Chapter 10

‘Faith is in things not seen’: Merleau-Ponty on Faith, Virtù, and the Perception of Style

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Introduction

The rather truncated paraphrasing of Hebrews 11.1 which forms the title of this contribution can also be found in Merleau-Ponty’s 1945 essay ‘Faith and Good Faith,’ where the French phenomenologist writes, ‘[M]an cannot be sincere, since sincerity supposes a definite nature which one can assess without ambiguity. It is not a matter of contemplating oneself but of constructing and going beyond oneself. “Faith is in things unseen”’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 176, my italics). In the midst of a critique of the idea of ‘sincerity,’ and the need for ‘certainty’ in politics,1 Merleau-Ponty thoroughly endorses this articulation of the idea of ‘faith’ as ‘an adherence that goes beyond the guarantees which one is given and therefore excludes an ever-present sincerity’ (Ibid., p. 176). Hence, this idea of faith as a sort of commitment to the world and to others plays an important role in the normative sketch of political action that Merleau-Ponty provides at the end of ‘Faith and Good Faith,’ and in the equally preliminary conception of heroism in the essay ‘Man, the Hero,’ which follows in Sense and Non-Sense. Although this notion of faith comes up in the context of a critique of the Catholic Church’s politics, Merleau-Ponty does not intend a religious, but rather a political faith and commitment. It is this notion of political faith that I will try to address in this chapter.

The notions of political action and heroism do not fade from Merleau-Ponty’s concerns in his later writings. He does, however, abandon some of the more eyebrow raising conclusions made in ‘Faith and Good Faith’ about political action and party loyalty.2 In a later collection of political essays—published in Signs—Merleau-Ponty chooses another term, virtù (virtue), to describe the proper understanding of political activity.3 In the ‘Introduction’ to Signs, written in 1960, he rather vaguely writes, ‘[t]he remedy we seek does not lie in rebellion, but in unremitting virtù’ (Merleau-Ponty,
1964c, p. 35). These two notions, faith and virtù, can in one sense be read as inhabiting opposite poles of the development of Merleau-Ponty’s political thought. Yet these two poles do not represent a turn or dramatic conversion in his thinking. Rather, what I wish to argue for here is a reading of the idea of virtù that is to a large extent continuous with the idea of faith presented in the earlier writing. We can point to a third essay, ‘A Note on Machiavelli’ (1949), which falls chronologically between the other two (1946 and 1960 respectively), to support this thesis. In an ironic manner, Merleau-Ponty writes of Machiavelli’s ‘nerve’ in speaking of ‘virtue’ while sorely wounding ordinary morality (1964c, p. 211). Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty uses the term in a manner quite similar to that of Machiavelli. For both authors, it describes a ‘means of living with others’ (Ibid., p. 214)—precisely what the idea of faith does in Sense and Non-Sense, where he writes ‘is not faith [. . .] stripped of its illusions, itself the very movement which unites us with others’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 186).

The significance of the idea of virtù, in its relation to faith, goes beyond the confines of Merleau-Ponty’s oft-neglected later political thought. It is tied up, I will argue later in this chapter, with developments in his ontology that were occurring at the same time, and we can thus examine the ideas of ‘style’ and ‘clairvoyance,’ as they appear in The Visible and the Invisible, ‘Eye and Mind’ (1961), and the 1961 lecture course from the Collège de France, ‘L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie aujourd’hui,’ in relation to the ideas of faith and virtù. While readings of Merleau-Ponty’s notions of ‘style’ and ‘clairvoyance’ have been more frequently associated with aesthetics than politics, I will try to show that virtù is the political analogue to the ontology of the perceptual world that Merleau-Ponty was in the process of developing in part through the ideas of ‘style’ and ‘clairvoyance,’ and thus that they are very much linked to the idea of ‘faith.’

I do not wish to neglect or ignore the fact that the concept of ‘faith’ in Merleau-Ponty is usually approached through the idea of ‘perceptual faith,’ the interrogation of which structures The Visible and the Invisible. However, by approaching the concept of ‘faith’ through the political writings of the 1940s, I will be following Merleau-Ponty’s own impulse to connect the perceptual and the political spheres: political faith is, I hope to show, ultimately and irrevocably tied up with the perceptual faith that Merleau-Ponty had set out to interrogate via a new ontology.

The idea of faith in relation to politics (and to party politics in particular) marks an important point in Merleau-Ponty’s political thought. In ‘Faith and Good Faith,’ we find both a rejection of a certain strain of Scientific Marxism, associated with Engels and Lenin, and a nuanced endorsement of
Lenin’s democratic centralism as being in line with Merleau-Ponty’s ideas about faith in politics. Hence, this chapter not only squarely situates faith within the task of separating ‘the radical humanist philosophy of Marx from the Engels-Lenin orthodoxy of positivism and scientism,’ a task which occupied Merleau-Ponty until the end of his life (O’Neill, 1984, p. 277), but it also aligns faith with the later politics of virtù and some of the remarks concerning choice that Merleau-Ponty makes in the context of elaborating his new ontology (e.g., in Merleau-Ponty, 2003b, discussed in sections 3 and 4 below). The endorsement of democratic centralism that it suggests is, I think, an accurate conception of how party politics are generally carried out even today.

In the following sections, I will first try to explain the idea of faith as it functions in Sense and Non-Sense (section 1). Following that, I will try to cash out some of the implication of this conception of faith in relation to political action (sections 2–4). Finally, I will link the notion of faith with the ideas of ‘virtù,’ ‘style,’ and ‘clairvoyance,’ all of which play an important role in Merleau-Ponty’s later writings (sections 5–6).

1. ‘Faith’ and ‘Sincerity’

The political sincerity that Merleau-Ponty attacks in ‘Faith and Good Faith’ entails a demand for certainty. But if, as Merleau-Ponty repeatedly claims, perception always affirms more than we strictly know (1964b, p. 179), then certainty can be both de facto and de jure precluded from the appearances of the natural world, where political and personal life are played out. Merleau-Ponty is adamant on this point, writing, ‘If sincerity is one’s highest value, one will never become fully committed to anything, not to a Church or to a party, not to a love or a friendship, not even to a particular task [. . .]’ (Ibid., p. 179).

