existence.

Interpretation, on the contrary, violates the principle of reason and forfeits justification. This can be taken in two senses. In a weak, more intuitive sense, we are confronted to a set of information which can be interpreted in more than one way. There, the arbitrary is in the decision to settle on one of the remaining available ways. Importantly, the assumption here is that what settles which interpretations do and do not remain available is itself determined by facts. But Merleau-Ponty takes a stronger view: even these so-called pre-existing facts are subject to the hermeneutic circle; they are themselves indeterminate and the result of previous hermeneutic decisions ("sedimentations"), all the way down. For Merleau-Ponty, interpretation is not, like in the weak option, a partial response to existing facts at all, for these facts themselves are not established either.

This should illuminate the paradoxical unity of institution and recognition: when interpreting, I attribute meaning creatively, under pressure from pre-existing interpretive commitments, inherited from my personal and social history. In other words, settling on an interpretation is both taking oneself to be responding to existing facts (and act of "recognition") and taking oneself to be interpreting these facts in an idiosyncratic way (an act of "institution"). It is both creative and constative at the same time and presents itself as an improved version of the stated goal of unifying the subjective with the objective, which

was the standard according to which agnosia could be diagnosed in patients like Schneider and movements like Russian communism¹⁴.

3.2. *Play: A Healthy Relation to the Arbitrary*

This should give us a certain standard for a humanistic politics: it consists of embracing the ambiguity that characterizes the milieu of politics: the unity and divergence of recognition and institution. In the years immediately following PP, the names of the specifically political attitude that embraces this circularity become a matter of explicit concern for Merleau-Ponty. It has been discussed elsewhere under what conditions Merleau-Ponty came to endorse the Machiavellian notion of *virtu* as a response to adversity [22]. But the recent publication of the manuscript from the late Forties allows us to take a few more steps. At the textual level, as I have been suggesting, the move from PP to HT to the “Note on Machiavelli” becomes almost seamless, in particular because it establishes a unity between the treatment of Soviet communism and the treatment of Schneider as two moments of the analysis of agnosia as the basic pathology both clinical and political. Secondly, and more unexpectedly, we observe a parallel between the extension of the discussions of agnosia and of play from the clinical context to the field of politics. Play becomes one of Merleau-Ponty’s idiosyncratic ways to describe virtue: the virtuous individual is the individual who knows how to play. It is well-known that Schneider’s agnosia is characterized by an inability to play:

[the normal subject] role-plays with his own body, he amuses himself by playing the soldier, he ‘irrealizes’ himself in the role of the soldier just as the actor slides his real body into the ‘great phantom’ of the character to be performed. ([1] p. 106) [but] [t]here is something meticulous and serious in all of [Schneider’s] behavior, which comes from the fact that he is incapable of playing. To play is to place oneself momentarily in an imaginary situation, to amuse oneself in changing one’s ‘milieu.’ [1] p. 136 (trans. amended)¹⁵.

Most importantly, a few pages later, Merleau-Ponty seems to define play as the appropriate response to cases of indeterminacy or ambiguity of the kind I discussed with reference to the hermeneutic circle:

Cases of ambiguous perception, where we can choose our anchorage as we please, are cases in which our perception is artificially cut off from its context and its past, in which we do not perceive with our entire being, in which we play with our body and with that generality that allows it to break at any time with all historical engagement, and to function on its own account. [1] p. 255 (trans. amended).

When I want to go from this interrogation to an affirmation and, *a fortiori*, when I want to express myself, I crystallize a collection of indefinite motives in an act of consciousness, I enter back into the implicit, that is, into the equivocal and the play of the world. [1] p. 271 (trans. amended).

If it remains unclear whether the concept of play does any technical work in PP, the unpublished material makes it clear that by 1947, play has acquired a technical status with an important role in Merleau-Ponty’s political reflections. While in PP, playing meant simply taking pleasure in the distance between being and meaning, the texts immediately following emphasize one implication of this: play has an ambivalent relationship to seriousness. One might expect that Merleau-Ponty would oppose play to seriousness, but this expectation is immediately complicated. What one must seek in play is not the absence of seriousness, but rather, he argues, a superior kind of seriousness, one that does not contradict freedom. His gloss on Sartre explicitly opposes these two senses of “seriousness”:

To this demand for a serious, perceptive, and attentive kind of prehension, one can oppose the ‘serious man’ who is under the philosopher’s watch”, [. . .] Sartre [. . .] criticizes ‘the spirit of seriousness’ in which the ‘serious man’ takes refuge and conceals his engagement,’ like a utilitarian and bourgeois spirit. But he appeals to a kind of seriousness that is proper to engagement.”

