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Erickson L. Totanes

Mindanao State University, erickson.totanes@msugensan.edu.ph

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Perception as Beholding: Theological Possibility and Moral Implication of Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Embodied Subject

ERICKSON L. TOTANES

MINDANAO STATE UNIVERSITY – GENERAL SANTOS CITY

Abstract

In this article, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's concept of perception reveals a way of seeing where the subject is involved with the object in a dynamic, reversible, and expanding relationship. This notion challenges the traditional and Cartesian subject-object dichotomy by emphasizing the embodied and lived experience of perception which elicits a process, a way of looking, anticipating, and reflexively, a way of being itself. By aligning seeing with beholding, I attempt to show how as simple an act as seeing evokes a manner of being related to an object, other people, and the world. The emergence of knowledge, of reality and viability of moral questions is neither the exclusive initiative of the senses or of the mind in the inside, nor of the thing known from the outside, but of their inseparable and intertwining relationship

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opened by perception itself. By this mystery which draws capacities and elements unto itself, I also show how in the process of transposing the concept of perception into beholding, Merleau-Ponty implicitly does a theology.

Keywords: *Epistemology, Phenomenology, Body-Subject, Seeing, Beholding, Perception*

The task of doing a theological reflection that is grounded in philosophy can be daunting if not dangerous lest it misappropriates what is said by the philosopher in question. Douglas Low cautioned against this very danger in pointing out how Maurice Merleau-Ponty denied stating anywhere in the body of his work any intent to align his philosophy with theology. With the direct references he provided, Low seems to have nailed a point that could set the boundary between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and theology.¹ But both disciplines are involved when one reflects on the world which they serve; hence, any attempt to provide an interrogation of the same object from philosophical, theological, and other lenses, should not only be possible but also be a necessary consequence of their participation in the "common truth."² Such is the background of my attempt to show how Merleau-Ponty implicitly does a theology by transposing the concept of perception, so central in Merleau-Ponty, into beholding.

¹ Cf. Douglas Low, "Merleau-Ponty, Theology and GOD," *Journal of Philosophical Investigation* 16 (41): 348–349, <http://doi.org/10.22034/JPIUT.2022.52913.3338>.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," in *The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences*, trans. John Wild (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 45.

Early Attempts at Doing a Philosophy and Theology of Beholding

The earliest attempt to understand perception philosophically can be traced to the Greek philosopher Thales who observed that Miletus was surrounded by water. By this primitive means of understanding reality Thales concluded that the principle that underlies all things is water.³ To this day, the history of philosophy recognizes that the answer Thales gave is not as important as the question he posed: Can there be one among the many, and many as there is one? In his reflection on “Filipino Postmodernity: Quo Vadis?” Romualdo Abulad commented on this question and said, “he [Thales] might as well be the first of our kind to look intently at the things around us, ultimately declaring them to be other than what they seem.”⁴ Thales’ bold claim, other than putting the pursuit to rest, awakened others to engage in the same pursuit, refuting and providing another way of looking at and relating with the world.

The concept of beholding is popular in Christian literature, especially in the realm of spirituality and sacraments. But just like studies on beholding in the philosophical literature, extensive research on beholding has yet to flourish and form part of the theological literature. Christopher Ben Simpson’s appropriation, for example, of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas into theological discourse barely talks about beholding as an important category except for some quotations drawn from the writings of Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea,

³ Cf. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, *Greece and Rome* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 22.

⁴ Romualdo E. Abulad, “Filipino Postmodernity: Quo Vadis,” *Kritike* 13, no. 2 (December 2019): 38, https://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_25/abulad2-december2019.pdf.

and Irenaeus.⁵ Frederick Jelly's attempt to engage in a dialogue between a Thomist and Merleau-Ponty, while mentioning the concept of beholding concerning human nature, misread the element of metaphysics in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty⁶ since it was Merleau-Ponty who acknowledged Thomistic theology as *the* theology in the Catholic Church. Yet even while bringing the latter to the level of anthropology,⁷ he engaged the insights of other theological thinkers of years gone by like Augustine himself. He argued, "To say yes to Christianity as a fact of culture or civilization is to say yes to St. Thomas, but also St. Augustine and Occam and Nicholas of Cusa and Pascal and Malebranche."⁸ As such, this article aims to fill this lacuna in conceptualizing beholding using a theosophical method of interpretation. The co-mingling of these two disciplines, although unavoidable, is a heuristic way of describing two concepts to mean one thing, even though it can also be interpreted distinctly by each of these fields. For understanding, I am fusing the concepts of perception and beholding so that the development of the concept of

⁵ Cf. Christopher Ben Simpson, *Merleau-Ponty and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Pub., 2014), 104, 110, 118; see also Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (Athanasius on the Incarnation), trans. T. Herbert Bindley (Picadilly: Religious Tract Society), 12.3-4, 45.2; Basil, *The Treatise De Spiritu Sancto: The Nine Homilies of the Hexaemeron and the Letters of St. Basil the Great*, trans. Blomfield Jackson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol.8, (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1895), 1:11, 5.2, 5.9, 8.8.7; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), IV.20.7.

⁶ Cf. Frederick M. Jelly, "A Thomist Dialogues with Merleau-Ponty," *Dominicana* 52, no. 3 (1967): 250, dominicanajournal.org/wp-content/files/old-journalarchive/vol52/no3/dominicanav52n3thomistdialoguesmerleauponty.pdf.

⁷ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 76.

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 142.

perception, as Merleau-Ponty views it philosophically in terms of its epistemic and metaphysical bases, is carried out while at the same time transforming this concept into a theological claim through beholding. Although to my knowledge Merleau-Ponty never used beholding to refer to perception, the way he revisited the concept, which this article seeks to show, points not only to a radical shift from the tradition of empiricism and intellectualism but also the bringing together in a paradox the acts and the system, the tension of parts and whole, of perspective and totality, of immanence and transcendence, and of the visible and invisible so richly contained in his writings. These relations, while properly addressed in his phenomenology of perception, have a strong bearing on theological discourse.

I also take Merleau-Ponty's idea of beholding as a metaphor for perception and carry it to its theological intent such that its dynamic meaning is more elaborate and definite, but equally open. Supporting this project is an important claim that Gadamer made in his analysis of play as the clue to the ontological explanation of reality. He said, "The metaphorical usage has methodological priority. If a word is applied to a sphere to which it did not originally belong, the actual "original" meaning emerges quite clearly."⁹ In such a context Merleau-Ponty's radicalization of the notion of perception, when raised to the level of beholding, emancipates perception from its physiological and cognitive limitations and directs it toward the world where one attends, anticipates, and enters into an exchange. In both senses, perception and beholding are ways to describe the subject's relationship with the world that for Merleau-Ponty is already there. I predicate that this world is characterized by a kind of undivided existence that encapsulates every entity with the embodied subject as a presence to be reckoned.

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1999), 103.

Beholding as a Way of Seeing

What does it mean to perceive and to behold an object in this shared world? Why is it that in the realm of a totality, one is at once in both the visible and the invisible? The following section addresses these questions through a gradual appreciation of the notion of seeing, moving from the simple act of making something meet the eye, toward its complex structures and relations showing, as it were, that there is more that meets the eye.

What Does it Mean to See?

With our natural sense of sight, we appreciate in varying degrees all the other senses. Even those who were born blind would have longed for sight as well. Sight is one of God's gifts to nature, to human beings specifically. It is worth recognizing in the absence of sight as well as in its presence that kind of joy Bartimaeus experienced and the man born blind at Siloam.¹⁰ While it is true that one with vision becomes acquainted with things and enveloped by them, there is something more than merely seeing with one's eyes. This section examines a gradually growing appreciation of the human faculty and act of seeing as contained in Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception. Whereas there is this notion that faith is belief in the unseen God and all that is in the spiritual realm, Merleau-Ponty takes the reversal of this notion and points instead to that kind of belief in what is seen by way of what he refers to as "perceptual faith."¹¹ On this level of reflection, perception employs seeing for itself.¹² To put this in

¹⁰ Cf. Mark 10:46-52 and John 9:1-41 (NRSV).

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 3.

¹² Cf. Jennifer Church, "Seeing Reasons," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 80, no. 3 (2010): 638, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20722809>. Church

perspective, I limit my discussion to the following: first, seeing as seeing something; second, seeing as seeing with; and third, seeing as being seen or the notion of reversibility.

Seeing as Seeing Something

“To see is to believe” has been the mantra of one relying on empirically verifiable claims. It is the position of one wanting to make an ascent to a proposition about something or someone or someone’s claim. But this proposition has a problem: Why would one need to ascend from seeing to believing if in the first place, one already beholds a thing, a person, or a reality in one’s eyes? Another problem is that when one turns to the things seen, there are so many things that one does not see. Perception in this respect serves as a corrective measure to the claim “you get what you see” because, by the same token, there is no correspondence between the object of thought in the mind and the object perceived.

Following Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological standpoint, to see is to see something.¹³ This injunction insinuates that there is already a movement from the consciousness to a reality outside of it yet at the same time is a reality that transcends it within an inexhaustible horizon, which Merleau-Ponty called the “world of perception.”¹⁴ This activity of seeing, which is commonly attributed to the eye, is instrumental to another human basic desire, which is as Aristotle

in this article states that perception has different modalities like visual, auditory, and tactile, but the employment of the concept of perception is interchangeable with seeing. The writer takes a similar vein in approaching Merleau-Ponty’s concept to show the progressive and broader meaning of the act of seeing. That there has been more to it is the point of contention that one does not merely see but also behold.