It is somewhat difficult to know exactly what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he tells us that perception always already affirms more than we strictly know, but we can point in two related directions. Our perception of objects is always run-through with empty or unfilled apperceptions, which are co-presented with what is given in the flesh, for example, the backside of a table or coffee cup. These co-presentations can be made fully present or can be fulfilled if I move around the table or turn the cup on my desk. In this sense, my apperception of the backside of an object affirms the object’s givenness as such and such a thing without me being able to strictly claim certainty with regard to the things in my perceptual field.
This may not however be the most fruitful way to interpret Merleau-Ponty’s claim, as it does not especially illuminate the political position that is being taken in this chapter vis-à-vis the idea of faith. We might do better to remind ourselves that for Merleau-Ponty the perceptual field is always imbued with a temporal-historical depth. In the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*, for example, Merleau-Ponty writes that perception is always cultural. What he means by this is that the meaning formations that structure our cultural world are not an ideal layer projected by a constituting subject over the perceptual field, but are through and through in the perceptual world itself, in the things themselves.

We can illustrate this with an example pertaining to our perceptions of others’ emotional states. In the series of radio lectures published as *The World of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the anger on his friend’s face. This anger, he writes, is not an interior mental state that he can apperceive on the basis of perceptions of the friend’s lived body (as Husserl’s analysis in *Cartesian Meditations* would suggest), but it is rather in the world, in the space between him and his friend, in the redness of the cheeks and the tension of the body. Faith, in relation to this example, would entail his adherence or prereflective commitment to the appearance of the anger on the friend’s face. Faith, in this sense, is what originally commits him to that anger insofar as he prereflectively reacts to it with his own body and expression.

One could object that, if faith is in things unseen, then this is not an adequate example, as the anger on the face of the friend is most surely seen. But other examples demonstrate the invisible sense that lines and gives depth to the perceptual field, and that is already being hinted at with the notion of political faith. In Richard Avedon’s famous photograph of William Casby, ‘Born a Slave,’ for example, the haggard and worn face of the old man speaks of an entire history of slavery, a history that from the perspective of the photo and the spectator is past. Yet, this history—for those with even a faint idea, provided by the title, of what they are looking at—is immediately present in the singularity of man’s face. The photo captures a movement in the perceptual field of the individuation of sense in the singular thing or visible being of the face, and its dispersal or generalization as the visible thing is immediately expressive of a history; ‘history’ as Merleau-Ponty says, ‘is the very flesh of man’ (1998, p. 78).

Our perception of the face commits us to, and involves us in, this history. But what is important is that there is a visibility of the invisible sense of history; in this case, of its pain and anguish. This commitment to a historical sense that appears as the depth of the visible is, in the sense described by
Merleau-Ponty, our faith in things unseen. This perceptual givenness of sense applies to cultural formations as well. A demonstration by workers may, in a certain sense, be the simultaneous appearance of a historical depth that accompanies their songs and slogans, that is, the history of the workers movement. Likewise for any political movement or party, faith is a mode of co-givenness in the perceptual field, the paradoxical appearance of the invisible sense that lines the visible world. But beyond its appearance, it is a commitment to and responsibility for this sense, that we can only separate ourselves from through a kind of abstraction.

Sincerity, in the sense that Merleau-Ponty describes in ‘Faith and Good Faith,’ is a refusal, on the grounds of a lack of certainty, of this originary perceptual and corporeal commitment to the historical depth of the perceptual field. One refuses the appearance of the history of slavery in the old man’s face because perhaps he or she is not certain of all the facts of that history, or even that the man was once a slave. But in refusing our implication through perception in this history, we are also able to refuse responsibility for it. We choose, as Merleau-Ponty says, a pleasant life under the guise of a vocation, or of a commitment, not to the history and the others who inhabit the perceptual field, but to a principle of sincerity that prohibits action unless we can be certain, something which we rarely are, or only are after the fact (1964b, p. 179).

I would like to call this appearance of history in the perceptual field, illustrated so well I think by Avedon’s photo, ‘style.’ When I say appearance of history, it does not mean the appearance in some sort of representational form of the events of an individual or collective past, but rather the intertwining of the visible with a sense—we might speak of a dynamic essence, a ‘verbal wesen,’ or ‘sensible idea’—of the development of the past and its movement into the future. This style is not something that we subjectively project upon the visible field; it is in the visible, as Merleau-Ponty often says, as its lining and depth. Faith then becomes not only a mode of appearance, but simultaneously our adherence or commitment to a ‘style,’ our originary implication in and hence responsibility (though not necessarily complicity or culpability) for a history. When Merleau-Ponty says that faith is in things unseen, I think that we must take it with more than a pinch of salt. We see according to a style; the historical development of sense fills the perceptual field at first glance with joy, pain, unease, anxiety, and struggle, and we commit ourselves bodily to that world, just as we commit ourselves bodily to the picture of William Casby as we shudder or cringe before the image. Thus our faith is in the invisible ideal lining of the perceptual field. But it is not enough to say that we see according to a style.
There is a visibility of style, in its movement, like the ‘sensible idea’ that Merleau-Ponty tries to describe at the end of *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Their carnal texture presents to us what is absent from all flesh; it is a furrow that traces itself magically under our eyes without a tracer [. . .] we do not see, do not hear the ideas, and not even with the mind’s eye or the third ear: and yet they are there, behind the sounds or between them, behind the lights or between them. (1968a, pp. 150–1)

Faith is thus through and through an integral aspect of our being in the natural attitude, an essential component of our originial corporeal being in the world. What is precisely unnatural is the ‘vocational’ attitude of the intellectual who refuses this originial commitment that our faith *qua* adherence to style entails. If we interpret faith in this way, it would seem that in ‘Faith and Good Faith,’ Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that we also adopt this natural attitude—to some degree—with regard to our politics. Initially, perception and politics seem to be quite distinct, and to treat them as equivalent would seem absurd; however, Merleau-Ponty wants to argue that we can, in a sense, do so. The question then becomes as follows: Is the ‘good faith’ that Merleau-Ponty demands of our politics merely what we find in the natural attitude or is it something beyond this originial faith? This is a question that we will have to tackle as we progress.

