

DRAFT

The traditional problem of other minds, i.e., the question of how I can know that others are minded creatures just like I am when [by definition in a certain framework] the only mind to which I have direct access is my own, is as Bruce Aune puts it, “a notorious source of philosophical malaise”.<sup>1</sup> As a number of philosophers have pointed out, when encountering the other I am presented with something of a paradox – on the one hand she is present to me as an object in the world;<sup>2</sup> on the other hand she stands before me as a subject with her own perspective on the world, on me and on my perspective. On the one hand, all I have access to of the other is her bodily and linguistic behavior; as Sartre puts it, it is only “the outer shell which I possess”.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the other is immediately present to me as another self, precisely as bodily and linguistic behavior, but not reducible to that behavior.

This problem of other minds has been approached in a number of different ways, most commonly perhaps through some version of the so called argument from analogy. The general idea of such a line of argumentation is that when I see bodies similar to my own, and I see that these bodies display behavior similar to my own, I can infer through analogous reasoning that these bodies have minds like mine, even though I have no way of actually knowing this with certainty, since the only mind I have direct access to is my own. The starting point for analogous reasoning is thus an idea of the mind as hidden behind or within the body understood in terms of an outer shell, and directly accessible only to the person inhabiting this outer shell. The solution to the problem of other minds in terms of hypothetical inference through analogous reasoning takes a rather long detour through a complicated process of association and projection. I must first relate the

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<sup>1</sup>) Aune, p 320.

<sup>2</sup>) Albeit a “privileged object”, to speak with Sartre, with the characteristic feature of being another self, [but nonetheless an object with properties which can be measured and determined in different ways].

<sup>3</sup>) Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p 511.

expressive signs I see on the other's body to my own bodily expressions and from there make the association to my own conscious experience, which I in turn would project into the other, whom I then come to identify as an other *like* myself. [A detour which actually only leads me back to my own solipsistic mind from which I started.] To account for this process involves a number of difficulties and, as is well-known, there has been a fair amount of criticism put forth against the argument from analogy.<sup>4</sup> This is not something I will go into here. Instead I will turn to another way of approaching the problem of others, namely the way paved by the notion of expression and the idea that the other is immediately accessible to me through being expressive of selfhood or subjectivity. In discussions concerning the problem of others, the notion of expression has come to play a part of increasing significance and prominence. Drawing on the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I will suggest that expression is something that happens in a communicative space between self and other while at the same time giving rise to both.

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In the section "The Body as Expression and Speech" in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes,

Faced with an angry or threatening gesture, I have no need, in order to understand it, to recall the feelings which I myself experienced when I used these gestures on my own account. I know very little, from inside, of the mime of anger so that a decisive factor is missing for any association by resemblance or reasoning by analogy, and what is more, I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read anger in it. The gesture *does not make me think* of anger, it is anger itself.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>) Max Scheler provides a number of counterarguments in his *The Nature of Sympathy*, p 239ff/232ff. For a good overview of Scheler's criticism, see Zahavi, "Beyond Empathy", p 152f. See also Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others", p 115f/298; *Phenomenology of Perception*, p 352/404.

<sup>5</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p 184 (bold emphasis added. italics in original).

At another point, also in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes famously that “the body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art” in so far as its expressions are indistinguishable from that which is expressed.<sup>6</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s turn to expression in *Phenomenology of Perception* is motivated by the aim of moving beyond a strict distinction between mind and body in favor of an understanding of subjectivity in terms of lived embodiment. He rejects an understanding of the body in strictly naturalistic or mechanistic terms and instead develops the phenomenological notion of the lived body inherited from Husserl.<sup>7</sup> The lived body, for Merleau-Ponty, is not simply a point of view on the world, or an instrument getting to know the world. The lived body, he writes, “is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions” and every human use of it “is already *primordial expression*”.<sup>8</sup> The lived body is a “nexus of living meanings” and “a power of natural expression”.<sup>9</sup>

As we see from these quotes, Merleau-Ponty insists that human embodied existence does not indicate any hidden affection by its expressive behavior, but, rather, that the body *is* what it expresses. The smile on my face is not detached from the joy which it expresses but, rather, the smile is the joy; the expression is that which it expresses. And in the longer section I just quoted there is no apparent disparity between the subjectively experienced emotion of anger and the gestures expressing this experience. Instead the

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<sup>6</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p 150; cf “The Experience of Others”, p 50.