¹³ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), xix, 6.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2004).

described, “to know.”¹⁵ Thus in the tradition of epistemology, seeing and knowing have been positioned alongside each other in a different order of priority. If one subscribes to empiricism or intellectualism, one can either take the function of the eye as a mere instrument for thought or to a more reductive position that relegates knowing as the sole responsibility of the mind, with the eye either disowned or considered deceptive to the clarity of judgment that the mind is capable of. In this sense, even the blind can see. Merleau-Ponty criticized this position citing that this judgment, which lets the mind turn critical, “encounters only bare propositions which it discusses, accepts or rejects,”¹⁶ because after clear inspection the position is empty of content. Merleau-Ponty argued that such position is “not aware of our contact with the perceived world which is simply there before us, beneath the level of the verified true and false. Nor does critical thought even define the positive steps of thinking or its most valid accomplishments.”¹⁷ This claim brings to focus what Merleau-Ponty introduced in his phenomenology, and that is to bring consciousness in the intellectualist sense to its point of contact with the world, albeit to ground thinking in it. There is some kind of “immediacy of perception”¹⁸ where the goal is precisely to restore it with an understanding that the mind, argued to be conscious and perceptive, is an “incarnated mind.”¹⁹ In bringing the same concepts employed

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Book 1*, trans. W. D. Ross, <https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.1.i.html>.

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work,” trans. Arleen B. Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 3.

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “Unpublished Text,” 3.

¹⁸ Jennifer Church, “Seeing Reasons,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 80, no. 3 (2010): 636, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20722809>.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “Unpublished Text,” 3.

by intellectualists and empiricists to a phenomenological standpoint, Merleau-Ponty radicalized the act of seeing as a mode in which one enters the world of the visible and invisible. The visible does not represent the invisible, but brings it into existence by way of this mode that is also already bathed with invisibility.

Merleau-Ponty attempted “to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and its world, going against doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness.”²⁰ The latter is an attack on intellectualism especially of the Cartesian kind that espoused pure consciousness, while the former is against the empiricists’ view which treated perception as though it were an expression of “an absolute belief in the world as the totality of spatio-temporal events”²¹ but eventually “cut off”²² from it in favor of a constituting consciousness. One of the translators of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith, stated that “empiricism is perceptual impotence . . . intellectualism is perceptual omnipotence,”²³ either of which for Merleau-Ponty is one’s prejudice of the world.²⁴ Looking closely, the empirical view that Locke and Hume advanced camouflages the attempt of intellectualism to provide a valid representation of reality in the world of ideas in the human mind. Accordingly, these ways of looking need to be overcome if one wishes to “look at the world through eyes unblinkered.”²⁵ Merleau-Ponty argued that it is not in thought that one unpacks the modality of objects

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, “Unpublished Text,” 3–4.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 46.

²² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 47.

²³ Colin Smith, “The Notion of Object in the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty,” *Philosophy* 39, no. 148 (1964): 110, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3748712>.

²⁴ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 62.

²⁵ A. R. Manser, “Phenomenology of Perception by Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” trans. Colin Smith, *Analytic Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (1963): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0149.1963.tb00795.x>.

outside of oneself because as one turns to perception itself, there is no direct correspondence of ideas in the mind to the totality of an object in question. It is rather given, he said, “as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which is it given exhaustively.”²⁶ He rejected the common-sense view that the knowing subject–object relation is a “collection of lived-through correspondences”²⁷ since by referring to the world as perceived, objects are pregnant with their forms²⁸ where “each perspective is there only in order to prepare for others.”²⁹ Is this statement contradictory? It would be so to someone who swings toward either of these two epistemic traditions. But Merleau-Ponty provides a midway position by bringing the concept of the body into the discussion, taking it as a totality and a bearer of presences and symbolic behavior that is neither a mere extension of the mind nor a passive recipient of “external causes”³⁰ but one’s definitive way of being-in-the-world. A. R. Manser rejoined Merleau-Ponty in this reflection when he said that the body is “the point of my insertion in the world and also the manner in which I am in the world.”³¹ Without qualms, Merleau-Ponty went as far as to say that each human being is his “own body-world, and which breathes into it a secret and magical life by exerting here and there forces of distortion, contraction and

²⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences,” in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 15.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 236.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 12.

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Crisis of the Understanding,” trans. Nancy Metzel and John Flodstrom, in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 194.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man,” 44.

³¹ Manser, Review of *Phenomenology of Perception*, 19.

expansion.”³² As a system in itself, Merleau-Ponty disclosed his project of describing the activity of seeing by way of the eye’s relations to the body as a whole and of the eye with the other parts of the body.

By way of common procession, what sees is the body because the eye in fact is incarnated in the body. But by way of appropriation and particularization, it is equally valid to say that it is the eye that sees. The eye is responsible not just to the mind which processes it, but also to the movements of the body, like the hands and feet when it is positioned in a certain way. The positioning always considers a particular context where the body in its motility acts in a manner that each part functions differently yet is always bound to the whole in “inter-acting senses.”³³ However, the self through one’s body is not an enclosed system apart from the world because, as a body, one is in the world, and only in it does one see. Accordingly, the world is “the necessary condition of seeing,”³⁴ as it were, setting the limit and the possibility of the body itself.

Seeing as Seeing With

The second point that needs elucidation is that to see is to see with. This point affirms three things: first, there is one that sees; second, the object one sees is seen partially; and third, seeing is not the exclusive accomplishment of the seer. Beyond the eyes of the subject that sees is the reversal and installation of this human capacity on the side of the perceived. To see is not the absolute and exclusive position of the knower. There is something in the act itself that transcends the subject–object dichotomy. The very act of experiencing something, as George J. Marshal commented, is “to experience it as transcending our

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 56.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 262.

³⁴ George J. Marshal, *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 95.

perspective.”³⁵ Understanding this relation between part and whole as drawn from the Gestalt framework enables one to recognize the intricate connection of seeing within a given field where accordingly one enters into a simple dimension, and then to a second, and a third dimension, which bring the complexity of the object in question into the intricate web of relationship within which the very act of seeing is involved. There is, so to speak, the intertwining of vision and movement that is “caught in the fabric of the world.”³⁶ Since “the world is made of the same stuff as the body . . . the undividedness [*l’indivision*] of the sensing and the sensed”³⁷ is pronounced. Perception becomes a state of awareness of an environment. Inversely, in and through the body is the environment’s awareness of a conscious subject in the world. This is to say, to see is to be present in a very concrete situation in the world where the existence of the perceiver, the perceived object, and the visual field is warranted but not caused by any of those entities but instead correlated to each by that same situation in the same world.³⁸ Taken together the perceiver, object perceived, and visual field elevate perception as the “original modality of consciousness,”³⁹ which is at the same time the existential mode of being with others in the world. One can only see because in the first place, one is involved in and part of the world. To decenter seeing from the self is to decolonize the self from one’s manner of seeing that is unique to oneself and excludes others. That which is natural to the subject has become cultural and this necessitates him to enter into

³⁵ Marshal, *Guide*, 70.

³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 163.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 163.

³⁸ This point is developed further in the dissertation which I am currently working on.

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 13.

intersubjective engagement since every object in question is never possessed by the subject but is intertwined with the subject by virtue of a co-inherence in the world among a subject, things, and other people.

Although to see does mean to see something, it is to point as well to these various levels of relationships where the eyes through one's body are involved in an extricable tangle. Before the act of seeing, there is a complex relationship between the subject and the object that is already in existence, and beyond themselves are the greater and extended wholes.⁴⁰ While critiquing Kant, Merleau-Ponty argued: "We can only think the world because we have already experienced it; it is through this experience that we have the idea of being, and it is through this experience that the words 'rational' and 'real' receive a meaning simultaneously."⁴¹ In his major work *Phenomenology of Perception*, he affirmed this "network of relationships"⁴² that one must first describe before making sense of any knowledge claim. Amid the mind's capacity for cognizing, thinking, doubting, or perceiving, is this kind of filiation that serves as a structure within which a subject moves as a living being.⁴³

For Merleau-Ponty "the problem, therefore, is to understand these strange relationships which are woven between the parts of the landscape, or between it and me as an incarnate subject, and through which an object perceived can concentrate in itself a whole scene or

⁴⁰ Lester Embree, "Merleau-Ponty's Examination of Gestalt Psychology," *Research in Phenomenology* 10 (1980): 92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24654310>.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 17.

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 530.

⁴³ See Acts of the Apostles 17:28 in which Paul while addressing the Athenians about God said, "In him we live and move and have our being." While this verse refers to Paul's definitive response to the inscription "To the unknown God" of Athenians, Merleau-Ponty places "what God means to human beings in the movement of history" already marked as it were by a network of relationships. See also Low, "Merleau-Ponty, Theology and GOD," 348.

become the *imago* of a whole segment of life.”⁴⁴ In this statement Merleau-Ponty claimed that the subject as an observer is connected with the world he observes and that the knower is inseparable from his body, which serves as his “point of view”⁴⁵ in the world. This peculiar relationship is already given, but not in the sense that the world is fully transparent. In this situation one enters “a scene that is visible already, as though bathed immemorially by an anonymous and general look.”⁴⁶ As Lingis commented, “there is an original intercorporeality, a “looking in general,” which precedes and makes possible every moment of vision”⁴⁷ that forms in a subject, yet that focuses and sees beyond the subject. In a poetic line, Merleau-Ponty captured this idea:

There is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible, lighting the fire that will not stop burning until some accident of the body will undo what no accident would have sufficed to do.⁴⁸

Seeing in this sense requires recognizing other presences that enable a person to really see a particular thing. The visual field, as Merleau-Ponty termed it, comprises some form of organization or structure that is co-habited thus making perception possible. To see is therefore not reducible to the seer himself since in the preceding

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 61.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, “Unpublished Text,” 5.