We should try to clarify some of the more counterintuitive elements of the idea of faith that Merleau-Ponty sets out here. First, faith is opposed to certainty. We normally consider faith to be a form of certainty that is not founded upon evidence. But Merleau-Ponty’s notion of faith is more in line with an admittance of uncertainty and a commitment to both a course of action (or institution) of which we are, in a sense, unsure. Simultaneous with this commitment, I will argue further on, is a rigorous interrogation and calling into doubt of that course of action or historical development. Second, faith is also opposed to sincerity, but only insofar as sincerity necessitates an absolute certainty with regard to the actions or institutions that we commit ourselves to. In a paradoxical move, Merleau-Ponty is connecting sincerity to what we normally consider its opposite, cynicism and detachment. Faith, however, is not opposed to knowledge. Rather—again counterintuitively—knowledge is opposed to certainty. Knowledge is not considered in terms of a correspondence theory of true belief in relation to real facts and states of affairs in the world.15 Instead, knowledge must be considered globally as an ever-developing horizon of interrogation. This also puts faith firmly on the side of truth as Merleau-Ponty explains it in
Adventures of the Dialectic is an indefinite process of verification or praxis.\textsuperscript{16} This conception of truth is one of the treasures of Marx’s radical humanism that had been buried by the predominance of Scientific Marxism’s positivism and economic determinism within the Communist movement, and which Merleau-Ponty’s political thought, beginning with the idea of faith, tried to unearth.\textsuperscript{17}

2. Siding with the Future

Faith’s opposition to certainty and sincerity is only one element of its relation to style and perception. The futural element of faith in its relation to style is equally important. The appearance of ‘style’ in the perceptual field is not only the appearance or visibility of the sense of the past, but also of its developmental tendencies toward the future.

The visibility of this tendency or potentiality that inhabits the perceptual field does not at all guarantee certainty. The future developments that we commit ourselves to, the schema of possibilities that can be understood either in terms of the lived body or of a political movement, can just as well be disappointed: the style—now in terms of future tendency and development—that we had committed ourselves to—even hoped for—may in fact take another unforeseen trajectory, leaving our projects futile, out of place, and embarrassed. For example, we don’t know for certain how our friend will react to any given conversation, show of emotion, or intimate gesture. We can only have faith that we have correctly perceived his or her style in its developmental trajectory from past to future. This ever present possibility of disappointment of faith—in terms of the appearance of a style—is what we might call the risk of perception. Or, consider Merleau-Ponty’s attack in ‘Faith and Good Faith,’ on ‘Catholic politics,’ this time for a refusal of this futural aspect of faith: ‘The Catholic as Catholic has no sense of the future: he must wait for that future to become part of the past before he can cast his lot with it’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, pp. 177–8). The Catholic fails to take a real risk on the future.

Merleau-Ponty transfers this originary risk of perception to the normativity of politics. We have, for example, no certainty of how a political movement that we align ourselves with may develop, and yet nonetheless Merleau-Ponty counsels an adherence to political movements that is analogous to our ‘faith’ in our perception of a friend. We commit ourselves to a movement on the basis of an originary faith that is akin to the appearance of, and commitment to, what we can call a teleology without a \textit{telos}.
This teleology without telos appears with the sense of the historical development and provides the futural dimension to the idea of style: it is a developmental trajectory or orientation that appears with the style of visible things. With the appearance of the style of another person or of a political institution or movement in perception is the simultaneous appearance of the potential future development of that person or institution. As it is without a telos or end, this developmental trajectory is continuously being undermined and reformed from within the field of perception itself. Faith, in the political sense, is not only the appearance and commitment to this teleology, but an openness to its reformulation and open-endedness. The perceptual field as a cultural field is haunted by its own style, not only in the appearance of the sense of the past, but also by the appearance of these developmental tendencies.

It is important to emphasize that there is not a reflective act through which an idea or expectation about the future is formed: this commitment or faith that is involved in every perception, is part and parcel of a being-in-the-world that is always a being-toward-the-world in precisely this sense, and that characterizes the embodied human condition. We are always being-toward-a-world that is not yet, being-toward-the-world in its potential pathways of development.

What I put my faith in is a certain style that cannot be isolated within the consciousness of an individual (either my own that I project upon the world or another whom I perceive) but is always a matter of the unfolding of the world. Likewise the teleology that we perceive does not belong to the thing in isolation from its surroundings or to the political institution (a party or movement) in and of itself. Style, in terms of the appearance in the perceptual field of both historical sense and potential future development, always pertains to the movement or development of the diacritical whole of the world that Merleau-Ponty refers to many times: a ‘unity of coexistence like the sections of an arch that shoulder one another’ (1964c, p. 39).

The futural being-toward-the-world of our commitment cum faith also comes with a component of responsibility. It is not a responsibility that we assume over something removed and foreign from us, but rather a responsibility that we are incapable of not assuming without succumbing to a sort of pathology analogous to conditions where our own limbs and their movements are experienced as alien and hostile. The apparent analogy between the responsibility that we assume over personal and even political relations and the way in which we might be said to assume responsibility over our perceptions points to an underlying identity. These are in fact the same
modes of responsibility. The styles through which we perceive the world are in the world, in the relations between things. The same can be said for the faith that we do not so much place in our relations with others, but that pulls us into those relations, the way vision pulls us toward the things. Likewise, the style of an object, in its relations with the gestalt whole that surrounds it, pulls us temporally forward in terms of its developmental orientations or trajectories, which are constantly being undermined and reformed in the movement of faith itself, insofar as it entails bringing itself into question, its own interrogation.

