Expanding the Extended Mind: Merleau-Ponty’s Late Ontology as Radical Enactive Cognition

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Abstract
In this essay, I argue that the late ontology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in particular the system he began to develop in *The Visible and the Invisible*, can be conceived of as a form of Radical Enactive Cognition, as described by Hutto and Myin in *Radicalizing Enactivism*. I will begin by discussing Clark and Chalmers’ extended mind hypothesis, as well as the enactive view of consciousness proposed by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch in *The Embodied Mind*. However, neither Clark and Chalmers’ extended mind hypothesis nor the enactive view of consciousness advanced by Varela et al. are radical enough to fully capture Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology. Inasmuch as Hutto and Myin’s formulation combines features of the extended mind thesis and enactivism, and expresses both in a sufficiently radical fashion, it overcomes the deficits of both theories and can serve as a translation, so to speak, of Merleau-Ponty’s “ontology of the flesh” into contemporary terms. In particular, their formulation makes explicit several central aspects of his theory: the intimate, mutually constitutive relationship between perceiver and perceived world, the equal weight given to the contributions of perceiver and world within this relationship, and the displacement of representational content from its central position in the understanding of consciousness. It is thus the ideal vehicle for demonstrating some perhaps unexpected ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s thought is compatible with contemporary conversations concerning the nature of mind.
At the end of their seminal article “The Extended Mind,” in a section intriguingly entitled “Beyond the outer limits,” Andy Clark and David Chalmers speculate on conclusions that might be drawn if we accept the sort of “active externalism” about mind for which they argue. In particular, they claim that “we may be able to see ourselves more truly as creatures of the world.” In this essay, I will argue that the late ontology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty – the system he developed most fully in *The Visible and the Invisible* and the essay “Eye and Mind,” but whose roots stretch back to some of his earliest publications – anticipates some key aspects of Clark and Chalmers’ hypothesis. It thus represents one possible way of viewing ourselves as “creatures of the world.” However, I will also contend that more recent research in philosophy of mind is even closer to Merleau-Ponty’s position than the original extended mind hypothesis is.

I will begin with a brief discussion of Clark and Chalmers’ extended mind hypothesis, and of the “enactive” view of consciousness proposed by Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch in *The Embodied Mind*. Unlike Clark and Chalmers, Varela et al. explicitly couch their discussion in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, in particular as presented in the early text *The Structure of Behavior*. However, neither Clark and Chalmers’ extended mind hypothesis nor the enactive view of consciousness advanced by Varela et al. are radical enough to fully capture Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology.
Thus I will consider a more recent, and more radical, formulation, namely Daniel Hutto and Erik Myin’s “Radical Enactive Cognition,” which I believe comes closest to expressing the theory of mind that was emerging in Merleau-Ponty’s late work. Their formulation makes explicit several central aspects of his theory: the intimate, mutually constitutive relationship between perceiver and perceived world, the equal weight given to the contributions of perceiver and world within this relationship, and the displacement of representational content from its central position in the understanding of consciousness. It is thus the ideal vehicle for demonstrating some perhaps unexpected ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s thought is compatible with contemporary conversations concerning the nature of mind. It is my hope that such a demonstration will serve as a first step toward a more active incorporation of his late ontology into these conversations.

Before proceeding, I would like to specify a few things that I will not be doing in this paper. First, although I am admittedly partial to Merleau-Ponty’s view of conscious experience, this paper is not meant as an argument for the accuracy of his account or of any other. It is, instead, an attempt to illustrate the extent to which the ontology that he was beginning to develop in *The Visible and the Invisible* — the so-called “ontology of the flesh” — is compatible with some contemporary ideas in the philosophy of mind, in particular those stemming from the Anglo-American tradition. As a result, I will not consider in detail any of the empirical evidence cited within the texts I will be discussing but will instead focus on the theories these empirical studies are used to support. Finally, although Merleau-Ponty clearly owes a great debt to both Husserl and Heidegger, and although Heidegger himself is an important figure in contemporary discussions of consciousness and cognitive science, I will be focusing
exclusively on Merleau-Ponty, and in particular on aspects of his ontology which are not present (at least not to such a great extent) in Husserl’s or Heidegger’s thought. That having been said, I will now turn to an overview of Clark and Chalmers’ watershed article.