<sup>7</sup>) Merleau-Ponty inherits and develops the notion of the lived body from Husserl. As is by now well-known, already Husserl provides extensive analysis of the structure of the lived-body and makes the now classic distinction between two different ways in which the body can be experienced, as a physical thing under an objectifying description (*Körper*) and as subjectively lived (*Leib*). This well-known distinction, and the notion of the lived body offers a way of moving beyond a dualistic thinking of the human being divided into mind and body, by taking into account the body as it is subjectively lived and by understanding consciousness as fundamentally incarnate. Although Husserl is perhaps mainly known as a philosopher of consciousness, the lived body plays a central role in his philosophy; something that was recognized already by Merleau-Ponty and that has been brought out clearly in much recent commentary. Husserl’s phenomenology of the body is, in Donn Welton’s words, a “hidden source of not only the presence but also the meaning that the perceptual world has for consciousness, [which] envisions what no other philosophy has previously seen”. Welton, “Soft, Smooth Hands”, p 39. See also Zahavi, *Husserl’s Phenomenology*; “Husserl’s Phenomenology of the Body”; *Self-Awareness and Alterity*, ch 6. For an overview of different ways in which a focus on the lived body challenges an understanding of the body as object, see the two readers *The Body* and *The Body and Flesh*, both edited by Donn Welton.

<sup>8</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, “An Unpublished Text”, p 5/403; *The Prose of the World*, p 78/110 (italics in original).

<sup>9</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p 151/177; 181/211.

focus is on identity. The expression of anger appears to be indistinguishable from the anger it expresses. They are two aspects of one and the same phenomenon.<sup>10</sup>

This identity between expression and expressed is however far from clear-cut, transparent, or uncomplicated. The experience we have of seeing emotions immediately and directly in expressive behavior is countered by experiences of expressions which seem empty or false. A smiling face may be expressive of a lack of joy, rather than joy, and give the impression that there is something else hidden beneath the smile, distanced from the smile and only expressed as a lack. Instead of demonstrating an identity between the expression and that which is expressed, this case displays a discrepancy between a supposedly hidden state of mind and the visible expressive behavior. At the same time, there is nevertheless an immediacy to the experience of expression also in these cases displaying a discrepancy between inner experience and outer behavior. When I encounter a smiling face that does not seem to display joy, but, rather, a lack thereof, I do not in fact only experience a discrepancy between inside and outside, but also an identity. The smiling face is expressive precisely of a *lack* of joy. The empty smile *is* the lack of joy and embodies the presence of something that escapes me. Experiences such as this would seem to support a view of expression in which visible expressive behavior is merely what the expressing subject more or less chooses to display or conceal of her inner experience. Traditionally the relation between inner experience and outer expression has been understood as one in which that which can be seen on the outside is a representation expressive of an inner core, willingly or unwillingly, brought to the surface of the body.

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10) According to Merleau-Ponty, bodily gestures and expressive behavior is a subject's way of being in the world. Subjective experience *is* the body in a certain manner of being and apprehended in a certain situation. "The expression of sadness," he writes, "is a means of being sad". Merleau-Ponty, "The Experience of Others", p 48f/558; cf p 46f/556f. This is also expressed quite clearly by Sartre who writes that emotion "is not mere behaviour, but the behaviour of a body which is in a specific state [--] the emotion appears in a disordered body carrying on a certain kind of behaviour". See *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, p 77/41. Here, Merleau-Ponty indicates that it does not suffice to say merely that my subjective feeling of sadness is directly visible on my body. My body in its expressive being must also be recognized as the way in which I experience my feelings and emotional states of mind. Without the burning tears in my eyes which make me see the world in a new way, or the lump in my throat and shivering lips which keep me from speaking, my sadness would be experienced differently. Although feelings and emotions are things I undergo, I do not simply undergo emotions passively in so far as I actively respond to them and undergo them in a specific manner. The way in which I undergo an emotion would seem to be co-constitutive of that emotion as I am moved by it. And, in my being-moved, emotions may be enhanced or diminished in strength, as well as qualitatively altered.

In much contemporary thought the stability and essence of the inner core has been questioned and the inner core has been understood as being a discursive production rather than a stable expressive essence. Both of these views are problematic simply because they do not problematize the very relation between inside and outside, or between mind and body. They share the same starting point, namely a dualistic framework which fixes inside and outside as two separate parts existing only in external relation to one another, so that an inside core is either the cause or the effect of an outside expression. The relation between the subjective inside and the objective outside remains one of cause and effect in which cause and effect can be clearly distinguished and are kept on two separate sides in a one-way relation. Because the actual relation between inside and outside remains unproblematized, neither of these views can account for human existence as an ambiguous unity.

The ambiguity with which the expressive body is actually experienced calls into question the limits and stability of that which is subjectively experienced and that which can be seen in outer manifestations. Embodied, gestural expressions of emotion clearly show the impossibility of reducing selfhood to either pure subjective experience on the inside or objectively determined behavior on the outside. Inside and outside are truly brought together in expressive conduct where not only my subjective intentions and experiences are made visible in my comportment but where also my discernible behavior has an impact on my subjective intentions and experience. However, the experience of expression does seem to leave us with two apparently conflicting pictures. The two pictures that I indicated right at the start in relation to the experience of others. On the one hand, expressive embodiment is one and the expressions cannot be distinguished from what is expressed, on the other hand, expressive embodiment is split into two and there is an apparent disparity between the expression and the expressed. The experiences of identity and discrepancy are equally strong and both of them must be taken into account and reconciled when attempting to map out an understanding of the expressive body, that of the self as well as that of the other. The experience of there even being a discrepancy between inside and outside tells us that the relation between the two is of an ambiguous character rather than clearly determined, whether in terms of two or one.