⁴⁶ Alphonso Lingis, *Phenomenological Explanations* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers), 91, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-010-9610-2>.

⁴⁷ Lingis, *Phenomenological Explanations*, 91.

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 163–164.

analysis, seeing makes sense because the seer is in a space he occupies and that space is also already occupied by already existing things beyond the object seen in the visual field. These things accompany perceivers as they engage in a particular thing and allow them to move farther to see the object more clearly and even move away and lose sight of it. In either case, seeing is seeing with. Like in the act of communicating with others, the seer becomes more of a listener even if it seems the speakership is always at his command while the listener becomes as well the speaker even while taking the position of a listener. Speaking in silence in this respect should therefore make sense. So just as one cannot speak to *nothing* but always about *something* and with *someone*, seeing is by nature a co-mingling of things seen and unseen.

Seeing and the Notion of Reversibility

There is a “system of exchanges”⁴⁹ that enables what is seemingly frozen by a look as actually vibrant and capable of looking as well. It is like “an integrated system of mutual constraint”⁵⁰ in the analysis of Braund on Gibson’s concept of perception where there is some kind of internal equivalence of the world in the body, a reciprocity which Merleau-Ponty succinctly put it as one’s gaze rendered outside: “it is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I see it.”⁵¹ This statement expresses an attitude of an incarnated mind, a spirituality of the lover, and a kind of attentiveness that does not hold captive an object of the gaze but is captivated by it, which lets the object and others be themselves while acknowledging that before the judgment of the mind is the primordial presence of subjects and

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 164.

⁵⁰ Michael James Braund, “The Structure of Perception: An Ecological Perspective,” *Kritike* 2, no. 1 (June 2008): 124, accessed December 16, 2022, https://kritike.org/journal/issue_3/braund_june2008.pdf.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 164.

objects in the perceptible world. There is “a system of meanings”⁵² that is not solely the accomplishment of a thinking subject but also of the phenomenal world where things and other people inevitably co-exist. Objects and other inanimate things in the world also see, but they do so only with a subject there present. The subject as part of these things serves as their eye in the world.

In his article “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty already invokes an ontological reading of perception with his concept of reversibility. In a spiral movement that starts from a point, the subject goes outside of itself and once again sets another point of reference as it returns. The moment a subject casts his eyes outside, the casting mirrors back in a way that the taking of a role simultaneously necessitates a taking of another. This mode in the change of roles happens within one’s relations to one’s body and the relation of one’s body to the world as well. Merleau-Ponty described this reversibility of mode as enigmatic: “My body simultaneously sees and is seen.”⁵³ Merleau-Ponty used art to drive home his point. In his analysis of a painting on many levels, such a work of art is the creation not purely of thought but also of the body that lends itself to the world. On the first level, the action of the painter freezes the world into a painting. When it becomes a completed work of art, the painting becomes a sensible symbol that communicates to the painter, a world. For it to carry meaning, a work of art has to take in as a full package both matter and form, which in turn give it a credence to communicate meaning to the beholder. This notion of reversibility underscores that meaning does not originate from a subject capable of constituting the world upon looking at it, but “arises from the encounter between an intentionally directed body

⁵² Alex Scott, *Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception*, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/merlauponty.html>.

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 162.

and the horizon of the lifeworld.”⁵⁴ On the second level the art work, through what it carries, looks at the seer. There is a “doubling-up”⁵⁵ both within the subject through his body, and the body with things. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, “they are the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside,”⁵⁶ in an interchanging mode of presence that at times one can no longer recognize who sees and what is seen, who speaks and who listens. In speaking of the painter and his art, Merleau-Ponty said, “The roles between him and the visible are reversed.”⁵⁷ In an earlier discussion, Merleau-Ponty described this relation of the body to itself: “It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself.”⁵⁸ This statement affirms an element of the body that is recognized as an object like other things in the world, but the recognition is not dependent on other things but on itself, a body-subject in the world. Why is this affirmation an important contribution to Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception? The reversibility of seeing annuls the supremacy of the mind to create a world of meaning, albeit to construct a reality to the disavowal of an existing world. It also rehabilitates the tendency to reduce what can be known as mere sensation since as one turns to perception itself as a ‘clarificatory system,’ the body becomes an active agent synergizing its experience in the world. Merleau-Ponty expounded that in these exchanges between generalized and individual existence, one receives and gives something.⁵⁹ These two moments announce an interlocking

⁵⁴ Jeanette Hicks, “When the Trees Look Back: Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Art” (master’s thesis, University of Guelph, 2013), 2.

⁵⁵ Christopher Ben Simpson, *Merleau-Ponty and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 42.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 164.

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 167.

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 162.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 522.

relation of spontaneity to receptivity, of activity to passivity⁶⁰ that neither reduces one to the other nor diminishes distinctive personalities of those in the visual field, but are interdependent on one another. What enables the reversal of roles, which is at each moment paradoxical, is this body that Merleau-Ponty considered as always on the side of a subject and one's point of view on the world.

The physical and historical situation of the body does not limit the body to a mere object in the world. As a conscious being, the body expresses itself to the world, while the world through the body expresses itself to the conscious self. As it were, the body becomes the consciousness of the world in so far as this body is the lived body "wholly animated"⁶¹ to function in the perception of an object, which makes the same object clothed with the being of the body with all its capacities, thus making the reversal of functions possible. To grasp and to behold are two modes of the same subject directed toward a world that is already innate and pregnant with meaning. This position reversed and radicalized the Platonic and Hegelian concepts of ideas. Reality is neither the ideal world of forms nor the absolute spirit. Rather, the ideal is the real where both the subject and object are in a "crisscrossing"⁶² relationship. This 'subject seeing an object' can be transposed into 'an object seeing a subject,' and since there is an intertwining of vision and movement, vision and the visible, reversibility comes and goes, appears and disappears, it becomes as lively as the present then eventually eclipses to prepare for something new. Is this a return to the Humean claim on the nature of

⁶⁰ Françoise Dastur and Robert Vallier, "Temporality and Existence (Merleau-Ponty between Husserl and Heidegger)," in *Questions of Phenomenology: Language, Alterity, Temporality, Finitude* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1xhr5sw.13>.

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, "Unpublished Text," 5.

⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort and trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 147.

impressions? It is, and there is nothing new with what Merleau-Ponty posited if he accepted through and through Hume's skepticism, but for him there is something real, only that it is always imminent and never realized in fact.⁶³ This enigma concerning the reversibility of seeing captures this idea of an ongoing exchange in the unfinished task revealed by perception.

There is no need to possess even at the level of critical thought the meaning that is already there. This ongoing exchange is also an invitation to hand to others for their assessment what is discovered in the present, to give up what has been discovered, and to receive anew what can be presented. Life is a continuous development of the unfolding of the real. Although each moment can seal the experience, it can at the same time be an opening to something new. The Humean impression in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception has been overcome, and there is no need to fear the seeming discontinuity of experience either from the vantage point of the perceiver or of the object's disclosure of itself, since it is open yet inexhaustible. There is another mode proper to perception that transcends itself. While allowing, in such a mode, the subject to stand still and hold in high esteem what he sees, what is there serves as an epiphany to something more, that is, it captivates not only the eye but the whole subject as well. This does not mean full transparency of self to self. In my analysis, there is a hidden dimension in perception that will be revealed only with a metaphysical eye. This eye which is at the same time existential and concrete is called the beholding eye. This eye enables the subject to put together the seen and the unseen, and what is contained in each: their relations and contradictions, their positions and dispositions, their being integrated within a whole, their convergence and divergence of its polarities, and beyond what is already lived and known.

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 133.

Prolegomena to Beholding as Transcendent Seeing

While transposing perception and repositioning it on the side of beholding as a form of transcendent seeing, I intend to demonstrate the metaphysical and ontological foundation of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception. By repositioning of perception I mean that to look or see is not only to grasp but also allow what is presented (i.e., seen) to be received. In this section, I argue that when perception is transposed to beholding, beholding places back the whole integrity of the one that is seen, and in the process recaptures the integrity of the subject as well. I present, first, why beholding is more than seeing; second, how beholding is a mystery in and through the body; third, the question of God and the ontology of perception, and finally, a concluding note to the analysis that serves as a preliminary discussion to the theological content of the article.

Why is Beholding More Than Seeing?

Beholding is much more than seeing, because it includes seeing, is realized in being, and advanced as the proper mode of relating with the world and others. These aspects of beholding facilitate a form of exchange that precedes knowing since beholding deals with some kind of spirituality within a way of life that is properly collective and embedded in the structure of the perceptible world. In dissecting its meaning from an epistemic lens and bringing it into the realm of metaphysics, I take the Hegelian doctrine of the absolute spirit not only as the culmination of history but a standpoint of history where beholding as a transcendent seeing is located across the trends of life, not above it but “as a life which is its responsibility and which tries to understand itself.”⁶⁴ This absolute spirit which contains in itself the life of communion is an experience of an undivided being, that at each

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 65.

moment can be ordinary, always new but always real. This encounter with the real is not the diffusion and banishment of the individual into the realm of the spirit's power but an enormous beginning⁶⁵ brought to the very end, so much so that from seeing to relating there is something real.