3. Naturalizing Politics

But this naturalizing of politics—in the sense of the natural attitude not the naturalistic—through the idea of faith comes at a certain price. By bringing political action and judgment into this constellation of style, faith, commitment, and responsibility, Merleau-Ponty seems perfectly willing to admit certain limitations imposed by the structure of our faith upon what we might normally call political freedom or choice. He refers, in this context, to the scope for individual choice or autonomy within the institution of the political party, deferring to Lenin’s idea of ‘democratic centralism’: ‘The party must welcome discussion but must also maintain discipline. The decisions must express the will of the active members, and at the same time the members must consider themselves committed to party decisions even if those run contrary to their personal views’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 180).

There are two dimensions to this relation between democratic centralism and the idea of faith. First, the idea of democratic centralism that Merleau-Ponty seems to be endorsing here entails faith in the party—in terms of commitment, responsibility, and action—on the part of the individual, despite the possibility that party decisions will run contrary to personal views. This element of individual faith in the party seems to go beyond the ‘natural faith’ that we outlined above, in that it contains an active or voluntary component. However, it also remains in line with the conception of natural faith, in that democratic centralism (as Merleau-Ponty conceives it) entails a faith in the general historical style of the party, its developmental tendencies. This faith outweighs disagreements that individual members might have with particular party decisions.

The second dimension entails precisely what we have just alluded to; the party, as an institution, like an individual, has both a style and also has faith in itself. The institution of the party commits itself to a certain historical
development in the world as a broader field of praxis. This faith in some sense mirrors that of the individual subject for the party.

When we speak of a naturalizing of politics and of political commitment this is what we mean. As we are tied to the world that we perceive in its style of appearance, a style that has developed, and also manifests—in the present—a certain path of future development, so too are we tied to a party institution that the subject, by committing to, intertwines herself with. Like any institution, the party has a developmental momentum that, while dependent on its active members, is not reducible to their individual positions. In a rather paradoxical sense, I do not think it would run contrary to Merleau-Ponty’s argument here to say that the party’s decisions are in a sense our own. We are committed and bound to them by the relation of faith, even if we do not always agree with them. What is more, our responsibility for these positions, with which we ourselves may not entirely identify, is not something that we should abdicate. On the contrary, it is necessary for a responsible politics.

However, this faith in the party’s decision-making structure must not be confused with a sort of blind loyalty or unquestioning attitude: ‘completely devoid of sincerity, faith becomes sheer obedience or madness’ (Ibid., p. 179). A questioning of the ties that bind one to the party is in order. But how can this questioning proceed? Again, we can profit by comparison to perception. The structures of perception which tie and commit us to the world are often interrogated by great painters and writers. These artists create an unnatural remove, alienation, or distance from the perceived world, but a distance that interrogates that world from within and examines its formation. Merleau-Ponty describes this in detail in relation to Cézanne’s painting in ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ published in the same collection as ‘Faith and Good Faith.’

In the 1954–1955 Collège de France lectures on institution and passivity, Merleau-Ponty returns to the theme of choice in relation to Matisse’s and Cézanne’s painting. These comments are also helpful in explaining the attitude toward democratic centralism and faith set out in Sense and Non-Sense. ‘The choice,’ he writes, ‘is always an attempt at overcoming that conserves [the style of the past] and not an over-simplified affirmation, closed in on itself’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2003b, p. 85). He is referring here to strokes of the brush upon a canvas, but we can render this idea in more political terms. Choice, or what Merleau-Ponty prefers to call ‘work’ (Ibid., p. 86), takes up an inherited style and interrogates it, transforming it. But this happens from within the movement of an institution, the oeuvre of a painter, or even the history of painting. Our choices are neither autonomous
nor entirely willful, but rather, as he says in relation to Cézanne again, ‘germination’ (Ibid., p. 86). As Cézanne’s unnatural vision germinates within nature, within the perceptual field, and in the things themselves, the political work of the individual, the attitude of doubt and interrogation with which we must responsibly approach the decisions of the party occur within the framework of the style of the party and the individual’s faith in it. Political choice, in this sense, is the ‘germination’ of the party.

4. Faith and Good Faith: A Political Reduction?

By moving between interrogation of political commitment and perceptual faith, we encounter a rather fruitful point of tension in Merleau-Ponty’s thought pertaining to the relation between the natural attitude and the phenomenological reduction. In the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty famously describes the failure of the reduction in positive terms: it is the failure of achieving a complete bracketing of the natural attitude that opens the possibilities for phenomenology that are explored in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. And yet, Merleau-Ponty does not reject the method of the reduction in its entirety. In a beautiful passage from the Preface of this seminal work, he describes slackening our intentional bonds with the world, precisely so that they can be brought to our notice: ‘Reflection does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiii). This slackening allows the interrogation of the perceptual world carried out by a Cézanne, Proust, or Rimbaud. Cézanne’s desire to paint the formation of the world entailed his almost mad remove from the everyday familiarity of perceptual appearances and functions like something of an epoché.21

How does this tension concerning the status of the phenomenological epoché translate into the discussion on political faith? We might start by referring back to Merleau-Ponty’s comment that politics is not a vocation, or rather his criticism of certain intellectuals for treating it as one, and as such as a bound and limited sphere (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 179). What Merleau-Ponty seems to object to in the idea of politics as a vocation is its isolation, or bracketing, from the other habitualities and accomplishments of the lifeworld. But, the idea that it would be possible to examine the social and political development of the lifeworld from a removed perspective is
not to be confused with the distance from within that characterizes, for example, Cézanne’s vision as he attempts ‘an exact study of appearances,’ ‘a piece of nature,’ ‘to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization,’ but with a distanced, ‘unfamiliar,’ ‘uncomfortable,’ even ‘inhuman eye’ (Ibid., pp. 12, 13, 16). This political remove (as opposed to Cézanne’s distance) would entail precisely what the principle of sincerity calls for and what Merleau-Ponty rejects: the pre-tense of the possibility of putting out of play the general movement and development of the lifeworld while political questions and problems are examined and an apodictic knowledge is arrived at about them.