The rather strong claim of identification between expression and that which is being expressed must thus be somewhat modified without the identity being lost. The identity of the expressive event must be thought of as embodying both coincidence and non-coincidence. What we need is an account of identity which is self-relational and allows for a moment of alterity within itself. It is precisely such an account of identity that Merleau-Ponty offers in his writings on expressive selfhood. The coinciding of the expression and that which it expresses, such as the smile and the joy, gives rise to these two sides as separate but interrelated aspects of embodied existence. At the same time, there is a non-coincidence at the core of coincidence. The event of expression involves a bringing together as well as a spreading apart. There is a continuous intertwining and unraveling of what we commonly locate respectively in the inside and on the outside of the human being. As said above, the separation between inside and outside is secondary to an original unity but this unity must carry a seed of self-differentiation within itself. As Bernard Waldenfels puts it, “the event of expression must be differentiated in itself and from itself”.<sup>11</sup> The coinciding of the expression and the expressed is rooted in a non-coincidence which cannot be fixed in terms of secondary separations between mind and body, inner and outer, or subject and object. The original non-coincidence is present only as an element of self-differentiation within the unity of the expressive body and it is this non-coincidence which guarantees that expressions are expressive of meaning, i.e. expressive at all.

Turning to expression as a way of grappling with the issue of how to understand the relation between self and other has the advantage of shifting our point of departure away from subjectivity as an utterly mysterious thing hidden within the body and accessible only to itself, to subjectivity as altogether embodied and embedded in the world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the fact of the matter is that “we do not start out in life immersed in our own self-consciousness [---] but rather from the experience of other people”.<sup>12</sup> In everyday life, the problem of others normally doesn't seem to be a problem at all. There

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11) Waldenfels, “The Paradox of Expression”, p 95.

12) Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p 86/48.

is something intuitively right about Anita Avramides' claim that the problem of other minds is a strictly philosophical problem, which only comes to the fore in everyday experience in rare cases.

As we all know well, our actual experience of others is not the experience of behavior which stands only in an external relation to the subjective states of mind to which it gives expression, and we do not need any theoretical model such as that of analogous reasoning to establish the existence of others. Rather, our experience of others is the experience of others as immediately expressive of themselves. Although I only know the other through the outer appearance of her body, through her glances, gestures, and speech, she is certainly more to me than simply a body. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "this other is a body animated by all manner of intentions, the origin of numerous actions and words" which I come to remember in the absence of the other's body but which can never be detached from their original embodiment.<sup>13</sup> My very interaction with her, in all of its forms, rests on my understanding of her as a self and not just a body with a connected mind. The lover's caress as well as the torturers infliction of pain would be utterly meaningless if they did not reach the self directly. The other's expressive body is not simply a mediator of her experiencing self, but instead, she is immediately present as the embodiment of her expressions. Instead of consciously interpreting her behavior, I am (by virtue of my own embodiment and embeddedness) attuned to her in such a way that I am able to read her expressions. What then does it mean to say that the other expresses selfhood rather than simply displaying behavior? What is the difference between understanding the other's expression and interpreting her behavior? Anthony Rudd points out that since mental states "transcend the behavior that expresses them" and this transcendence is given in the experience of the expressions, we are never safe-guarded but always risk making erroneous judgments regarding the meaning of what the other is expressing.<sup>14</sup> I might for instance read the smile on the other's face as expressive of joy whereas in fact, she is deeply troubled but knows how to smile convincingly to an audience. Is her face

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<sup>13</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p 82f/44f. He continues, "the process of *looking at human beings from the outside* – that is, at other people – leads us to reassess a number of distinctions which once seemed to hold good such as that between mind and body" (italics added).

<sup>14</sup>) Rudd, *Expressing the World*, p 120.

nevertheless an expression of joy? And, if we peel away the smile, or any other expressive behavior (given that this would be possible), what would be left?

These questions point us to a duality of the problem of others. There are at least two things at stake regarding this problem: one is the traditional other-mind skepticism, i.e. the problem of how I can come to know that there are other minds at all; the other is the problem of how I can come to know what these minds are like. These two issues are not completely separate from one another but they are still different. For instance, the expressions of people from other cultures can be completely mysterious to us but it is nevertheless quite clear that these expressions are precisely expressions of selfhood. Turning to the notion of expression as a framework for explaining our perception of others is a turn away from the skeptical question of whether there are minds other than our own at all, and instead toward the question of how we should understand the others with whom we evidently interact.