One's embodied subjectivity is not sacrificed in the directedness of the subject toward communion. Instead, it is sustained by a presence greater than oneself. The endurance of embodied existence is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that the body is on the side of the subject that from the very beginning is primordial to thought. This concept of body-subject interlocks with this concept of beholding where the act moves from the 'I' to the other, and with others to an encroachment of space without imposing on the other to surrender, but evoking instead a shared body within a shared situation. In some points, this means a return to the past where the future is made, to create a present that is not imprisoned by that past, but precisely as a present, is a re-creative force for one to see more clearly what is real.

When beholding itself is regarded as the foundational principle, experience offers more than just a tool for thought. Experience, as it can be portrayed, leads to experience⁶⁶ in the phenomenal field. In other words, for Merleau-Ponty, there are modes of existence that take primacy over a noble desire to know. Philosophy in this sense is not purely conceptual building but also experiential building. Every concept, while valid, must always refer back to experience that transcends it. Words as expressions of thoughts are not exclusively

⁶⁵ This notion is premised on the writer's belief in eternity as an eternal present. There is no more coming to past, no more unknown future, but dwelling and indwelling before and in the presence of the eternal presence of the real.

⁶⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 351.

possessed by a detached intellect, but rather by the subject, who, through the body, becomes present to an object. Words, therefore, transformed into meaning are not solely the property of the knowing subject, but also of the world, of which the subject is an embodied part. Concepts alone without perception are empty, according to Kant. What a subject says about an object, which could involve affirming or negating a quality, forms part of the ongoing disclosure of an object that is already present in the world.

The subject is neither alone in the world nor stands above it. To enter a world is to enter into a peopled world. In the mode of beholding, a subject can recognize the other as a totality and is neither reducible into parts, however beautiful, nor into their qualities, however admirable. Beholding goes beyond the awareness of beauty on the part of the beholder to an experience that while deeply personal, highly esteems “the undivided being”⁶⁷ that exists with others. Merleau-Ponty affirmed that once the subject looks beyond himself, “vision is already inhabited by meaning (*sens*) which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world . . . of our existence”⁶⁸ and coexistence. When the beholder looks at the world, the world is a meaningful whole. This is not to say that one fully comprehends a reality that is by nature inexhaustible. It means something is real and therefore objectivity is true, but objectivity is not fully realizable in one single moment. Merleau-Ponty explained, “Human existence can never abstract from itself to gain access to the naked truth; it merely can progress towards the objective and does not possess objectivity in fully-fledged form.”⁶⁹ The notion of recapitulation that interfaces with the finality of all temporal events enables a person to frame reality

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 17.

⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 60.

⁶⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 108.

with a teleological vision but arrest it in the present moment as though it is the only thing that is real and true. Beholding is living the present moment as a way of anticipating something more. It is holding the best of both worlds while rooting oneself in being. To life's questions, answers are not always clear and some conclusions already made are not always final.⁷⁰ Hence, this, too, ought to be considered.

This is why, beholding currently takes the mode of a loving gaze that allows a thing and others to be themselves. There is “proximity and distance”⁷¹ as one upholds the otherness of a thing or other-selves. Concerning others, the self exalts the body, either one's own or that of others, not as a god or an idol but as a presence that evokes a response. Here one may raise the ethical question of whether ‘the beheld body’ becomes an object of pleasure for the beholder. Reflexively, it is a question of whether the beholder, who now as ‘the beheld,’ can become an object of pleasure for the other as well. It can happen that the relationship can swing into this co-objectifying tendency since in the perceptual field there is this intersection of looks in which boundaries overlap. This overlap, referring to Intersubjectivity, he described saying, “from the depths of my subjectivity, I see another subjectivity invested with equal rights appear because the behavior of others takes place within my perceptual field.”⁷² It is crucial that because of this encroachment, the presence of the other can become an object of one's gaze, something Merleau-Ponty asserted as a reply to Sartre's injunction, “hell is other people.”⁷³ Before intentions are revealed by the body, the body, according to Merleau-Ponty, binds with a subject that is from the very beginning a unity, that when

⁷⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 50.

⁷¹ Christian Joseph C. Jocson and Marvien Einstein S. Mejaro, “Ang Pilosopiya ng Laman ni Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” *Kritike* 11, no. 2 (December 2017): 70–79, https://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_21/jocson&mejaro_december2017.pdf.

⁷² Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 17–18.

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 41.

perceived is understood to be a “bearer of symbolic behaviors and of the behavior of true reality,”⁷⁴ that as a beauty and therefore as a good, the body before the beholder is always to be treated as an end. Merleau-Ponty called this the body-subject. This notion is already contained in the famous humanity test in Kant’s formulation of the categorical imperative “to treat himself and all others never merely as means but always at the same time as ends in themselves.”⁷⁵ Since there is no pure transparency in the perceptible world even in the realm of morality, the task of true communication confers on this act of looking, a “new dimension of intersubjective being”⁷⁶ which compels recognition of shared humanity in and through the body. A forceful argument that reinforces such a claim is captured in Daniel Murphy’s paper on Emmanuel Levinas’ declaration, “to see a face is to already hear ‘You shall not kill.’”⁷⁷ When humanity is in crisis, the challenge is always to find a better way of living, as it were, a better way of doing things together.

Participation in this shared world demands an affirmation of this primordial existence of the body already installed with an inherent dignity. It is not in thought that this value is affirmed. Merleau-Ponty pointed out that “the idea of going straight to the essence of things is an inconsistent idea if one thinks about it.”⁷⁸ Like the Hegelian dialectic of an idea, the more one talks about a thing in terms of its qualities, the more one goes farther from that thing. But when one simply beholds, one takes what is given at a time and as “a route, an

⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 18.

⁷⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 41.

⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 18.

⁷⁷ Daniel Murphy, “‘To ‘See a Face is Already to Hear ‘You Shall Not Kill’’: Levinas’s Development of Hermeneutic Phenomenology” (PhD Thesis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2018), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/see-face-is-already-hear-you-shall-not-kill/docview/2661479794/se-2>.

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 21.

experience which gradually clarifies itself, which gradually rectifies itself, and proceeds by dialogue with itself and with others.”⁷⁹ Beholding, thus, becomes itself the price. It is an end.

Beholding places thought into act. The thought becomes incarnate through the act. The act is transformed into the other, which the subject seems to hold, but in reality, holds only a specter of an inexhaustible mode of exchange. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty talked about the simultaneous movement of knowledge and action. The act employs creative imagination not to represent into thought what is not reducible in the realm of the intellect but to acknowledge presences that carry elements of things unseen, absent from the viewer but present in their terms. In consideration of others, there is a diversity of experience in beholding an object. To the object itself, there is always something more than what is available to the subject. With beholding *per se*, the capacity does not reside in the conscious subject alone, for what is beheld is capable of beholding as well. During solemn liturgical rites of what the Catholic Church refers to as the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the communicant who receives the sacred bread in one’s hand receives the totality of its form that is fully contained in the totality of the material object. But because it is *per se* a sacrament, it is received only according to the order of the receiver in his bodily state and the species in its material state.⁸⁰ In this sense, Merleau-Ponty alludes to the idea of the “predisposition of the receiver,” not of a receiver that is enclosed within himself but rather of one that is open to what he beholds

⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 21.

⁸⁰ Notes on the discussion of the epistemology of Thomas Aquinas rendered at Christ the King Mission Seminary way back 2001 by Rev. Fr. Pablito M.Tagura, SVD, now Bishop and the current Apostolic Vicar of Apostolic Vicariate of San Jose in Occidental Mindoro. In citing this note I acknowledge the seed of wisdom my mentor allows me to see, which has become part of the way I relate with the world.

through his body. When the priest says, “Behold the lamb of God,” the communicants are invited to look. What is it that they see and how should they see it? When they indeed move toward the sanctuary to receive the sacred species with their hands, where do they turn? And when they indeed turn, are they the ones that still behold the sacred species in their bodies, or does the one that they carry in their bodies, the one that now holds them in his being, mercy, and grace? One beholds the thing in his eyes and then again in his heart, and what one perceives in his hands permeates him more in his being; what one consumes consumes him more without diminishing his embodied self. The self remains even while captivated by the object of his pursuit. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception reveals not ideas, but a person to be encountered and received.

Yet the experience does not end in merely receiving. The minister’s word ‘go’ signifies the bringing forth of what is now in the body into the world which it transforms: “it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.”⁸¹ Hence, when one performs an act of charity, the look ought not to be a condescending act on the part of the giver toward the receiver as if the latter is just a person in need. Beholding allows affirming the other first as a person to be loved, and a person capable of loving before the natural inclination of loving to mean giving. In a very fascinating way God’s eyes become God’s love, and God’s love has been that of a person, consubstantial with God and consubstantial with humanity as well.

Beholding is an entry into the mystery of what one sees but neither claims to know nor possess. At this level one admits what Merleau-Ponty called the primacy of perception. The moment one says ‘I know it’ the object immediately recedes from one’s view. The attempt to

⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 235.

transform the object into thought immediately diminishes the totality of the object in question. Hence, the contradiction is overcome because thought does not correspond to its object outside of itself. Merleau-Ponty in this respect took the again Humean stance but not by merely restating that ideas are mere copies of impressions that are moving, shifting, and drifting away from one's view at each moment, and for which reason Hume himself has turned skeptical of the certainty of whatever one knows. But like Kant, Merleau-Ponty did not admit the conclusion of skeptics like Hume. The primacy of perception affirms that outside of oneself are things that are real: there is a world, others, and oneself and nothing is more difficult than to learn to see precisely these things again as if for the first time. By way of implication, philosophy is not a meaning-giving activity but a recurring return to the foundation of all rationality, values, and existence, and this is for Merleau-Ponty the world of perception. In it, the primacy of presence is also affirmed.