I

Clark and Chalmers’ 1998 paper represents a challenge to traditional forms of externalism about mental content, specifically beliefs. They ask us to consider Inga and Otto, two hypothetical visitors to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Neurotypical Inga arrives at the museum after recalling its location, which she correctly believes to be West 53rd St. Otto, who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease, looks up the address in a notebook he carries with him at all times, and in which he records important information; as a result, he too arrives at West 53rd St. Clark and Chalmers contend that Otto, no less than Inga, believes that the museum is located on West 53rd St., inasmuch as “the notebook plays for Otto the same role that memory plays for Inga. The information in the notebook functions just like the information constituting an ordinary non-occurrent belief; it just happens that this information lies beyond the skin.” In other words, certain types of cognition, such as Otto’s belief about the location of the museum, are “continuous with processes in the environment.” Otto and his notebook are linked through “a two-way interaction, creating a coupled system that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right.” Like all externalists, they acknowledge that having certain mental states entails being related to the environment in a particular fashion.

However, Clark and Chalmers are quick to distinguish their “active” externalism about beliefs from, for example,
Hilary Putnam’s semantic externalism; they state that, while formulations such as Putnam’s consign external elements to a passive, historical role, in their active formulation, “All the components in the system play an active causal role, and they jointly govern behavior in the same sort of way that cognition usually does.” By assigning an active role to an element not only outside the brain, but also outside the body, Clark and Chalmers’ formulation captures one important aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, namely the blurring of the boundary between mind and world. While Clark and Chalmers’ active externalism is still quite far from what Merleau-Ponty was proposing, it provides a necessary foundation for understanding his thought in the context of more recent developments in philosophy of mind. In particular, the claim that both internal and external factors can play an active constitutive role in cognitive states such as beliefs is an important aspect of his late ontology.

In order to appreciate the full extent to which Merleau-Ponty’s late thought anticipated more recent developments, the extended mind hypothesis needs to be expanded and radicalized. Mark Rowlands characterizes it as only making claims about how it is possible that some mental processes are in part composed of environmental elements. While these contingencies might seem to render the extended mind hypothesis rather weak, it is in fact a substantial challenge to traditional ways of thinking about cognitive processes. This is the case primarily because it is a claim about the constitution of mental processes, as opposed to one that merely specifies the necessary environmental conditions under which they can take place. For Rowlands, this makes it stronger than two related theses, namely those of embedded and embodied mind or consciousness. While my primary focus in this essay will not be on either of these theses, it will be helpful to briefly
describe them, as they underlie much of the discourse on enactive mind, which I will consider in the following sections.

In the words of Lawrence Shapiro, the embodied mind thesis means that “minds profoundly reflect the bodies in which they are contained.”ix In other words, a given cognitive or perceptual ability is dependent for its character on features of the organism’s physiology. To explain human vision, for example, we must discuss the specifically human visual apparatus, and perhaps other aspects of human physiology that are external to the brain as well. As a result, discussing “vision in general” is at best vague and at worst meaningless, inasmuch as human vision is essentially different from the vision of other species, given their differing physiology. Rowlands holds that the embodied mind thesis is not a significant challenge to the traditional Cartesian conception of the mind, inasmuch as “real cognition may be dependent for its correct functioning on wider bodily structures and processes, but there is no reason for thinking that these wider bodily structure and processes form part of cognition. Dependence, even essential dependence, does not add up to constitution.”x He makes a similar claim about the thesis of the embedded mind,xî which states that cognition is interactive in nature, “the result, at least in part, of causal processes that span the boundary separating the individual organism from the natural, social, and cultural environment.”xîi On many occasions, this embedding comes about when cognitive functions are, in part, “off-loaded” to the environment in order to increase the efficiency and overall cognitive power of the organism.xîî

In contrast, the extended mind hypothesis, in which “the mind leaks out into the world, and cognitive activity is distributed across individuals and situations,”xiv does not
merely describe a relation of dependence: in extended mental states, the relation between the organism and its environment is constitutive of those mental states. While Clark and Chalmers do not claim that all mental processes are extended, the ones that are necessarily result from this constitutive relationship. As alluded to above, however, even this extended, active externalism does not fully capture the character of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, and thus I will now turn to a discussion of the thesis of the enactive mind, starting with its seminal text, *The Embodied Mind* by Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thomson, and Eleanor Rosch, first published in 1991. Clark and Chalmers acknowledge *The Embodied Mind* in a footnote accompanying the statement that “cognition is often taken to be continuous with processes in the environment.”