One obvious advantage of understanding the other in terms of expression and as being expressive of selfhood is that it retains a respect for the other precisely as other. Understanding the other as expressive of selfhood is a refusal to reduce her to her objective manifestations, to what can be mapped out and charted from a third-person perspective. She would in a genuine way be understood as another self, not as a possible mind attached to a visible body, but as another self not to be determined or doubted by me. This respect for the irreducible otherness of the other recognizes that the other is the source of her own expressions and it takes away some of my constituting power with respect to her. There is something of the other which persistently escapes me for even though I know the other as another self, I only know the other from a third-person perspective. If I see a woman sitting in a café with a book in front of her, I will most likely assume that she is reading, while in fact it may well be the case that her mind has drifted far away taking her awareness from the book. Although I can read the expressions on her face, the privacy of her mind is never fully revealed to me.

Even in cases when what the other is thinking or feeling seems to be given to me without any ambiguity, she still transcends me and there is something of her that eludes my grasp.



At any point when I think that I have a firm grip of the other, her own expression of herself has the power of breaking free from that grip and overthrow all my conceptions of her. By being the source of her own expression and not reducible to her outer manifestations, the other continuously transcends any perspective I may take on her. She reveals herself to me as the limit of my perspective on the world and thus, in some respect, as the limit of my selfhood. If she tells me in one way or another, I can know what she is thinking but since I will never share her first-person perspective, I cannot think it. If the transcendence of the other in relation to me would be lost, the other would cease to exist. Our perspectives would merge resulting in the annihilation of both our perspectives and thus of us as singular beings in interrelation. This necessary transcendence of the other in relation to my perspective on her is captured well by the notion of expression as it embodies a movement of self-transcendence in which the new and creative expressions always transcend the soil of established expressions from which they stem.

While the undisputable otherness of the other reveals her to be the source of her own expression, the issue of taking seriously and remaining respectful to the other as other also brings to light a limit of the extent to which she is this very source. She, like me, is born into a symbolic framework of a larger social and cultural context. At the same time as her unique perspective from within her context transcends the way in which she is objectified by that context, there is also something external to her which surpasses her and to some extent takes over her thoughts and intentions, carrying these to their actualization. I am in a significant way expressed by for instance stories told about me and meanings inscribed on the my body; without this expression of myself which is imposed upon me from the outside, I would not be able to express myself. So, in one respect the other, as well as the self, is certainly at the source of her own expressions, but in another respect she is not and it is vital to recognize both these aspects. In fact, the whole idea of taking seriously the perspective of the other and recognizing her precisely as other may become nothing but a worthless chimera if both of these aspects are not given equal consideration. Although there is certainly a limit to the extent in which I can know the other in an objectifying way from a third-person perspective, the fact remains

that I can do exactly this and I do this without taking away her otherness. Recognizing sedimented meanings inscribed upon her by culture, society, and history is a way of recognizing her as other. Moreover, in order for me to be able to know her at all, I must know her also in her objective properties. The crux here is to avoid a complete objectification of her in which case she would lose her existence for me as another self and I would find myself faced once again with the “distinctively philosophical problem” of other minds.

The way my body is perceived, understood and assessed by others will undoubtedly have an impact on the way I experience and live my embodiment. Particular and generalized others have a hold on me and partly determine who I am. In addition to being expressive of my self, the lived body also expresses selfhood, and just as surely as the lived body is an expression of selfhood, is selfhood an expression of lived embodiment. In fact, the expressive body is not only the outside manifestation of my intentions, but also a site for the inscription of social and cultural norms and values which I incorporate into who I am. Before I have said anything, my body has already silently spoken by being the carrier of meaning which goes beyond any individual intention or creation, but which is at the same time transmitted through individual embodiment. I am born into meanings of my identity, which are not of my creation and which precede me by generations. To a large extent, these meanings are based on identifiable features of my bodily being. And, even though I might not completely identify with the meanings ascribed to my body by virtue of its sex, race, color, posture, age, size, etc., they are all the same part of who I am. I cannot deny that the identities and meanings given to me through the necessary situatedness of my existence are part of all that which make up my selfhood. Since I am not the creator of the meanings into which I am born, there is always an aspect of my own being which eludes me but which nevertheless is part of my being. When I am identified as a white, heterosexual, single woman in my mid-thirties I am in an important sense trapped in the signification of that identification in a specific spatial and temporal context, whether I am aware of it or not. Being aware of it can lead me to react against it and point out its insufficiency in describing who I am. However, regardless of my reaction, my necessary

situatedness implies a necessary condemnation to meanings which are imposed upon me from the outside and which play a major role in shaping who I am.

Instead of understanding intersubjective relations starting from the self to the other or from the other to the self, we must find a middle path which recognizes the constitutive force of both self and other in relation to one another. Expression I suggest is essentially something that happens in a communicative space in between self and other while at the same time giving rise to both. To elucidate this point further, let me turn to the example of seeing an expression of anger. When I see the expression of anger, for instance, I do not perceive the anger as separate from its expression, but, rather, the anger is embodied as a specific expression. Merleau-Ponty gives a clear and colorful example:

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 some otherworldly realm, in some shrine located beyond the body of the angry man [---] anger inhabits him and it blossoms on the surface of his pale or purple cheeks, his blood-shot eyes and wheezing voice...<sup>15</sup>

We have seen quotes similar to this one in other thinkers, perhaps most notably Scheler, Sartre, and Wittgenstein, who all make the same point, that subjectivity is not something hidden away underneath the surface of the body but is instead in important respects made openly present in gestures and comportment reaching out into the world. When I see the, in this case, angry gestures I do not perceive the anger as something separate from the gestures. The experience of anger does not seem to be separate from its expression but, rather, the anger is embodied as a specific gesture.