([14], vol. 2 Note 1191).

This dialectic between the two senses of seriousness, which Merleau-Ponty takes over from Sartre, is at work in Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of Machiavelli a few months later. One of the very first references to Machiavelli, and probably the origin of the famous Note on Machiavelli of 1949, is in his work for HT, where he cites Koestler’s Rubashov:

We have been the first to replace the liberal ethics of the 19th century, based on fair play, with the revolutionary ethics of the 20th century. [...] A revolution that plays by the rules of tennis is an absurdity. The struggle may remain relatively honest in the moments in which history follows a lazy course; when it encounters critical junctures however, the only possible rule is the ancient saying to the effect that the end justifies the means. We have introduced neo-Machiavellianism in this century.

([14] vol. 1, note 864).

There, Koestler sets Machiavelli on the side of the Commissar as committing to the principle of absolute objectivism and opposed to the ethics of play. Yet, just a few years later, Merleau-Ponty continues his polemic against Koestler by returning to the figure of Machiavelli to redeem him from this clichéd reputation. He opens his note on Machiavelli with a reference to the common perception of Machiavelli, illustrated, among others, by Koestler. His response there is not to deny that Machiavelli represents a certain kind of seriousness in politics, but it is to question the dualism according to which seriousness is the opposite of play. Rather, he argues, Machiavelli does not represent the seriousness of the cynic who denies their own freedom (as Koestler assumed), but a kind of higher seriousness¹⁶: the seriousness of *virtu*, the seriousness of the agent who takes their agency seriously, that is to say, who recognizes that they are condemned to play, wager, and take responsibility for their freedom¹⁷. Again, the recent publications, which cover exactly the link between HT and the “Note,” give us precious elaboration of what this ideal of play in politics involves. Merleau-Ponty cites Hegel’s analysis of play several times and adds his own emphasis:

If we consider the internal character of these games [ces jeux] we observe first that play opposes seriousness, dependency and necessity. [. . .] Labour is serious insofar as it is concerned with needs; be it myself or nature, we must perish; if one must remain, the other must yield. Or, compared to this kind of seriousness, *play belongs nonetheless to a higher seriousness* for in it, nature is informed in spirit.

([14] vol. 2 p. 520)¹⁸.

In short, it is play that offers the solution to the Marxist demand that politics should unify the subjective (the “spirit”) and the objective (“nature”) and transfigure it into a synthetic realm of meaning¹⁹.

4. Conclusions

My objective in this paper has been to extract the way in which the recently published *Inedits* and *Lectures* cast a new light on the canonical discussion of agnosia in PP and to show how this makes agnosia the central concern of Merleau-Ponty’s ethics. There are several such new insights: the first has to do with the continuity between PP, HT, and the