At the same time, the demand of a critical attitude—a modicum of sincerity—toward the decisions of the party can also be thought of in terms of the epoché as described by Merleau-Ponty in the Preface to the Phenomenology of Perception and even ‘Cézanne’s Doubt.’ A certain distance is established without putting out of play our commitment to the perceived world or to the party. What this allows is the formation of the meaning structures which guide the party and (in)form its decisions to become visible. The proper attitude that faith demands toward the party is the same that Cézanne takes on in his painting: ‘he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization’ (Ibid., p. 13). Again we can refer back to the dimensions of the relation between the individual and the party. On the one hand, the role of the individual is to interrogate the party’s institutional development so as to render visible its style and sense. On the other hand, the role of the party itself is, at least in part, to render visible the development of historical sense within the general field of praxis, that is, the world. And, by rendering the movement visible, it commits itself to acting from within that movement, in the manner that Merleau-Ponty describes the work of the painter in the lectures on institution: ‘in the painter at work, there is history re-founded’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2003b, p. 86).

The party is thus criticized and examined from within the movement of faith. The question of course is how to know when to ‘determine the moment when it is reasonable to take things on trust and the moment when questioning is in order’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, pp. 179–80). Merleau-Ponty does not give a satisfactory response to this, stating only that it depends on a ‘higher awareness.’

This understanding of faith also allows us to avoid an overly Marxist-Hegelian interpretation of a remark that Merleau-Ponty makes toward the end of ‘Faith and Good Faith,’ where it is rather unclear whether the voice we hear is Lenin’s or Merleau-Ponty’s: ‘The revolution is both a reality
which the spontaneous course of events is preparing and an idea being worked out in the minds of those individuals who are most aware of what is happening’ (Ibid., p. 180). If we ascribe this position to Merleau-Ponty (as well as Lenin), we can assign to it, on the basis of our reading of the concept of faith, a sense that avoids the finality or logic of a Scientific Marxist philosophy of history.24 Rather, if we read the statement in terms of the descriptions of faith offered earlier in the chapter, we come to a position that is nearly the opposite of that held by Scientific Marxism. First, as we have seen, the idea of faith explicitly and emphatically precludes the kind of certainty—sincerity—that Scientific Marxism not only allows, but which, as it adheres to an economic determinism, necessitates. Second, working out the idea of the revolution ‘in the minds of those most aware of what is happening’ is not, as Engels argues, a matter of working out, the ‘details and relations’ of the objective laws of motion of society (1968, p. 50).

This ‘scientific’ standpoint greatly diminishes the role and importance of that which Merleau-Ponty makes the focus of the essay (i.e., subjective faith and commitment), and which I have argued is an essential component of his conception of faith (i.e., the open-ended and indeterminate development of historical sense). At the least, it would seem to diminish the role of the political subject to the deciphering of the laws of motion. Such a diminishment would hold not only for the subject, but also for the party: the role of the party becomes the deciphering of the laws of the development of the dialectic, and the implementation of a program to bring about proletarian revolution. The party becomes the steward of the natural law rather than the guardian of an open, indeterminate, and historically contingent praxis—what Merleau-Ponty, in Adventures of the Dialectic, calls ‘truth.’25

In a seemingly odd manner, the party can be compared to Cézanne’s ‘endless’ task as a painter, which was to depict the movement and formation of the field of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 15). The role of the party in this strain of Marxist theory would then be to make manifest the sense of the movement of the field of praxis. As such, ‘revolutionary politics cannot bypass this moment when it steps into the unknown’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1973b, p. 52).

If we consider the above quote on the coming revolution in light of our analysis of faith, we arrive at substantially different conclusions than those of the deterministic Scientific Marxism. ‘The spontaneous course of events’ that is preparing the revolution cannot be understood in terms of a logical or inevitable progression, but rather as a quasi-visible development
of sense in the perceptual field that Merleau-Ponty will later call, alternately, both the ‘landscape of praxis’ and ‘ontological landscape.’\textsuperscript{26} Such developments are decidedly intersubjective, resulting from interaction and communication between historical actors, and are ultimately contingent, without finality and not subject to laws of economic determinism.\textsuperscript{27} What is manifest in the spontaneous course of events is a style that contains within itself the appearance of potential pathways of sense development within an open and unending dialectic.

From the liberal democratic standpoint adopted by the dominant Western political discourses today, Merleau-Ponty’s comments about the importance of retaining our faith in party orthodoxy, and in particular the orthodoxy of the Communist Party, seem to be either errors in his earlier thinking that should be corrected, and/or part of a wider strain of political myopia that infected the French left in the decades following World War II with regard to their attitudes toward the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. But, could we not say that the form, if not the specific content, of Merleau-Ponty’s call for faith in party orthodoxy to a large extent mirrors our own contemporary political and, specifically, electoral practice?

When we vote for a party on Election Day it is not, I think, generally with an attitude of sincerity, in the sense that Merleau-Ponty describes. We rarely know exactly, policywise, what a party has to offer, and even less what they will do upon being elected. Contrary to Husserl, who, in the \textit{Crisis}, speaks of the vocational time and epoché of the voting booth, I would say that while we may conduct a great deal of our political lives attempting to attain some distance from our natural faith and commitments, we vote in the natural attitude, often on the basis of a more general style of being, and of potential future development that we perceive in an institution such as a party. From the Merleau-Pontean perspective that we have tried to sketch here, that is not a failing of political judgment, but is rather an optimal realization of how politics should be done, since ‘it is beyond the competence of any citizen to analyze, unravel, and judge everything by himself in the complexity of world politics.’\textsuperscript{28}

According to this view, the idea that there is a metaphorical free market of political choices represented by various parties from which we can pick and choose depending on our changing opinions would be little more than an undesirable illusion. Instead, since it is impossible to have such a comprehensive grasp on all the issues that we can always discern precisely our own position on every issue, never mind what party best represents that position, it would seem the case that voters very often support a party
on the basis of the general direction the party indicates that they want to take the political body, and to what degree voters believe the party orthodoxy and think that the vision is realizable. In other words, to a large extent, people vote on faith, on the style of the party in relation to the current landscape of praxis, and it is prudent—at least according to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of political faith—that they do so.