The recognition of the anger as directly and immediately present in its embodied expression is a recognition of subjectivity as fundamentally embodied and a rejection of any clear-cut mind-body dualism (which is a big underlying assumption for the problem of other minds). But can we really be content with saying that the anger is embodied, immediately present in gestures and behavior? Not quite. (Or rather, that depends on

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<sup>15</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p 83f/45f.

what we mean by embodied.) In the same breath as we recognize that subjectivity is fundamentally embodied, we must also recognize and bring to attention that this body is not cut off from the world. Being embodied is, all of us here know this well, to be embedded in the world and this has some consequences for how we understand the embodiment of expression. It is in the world that the expression of anger takes place and the way in which the world surrounds and supports it is part and parcel of the way in which it is expressed. This world is not an empty space, or limited to an objective instrumental level where we could only arrive at the existence of others as probable objects of knowledge. Instead it is a place where genuine experience of other people is possible and takes place.<sup>16</sup>

This world in which I dwell and comport myself in different ways is not only my world. In fact, in order for it to be my world at all and not only a prolongation of my body, it must be experienced as an intersubjective world. I necessarily experience the world as a shared world, inhabited by me and others, and available from different perspectives. The other comes into being as having a perspective on my world and dealing with my world in a way both foreign and familiar to me. As Renaud Barbaras puts it, “the world manifests itself to me as what is immediately accessible to others [and] involves the requirement that what is offered to me be offered equally to them”.<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that my meeting with the other adds a new dimension to my experience of the world, in so far as my private world is discovered as the dimension of a generalized life and my relation to myself as already infused with generality.<sup>18</sup> When my private world is revealed as having a general aspect and being open to others, the private world of the other is simultaneously revealed as taking part in that same generality and I am thereby granted access to the private world of the other as she is to mine. Merleau-Ponty writes, “it is the thing itself that opens unto me the access to the private world of another”<sup>19</sup> and I

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<sup>16</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p 15/22; “The Experience of Others”, p 35/540.

<sup>17</sup>) Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, p 22/42. Cf Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 136/189.

<sup>18</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 138/192.

<sup>19</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p 11/27.

“feel the close presence of others beneath a *veil of anonymity*” in all cultural objects.<sup>20</sup> In my meeting with the other, her world is accessible to me strictly from a third-person perspective. Although the other’s world is given to me as a dimension of our shared world, it nevertheless, as it is *her* world, remains alien to me in important respects.

Here, for Merleau-Ponty, in the opening of my world to the other and her world to me, the lived body makes its presence known as it is the cultural object par excellence which “as the vehicle of a form of behaviour” brings all other cultural objects into existence and which makes it possible for me to undergo and react to the experience of the world and of others.<sup>21</sup> Through my embodiment and my relation to the world, which connects self and other, my actions can be taken up and understood by the other and I can likewise take up and understand the actions of the other. Through her expressions in the world, which I immediately recognize as overflowing with meaning, I identify the other as another self from whom I differentiate my own self. The identification with as well as the differentiation from the other must be based on a total, but incomplete, awareness of the body which can be transferred to the other. Merleau-Ponty writes,

[I]t is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a *miraculous prolongation of my own intentions*, a familiar way of dealing with the world.<sup>22</sup>

The other is thus also understood as being a conduct, a system of behavior and intentions that are aimed at the world. It is in the conduct of the other, “in the manner in which the other deals with the world” that I will discover her subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> Through her conduct the other offers herself to my motor intentions embodied in my conduct. This very process in which I find the other’s conduct and gestures as the objects of my motor intentions and transfer my intentions to her body and her intentions to my own is not in fact a condition of possibility for the perception of others. Rather, this transfer of the

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20) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p 348/400 (italics added); cf *The Prose of the World*, p 87/122f.

21) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p 348/400. Cf *The Visible and the Invisible*, p 135f/176; *The Prose of the World*, p 136/190.

22) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p 354/406 (italics in original). Cf *The Visible and the Invisible*, p 57/82f.

23) Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others”, p 117/298.

corporeal schema *is* the perception of others through which I come to “live in the facial expressions of the other” as I experience the other living in mine.<sup>24</sup>

The anger described above, embodied by purple cheeks, blood-shot eyes and a wheezing voice breaks forth and unfolds in the space between self and other. And, in the same way as I cannot locate the anger somewhere hidden underneath the expressive gestures of the other, it is also impossible for me to separate my own anger from its embodiment. My anger with someone may take a number of different forms, such as screaming or shouting with a trembling voice on the verge of tears, silent and controlled patience, short and sour remarks, or simply uncontrollable crying. Of course the reason why I am angry will partly determine how my anger actually comes to expression but this reason is intimately interrelated with how the anger is situated in a specific context and in relation to specific people. The anger is located in the space I share with others and how others respond to my anger will shape the way I emerge as a self expressive of anger as well as the way in which I choose to actively express this anger.<sup>25</sup> I discover myself as experiencing myself in a certain way in relation to others and to my situation in the world, and I constantly negotiate who I am and become who I am in these relations. The other stands before me as another self who either offers herself to me in dialogue and interaction, thereby furthering my self-becoming, or imposes herself upon me as a threat, forcing my becoming in directions unwelcoming to me and thereby hindering its flourishing.

By locating the expression of anger, in this case, in a shared space between self and other, Merleau-Ponty first of all does away with the idea that the anger is some neatly boxed up thing directly accessible only to one person. He also emphasizes that self and other are not only, each in their own right, expressive of selfhood, but are also expressed by one another and emerge in relation to one another. Further, he points to a fundamental reciprocity between self and other which should not be taken to imply symmetry. Being embedded in the same expressive space, both self and other share the anger which

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24) Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others”, p 146/303. In “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, p 159/201, Merleau-Ponty writes, “I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts. This is no failure to perceive others; *it is the perception of others*” (italics added).

25) Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p 84/46.

saturates this space. We both delineate our identities in relation to one another informed by the anger between and around us. What we do not share, however, is the perspective from which this anger is embodied. In spite of the reciprocity between us there is thus a basic asymmetry in the way we have access to and experience the anger. This asymmetry accounts for the qualitative difference between on the one hand feeling the anger from a first-person perspective as it floods through every aspect of my embodiment, and on the other hand experiencing the anger from a third-person perspective as it takes hold of and reaches out from the embodiment of the other. I experience the anger between us both in my own embodiment of it, whether I feel it as my anger or as anger stemming from the other, as well as in the other's embodied expressions, whether I experience these as responsive to my own felt anger or as a display of the other's anger calling on me to respond. What I do not and cannot experience is the anger as experienced by the other for I cannot embody her perspective nor give up my own. The reciprocity of our relation lies in the fact that we both have immediate access to the expression of anger while the asymmetry is due to our embodiment of separate perspectives. (And this asymmetry between self and other is also why I experience the other precisely as another subjectivity, foreign to my own.)

What we see here is thus that the mental states, such as that of anger in this case, transcend their expressive behavior, is precisely a way of pointing to this singularity of perspective upon which the experience of anger rests. It is not a way of resorting to the idea of mental states as something accessible only to one person and without a shred of ambiguity to that person. Rather, the transcendence of mental states in relation to their expression articulates the transcendence of the other in relation to all possible views which can be taken upon her. *Her* experience from *her singular* and irreducible first-person perspective transcends the way the anger is expressed in her embodiment simply by adding an aspect to the expression which continuously escapes my grasp and my perspective. There is also a way in which the anger transcends both self and other by being situated in and overflowing the space surrounding and grounding our respective perspectives. The anger unfolds between self and other and is experienced in qualitatively different ways by each of us. In so far as our respective perspectives limit the way in

which we experience the anger, they are transcended by any other perspective as well as by the shared space in which the anger unfolds and which constitutes the horizon for each singular perspective and experience of anger. Finally, and in a related way, my experience of anger from a first-person perspective not only transcends its expression but is in turn transcended by its expressive behavior. Regardless of how my experience of anger is expressed in my embodiment, my expressions carry meaning beyond my own experience. My purple cheeks, blood-shot eyes and wheezing voice are given to others as meaningful in themselves and although my experience of anger is directly present in these expressions, they are also soaked with historical, cultural and symbolic significance of which I am not the source. In this respect, my first-person perspective is transcended by a larger framework of which it is part.

But it is also transcended by the singular first-person perspective taken on me by the other. The other appears to the self as the perspective which limits my own perspective and bestows upon me an outside, overflowing with meaning of which I am neither creator nor master. Merleau-Ponty puts this point nicely in *The Prose of the World* where he writes,

The looks with which I scan the world, like a blind man tapping objects with his cane, are seized by someone at the other end and sent back to touch me in turn. It is no longer enough for me to feel: I feel that someone feels me, that he feels both my feeling and my feeling the very fact that he feels me...<sup>26</sup>

Here, the other is portrayed as having a strong hold on the self and the quote makes it clear that the other does seem to hold a secret to my being which I can never know, namely that of her irreducible perspective on me. On the one hand, the other stands before me as a strong presence calling forth my own being, on the other hand, the other is brought to being in her encounter with me. That there is a necessary and mutual implication of self and other is quite clear.

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<sup>26</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 134f/186f.