Although they do not discuss the book, or elaborate on the notion of enactive consciousness, it is clear that they were aware of its connections with their own theory.

II

At the time of Clark and Chalmers’ groundbreaking article, there was already a growing body of both empirical research and philosophical discourse on the issues of embodied and embedded cognition. Varela et al. had contributed to that literature by developing a theory that they called “enactive” cognition. In *The Embodied Mind*, which serves as a response to representationalist theories of mind, and computationalism in cognitive science in particular, they argue that it is impossible to understand the sensorimotor capacities of humans or other organisms without considering the environments and contexts with which the organism engages. This engagement, they argue, can occur without the need for the organism to internally represent features of the external world or to process any sort of data gained from its interactions with that world. In
enactive, “noncomputational” cognitive science, then, embodied and embedded activity takes the place of representational cognition as the central object of inquiry. Enactivism goes further than embodied and embedded cognition, however, by claiming that the organism “enacts” a world through its actions and choices. Thus “cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a story of the variety of action that a being in the world performs.”

The analysis contained in The Embodied Mind is particularly valuable for the current discussion due to the authors’ use of Merleau-Ponty’s thought as a guiding thread for their project. Like Merleau-Ponty, and unlike Clark and Chalmers, Varela et al. focus much of their attention on perception. For them, “the enactive approach consists of two points: (1) perception consists in perceptually guided action and (2) cognitive structures emerge from the recurrent sensorimotor patterns that enable action to be perceptually guided.” With respect to the first point, they argue that world and perceiver are intermeshed, insofar as the perceiver’s actions are guided by the structure of its sensorimotor systems, and that those actions in turn effect changes in the world. The latter claim is not meant as a statement of psychologism; rather, it asserts that the manner in which an organism habitually navigates and interacts with its world is constitutive, in part, of the way in which that world is experienced. Perception is thus “not a passive mapping of external features but a creative form of enacting significance on the basis of the [perceiver’s] embodied history.” Instead of attempting to discern how a perceiver is able to extract and process relevant data from a pregiven world — a question which they claim lies at the heart of representationalist theories of mind — the enactive view of cognition
acknowledges that the actions of the perceiver are ultimately a reflection of the nature of both its embodiment and its environment, the latter of which is itself enacted by the perceiver. To defend their second point, Varela et al. focus on the activity of categorization, which is fundamental to cognition in both humans and other species. Certain basic levels of categorization (one example they give is our tendency to classify an object we may be sitting on as “a chair,” as opposed to simply “furniture” on the one hand, or “an armchair” or “an office chair” on the other) arise based on an intersection of biological, cultural, and cognitive demands and are thus “the point at which cognition and environment become simultaneously enacted.”xx In other words, we mentally default to certain categories when we attempt to understand or describe our experience, due to their having emerged as the most efficient, both cognitively and socially.

As Varela et al. point out, Merleau-Ponty himself advances just such an active connection between perception and action, and between perceiver and world, even in his earliest works. While the ultimate goal of this essay is to explore the similarities between enactive and extended models of cognition and Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology, to do so effectively requires at least a brief discussion of some of his earlier works, in which he lays the groundwork for his later position. Indeed, his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, begins with the statement that “Our goal is to understand the relations between consciousness and nature.”xxi A few pages into the work, he states that

Since all the movements of the organism are always conditioned by external influences, one can, if one wishes, readily treat behavior as an effect of the milieu. But in the same way, since all the stimulations which the
organism receives have in turn been possible only by its preceding movements which have culminated in exposing the receptor organ to external influences, one could also say that behavior is the first cause of all the stimulations.