In the lectures on institution, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the opening of an ideological field that sets on course a teleology: both this field and its teleology are visible, perceivable, and subjects are only formed and can only operate within these fields and their teleologies. The party is such an ideological field and, according to Merleau-Ponty, should remain so. The party takes up the sedimented sense that forms the field of perception as a field of praxis in its movement and tries to orient it according to its own style. In this sense it sets a teleology on course, opening limited horizons or pathways of future development, pathways that are in line with its (the party’s) style.

In politics we look for situations where a party provides an expression of our own commitment and faith, and thus we combine our political enterprise with that of the party. We do so without the certainty or sincerity that ‘focus-group politics’ feigns. Our faith, rather than being an expression of certainty is a risk that we take, one that we commit ourselves to not only in the life of the mind, but also down to the level of our bodily comportment and the originary manner in which the world appears pre-reflectively as a horizon of possibilities. In representational, parliamentary democratic politics, which Merleau-Ponty only later came to directly endorse, this means lending support where the style of a party deems it rational. According to this view, the idea of total sincerity in politics is bad faith. We, as with any member of any party, do not fully grasp all the issues, what the future will hold or how we, or the party we vote for, will precisely react. What we must try to do is read the signs to discern the style of a party and treat it like a friend into who we put some faith, and intertwine our own identity and being-toward-the-world, so long as their commitment to the world remains in line with our own.

5. Virtù and ‘intuitive flair’

I said above that Merleau-Ponty’s response to the question of how we know when to question and when to take things (the party’s decisions) on trust was inadequate. In ‘Faith and Good Faith’ he simply refers to a ‘higher
awareness’ that is ‘man’s value’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 179). I think that we can say without difficulty that this ‘higher awareness’ is rendered in his later thought as virtù. This applies particularly well to the description that he provides in ‘A Note on Machiavelli’ (‘a means of living with others’), and also to the idea of heroism that is presented in ‘Man the Hero.’ Here, Merleau-Ponty carefully separates his idea of heroism from a Hegelian notion of a ‘steward of the world spirit’ who is certain that he is carrying out the ‘wishes of history,’ or a Marxist idea of the party as having a privileged—scientific—vantage point on the unfolding of the dialectic (Ibid., p. 184). Instead, he connects his conception of heroism with the idea of faith, particularly as it pertains to relations with others, defining heroism as ‘loyalty to the natural movement which flings us toward things and toward others,’ and then going on to say that faith is ‘the very movement which unites us with others, our present with our past, and by means of which we make everything have meaning’ (Ibid., pp. 186–7). Virtù, as a ‘means of living with others,’ is the later rendering of this heroic faith.

We have connected the idea of faith with ‘style.’ The perception of style, which we can also call a sort of ‘clairvoyance’ or ‘preseeing,’ is the perception of a developmental history, with both past and future horizons. Significantly, faith entails committing ourselves to, and assuming responsibility for, this history with which we are originarily perceptually implicated and its future development. However, virtù as a ‘means of living with others,’ a form of ‘heroism’ and of comprehending a style, must also involve the higher awareness of knowing when to bring that style into question and attempting to recast its teleology. But exactly how we are to do this remains unanswered. We can find a helpful clue in Husserl’s idea of ‘intuitive flair,’ which appears in his brief discussion of personal style or character in Ideas II (cf. Husserl, 1989, p. 286). Husserl writes,

One speaks of intuitive ‘flair,’ a term which very often signifies just the opposite of intuition, i.e., insight, and is instead a presentiment, a pre-seeing without seeing, an obscure, specifically symbolic, often ungraspably empty, premonition. The actual nexus is then but a goal grasped in anticipation, an empty intention, one which is so determined, however that we follow the tendency, with its determinate direction, and in fulfilment of it can acquire a chain of actual intuitions. (Ibid.)

The actual motivational nexuses that we have the presentiment of are thus given in the other’s expression in their most empty form. The presentiment offers an indication or direction to be pursued in the empathic construction
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of the intentional nexuses of the other. This promise of intuition given in the *presentiment*—what we most often associate with the term *style* in its everyday usage which here retains its value—can never in fact be fulfilled, with regard to the other, but only appresented in an incomplete manner.

This typology of intersubjective relations bears a close resemblance to our understanding of political faith. Husserl remarks in these passages that a better apperception of the other’s *style* is possible if we are able to put ourselves in the place of the other, to follow ‘the sedimented meaning of all [their] voluntary and involuntary experiences,’ to use Merleau-Ponty’s words (Merleau-Ponty, 1968a, p. 180). The perception of the style of the other, manifest in these indices, is the preseeing, clairvoyance, or *presentiment*, of the sedimented nexuses. But a preseeing of what is *de jure* invisible.

What is *presentified* in the ‘intuitive flair’ that we have of another is a horizon (or scope) of possible manifestations of latent intentional nexuses, based on a givenness of the relations of styles within a diacritical gestalt whole. ‘Intuitive flair’ would be the perceptual givenness of a developmental, or institutional, history. This perceptual givenness of style in the expression of the other is, however, only indexical; it points toward, or gives an indication of, what cannot be fully given. ‘Intuitive flair’ in this sense is always a mixture of presence and absence.

Could we not take Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *virtù* as a *presentiment* or ‘intuitive flair’ for the *style* of the historical moment, which would of course include the *style* of others? This again fits very well with the last paragraph of the ‘Introduction’ to *Signs*, where, following the reference to the model for political action as an ‘unremitting virtù,’ Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘There is no universal clock, but local histories take form beneath our eyes, and begin to regulate themselves, and haltingly are linked to one another’ (1964c, p. 35). But while we have described faith as being originary and natural (i.e., taking place in the natural attitude), this idea of *virtù* involves a distancing from the originary or natural faith, which is also its interrogation. By interrogating our natural commitment to the other, or to an institution such as a party, in its historical development, the (invisible) *style* of that development becomes more readily visible. This interrogation is carried out by tracing the visible signs that serve to make manifest the invisible sense that lines the visible world.