In reality one need not claim possession of forms which are just there in the world. It is just enough that one beholds and keeps himself abreast with the world through his body. I do not mean one ought not to use things, because then one would have to differentiate between using things and loving people and not loving things and using people. There is a liberating experience in this regard, as Merleau-Ponty argued, especially when one realizes that knowledge is always provisional even with some advancements in later knowledge. For Merleau-Ponty, “our ideas, however limited they may be at a given moment—since they always express our contact with being and with culture—are capable of being true provided we keep them open to the field of nature and culture which they must express.”⁸² This would mean that beholding is gradual and progressive with the co-

⁸² Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 21.

interchanging of roles among subjects and objects and other people in the world. Merleau-Ponty called this a network of relationships. Beholding in this sense is the perceptiveness of this primordial relationship among things where a human person is but a stardust. This “openness to something,”⁸³ to use Merleau-Ponty’s term, enables the beholder to recognize that in the scheme of things one need not grasp, or decipher things like a pure consciousness standing above the world, but as an embodied subject one is receptive, co-present, and dialogical at every moment of existence.

In terms of its depths, beholding is like “down-going,”⁸⁴ to use Nietzsche’s words. This depth pulls its height where the mind does not have an independent existence apart from the body, and the body is taken as a totality apart from the world. In a kind of inseparable relationship, Merleau-Ponty extrapolated, “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.”⁸⁵ This is the core of Merleau-Ponty’s incarnational approach to the ongoing reality opened by perception. This is not a journey of inwardness because for Merleau-Ponty, “there is no inner man”⁸⁶ but one who is deeply rooted in the world. But because this idea which is already contained in Heidegger is abstract even with the concept of *dasein*, this being in the world is one’s body which is an “intertwining of vision and movement.”⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty here argued that there is a transubstantiation going on through the body’s inherence in things: the body that sees and that moves around things is transformed into a thing among things, while things that

⁸³ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 21.

⁸⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (New York: Random House, 2006), 4.

⁸⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 235.

⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xii.

⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 162.

carry the mode of the visible, become themselves the seer, which takes the position of a subject through one's body.

Merleau-Ponty argued using the relationship between the painter and his painting, that when subject and object are put together, “inevitably the roles between him and the visible are reversed.”⁸⁸ In some kind of mystical experience, Merleau-Ponty talked about inspiration in the literal sense to drive home this point. He posited, “There is inspiration and expiration of Being, action, and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.”⁸⁹ In the heart's “slightest movement”⁹⁰ the person through his body brings the whole cosmos into his presence, although conditioned by bodily facticity, the person who beholds is the one carried along. Is this a defiance of what Merleau-Ponty claimed about perception and is no longer what he meant? In his work *Sense and Non-Sense*, he made his utter pronouncement that is consistent with the framework of beholding, “Man is metaphysical in his very being, in his loves, in his hates, in his individual and collective history.”⁹¹ With these insights, the reflection moves to some conciliating points where this metaphysical act is a pure contemplation no longer of the abstract but of the visible.

Beholding Mystery in and through the Visible

The human person is involved in a mystery which for Merleau-Ponty, has two sides, namely, “that we are open onto the world and

⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 167.

⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 167.

⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 28.

⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 28.

that we are embedded in it.”⁹² One is in the visible and invisible reality as these are forms of a single existence shaped by way of relationships and networks. Hence, engaging in this inexhaustible mystery requires a way of looking and elevates seeing into beholding. Initially, the thought of beholding connotes being itself, *to be*. While it is projected outside of oneself beholding evokes the whole presence of the ‘one that looks,’ the beholder, more than the ‘one beheld.’ Beholding then is a question of being such that as it alerts that something important is to be revealed, it shows a way of revealing that can only happen when something itself has been revealed. It is also then about the lover as much as about the beloved. In these dynamics there is a shift of attention from the lover to the beloved because beholding carries in itself both evocative and invitational powers at the same time. One can look, or one can look away.

That is why, beholding is an attitude, a spirituality, and a kind of attentiveness that while being captivated by the other, the beholder is also capable of a certain disposition before the presence of another. Reflexively, the act calls for being oneself before holding onto another in as much as loving requires one’s full possession of oneself in order for one to have something to give. In the act of giving, one realizes that one truly loves not in the quantity of something but in the quality of being even though as Merleau-Ponty himself attested, “one could not love without qualities, bodies and time.”⁹³ Beholding opens one to the singularity of existence proper to humans. It is love that promises itself beyond description. This love is provoked by a mere look at another’s presence. It is a loving gaze that promises more than what meets the eyes, where reciprocity cannot be forced even if it is longed for.

⁹² Taylor Carman, “Foreword,” in *Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), xi.

⁹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 27.

The call to behold always awaits a response. However, the most essential thing cannot always be assured to the lover as well as to the beloved. While it is therefore in the nature of loving that a lover expects love in return, such desire in a relationship is not forced. Where there is indeed a sincere mutual gift of affection, love begets love beyond the call of duty and act of self-sacrifice. From this nucleus of mutual affection, this shared love of two people can be efficacious to the wider human community. The efficacy is not in the remote future brought about by the promise of love, but by what lovers offer to each other at each moment of their lives. The body-subject in this sense, that inhabits time and space, carries this meaning. In the body there is the mysterious convergence of time, of opposites, of contradictions, of separation, and of communion, all pointing, manifesting, and carrying the invitation that life ought to be a loving response.

Something or Someone, is just there, wherein dwells a subject that is a being through his body. There is already an integral unity in the world that serves as a general structure in the person's exchanges with other people. Each moment becomes a constant call to be in an existential presence with another. One does not need to possess because the lover need not fill in what one lacks. Borrowing the words of Ravi Zacharias in his work *Recapture the Wonder*, this idea of beholding being sought for, "is not as much about something we may possess as it is about what possesses us."⁹⁴ The movement is not to get something from the other but to experience progressively what it means to give and receive. In the realm of the perceptual and perceived world, "sensation is literally a form of communion."⁹⁵ The beholder gives himself to the beloved in a receiving sort of way, while

⁹⁴ Ravi Zacharias, *Recapture the Wonder* (Tennessee: Integrity Publishers, 2003), 8.

⁹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 246.

the beloved receives the beholder in a giving sort of way. The role can be interchanged especially when one acknowledges that the mode of exchange is not purely the body as physical but the totality of personhood that is also metaphysical. It is the nature of these exchanges that beholding is gradual at each level.

In so far as human persons carry their facticity through their embodied existence, the unfolding of meaning continues and is never finished. Demanded of this sort of relationship, especially on the side of the committed, is the effort to keep renewing and affirming what has previously been made. And while there is a progression, there can also be regression. It emerges through an ongoing process of interaction that is formative⁹⁶ of both the beholder and the beheld. Out of one's experience in the world, one discovers and receives this meaning, which is not tantamount to a return to passivity where the body is a mere instrument of what is fed from the outside. Equally, this notion of what is already there does not mean full independence of the object. As it was said, there is always something more than the task of pure consciousness and the object that is perceived. To behold is thus to acknowledge this unfinished and ongoing project with the world, which Merleau-Ponty captured in his words, "Intertwining-the Chiasm."⁹⁷ Here enters the element of freedom involved in the whole process whereby with the world, a subject makes a "meaningful perception."⁹⁸ Without one or the other, no perception can be accounted for. The affirmation of each gives everything leeway for seeing and what is there to see, all the while affirming the act of seeing as an act of being.

⁹⁶ Cf. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, 5.

⁹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 130.

⁹⁸ Nick Crossley, "The Politics of the Gaze: Between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty," *Human Studies* 16, no. 4 (1993): 410, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20011017>.

Merleau-Ponty determined that to see is to be “involved in the world and with others in an inextricable tangle.”⁹⁹ Since this relation is characteristically ambiguous, the exercise of choice, according to Merleau-Ponty, demands one “to act in such a way that our action cannot be considered by others as an act of aggression, but, on the contrary, as generously meeting the other in the very particularity of a given situation.”¹⁰⁰ It is in this situation, which serves as a “field of presence,”¹⁰¹ that freedom is realized. While it accomplishes the task at hand, it also prepares itself for another which it takes not as an isolated subject but as an intersubjective field.¹⁰² I contend that seeing is not simply relegated to the eyes. Although it is one of the particularizations of the eyes, whose sublime task is to open a person to things and other people, seeing according to Merleau-Ponty consists of this subject through one’s body, things through one’s body, others through their bodies, situations in which subjects and objects are present, and all the rest in so far as they are these subjects, things, and beings-in-the-world. Beholding thus is directed neither to just this lover nor this beloved, neither just ‘them’ nor ‘us’ but to this system and network where each can be a willing participant for its realization or obstruction, and thus a suspension of its ongoing development. A sudden break in perception, however, is not the freezing of time, but with reflection, the giving of meaning to this

⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 528.