Note and how it suggests that the case of agnosia first examined in PP comes to be the paradigm through which Merleau-Ponty approaches normative questions: agnosia, in its medical and political forms, becomes the basic pathology that Merleau-Ponty's efforts are directed against. The second has to do with the way the new materials give us a fuller picture of Merleau-Ponty's way of addressing the challenge of agnosia so defined. We have known since HT and AD that Merleau-Ponty's political worry had to do with the concern for finding the correct encounter between the objective and subjective. But now, we can go one step further: Merleau-Ponty finds a positive account of this encounter in the hermeneutical structure. Hermeneutics involves a seamless encounter of objectivity and irreducible freedom because it both takes stock of existing, sedimented meaning structures and takes possession of an irreducible opportunity for decision. It is only when both are unified that new meaning is produced. This has a further set of consequences of an ontological nature this time. First, the subjective–objective pair becomes refined into the institution–recognition pair. Second, Merleau-Ponty, in typical phenomenological fashion, operates a reduction of “reality” (on the side of being) to the “world” (on the side of meaning). That is to say, the relevant milieu of normativity is the world of meaning. This is dramatized in two ways: first, we move from an anthropological account of the political subject to a phenomenological one: political and moral agents are not *beings*, but *existents*. Merleau-Ponty's humanism tasks itself to be promoting and furthering the achievement of *existence*. Good politics is to be understood as humanism in the sense of an attempt to replace the real with meaning: the creation of a human world out of some brute being. The enriching of meaning constitutes its directing value. Finally, and consequently, the political arena is defined as the arena of meaning-making. What politics are about is determining which meanings will be instituted or sedimented. Finally, these new materials allow us to flesh out Merleau-Ponty's account of the political attitude that is consistent with this hermeneutic notion of politics. Till now, the best attempt we find in the published writings is Merleau-Ponty's rather underdeveloped reprisal of Machiavelli's notion of *virtu*. The unpublished texts give us a deeper understanding of what the specifically political virtue looks like: it is a kind of higher seriousness best characterized as playfulness. For playfulness is serious because it deals with the constraints of the real. Yet, it is more serious than the fatalism of the objectivists (“the “commissars”) because it takes into account not just the objective real but also the real necessity to act freely. It is adequate to the equivocality of being: reality is made of more than objects and facts; it is also made of possibilities. Sticking to the first whilst ignoring the second is no realism at all. Play, in this sense, constitutes a higher realism. This is why playfulness is more serious than seriousness but also more arbitrary (as befits play): because it takes possession of the field of indeterminacy left open by any hermeneutic process: it acts freely. The challenge of a Merleau-Pontian ethics, therefore, is summed up in one goal: healing Schneider, and this means: regaining play.

Now, this obviously counts as an argument about the ethics at work in Merleau-Ponty's thinking. We must conclude that he was, in fact, a humanist of this sort. But we might wish to ask the further obvious question: assuming this is indeed Merleau-Ponty's ethics, is such ethics persuasive at all? Any question about the value of any ethical system has to address three notorious questions: First, the problem of criterion: does the theory provide a usable criterion? Second, the question of justification: is such an ethics justified? Third, selectiveness: is this criterion meaningful enough as to be selective? It seems to me that, in the reconstruction I have just presented, Merleau-Ponty's ethics is remarkably able to address these challenges. Let me deal with each of these in turn.

The criterion at work in Merleau-Ponty's normative concerns is humanism. This means both that it is taken to be “good” for humans to attain what he calls “existence” (i.e.,

a creative relationship to reality); and it is good, for this reason, to make progress in the humanization of the world: it is good to transfigure the world of being into a world of meaning, and subsequently, to make the world of meaning as rich and wide-ranging as possible. This is quite a usable criterion indeed. Phenomena, actions, and even political regimes that promote meaning-making are more desirable than those that do not. This means, not unexpectedly, that totalitarian tendencies in politics are to be rejected because they privilege objectivity over meaning, for example; it also means that discourses are legitimate in the public sphere not because of their truth but because of their ability to contribute to world-creation. In the process, socially constructed realities take normative precedence over knowledge (roughly speaking, culture has primacy over science). This should give us a sense that, indeed, it is a position determinate enough to exclude some views and to promote others. Such hermeneutic humanism, as Merleau-Ponty insists constantly, is threatened on two fronts. The first is dualism: if the subject and the object are kept too far apart, meaning-making has no chance to get off the ground: it will stick to pure objectivity, which fails at attaining meaning, or to pure subjectivity (which is about literally nothing, and therefore fails too). The second is reductionism: the reduction of the subjective to the objective or vice versa. Some absurdly radical forms of Marxist materialism could correspond to the first (but also some capitalist equation of humanism with prosperity), as well as absurd idealism of the kind he attributes to Kant in several passages. In the opening to PP, Merleau-Ponty calls both these pathologies with the same name: “death.” ([1] p. 74). This is because only the possibility of further refinement, revision and deepening of our worlds constitutes “life” and that reductionist and dualistic calcifications tend towards an extreme kind of determinacy which makes them impossible.