This brings us to the relation between the sort of ‘faith’ that Merleau-Ponty is describing here and the more Husserlian idea of ‘presentification’ as it relates to ‘intuitive flair’ in the passage above. We can understand ‘faith’ both in terms of style, as we have done, and in terms of an unfulfillable
promise of an intuition of something absent. Is it the same for ‘presentifica-
tion’? What Husserl describes as ‘intuitive flair’ is precisely the promise of
a presentation that will never be fulfilled, so that it becomes a form of
faith. Yet, it is also a motivation for action along a certain ‘tendency,’ the
axis of which is given in the ‘presentification.’ In this way, what we describe
as ‘faith’ becomes a form of interrogation spurred on by the (necessarily)
empty anticipation that demands fulfillment. The ‘presentification’ gives
an indication—or a ‘determinate direction’—of symbolic indices to follow
in our interrogation, the praxis Merleau-Ponty describes as \textit{virtù}. There is
a circular movement here: faith becomes its own interrogation.

6. ‘Everything comes down to this’

In a working note from May 1959 Merleau-Ponty writes,

Everything comes down to this: form a theory of perception and of
comprehension that shows that to comprehend is not to constitute
in intellectual immanence, that to comprehend is to apprehend by
coop-existence, laterally, by the style, and thereby to attain at once the far-off
reaches of this style and of this cultural apparatus. (1968a, p. 188)

What this essay has endeavored to show is that the kernel of this thought,
its institution, can be found in the earlier political writing. The concept
of faith that we have tried to expound here still provides a key for under-
standing both Merleau-Ponty’s later political thought—embodied in the
term \textit{virtù}—and the relation between that thought and the ontology of
the visible world that he was developing in his last notes and essays.

The term \textit{voyance} or ‘clairvoyance’ takes a central role in the develop-
ment of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology in the 1960–1961 course, \textit{L’ontologie
cartésienne et l’ontologie aujourd’hui}. We also find several references to it
in ‘Eye and Mind.’\textsuperscript{33} Here, we can only attempt an indication of how this
term, along with the idea of style, relates to the idea of political faith
from which we started. In these texts and notes, Merleau-Ponty describes
‘clairvoyance’ as a bond or conduit between the visible world and sedi-
mented meaning; it is a seeing that ‘renders present to us what is absent’
or invisible, a vision that makes the invisible armature of sedimented sense
that structures the perceptual world visible (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 171).
Clairvoyance in this sense is both that faith which binds us to the world
and to others, and a kind of seeing of faith, a manner of making visible or
perceiving our faith in the world. Clairvoyance is thus what Merleau-Ponty
describes above as comprehending by the style. He is careful to separate this idea from a Cartesian idea of vision as the reading of signs by thought (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, pp. 182–3). Vision for Merleau-Ponty is this faith in the world and in others. Perception is always infused with the ‘intuitive flair’ that Husserl spoke of; it remains seeing according to corporeal indices, but what they point to is not relations in thought, but rather the relations between the styles of the things themselves. Thought, faith, commitment, and responsibility are on the outside, in the visible. Subjectivity is formed—instituted—in their bond with perception. Or we might even say that perception is a form, the originary form, of faith, commitment, and responsibility.

In this way the idea of political faith that Merleau-Ponty wrote of, if somewhat vaguely, in the essays of the 1940s remains central to the ontology that he was developing at the end of his life. The ‘clairvoyance’ that he describes in these last writings, the seeing of style in its movement and development, thus becomes key to understanding the idea of virtù. But central to all this remains the faith that pulls us forward into our commitments and relations with others and with political institutions, forming our world as one that is constantly infused with hope, love, fear, disappointment, and ultimately the renewal of commitment and resolution that our faith calls for down to its primordial perceptual being.

Notes

1 Specifically, the politics of the Catholic Church, whose refusal to fully back the workers’ struggle Merleau-Ponty vehemently attacks.

2 I emphasize ‘some’ because, though he abandoned the support for the Communist Party, he still retained some of the idea of democratic centralism.

3 Neither Merleau-Ponty nor his translators were particularly consistent with the spelling of vertu or virtue. In the ‘Introduction’ to Signs the word is spelled virtù. However, in ‘A Note on Machiavelli,’ the normal French and English spellings are used, vertu and virtue respectively. I will use the spelling from the ‘Introduction,’ virtù, in order to indicate the rather unorthodox meaning of the term that I hope to set out.

4 Indeed, in the earlier essay, he still seems to counsel the sort of wait and see attitude toward Communist politics that he defended in Humanism and Terror. By contrast, the introduction to Signs, represents the other Merleau-Ponty: the more cautious and prudent thinker, who rejected the politics and tactics of both Soviet Communism and the Parti Communiste in France, endorsing social democracy and with it liberal parliamentarianism—a ‘Weberian militant liberalism’—as the only guarantee of ‘opposition’ and ‘truth’ (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1973b, p. 226).
‘How could he have been understood? He writes against good feeling in politics, but is also against violence. Since he has the nerve to speak of *virtue* at the very moment he is sorely wounding ordinary morality, he disconcerts the believers in Law as he does those who believe that the state is the Law’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c, p. 211).

For example, when he suggests that both perception and politics—precisely in being acts of faith—involves a ‘commitment which is never completely justified’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 179).

In this chapter O’Neill defines what he calls ‘the context of Marxist *scientism*’ as ‘once Marxism became Party knowledge and a tool for the industrialization of Soviet society, Marxism identified with economic determinism and the values of scientific naturalism at the expense of its own radical humanism’ (p. 276).

There are also apperceptions—co-givennesses—which cannot be made present by simply changing my perspective on the object. Most famously and importantly those, described by Husserl in his Fifth *Cartesian Meditation*, that I have of another person’s inner states (emotions, thoughts, etc.) on the basis of the perception of the expressiveness of the lived body.

Cf., for example, ‘[m]oreover the distinction between the two planes (natural and cultural) is abstract: everything is cultural in us (our Lebenswelt is ‘subjective’) (our perception is cultural historical) and everything is natural in us (even the cultural rests on the polymorphism of the wild Being)’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968a, p. 253).