Thus the form of the excitant is created by the organism itself, by its proper manner of offering itself to actions from the outside. xxii

While *The Structure of Behavior* is far removed from the ontology of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty develops in his last works, it is important for understanding his intellectual trajectory. Drawing on his interest in descriptive psychology, as well as the work of the Gestalt theorists, he begins there what would become a lifelong quest to find an alternative to both behaviorism (which he refers to as “objectivism”) and Neo-Kantian “intellectualism”xxiii – a quest which comes to fruition in *The Visible and the Invisible* and other late texts. Although Varela et al. focus primarily on *The Structure of Behavior*, this does not mean that they are unaware of the significance of Merleau-Ponty’s later work for their enactive approach. In fact, they motivate their focus on Merleau-Ponty in part by pointing out that, unlike Husserl or Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty acknowledged that not only the sciences, but even phenomenology itself, “explicated our concrete, embodied existence in a manner that was always after the fact. . . . precisely by being a theoretical activity after the fact, it could not recapture the richness of experience; it could be only a discourse about that experience.”xxiv This acknowledgement of a level of experience that is prior to any attempt at rational explanation is a large part of what makes Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology so compatible with the enactive approach to consciousness. Inasmuch as this
aspect of enactivism is not as fully developed in The Embodied Mind as it is in later works on enactive cognition, in the following section I will consider one of those later works, Daniel Hutto and Erik Myin’s Radicalizing Enactivism, in order to illustrate the true extent of this compatibility.

III

Before proceeding, I would like to briefly address the question of what enactivism can contribute to an explanation of Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology beyond what is furnished by the extended mind hypothesis, with its active, constitutive externalism. Rowlands summarizes the difference succinctly with his argument that, whereas the extended mind hypothesis makes a claim about the constitution of certain mental processes and activities, enactivism addresses an organism’s expectations about sensorimotor experiences and the way that organism is able to navigate the world. He argues that enactivism “turns on expectations and abilities rather than exploratory activities. And there is no reason for thinking that either of these are extended in the sense required to make [enactivism] a form of EM [extended mind].” While I agree with Rowlands that there is nothing about enactivism that implies that mind is extended, I do not share his worry that “it is not even clear that they are compatible views.”

Not only, as I argue, does Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology contain elements of both, but more recent texts, such as Hutto and Myin’s, have put forward versions of enactivism in which the types of “expectations and abilities” that Rowlands describes are conceived of as fundamentally extended in Clark and Chalmers’ sense. These more recent, and more radical, formulations are thus, in a sense, hybrids which draw on both the extended mind hypothesis and the work of Varela et al. and other early enactivists.
Hutto and Myin incorporate aspects of both of these traditions into what they call Radical Enactive (or Embodied) Cognition (REC), characterized by an “uncompromising and thoroughgoing rejection of intellectualism about the basic nature of mind, abandoning the idea that all mentality involves or implies content.”

They hold that cognition, and indeed all mentality, consists in an organism’s contextually embedded interactions with its environment. As we have seen, Clark and Chalmers confine their discussion to the practice of “offloading” one’s memory onto a device external to the body and thus leave open the possibility that, in the vast majority of cases, cognition remains brain-bound. Hutto and Myin, however, argue that mind is essentially distributed among brain, body and environment and “that minds are already, in their basic nature, extensive and wide-ranging.” In their formulation, brain-bound mentality is a rare exception, not the rule. The rejection of the idea that mental activity necessarily requires content is what makes Radical Enactive Cognition so radical. While acknowledging that “some very important forms of cognition essentially depend on the interactions between propositional attitudes,” Hutto and Myin maintain that this is not always, or even frequently, the case. In fact, they attribute the stagnation in the further development of the extended mind hypothesis to a reluctance on the part of theorists to divorce it from the notion of mental content. In opposition to those who insist that any theory of cognition must be based on representational, contentful mental activity, “Defenders of REC argue that the usual suspects — representation and computation — are not definitive of, and do not form the basis of, all mentality.”

In their strong reaction against representationalist theories of mind and the notion that cognition necessarily involves content, we see an echo of the critique of intellectualism.
that Merleau-Ponty outlines in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, which sets the tone for the rest of that volume. In a more extensive articulation of themes already present in *The Structure of Behavior*, he criticizes the Vienna Circle for their doctrine that “we can enter into relations only with meanings” in the traditional sense, asserting instead that, in a pre-predicative layer of consciousness, “can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean.”