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 26. This text anticipates the moral dimension of seeing, where a previously natural and spontaneous act becomes now a responsibility. One can better appreciate the demand of this responsibility if a subject not held as a mere right but behold it as a gift to nature itself. No wonder, the famous Helen Keller even after having accepted her fate as a woman who became blind and deaf as a result of an illness while yet 19 months old, had wished she could see as depicted in her essay “Three Days to See.” See Helen Keller, “Three Days to See,” *The Atlantic* (January 1933 Issue), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1933/01/three-days-to-see/371679/>.

¹⁰¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 524.

¹⁰² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 525.

experience. It is just like that Biblical sixth day when the Creator “saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”¹⁰³ Then on the seventh day comes the peak of beholding. It was blessed among all the other days for the subject “to give thanks, to reflect on his activities and to commune with his Creator.”¹⁰⁴ But the moment to reflect is also a beginning, a new awakening, to see once again what has been seen and done and take a better sense of it.

The Question of God and the Ontology of Perception

To speak of beholding is to enter a space where perception, presences of things and the body become indistinguishable, where seeing is no longer just the registering of forms into the mind, but the felt reverberation of various modes of existence. This movement unavoidably raises the question of what, or whom, one ultimately beholds. Theologically, beholding is ultimately beholding God. But can such a question find space within the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty? Or does the whole program of inquiry gear toward something his method leaves unsaid yet not foreclosed? If Low’s predication is correct that nowhere in his text does Merleau-Ponty support the idea that theology can be found in his philosophy, that what one can have is a mere inspiration to add to the development of theology apart from what Merleau-Ponty intends,¹⁰⁵ then one ends up compartmentalizing reality as though theology and philosophy do not

¹⁰³ Genesis 1:31 (NRSV).

¹⁰⁴ Rabbi Sholomo B. Levy, “Understanding the Hebrew Calendar,” 2. <https://blackjews.org/Essays/Understanding%20the%20Hebrew%20Calendar%20by%20R%20Levy.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Douglas Low, “Merleau-Ponty, Theology and GOD,” *Journal of Philosophical Investigations* 16, no. 41 (2022): 371, <http://doi.org/10.22034/JPIUT.2022.52913.3338>.

share the same world. This compartmentalizing misrepresents the fact that Merleau-Ponty, while he openly declared his atheistic leaning before his interviewer, was baptized and reared as a Catholic and given the last Mass and rites as a Catholic.¹⁰⁶ Through and through, the concepts he used in his philosophy—Incarnation, flesh, visible, and invisible—are concepts that reflect an intense familiarity with biblical and Catholic thought already contained in the Christian Tradition in general and Catholic Theology in particular before he was born. Low's claim is valid if Merleau-Ponty predated Christianity and biblical times, thus making the use of those concepts his original. But that is not how his story went. He may have avoided spilling the beans, but he did not reject what his philosophy offers. He concluded in *The Primacy of Perception* that his work is not “a destruction of the absolute or of rationality.”¹⁰⁷ The thing is, the question can be anyone's question. On the one hand, it may be a question that betrays a radical state of disbelief in the existence of God. But on the other hand, it may be a question raised by one searching for God. It may be asked by a scientist perhaps or an innocent person, and all who are searching for meaning amid the confusion and contradictions of life, particularly in this 21st century.

The question “Is there a God?” hinges on the question of the meaning of life, of origin, of what type of choices people have to make that could quench the thirst in their souls. What could satisfy the thirst

¹⁰⁶ Michael P. Berman, *Merleau-Ponty and God: Hallowing the Hollow* (New York: Lexington Books, 2017), xiv. See also Frans Vandebussche, “The Problem of God in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (March 1967): 46. Berman remarks that “the veracity of this claim has been contradicted by others, such as Duane Davis, a respected Merleau-Ponty scholar.” As someone who has read Merleau-Ponty for 22 years, I take the opposite view: there are elements in his philosophy that are indeed theological in tone, and that sustain in me the gift of faith that finds expression in the perceived world where I have lived.

¹⁰⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 27.

if not the longing for the ultimate? Merleau-Ponty, however, said and this I repeat, “the Incarnation changes everything.” What humans have sought is deeply united in their bodies, as they move in this world. The challenge is to live this presence at each moment, *ergo* to realize what Merleau-Ponty said, “The other side of things must already be visible in the environment in which we live.”¹⁰⁸ The question is not, ‘Is there?’ But it has always been, ‘What is here?’ or better yet, ‘Who is here?’

Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception is a philosophy of embodiment and philosophy for him is an interrogation of Being. All along while the subject is engaged in this project, he enters into a world through his body. The situation he finds himself in, which he inhabits is dimensional. Perception itself reveals that this is a mystery not fully exhausted by a single perception. One lives in one's world as one lives in one's own body. Because this world does not exist solipsistically in the mind of the thinker but is rather a peopled world, one lives in an intersubjective world wherein his body, decisions, acts, and things valued are interwoven with the life of others. There is nothing in a person too remote that it lies beyond the reach of other people. The nature of this life is shared from the very beginning. However familiar, there is always an element of hiddenness about life, a point that for Merleau-Ponty is not enigmatic but rather the very price of existence. Humility to accept this truth provides one's life its limit and possibility. Knowledge is therefore always intersubjective, dialogical, provisional, and incomplete. Its finality is beyond the individual human subject. The totality in question is not beyond reach; rather it is inexhaustible.

For Merleau-Ponty God is beyond what a subject can see, but not that God is beyond the visible. It has been established that the

¹⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 27.

mystery of the incarnation has permeated the internal and outer structure of reality so that what is simply material from a scientific lens is the bearer of this reality. Although Merleau-Ponty does not attribute metaphysics to the *first cause*, who is God, he would affirm that there is already a metaphysics in humans. The full taking up of an invisible reality in the visible makes the human being a genuine communicator of this reality in the visible world through one's very being. This is the kerygma in Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception. In so far as there is this body, understood not only biologically but also as a living presence, the mystery is at once carried and communicated as a driving force for its participation in the making of society until the full flourishing of the incarnation is realized. For even while saying that the incarnation changes everything, the situation of every subject allows for an appreciation of the individual and collective existence to come to fusion and full fruition. His theory of perception allows for many expressions of the incarnation. It is an ongoing project that starts on something that others can continue. History may thus be an advancement or a decline depending on the choices individuals and society make. Whose narratives dominate, and whose power or influence leaves a mark in this ongoing story? At the heart of the incarnation is the embodiment of love itself. What leaves a mark is that which is humanized, but in the manner whereby the receiver can become unaware that what he is looking for is already here received and met at each beating of the heart. The human condition has been taken up¹⁰⁹ and from this nucleus is its expansion and explosion to the "infinite horizon of things"¹¹⁰ where the subject no longer lives within himself but properly among other people and

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 96.

¹¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 28.

things already present. What kind of presence is a subject called to be that could serve as a window to other dimensions of life?

Surely, the witness of a holy life is the enduring challenge imposed on the followers of the God-incarnate. This witnessing involves embracing one's shared humanity, communicating oneself with and to others, with a profound sense of freedom that only in this temporal life can one bear witness to the call to live in love.¹¹¹ For this reason, one has to choose well, whether to be or not to be. What should one choose, and on what basis? Merleau-Ponty joined in the debate on whether it is fit to make a sharp distinction between the God of things and the God of men and claimed that across the collision of philosophers like Aristotle and Descartes, or Thomas Aquinas and Pascal is the Catholic hope that things "reveal a God-directed orientation of the world and wish for man—like things—to be nothing but a nature heading toward its perfection."¹¹² This is essentially the ground of teleological ethics already contained in Aristotle and natural law as espoused by Aquinas. Merleau-Ponty's position is clarificatory in this respect in the sense that nature is not deterministic as if anything that a subject does is bound to this general orientation. The subject of Merleau-Ponty in each situation is a subject that is both free and bound to this situation. The subject engages it with his freedom but together with it are other values at stake in that same situation. But should one's choice be the proof of God's existence in the manner whereby as a subject, one has acted according to his pre-established nature? Merleau-Ponty advanced the second notion of freedom where as a subject one has the "absolute power to say yes or no."¹¹³ This would mean according to Merleau-Ponty that "If I can say yes or no to my destiny, then the Good is not

¹¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 40.

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 75.

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 77.

my good unless I agree to it, nothing has value in itself, and man's freedom is, as Descartes thought, in a sense equal to God's."¹¹⁴ Theologically, the human subject is never compelled to act against his will to follow God. It is in the very nature of the God–creature relationship that each claim of freedom is in place and that one is fully in a position whether or not to respond.

In a world where there are contradictions here and there, the human subject could not long endure a struggle that is continuous and unending without holding onto a presence greater than oneself. The power of the incarnation is that it coalesces what in human terms are irreconcilable tensions of opposites: divinity in the human, infinity in the finite, joy in suffering, and even grace in sin. The pursuit of wisdom which started with the Greeks has become the *logos* incarnate. The permeating power of the incarnation is such that all facets of human life have been re-oriented. Its radicalism is such that it is rooted in suffering while promising the bliss of eternity opened up by the resurrection. What was said of the prophet Simon echoes to this day, the incarnation will always remain a contradiction that cannot be overcome but ought to be followed through and through if its light and message are to transform individual and collective life. Along with the concept of original sin, the incarnation according to Merleau-Ponty is valuable “because they reflect man's contradictions of body and soul, nobility and wretchedness”¹¹⁵ that only with the embrace of this mystery will one find the light amid one's enigmatic life. The answer is not always clear because the incarnation employs human language that may be understandable but paradoxical at the same time. It is understandable in the sense that it can be communicated but paradoxical in the sense that in entering into communication with

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 77.