‘My interlocutor gets angry and I notice that he is expressing his anger by speaking aggressively, by gesticulating and shouting. But where is his anger? People will say that it is in the mind of my interlocutor. What this means is not entirely clear. For I could not imagine the malice and cruelty which I discern in my opponent’s looks separated from his gestures, speech and body. None of this takes place in an otherworldly realm, in some shrine located beyond the body of the angry man. It is really here in this room and in this part of the room that the anger breaks forth. It is in the space between him and me that it unfolds’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 63).

I am grateful to Jacques Rancière’s ‘Notes on the Photographic Image’ in *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July/August 2009) for bringing this photograph to my attention.

I risk somewhat twisting the sense of Merleau-Ponty’s comment here, as the ‘flesh’ in this quote does not necessarily refer to the body. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty does point to corporeity as the guardian of the ‘indestructible past’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968a, p. 243). It is our corporeal intertwining with the things themselves that allows for the lining of the perceptual world with historical sense, for perception to always be cultural.

Cf., for example, the description of ‘sensible ideas’ in the final chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*: ‘no one has gone further than Proust [. . .] in describing an idea that the contrary of the sensible that is its lining and depth [. . .] this invisible, these ideas, unlike those of that science cannot be detached from the sensible appearances and erected into a second positivity’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968a, p. 149).
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14 Cf., ‘Like the memory screen of the psychoanalysts, the present, the visible counts so much for me and has an absolute prestige for me only by reason of this immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere, which it announces and which it conceals’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968a, p. 114).

15 Cf., ‘For a theory of praxis, knowledge itself is not the intellectual possession of a signification, of a mental object; and the proletarians are able to carry this meaning of history, even though this meaning is not in the form of an “I think”’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1973b, p. 50); and, ‘In what sense are we employing the word truth? It is not the truth of realism, the correspondence between the idea and external thing [. . .] Thus the truth of Marxism is not the truth one attributes to the natural sciences, the similarity of an idea and its external ideatum; it is rather non-falsity, the maximum guarantee against error that men may demand and get’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1973b, p. 52).

16 ‘Truth itself is then conceived as a process of indefinite verification’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1973b, p. 53).

17 Numerous passages in both Adventures of the Dialectic and the 1961 lectures on Marx in ‘Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel’ refer to the task of freeing Marxism from Engels’ and Lenin’s scientism (and sometimes from Marx himself): For example, ‘We must first show this in Marx [. . .] [t]he notion of praxis as inheritor of absolute knowledge,’ and in reference to certain passages in the Economic and Philosophical Manucripts ‘This is the face which communism turns toward a “beyond” (its side where negation of the negation is positive) [. . .] It implies a return to the positive by the Party and the dictatorship. This is certainly efficacy, but is it a realization of negativity?’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1998, pp. 58, 82–3).

18 ‘The idea as a field does not contain what will develop there [in the field], and nonetheless it sets on course a teleology’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2003b, pp. 98–9).

19 In alien limb syndrome, for example.

20 Cf., the descriptions of Cézanne’s painting in ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, pp. 10–18).

21 Indeed, Merleau-Ponty speculates in ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ on the relation between Cézanne’s possible schizophrenia and his ability to enact (what I think we can call) a sort of phenomenological reduction in his work (1964b, pp. 20–1).

22 Cf., for example, ‘We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them through the human actions which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakably. Cézanne’s painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 16).

23 In section 5 below, we will show that this ‘higher awareness’ can be equated with the notion of virtù found in Merleau-Ponty’s later writings.

24 A cogent summary of the concept of Scientific Marxism can be found in John Holloway’s Change the World Without Taking Power. The Meaning of Revolution Today: ‘The notion of Marxism as scientific socialism has two aspects. In Engels’ account there is a double objectivity. Marxism is objective, certain, “scientific” knowledge of an objective, inevitable process. Marxism is understood as scientific in the
sense that it has understood correctly the laws of motion of a historical process taking place independently of men’s will. All that is left for Marxists to do is to fill in the details, to apply the scientific understanding of history’ (2002, pp. 121–2).

25 It was Lukács who, in History and Class Consciousness, perhaps most famously, pointed out the impoverishment of dialectical thought by this scientific account: ‘Dialectics, he [Engels] argues, is a continuous process of transition from one definition into the other. In consequence a one-sided and rigid causality must be replaced by interaction. But he does not even mention the most vital interaction, namely, the dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process, let alone give it the prominence it deserves’ (1971, p. 3).


27 This is opposed to Engel’s interpretation of the dialectic: ‘An exact representation of the universe, of its evolution, of the development of mankind, and of the reflection of this evolution in the minds of men, can therefore be obtained by the methods of dialectics with its constant regard to the innumerable actions and reactions of life and death, of progressive and retrogressive changes’ (1968, p. 46).


29 Cf., ‘There is [. . .] in the order of the perceived, not only Dingwahrnemung, but Verhalten of which it is a particular case; not only a sensorial field, but ideological, imaginary, mythical, praxic, symbolic fields—historical surroundings [entourage] and perception as the reading of this surrounding’; and ‘there is not an intelligible world, there is a culture. Which is to say, the apparatuses of knowledge (speech, books, works) open an ideological field [. . .] the idea as a field does not contain what will develop there, yet it sets on course a teleology’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2003b, pp. 175, 98–9).

30 Merleau-Ponty in many places calls these ‘signs’ ‘existentials.’

31 It would seem that we are also able to have an apperception—sometimes wrong—of someone’s style while knowing very little about him or her. We can apperceive their actions as fitting into more general forms of style. The phrase, ‘I know your type,’ tells us something here. When we say such things we are not really saying anything about the person, about whom we may know very little, but rather about the world. We know or have experience of certain more general styles that are manifest in the world, and how certain general styles or possible nexuses of motivation will (or might) respond in the world in relation to others.

32 In Merleau-Ponty’s course notes on Husserl’s ‘Origin of Geometry,’ we find a strikingly similar idea with regard to intersubjectivity. Merleau-Ponty writes: ‘Just as the only way to remember an idea is to begin the ideation over, the only way of yielding to intersubjective thought is to retrace the trace, to think anew by operating through an activity an exact coincidence with a passivity’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002a, p. 56).

References