In a similar vein, he calls into question Husserl’s eidetic reduction, the process of “free variation” within the imagination of the features of a given mental object, which Husserl claims allows us to intuit its “essence,” or the fundamental features shared by any set of such objects. The reduction is thus a reflective process of abstraction from our lived experience that yields ideal species, which in turn reveal to us the basic structure of that experience. Merleau-Ponty, however, claims that the eidetic reduction results from “the determination to bring the world to light as it is before any falling back on ourselves has occurred,” in other words, before we have begun imposing our own representationally-based conceptions onto it. While Husserl acknowledges that the world is experienced as “pre-given” or already present when we perceive it, Merleau-Ponty hints that he fails to fully recognize the implications of this claim. In particular, in attempting to understand our experience of the world through a reflective examination of intentional content, Husserl attempts “to make reflection emulate the unreflective life of consciousness.” This critique is significant, inasmuch as, with the notion of the “unreflective life of consciousness,” Merleau-Ponty has already begun to focus on a level of consciousness that is prior to representation and to the “interactions between propositional attitudes” that Hutto and Myin claim are not essential to most forms of cognition. Like Merleau-Ponty, Hutto and Myin acknowledge that contentful mental
states do exist, but they suggest that “representationally based cognition might be just the tip of the cognitive iceberg,”xxxix concealing a vast expanse of non-representational cognition under its surface.

Hutto and Myin see themselves as holding a far more radical view of the nature of mind than Clark and Chalmers’ extended mind hypothesis entails; they even replace the notion of mind being extended with that of its extensiveness in order to emphasize this distinction. Much as Varela et al. maintain, in the context of their discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s early work, that “we must see the organism and environment as bound together in reciprocal specification and selection,”xlii Hutto and Myin endorse what they call the “Equal Partner Principle” in the understanding of mental activity, namely that “contributions of the brain are not prioritized over those of the environment.”xli In so doing, they echo an important theme in Merleau-Ponty’s work, one which is particularly evident in The Visible and the Invisible but which can be seen in embryonic form in Phenomenology of Perception, namely the parity of the brain and the environment in the constitution of mental activity. While not yet going so far as to call into question the boundary between self and world, as he later would, Merleau-Ponty holds that “we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world”xlii and speaks, in a discussion of sense experience, of “another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them.”xliii This “other self” is that in us which senses and perceives: not the contentful mind, but rather the “unreflective life of consciousness” that underlies it. In The Visible and the Invisible, the notion of “flesh” takes the place of the “other self,” and Merleau-Ponty makes claims even more radical than those of Phenomenology of Perception, particularly regarding the
mutually enactive relation between self and environment. In that text, his ideas are even closer to those of Hutto and Myin, who directly state that “REC takes at face value . . . that the specified bodily and environmental factors are equal partners in constituting the embodied, enactive intelligence and cognition of these artificial and natural agents.” While Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly discuss the notion of parity, it should be clear, even from the cursory examination of his earlier work that we have undertaken thus far, that he places great importance on the role played by the world in the constitution of conscious experience. As we will see in the following sections, he goes even further in his later works, effectively nullifying the distinction between the contributions of self and world, and thereby rendering them “equal” in a sense perhaps somewhat different, but no less fundamental, than that intended by Hutto and Myin.

Hutto and Myin’s notion of extensiveness is closely tied to the Equal Partner Principle, which, in rejecting the priority of brain-bound contributions to cognition, also provides a response to internalist critics of the extended mind hypothesis who argue that brain activities must be “metaphysically sufficient” (i.e., representational and contentful) to qualify as cognition. For Hutto and Myin, proponents of this type of position are already committed to prioritizing the brain’s contributions to mental activity over those of the environment, and they seize upon the notion of content to help make their case. By construing mind as not essentially contentful, Hutto and Myin believe they have provided a definitive counter to all such objections, insofar as internalists can no longer fall back on contentful mental states as the basis of mind. As they put it,

If REC is right, basic cognition is not contentful; basic minds are fundamentally,
constitutively already world-involving. They are, as we say, extensive. For to accept REC’s thoroughgoing rejection of content in this domain is to reject the idea that basic minds might be non-extensive — i.e., essentially internal and brain-bound because contentful. xliv

Radical Enactive Cognition thus represents a very explicit and thorough intertwining of enactivism and a radicalized variation of the extended mind hypothesis, and it therefore serves as an extremely effective lens through which to understand Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology within the context of contemporary philosophy of mind. Not only does it capture the mutually constitutive relation between mind and world and the emphasis Merleau-Ponty places on their parity in this relation, but the claim that mind is not fundamentally contentful speaks to Merleau-Ponty’s focus on the pre-predicative levels of cognition and his sustained critique of “intellectualism” and its premise that consciousness is essentially structured by reason. Both of these themes, while present in his earlier works such as Phenomenology of Perception, are most fully developed in The Visible and the Invisible and the late essay “Eye and Mind.” With this in mind, I will now turn to an examination of these texts to demonstrate just how compatible Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology and Hutto and Myin’s Radical Enactive Cognition truly are.