Secondly, Merleau-Ponty’s ethics finds its justification in its ontology. For his is an ontology in which a certain norm is inscribed in being. As early as PP, Merleau-Ponty argues that some configuration of meaning (overdeterminate ones) lead to “the death of consciousness,” and some (the ones that remain open to interpretation), to life. This is because the essence of being lies in “the prospective activity of consciousness” ([1] p. 241, see also 246. trans amended) and that determination interrupts this activity. As Merleau-Ponty famously claims in the preface to PP, this suggests that there has to be one unique primary phenomenon (more than one would involve an irreducible difference in the kind disqualified above between them), but this primary phenomenon has to also avoid self-identity. We need a unique phenomenon of multiplicity and, therefore, a principle of historicity. In Merleau-Ponty’s language, there is one phenomenon left once all reductions have failed, literally, an irreducible phenomenon, which is “the prospective activity of consciousness.” As the rest of the preface develops, this phenomenon, because it is primary, is the source of the world, it is a phenomenon that produces the world out of its own resources. It is the phenomenon responsible for the appearance of objects, and thereby, for the twin transcendental illusions of objectivity and subjectivity. The prospective activity of consciousness is the answer to the Sartrean question which Merleau-Ponty rehearses: “how, paradoxically, there is for-us an in-itself” ([1] p. 74). Because what it produces is an illusion, a false interpretation (of the for-itself as an in-itself), it becomes clear that the essence of this primary phenomenon is hermeneutic. But this phenomenon possesses an additional property, namely that it is identical with the famed failure of the reduction announced in the same pages. What the reduction teaches us, famously, is that this impossibility is a sign that this transcendental illusion is necessary. It is necessary that the world appears polarized between the subjective and the objective, although it most emphatically is not so polarized. It is necessary that the world appears as it is not. This gives us an ontological foundation for the dynamic principle of interpretation and therefore a normative principle

at the heart of being, and this principle is simply this: that the act of hermeneutic (the “prospective activity of consciousness”) *must* go on.

From this ontological argument issues another anthropological one to support Merleau-Ponty’s ethics of interpretation. That it is a humanist ethics means broadly speaking, that it draws normativity from an account of what humans are, and the basic starting point for any Merleau-Pontian anthropology is that subjects are consciousnesses and that consciousness is identical with this very prospective act described above. Existence is the prospective activity of consciousness. This is why it can be assumed that transfiguring oneself from being to existence (the act of consciousness *par excellence*) is a valuable thing to do, and this is also why one might assert that existence is identical with the continuous act of meaning-making. It is, in short, our essence that makes us want to achieve existence, and to exist is to make a world.

This addresses the second challenge, but it raises a third one: almost all kinds of normativity will have to contend with a double demand. First, it will need to be justified, and this almost inevitably involves a grounding in being or at least in some legitimizing being. We saw that this is satisfied in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of “life” and its rejection of “death”. Second, it must be selective: it must be able to censure or endorse certain states of affairs. The problem is that these two demands are in conflict: normative systems must be able to prefer some parts of being over some other parts of being and to do so on the basis of an account of being [29,30]. Merleau-Ponty himself contends with this problem almost explicitly when he examines the false alternative between the Yogi and the Commissar in HT and in the unpublished texts when he worries about “fatalism.” ([14] vol. 2, 191, 205). Fatalism is unappealing because it reduces what ought to be to what is and therefore disqualifies judgment. How does a Merleau-Pontian ethic avoid fatalism? It is to be expected that the solution lies in his ontology of ambiguity. You will note that the double bind described above is only problematic for univocal ontologies, ontologies where things either are or are not, with no in-between. In such cases, what there is cannot be judged from the point of view of what there is not, and therefore, all that there is is *ipso facto* endorsed (this is, famously, a secularized form of the problem of theodicy, as Merleau-Ponty himself recognizes) ([31] p. 31; [32] pp. 202–209, [33] ch. 7). But, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is not of this univocal kind (whether it has merit ontologically speaking—which I think it does—is a subject of debate but to be left out for now). Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, being can only be conceived in the guise of becoming. This means, among other things, that it is not automatically fulfilled, and therefore, that at every moment, it takes on configurations that are susceptible to critical judgment. Any state of affairs of the world can be assessed normatively in terms of whether it fulfills the requirement for world-making more or less successfully. Although this does mean that no configuration of being is devoid of value (they all represent a certain configuration of meaning and enable further meanings), and none is absolutely sovereign (no act of meaning-making involves the exclusion of all further meanings), it does mean that one can, without contradiction, judge being by its own standards: some configurations of meaning make less further meanings possible than others and tend to make future worlds less rich, more drab, and greyer. Think of an open society rushing into a book-burning kind of totalitarianism: it is clear in this case that we are swapping one hermeneutically fertile political structure for a more sterile one, although it remains clear also that even in the sterile one, some meaning-making remains possible. It seems therefore that, as a result, Merleau-Ponty possesses the ontological tools necessary for avoiding both the fatalism of the Yogi—the view that value is always-already fulfilled because it is identical with being and the cynicism of the Commissar—the view that goodness is simply what one wants, without criterion. Although these meta-ethical considerations can only be preliminary, they offer a suggestion for the terms under which