My first-person perspective is in a sense a necessary blind spot for me out of which my perception and experience of the world emerges. The same is true of the other who like myself embodies a perspective on the world. As my blind spot, my own perspective escapes me whichever way I turn and it constitutes a moment of ungraspable otherness within my identity. Also the perspective of the other ultimately escapes my grasp since it is something which I can never inhabit, regardless of how well I can thematize it and objectify it from the outside. However, in my experience of the other, there is what we might call a double blindness. On the one hand I remain blind to my own perspective. On the other hand, there is a blindness of the other's perspective which I can see but never reach, and which in turn is a perspective encircling my perspective and duplicating my blindness. I can know that the other has a perspective on the world and on me, but my only possibility of assuming that perspective would be to become the other in which case either my own perspective would no longer be mine, but, rather, become other to me, or I would embody multiple perspectives and eventually do away with any boundary between myself and the world and thereby also with the very possibility of having any perspective at all. In this sense, the other is truly the limit of my perspective. The double blindness present in my experience of the other is at the same time exactly what makes the relation between self and other as well as our perception and experience of each other possible. To experience others is to experience them as inhabiting a first-person perspective which is not mine and to which I can never have access. It is to experience a presence which carries its own absence on its sleeve and which continuously escapes my grasp.

So, the other escapes me in an important way and that is in part what makes her other. But we must still ask how other the other can really be? We know that embodied self-experience involves the experience of being accessible to others precisely as embodied. Before the other I am both the one holding a perspective on her which escapes her grasp and a recognizable object in the world, infused with subjectivity which seeps through my objective aspects but which nevertheless remains in important respects something of a hidden secret. The same is true for my perception and experience of the other. She is both someone who holds a perspective on my perspective and escapes my grasp and someone

who is recognizable to me through her objective features. I never simply see subjectivity, whatever that might mean, I see embodied subjectivity in the world.

Emphasizing the importance of recognizing both similarities and differences in the perception of others, Merleau-Ponty writes,

my perception of the other is at first sight perception of the gestures and behavior belonging to 'the human species.' But [---] if the other person is really another, at a certain stage I must be surprised, disoriented. If we are to meet not just through what we have in common but in what is different between us – which presupposes a transformation of myself and of the other as well – then our differences can no longer be opaque qualities. They must become meaning. In the perception of the other, this happens when the other organism, instead of 'behaving' like me, engages with the things in my world in a style that is at first mysterious to me but which at least seems to me a coherent style because it responds to certain possibilities which fringed the things in my world.<sup>27</sup>

What is brought to light in this rather long quote is first of all the necessity of recognizing the other as radically other in order for genuine interrelation between self and other to be possible. In my encounter with and experience of the other, I must allow for her alterity to introduce an element of disorientation and perplexity which transcends me and in some sense throws me off guard. Our relations to others must be characterized by our differences as well as by our commonalities in order for both to be apprehended and allowed to influence and shape our interrelation in a fruitful way. A recognition of both differences and commonalities is necessary for there to be genuine concern for the other. Too much of an emphasis of the other's radical difference from me might rather result in a complete lack of understanding and *indifference* toward the other instead of a recognition of her otherness. On the other hand, overemphasizing the likeness between the self and the other might in the end leave no room for otherness at all and consequently lead to intolerance. (It is interesting to note here that an exaggerated recognition of and respect for individual and cultural differences in society motivated by

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<sup>27</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 142/198.

an ideal of open-mindedness might in fact lead to a lack of concern and interest for the other, and to a blindness of the other precisely as other. There is only a very fine line between unconditional acceptance and complete indifference.)

Further, as we have already said, the perception of others is brought out as taking place in a world which on the one hand has the quality of being my private world but which on the other hand also accommodates and is shared with the other. It is in this shared world that the differences between myself and the other become meaningful as we both interact with the world and take up the possibilities it offers in our own unique ways, each responding to the other. The way in which the other behaves and interrelates with the world may be utterly mysterious to me but the world provides me with a generality and ground in which I can situate and come to understand her mysterious manner of behavior by relating it to my own familiar comportment. The world provides a common point of support and basis for understanding and agreement as well as for misunderstanding and disagreement.

Another thing that is brought out with clarity in the quote above is that the relation between self and other is an ongoing process of alteration. My encounter and interaction with the other as someone who is different from myself presupposes, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “a transformation of myself and the other as well”.<sup>28</sup> The force by which the other draws me toward meaning and toward herself is equally a force which draws me out of myself and back again. It is paralleled by and in dialogue with an active force by which I draw the other out of herself and toward me. We are each exposed to one another, each vulnerable to the other, each soliciting the awareness and attention of the other as that off of which we feed for our sense of self and identity. Merleau-Ponty is careful to point out, directing a sharp remark toward Sartre, that this interplay between activity and passivity does not entail “that I am *fixed* by the other, that he is the *X* by whom I am *seen*, frozen” in my passivity.<sup>29</sup> Rather, my passivity is equally an activity and as the other draws me

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<sup>28</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 142/198.