IV

The Visible and the Invisible was incomplete at the time of Merleau-Ponty’s death in 1961, and thus any attempt to make definitive statements about its ultimate direction necessarily involves speculation. One thing that is clear, however, is that it represents a bold critique not only of
transcendental philosophy, but also of the empiricist tradition in Western thought. In it, Merleau-Ponty seeks to describe a pre-objective state, before “philosophy declares itself to be reflection” and makes the distinction between subject and world, and before experiences are “worked over” by reflective consciousness. In doing so, he calls into question some of the fundamental tenets of phenomenology, including the notion of the intentionality of mental states, famously described by Franz Brentano as “reference to a content, direction toward an object.” In other words, to use an often-repeated expression, “consciousness is always consciousness of something.” For Brentano, all (and only) mental states have the property of intentionality; indeed, in an attempt to distinguish mental and physical phenomena, he suggests that “We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves.” While Husserl, a student of Brentano’s, departed from his theory of intentionality in some fundamental ways, the description and analysis of intentional acts is still a central concern of classical Husserlian phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty, however, thoroughly rethinks Husserl’s conceptualization, thereby also calling into question the notion that cognition is essentially contentful.

Merleau-Ponty addresses intentionality as early as *Phenomenology of Perception*. Working from Husserl’s conception, he points out that the purpose of phenomenological analysis is not recreating the world within reflective consciousness, but rather “recognizing consciousness itself as a project of the world, meant for a world which it neither embraces nor possesses, but towards which it is perpetually directed – and the world as this pre-objective individual whose imperious unity decrees what knowledge shall take as its goal.” Picking up on a theme
from Husserl’s late work, he distinguishes traditional intentional acts from what he calls “operative intentionality” or “that which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, and furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language.” Operative intentionality thus encompasses desires, sensations, evaluations and other types of non-objectifying mental experiences that serve as a ground for objectifying intentional acts. Although Merleau-Ponty clearly still conceives of these types of experiences as intentional, for him (unlike for Husserl) they are not intentional acts and thus do not have content or meaning in the same way that intentional acts do. Drawing this distinction within the realm of intentionality thus allows Merleau-Ponty to focus on the pre-predicative layer of experience and to emphasize its fundamental role in the structuring of consciousness. He thereby mirrors Hutto and Myin’s rejection of contentful mental states as fundamental to mind, and their relegating of such states to “the tip of the cognitive iceberg.”

This theme continues in “Nature and Logos: The Human Body,” a lecture course from 1959-60 in which Merleau-Ponty casts the prepredicative level of perception as a language, albeit a “tacit” one: “An organ of the mobile senses (the eye, the hand) is already a language because it is an interrogation (movement) and a response (perception as Erfühlung of a project), speaking and understanding. It is a tacit language.” Whereas traditionally language is seen as an expression of the “higher,” contentful cognitive abilities of humans, Merleau-Ponty claims that “our body is symbolism” and that language is “a second body,” thereby inverting the traditional relationship between contentful, representational mental activities and the more
fundamental, contentless activities on which they are grounded. While Merleau-Ponty is not claiming that spoken or written language is contentless – Hutto and Myin also make it clear that they believe that organisms that have language “are capable of genuinely contentful, representational modes of thinking and reasoning”\textsuperscript{lv} – he does attribute a great deal of the structure of language to the realm of the contentless and nonrepresentational. If the capacity for symbolic manipulation that is necessary for language is already present in the body, then language in the traditional sense is no longer a radically distinct capacity that emerges only in the “higher” cognitive realms, but is rather an outgrowth of cognitive modes that are already present at more fundamental levels of cognition. This line of reasoning is very much in keeping with Hutto and Myin’s statement that Radical Enactive Cognition “denies that basic mentality and cognition should be modeled in terms of propositional attitudes.”\textsuperscript{lvii} Rather than the type of thinking present in language being the paradigm through which all cognitive activity is understood, Merleau-Ponty turns the tables, using prepredicative mental activities as the paradigm through which to understand language.