the work of the 1940s should be brought to bear on the more general question of what a Merleau-Pontian ethic looks like.

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Notes

¹ I use Landes' translation (with amendments when noted).

² See also [10] p. 7.

³ Samantha Matherne [12], distinguishes between the "motor-centric" interpretation of Hubert Dreyfus, Sean Kelly, Taylor Carman, and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc from her own "imagination-centric" interpretation of PP. I agree with her that the narrow "motor-centric" view is insufficient as long as it fails to include cognitive processes such as imagination. It seems to me however that Matherne's idea that one must choose between these two accounts is grounded in the idea, that she shares with her opponents, that for Merleau-Ponty, comportment and perception must be transcendently grounded in one or the other of the basic faculties (embodiment for the ones, imagination for the others). In my view, Merleau-Ponty's aim is to talk about perception and action as grounding the emergence of the subject who possesses these capacities. Therefore, this subject does not precede perception and action, and there is no genuine competition between the motor-centric and the "imagination-centric" models. I thank an anonymous Reviewer for pointing out Matherne's article to me.

⁴ See also [10] p. 4.

⁵ See also [1] p. 105, [2] p. 133, [1] p. 114 and [2] p. 142.

⁶ See also [1] p. 105 [2] p. 133, [1] p. 114 [2] p. 142.

⁷ See also [14], Vol. 1, pp. 293, 352.

⁸ See also [14], Vol. 2. 380.

⁹ See also [14], Vol. 2, p. 307.

¹⁰ See also [14], Vol. 2, pp. 380, 386, 404, and [14] vol. 1, p. 466.

¹¹ See also [14], Vol. 1, p. 198.

¹² On Gibson's engagement with Merleau-Ponty, see [18] p. 121 ff. See also [19].

¹³ Rajiv Kaushik has recently presented a magisterial analysis of this idea in the second chapter of [24].

¹⁴ As corroborating evidence, one could refer to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the Machiavelli case, a case tightly connected to HT, and as we now can see thanks to the new *Inédits*, connected to PP. For Merleau-Ponty, Machiavelli's chief insight was that power was subjected to exactly this hermeneutic structure: obedience is both a response to power and what makes this power be. The unity of institution and recognition is bread-and-butter of politics.

¹⁵ See also 61/87, 245/283.

¹⁶ In his own study of play, Johan Huizinga [25] also insists that play achieves a kind of higher seriousness because it transcends the naïve seriousness Merleau-Ponty associates to the Yogi *and* what Huizinga calls "frivolity," a kind of irresponsible action associated with the commissar.

¹⁷ The *Inédits* (especially [14] vol. 1, p. 198) seem to suggest that the famous "Note on Machiavelli" of 1949 is a direct extension of Merleau-Ponty's polemic with Koestler in [4]. Against Koestler's idea to the effect that Machiavellianism is a kind of materialism of force, Merleau-Ponty argues that for Machiavelli, power is of the order of meaning and maintained by a kind of play [26].

¹⁸ The emphasis is Merleau-Ponty's. As is well known, this definition of play as involving a higher kind of seriousness, combined with freedom, has been elaborated by Huizinga explicitly, although we can find traces of it in Nietzsche and Schiller among others.

¹⁹ The affinity between hermeneutics and play has since been well-documented by Gadamer, who also emphasises the way that play, because it embraces indeterminacy and arbitrariness, is a crucial dialectical device towards what he calls the "transformation of the world into structure" ([27] p.120). On the relations between meaning-making and play, see also, Wittgenstein's famous analyses of language-games ([28], §23–32).

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