¹¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 175.

others the message is not forced. The parables of the Gospel use language that is simple and images that are vivid but its meaning is beyond itself. Just like a grain of wheat on the hand of a farmer, it's just a seed planted to grow in abundance. But in the hand of the Lord, it's the dawning of the Kingdom of God.

Beholding as transcendent seeing looks into the two sides of signs and reality, of what's within and what is beyond. The Christian mission is to keep on pointing to him as a point of reference while living in the here and now the consequence of this conviction. Hope is not in the future that is yet to come. Hope is in the person living in the present. One who beholds is made aware "of the sacred bond," according to Merleau-Ponty, which has caused people of the past "to be still alive in our midst."¹¹⁶ The sacrament especially that of the Eucharist carries this immense power and glory. Zacharias whose writing has served as one of my partners in this dialogue with Merleau-Ponty explained that the worship that is both offered in spirit and truth, of flesh and spirit "was symbolized in the Eucharist as touch and taste, as the transcending meaning of the eternal was brought into the temporal."¹¹⁷ Unity and diversity, diversity and unity, unity in diversity, or diversity in unity however the phrase is formulated, the Eucharist brings with itself those meanings. And because what is in the Eucharist is Christ himself, Zacharias said that Christ is "the greatest sacrament, compared to which all the others are types and shadows."¹¹⁸

I propose that in beholding, there is a fundamental difference in the way things, even the obvious ones, are perceived. But there is an obvious thing that cannot be denied even while it can be doubted.

¹¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 94.

¹¹⁷ Ravi Zacharias, *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), 123.

¹¹⁸ Zacharias, *End of Reason*, 125–126.

Merleau-Ponty shared this notion with Heidegger and all those who recognized one's finite existence as a subject being-in-the-world. According to Merleau-Ponty, this indubitable thing is the primary stratum of the sensible world that gives an assurance of being in truth.¹¹⁹ This is why I suggest the principle that association precedes dissociation in human relationships because in perception, things reveal a common participation "at the core of the subject."¹²⁰ It is for Merleau-Ponty, "the central phenomenon of perceptual life."¹²¹ This association is the positive meaning that can be drawn from the gestalt theory which affirms that there is a "whole in which each part is internally related to each other part."¹²² For this reason the pursuit of the common good remains a valid and enduring pursuit that demands an ascent of everyone because it is by nature indivisible and shared and meant for all. The majority of citizens in a society, even while enjoying relative peace in their locality, cannot therefore be indifferent to the suffering of those distant communities troubled and ravaged by war. Their plight is a concern even for one living at the remotest place on the earth especially when key players of conflict hold in their hands the code that can make the world explode. Strengthening what unites rather than what divides is thus the topmost concern of individual and collective members of society across different levels of engagement. Communities can always associate with others given a common cause.

However, fundamental beliefs are not at all the same and thus dissociation lies on the other side of associating with others. It is

¹¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 12.

¹²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 265, 431.

¹²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 61.

¹²² William S. Hamrick and Jan Van Der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 15.

healthier to be in a society that affirms boundaries based on what one believes than to live in a society that has no boundaries. There are things therefore that a person ought to adhere to not due to discrimination as in the case of cancel culture but because of one's conviction which is at the same time one's act of self-surrender or in others of self-donation to a belief. The difference is in recognizing that there is something peculiar to everyone that only when each one is willing is there something to be shared and something to be received. Within a certain atmosphere of freedom this power to give and receive reaches the level of mutuality. It is not forced, and therefore when differences in perspective and beliefs are unsettling thus causing division, dissociating becomes a proper response. Dissociation is not purely separation, but bending or even breaking from the point of unity so that once again everyone can enter into oneself "and seek there the abode of truth."¹²³ This is the paradox of inhabiting a perceptual world that the thing in itself, while one beholds it, slips from one's view at the moment one says something about it. But because there is something more than what is said, everything that has to be said has to refer back to this mute experience where in its silence, there is so much to say: "There is being, there is a world; in the strong sense in which the Greek speaks of *το λεγειν*, there is cohesion, there is meaning."¹²⁴ In the light of the mystery of the incarnation, this world and meaning converge into the logos. It carries these two notions where this rational ordering of the universe as understood by the Greeks is for the Hebrew, the word of the Lord whose activity it is, is present in the world.¹²⁵ Was there a conversation when Andrew and Philip brought the Greeks to Jesus? The text did not say so. It seems that that the song popularized by

¹²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 31.

¹²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 88.

¹²⁵ Cf. Zacharias, *End of Reason*, 125.

Alison Kraus and Ronan Keating captured that moment, “[They] say it best, when [they] say nothing at all.”¹²⁶ This is the wisdom of the wise beholding one another. But it is at this point that Jesus spoke of the awaited hour for the Son of Man to be glorified.¹²⁷ Henceforth, Jesus provides the reason for his coming to humanity, and the framework within which to appreciate what beholding is and what it demands, “unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”¹²⁸ This is the paradox of life with which believers of the incarnate word have to wrestle in this life in and through their bodies. It serves as the moral boundary where “eternity is not another order of time, but the atmosphere of time.”¹²⁹ The body-subject as the synthesis of this project is a transition synthesis, where the end will always be for the body in its glorified state, at its height and transcendent value “the very definition of subjectivity”¹³⁰ itself. The questioner looks for an answer neither outside of himself nor in the result of what he produces, but rather in what he carries forward, this bearer of reality that is his own body. The body is part of the question, it is the question itself. The subject in his body is the dweller in this world and in so far as there is a body whose beginning and end are intersubjective, there will always be pointers, carriers, and

¹²⁶ “When You Say Nothing At All,” composed by Paul Overstreet and Don Schlitz, performed by Keith Whitley, released 1988, RCA Records. Publishers include MCA Music Publishing, Universal Music Corp., and Don Schlitz Music. Later versions by Alison Krauss (1995) and Ronan Keating (1999) were released under different labels and publishers. Information retrieved from <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Ronan-Keating/When-You-Say-Nothing-at-All>.

¹²⁷ Cf. John 12:20-23. Henceforth all quotations from scripture are from the *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version.

¹²⁸ John 12:24-25 (NRSV).

¹²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 457.

¹³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 433.

communicators of reality, meaning, and existence. The novelty of Christianity is its conviction that there is a transcendental point of reference with which human beings are to measure themselves. Just as Merleau-Ponty claimed the reversal of eternity in time, this paper returns that back to eternity as the origin and end of things. After claiming that there is a world and that human beings as subjects are projects of this world, there is still the question of where life begins and where it will end. Without an answer to these questions, there would be difficulty in trying to define this body—conscious, self-willed, and affective.

The notion that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God as proclaimed by the book of Genesis remains and stands as the Christian self-understanding of themselves. This notion never changes even if some postmodern views go as far as to say that everything is just a construct. Although this idea is reflective of Merleau-Ponty's view, there is an element in his thoughts that points to what is already given. It is not construction but reconstruction of the belief of the past to make sense of the present that is here presented as "living references"¹³¹ to what has been believed. When a subject beholds, he brings himself through his body into the object he beholds, all the while it seems, that speaking about it is a necessary consequence, but speaking is the most remote of its acts since to behold in the final analysis is to be present, to enter into communion without being lost in being but becoming himself an existing being that is worth beholding as well. If the body is viewed as an end in itself, its dignity being the incarnate subject, then eternity is not delusional because it is the proper place to be for the body in its so-called glorified state. A beholder of reality is then one who can make sense of this type of prayer, "Discover in me O Lord, the nothingness

¹³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 130.

of this world and the fullness of heaven, the shortness of life and the length of eternity.”¹³² The incarnation event is an awakening of the divine imprint, or to borrow a phrase from Blaise Pascal, “an inward disposition entirely holy,”¹³³ which Merleau-Ponty finds “its privileged bearer”¹³⁴ in the human being already embodied from the very beginning.

But there must be another reality that must support and sustain the incarnation otherwise humanity and creation could have collapsed at his death. It is thus possible to conceive that the death of Christ is the death of God, yet because He is God, death does not have the final power. Death is overcome while embodying it upon himself. In either case, the death of God is not the final word and consequently, so is the death of many as well. But since this is yet the physical death transformed into a glorious state, other types of death are so manifest in the postmodern subject. There are the deaths of the spiritual, moral, and values in one’s physical life.

The negative ramification of the incarnation is that the subject in interpreting it may do so devoid of its origin, meaning, and destiny. Thus the incarnation is tied with eternity because this tendency of the subject has already been anticipated. The incarnation in his glorious state is the new point of reference that changes everything. Scripture contains this thought in Christ’s words: “When I am lifted from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”¹³⁵ Beholding this glory instead of blocking one’s eyes to the world, opens it to its real meaning and

¹³² While I may not be able to ascribe the prayer to a writer in past ages, I acknowledge it to be a prayer taught to me by Deolindis Luza, the foundress of the Workers of Christ Missionary Sisters.

¹³³ Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1910), 101.

¹³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 71.