Merleau-Ponty is motivated to expand the traditional model of intentionality, and of cognition in general, in part because that model distances consciousness from the world, and he believes that there is no such distance between a perceiver that is capable of such things as sight and touch, and the world containing the objects of these senses. This belief is expressed most clearly in\textit{The Visible and the Invisible,} particularly in the chapter entitled “The Intertwining – The Chiasm.” He argues there that while, for example, seer and seen are not indistinguishable, they are intermeshed such that there is never a point at which a self-identical, empty object is presented to a vision which fills
it with significance. A color such as the particular red of a woman’s dress is “not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to a vision which could be only total or null;” lviii in other words, the red is not merely a placeholder for perception (human or otherwise), waiting to be imbued with significance by a vision which is able to identify it as a quality of a particular object. Rather, the red, the dress, and the perceiver all belong to one reality, none of whose components has a stronger claim to actual existence than any other. They are all woven into a single fabric, which extends “between the alleged colors and visibles” forming a pervasive ground of their materiality, which Merleau-Ponty characterizes as “the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a flesh of things.”lix

This notion of the flesh, which is central to Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology, is an expression of the intertwining of perceiver and perceived, and of self and world. It reveals a mind which is essentially extensive, as in Hutto and Myin’s formulation, and which conforms to their Equal Partner Principle by almost completely erasing the distinctions between the contributions of brain and world to perceptual experience. This is a radically enactive view of consciousness, in which, to repeat the words of Varela et al, “cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind.”lx In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty argues that “Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world. . . . My movement is not a decision made by the mind . . . It is the natural consequence and the maturation of my vision.”lxI On this view, motion is impossible outside the context of a vision which engages pre-objectively with the
world. Central to this idea is the fact that “the world is made of the same stuff as the body,” namely physical matter. My body is thus itself visible in precisely the same way as other objects in the natural world are, meaning that it is something which both sees and is seen. For Merleau-Ponty, this is a fundamental characteristic of human vision and the human body, without which it would be “not really flesh, not really the body of a human being.” The nature of our conscious experience of being embodied human beings is thus conditioned by the particular structure of our sense organs and their interaction with the environment, in line with embodied and embedded theories of cognition. Merleau-Ponty goes further than this, however, to argue that “There is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched . . . a blending of some sort takes place.”

This represents what is arguably an even more radical form of enactivism than that which Hutto and Myin propose, whereby the brain and the world are not only equal partners in the constitution of the self, but their “partnership” becomes something closer to a union. There can be no question of prioritizing the contributions of one partner over the other, for it becomes difficult to even speak of a contribution that originates from the brain or the environment alone. Brain, body, and nature alike are embedded in the same material realm and are thus all part of a larger, all-encompassing unity. This intertwining – which Merleau-Ponty refers to as the “reversibility” of the senses – thus points to an underlying interconnectedness that is characteristic of the physical world as a whole, making an assignment of priority to the brain seem arbitrary at best. Particularly in moments when we are engaged in activities such as painting a landscape or portrait, which require sustained and intimate contact between the painter and the environment, “it becomes impossible to distinguish
between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.” Merleau-Ponty describes this intermeshing of seer and seen particularly vividly in a striking passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he states that

As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out toward it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me.’ I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue.

This interconnectedness and reversibility are central to the notion of “flesh,” which forms the centerpiece of Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology.

V

Throughout “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty emphasizes this immanent connection, and attempts to explicate the notion of the flesh, by focusing extensively on touch, in addition to his discussions of vision. More than any other sense, touch is uniquely well suited for such an analysis, given the comparative ease with which the interplay between the sensing and sensible aspects of bodies can be demonstrated with reference to it. To cite just one well-known example, Merleau-Ponty asks us to imagine placing our left hand on top of our right, while the latter in turn touches an object in the world. Referring to the right hand, he states that “Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they
interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it.”

Importantly, he adds, “it is no different for the vision:” touch may be the paradigm sense, but this “reversibility” is inherent in all senses. Just as “the “touching subject” passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things,” the visible “palpates . . . the visible things” with this same immediacy. This “palpation” is not a function of representational thought, however, but rather of the pre-predicative, contentless cognitive realm that underlies it. In fact, Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to say that “vision divides itself. There is the vision upon which I reflect; I cannot think it except as thought, the mind’s inspection, judgment, a reading of signs. And then there is the vision that really takes place.” Clearly, for Merleau-Ponty, what “really takes place” does so independently of the workings of representational cognition.