<sup>29</sup>) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 19f, note 7/29, note 1 (italics in original). Much later in the text Merleau-Ponty writes, “Before myself as speech and the other as speech, or more generally myself as

out of myself toward her, I am already reaching out, extended into the world through my embodiment. Instead of being passively frozen by the other's activity, I am actively meeting her, taking up and responding to her expressions, attempting to understand her and letting myself be understood by her, drawing her toward me as she draws me toward her. This movement between self and other in which I come "to understand situations other than my own and to create a path between my life and the lives of others" is, for Merleau-Ponty, through and through a movement of expression.<sup>30</sup> As I express myself before the other I at the same time express her and am expressed by her. Others, writes Merleau-Ponty, "are not the sole judges of what I do" and denying myself for the benefit of the other would equally be a denial of her selfhood and of her as other to me in any radical sense of the word. At each moment of expression, self and other are as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "linked without concession on either side".<sup>31</sup> Neither self nor other lose themselves without also gaining and becoming themselves in the face of the other. Although the spiraling structure of expression embodies a necessary moment of alteration, there is in the moment of expression no alteration of self simply for the benefit of the other. Alteration of the self is in equal measure alteration of the other and simply accounts for the mutual becoming of both in a process of selving and othering. As I interact with others through speaking and listening, I allow myself "to be pulled down and rebuilt again by the other" who in turn is pulled down and rebuilt again by me.<sup>32</sup>

This perpetual becoming of selfhood in the expressive movement of selving and othering takes the form of a continuous response to the other with whom I am in dialogue and who, by the same token, responds to me. I live my selfhood as an ongoing response to what I am conceptualized as being, either by myself or by others and this is a position from which I can never rest for my refusal, or even inability, to respond is a response in itself. We resist being determined by others and are driven to expression by the urge "to explain things we have said that have not been properly understood [and] to reveal what

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expression and the other as expression, there is no longer that alternation which makes a rivalry of the relation between minds" (p 143/199f).

30) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 86/122.

31) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 85/120.

32) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 19f/29f; cf 135/188.

is hidden within us”.<sup>33</sup> By taking a perspective on us, others bring to light our limits and by contesting what we say about them, point to the limits of our own perspectives. I see myself limited by the other and, yet, I nevertheless need the other to give birth to me through dialogue and interaction.<sup>34</sup> I need the other to strengthen and validate as well as doubt and contest my experience of the world and of myself. I need the perspective of others in order to contextualize and make meaningful that of my own. In speaking and listening to the other, my understanding of her settles in the gaps and fissures of my own speech. According to Merleau-Ponty, “my speech is intersected laterally by the other’s speech” and as she speaks in me, I simultaneously hear myself in her.<sup>35</sup> My experience of the other is, as Merleau-Ponty writes, truly that of a replica of myself [and] a response to myself”, in so far as she provides me with another perspective on my world and reality.<sup>36</sup> The other gives me a perspective on my world which matches my own perspective but which will always remain foreign to me. It holds out a promise which provides reassurance but which will never be fulfilled. It responds to me as an echo of my own voice, giving back to me what I offered in partial and altered form, adding to it her own tone and style.

The expressive space between self and other is the foundation for our similarities and the place where I experience the other as a replica and mirror image of myself. However, as we know, it is also the space in which our differences are brought forth and it becomes clear that I can neither know the other in the same way as I can know myself nor myself in the same way as the other knows me. There is thus a clear duality at the very heart of the relation between self and other and the issue at stake in understanding intersubjectivity is how to preserve the uniqueness of the other while at the same time bridging the gap between self and other. This is a task set before us not only in theorizing the issue of the relation between self and other but also in our actual living of that relation. We are, Merleau-Ponty argues, “continually obliged to work on our differences [---] and to perceive other people” precisely as other. The meeting of minds does not take

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33) Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p 87f/50.

34) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 135/188.

35) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 142/197.

36) Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p 135/188.

place in a realm of reason but in the world where minds are embodied and made present in their expressions, in their gestures and speech. Other people are immediately present to us as indubitably as we are ourselves and yet they escape us at each moment of their immediate presence. They haunt us and we are, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “no more able to reach them definitively than we are to give up on them”.<sup>37</sup> In our dialogue with others, we are drawn into an endless project of attempting to reach them, to learn about them and come to understand them. This project is at the same time one of self-understanding and the desire that draws us toward the other is equally a desire to express oneself and to be understood, as it is a desire for the other. Desire is the longing of life for itself, a life that is self-relational, reaching out from itself in order to become itself.<sup>38</sup> I am always reaching beyond myself and in that reaching I am *already* always beyond myself. My existence is characterized by a movement of transcendence which is never completely pre-patterned, but follows the flux of existence and thus shapes and projects being in a continuous dialectical process with the other.

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37) Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p 87f/50.

38) Merleau-Ponty writes that it is “the drive of speaking subjects who wish to be understood” that “sustains the invention of a new system of expression [by taking] over as a new mode of speaking the debris produced by another mode of expression”. See *The Prose of the World*, p 35/50.