¹³⁵ John 12:32 (NRSV).

intentionality. It serves as one's eye, a kind of double vision that as one lives his life with its "growth and decline, birth and death, regression and progress,"¹³⁶ one is also called to live for something more. In a sense, the dualism of Descartes was not fully overcome but unlike his position, this duality is one among persons and relationships, "between idea and reality."¹³⁷ To recognize the God above much more than the God among human beings is to confront "the polemics against 'horizontal transcendence' in the name of 'vertical transcendence'"¹³⁸ that stands at the center of human history. He whom this article beholds serves as the moral boundary. The gift to Christians lies neither in earthen vessels nor in enduring structures but in the person of him whom they serve. It is also the same gift offered to others beyond the boundaries of Christianity. In him, all human projects, religion and culture, and political and economic affairs, rise and fall. Merleau-Ponty himself acknowledged as though in a form of interrogation what is owed to Christianity, which when abrogated from it becomes contradictory. He asked, "How can we take ideas like those of history, subjectivity, incarnation, and positive finitude away from Christianity to attribute them to a 'universal' reason with no birthplace?"¹³⁹ What Christianity believes is not without historical bases as much as vertical reference. To behold both ways of reading reality, much more as a reason for living is always gain. Nothing is lost, but is transcended.

¹³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 71.

¹³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 140.

¹³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 72-73.

¹³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 142.

Conclusion: Beholding as a Theological, Spiritual, and Moral Claim

Christian life in general and the life of the Catholic Church in particular while it is a life in the spirit, is radically sensuous and symbolic. By advancing the concept of perception into beholding as a theological, spiritual, and moral claim, I attempted to show the convergence of these disciplines and their diffusion in the realm of human experience especially when placed in terms of relationality. Relationship with the divine is mediated by symbols that embody it. In the Christian perspective, one cannot go to God without symbols. The apparent direct line between each individual and God employs the language of the body that can be verbal and symbolic. The celebration of the sacraments especially with the centrality of eucharistic spirituality is filled with objects called matter that serve as vehicles of grace. These thoughts are not strange things when put alongside Merleau-Ponty's reflection on perception and the body. The tangible objects that can be seen, touched, and received are not only pointers of reality outside of themselves. They carry the presence that enters into communication with those who participate. The relationship is mediated but it does not mean it is impersonal. It is a personal and intersubjective responsibility where the mediation provides a safe space, where this meeting of identities happens in a loving and graceful exchange of selves. Before the visible, there is something and something more to behold.

When the seer renders himself to an object in a receiving sort of way, what is rendered is a presence through the object that is received. With the concept of beholding, one can always discover an element of truth even from a self-proclaimed atheist. Van Der Veken, in commenting on the problem of God in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, said that "philosophy does not negate but radicalizes the God-

question, that true philosophy wants to define the sacred in a new way.”¹⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in his view is “an endeavor to find ways to think about the most ultimate philosophical questions in a manner which might lead to all the consequences of a religion of the incarnation.”¹⁴¹ While Jack Williams took a contrary position when he argued that, “Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy remains strictly anti-transcendent,”¹⁴² I counterargue that such a remark is a misreading and diminution of an important element in Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts, that is, the convergence of transcendence and immanence in perception. The incarnation as expressed in perception brings transcendence and immanence together as it advances the idea that God is near and is here. As a consequence, the very concept of the will of God which is the “absolute norm”¹⁴³ of human behavior in the Christian sense is in every concrete situation where according to Van Der Veken, “eventually I myself decide to recognize in these ambiguous signs the will and the hand of God.”¹⁴⁴ By advancing this theory, one cannot but notice the demands and challenges of life where the gospel of truth needs to permeate. By beholding the incarnation, one is compelled to bring one’s reflection to the plight of humanity especially to the suffering and the abandoned, and to act on their behalf as a consequence of this realization.

To behold is consistent with the natural inclination of the human person to use the senses in engaging with the world while eliciting the question, what and how am I seeing? It is not accidental for the poet

¹⁴⁰ Jan van der Veken, “Merleau-Ponty on the Ultimate Problems of Rationality,” in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 12, no. 3 (September 1989), 203, <https://utpjournals.press/doi/pdf/10.3138/uram.12.3.202>.

¹⁴¹ Van der Veken, “Ultimate Problems,” 203.

¹⁴² Jack Williams, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Philosophy of Religion,” *Religious Studies* 57, no. 4 (2021), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441251900074X>.

¹⁴³ Van der Veken, “Ultimate Problems,” 203.

¹⁴⁴ Van der Veken, “Ultimate Problems,” 203.

to say, ‘What we need is a filtered sunshine’ but it is precisely in addressing the moral question of perception that one appreciates the wonder and awe of the “inexhaustible system”¹⁴⁵ contained in the world. The body’s sensual capacity as can be expressed in the world is the vehicle of the progressive disclosure of the world to the subject which in turn is a way to understand the self. However, this article has shown that there is something more primordial than simply using one’s senses. While “wonder is seen as the authentic philosophical attitude”¹⁴⁶ what Merleau-Ponty established is the integral unity of transcendence and immanence in the world where “man and the world are sustained through and through by a more encompassing mystery, which is itself the possibility of their mutual dialogue: man interprets what is waiting to be expressed in vision, in language, in thought.”¹⁴⁷ In the world, “there is something to see and to say.”¹⁴⁸ Its nature, as said, is inexhaustible¹⁴⁹ with “a universal style shared in by all perceptual beings.”¹⁵⁰ The idea of heaven or eternity is therefore not separate from the human world. Belief in eternity does not hang in the air, in Kant’s words of ‘starry heavens.’ But even Kant would have to give up reason for faith as though human beings can strip themselves of the two, put at bay faith and explore first reason’s capacity, and only then make an ascent after reason fails to unpack reality. This inchoate attempt at sketching the concept of beholding in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty reveals that faith and reason are two moments of incarnation. To fully make sense of this bond, Merleau-Ponty intriguingly remarked that the human person is not only in the world but also of it. This remark seems to contradict a key

¹⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, “Unpublished Text,” 5.

¹⁴⁶ Van Der Veken, “Ultimate Problems,” 203.

¹⁴⁷ Van Der Veken, “Ultimate Problems,” 204.

¹⁴⁸ Van Der Veken, “Ultimate Problems,” 204.

¹⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 15.

¹⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, “Unpublished Text,” 6.

message Jesus told his disciples, “You are in the world but not of the world.”¹⁵¹ But rather than opposing Christ Merleau-Ponty brought out the full meaning of what it means to be a being-in-the-world in and through one’s body. This remark hints at an important Christian belief in the incarnation that God is always near and bound with humanity. Eternity is worth aspiring for because it is meant for humanity, and the endurance of the body makes it possible to state that there is such a place to stay even beyond death. If the pursuit of eternity is to make sense, then it should be experientable in the here and now, not remote from it.

But since belief in God is mediated, to say, ‘there is God’ is not to say, ‘I see God.’ I can see things, symbols, and people, but am not able to make a definite claim that I see God. This inability is not a deficiency in the claim. After all, the only being who saw God and who beheld God’s glory did not elevate seeing as a requirement for the blessed in saying, ‘Blessed are they who have not seen yet believe.’¹⁵² This is the hallmark of a relationship that has been far superior than that of one meeting the eye. At best, it is what trust is which makes questioning whether God exists even meaningless. The problem of God in Christianity is not a problem of inaccessibility. It is always as it has been, the problem of really seeing what is already here. The invisible is in the visible. The presence of God is affirmed in the presence of a human being, which, however, is not an abstract entity but present in concrete situations in and through his body. By advancing beholding as a transcendent seeing, I have much to look forward to in the ongoing task of making the world a better place for its inhabitants. This does not mean giving up eternity since by turning the question on the human person as an embodied being-in-the-

¹⁵¹ Cf. John 17:14-16 (NRSV).

¹⁵² John 20:29 (NRSV).

world, one pursues the place where the fullness of beholding life and love reside.

Philosophy and theology have the same goal which is to know the truth and understand reality. This is the same with Barcelona's articulation of Hartshornean process thought, "the God of the believers and the God of the philosophers is the same God—there is only one God."¹⁵³ When a sincere seeker starts to wonder, he sits down and writes his reflection, he is consumed by it, lives time, and leaves others as he thinks through his subject. In a seemingly narcissistic fashion, his life, space, and time are bound to one another. In the spell of a moment, he is one with his work. The fruit of what he does ignores its utility but neither is he necessarily compelled by the demand of duty even if what he does serves a purpose so that his labor may not be in vain. But the desire itself is a gift. In the exertion of the subject's power and faculty, the measure of his influence is neither in the consequences of his action nor in the completion of his duty. It is when he is faithful to this noble cause of constantly engaging his capacity that he shows the immensity of his power which is equally his beauty and effulgence, an act of transcendence itself.

To pursue wisdom and to be in love with it by actually rendering oneself present is not excessive self-love. It is a sustained commitment in that nothing else matters more than a time well spent with the beloved. The pursuit of other things may as well be very good and one can always anticipate the joy they bring in contemplating and encountering them. But this constant return to one's reflection, while it absorbs him who beholds his face, in the scheme of things, is a look and face of love itself. Affirmatively, 'charity is wisdom itself' so goes a religious saying. And this means, to look at others and move out of

¹⁵³ Salvador P. Barcelona, "The Changing Image of God in Process Philosophy," *Kritike* 1, no. 1 (June 2007): 100, https://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_1/barcelona_june2007.pdf.

oneself in love because only in loving the other can one see more. To be immersed in love is to be drowned and vanish. It is the paradox of life that has been taught and shown from years gone by that only when one loses his life will one find it, and that only when one dies will he be born anew and live through others. The glory of a thousand journeys is nothing compared to this great story that changes everything. By forwarding this notion from Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, I have less of a doubt that when the object of seeing is truth itself, the proper mode is to behold. The mode is itself the enduring value and a perjuring presence that can be recreative of what it means to be human in this shared world.

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