This initial account is somewhat of a simplification, however, for it is impossible for my hand — or anything else — to truly be at once touching and touched. In reality, “one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch it — my right hand touching.” True reversibility is thus “always immanent and never realized in fact.” While it might seem that this refinement only serves to introduce a new dualism into Merleau-Ponty’s ontology to replace those that he hopes to overcome, in fact it represents nothing more (and nothing less) than an acknowledgment of the inherent potential for each of the two states to become the other. At any moment, my right hand, being touched by my left, can become a hand touching an object in the world; in this sense, there is never touching without the potential for being touched. Thus touching always carries with it an implicit possibility, the “memory” of being touched, which “encroaches” on my
experience of touching myself or someone else, leading Merleau-Ponty to ask “Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?”

The flesh, then, is in one sense fundamentally just this reversibility of the senses, “the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body.” This reversibility speaks to a mutually constitutive relationship that extends beyond even that of Radical Enactive Cognition, with an intimacy that encompasses both the actions and the expectations of the perceiver. Acknowledging this “coiling over” and “encroachment” of the visible upon the seeing, along with the parity of vision and touch, leads naturally to the conclusion that I affect the world through my vision no less than through touch and am, in turn, affected by the visible as much as I am by the tangible. In fact, the very distinction between visible and tangible worlds is a spurious one, inasmuch as, “Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.” If my perceptual faculties and the perceived world are so thoroughly enmeshed, and if vision has the immediacy of touch, then the probing and speculating I do that allows me to form expectations about the world cannot be disentangled from the activities I engage in as I interact with the environment. Both aspects of perception are distributed among brain, body and world, while the boundaries between them, so significant in representational and computational theories of mind, become blurred beyond recognition.

When he speaks of vision as “a palpation with the look,” Merleau-Ponty is thus not just making a poetic statement but is emphasizing the way in which vision, embedded as it is within the same order of being as the visible, cannot help
but affect the visible through its activity, in much the same way as when, for example, I move my hand, I cannot help but displace some physical matter. Every act of sensing is thus inherently creative. One of the most succinct expressions of this view is found in Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of a familiar phenomenological statement: “The body is not only a thing, but also a relation to an Umwelt [environment].” Importantly, he also holds that it is the body, and not representational thought, that defines our essential humanity. In “Nature and Logos: The Human Body,” in a section in which he is discussing the place and importance of the human body in the study of nature, he insists that “The concern is to grasp humanity first as another manner of being a body.” If our humanity should be known first and foremost through our embodiment in a certain type of body with certain sorts of sense organs and ways of perceiving the world, and if this body is fundamentally relational, unable to be separated from its embeddedness in its environment, then what makes us human is essentially our mutually enactive relation with the world. Nature is as responsible for what we call mind as the brain is.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty insists, not only every act of sensing, but also every act of being sensed, is imbued with this generativity. This is the case because the “matter” which constitutes perceptible objects is not some dead, inert stuff that is passively acted upon, and which only has meaning insofar as it can be formed into sensible things. It is, by contrast, as active and vital as the senses themselves, necessarily affecting the sensing body each time this body “palpates” the world through its powers of sensation. Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology is thus a sort of inversion of the ontology that Clark and Chalmers predicted at the end of their landmark article: communication and action have not been reconceived as being like thought, but rather,
thought has dissolved into action and perception. It thus provides a profound example of how we might “see ourselves more truly as creatures of the world”\textsuperscript{[lxxix]} and is a significant precursor of some of the most intriguing developments in recent philosophy of mind. Most notably, as I have argued, it anticipates some of the most important features of Hutto and Myin’s Radical Enactive Cognition, namely its claims that much of cognition is contentless and that contributions of the environment should be weighted equally with those of the brain in the understanding of mental activity. By pointing out these affinities between Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology and contemporary discussions, I hope to have provided some impetus for integrating a consideration of his thought into these ongoing conversations.

\textbf{NOTES}

\begin{enumerate}[i]
\item Clark and Chalmers were not the first to propose a version of “active” externalism, although their article has arguably generated the most discussion. See also John Haugeland, “Mind Embodied and Embedded,” in \textit{Mind and Cognition}, ed. Yu-Houng Houng and Jih-Ching Ho (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1995): 3-37; and Robert A. Wilson, “Wide Computationalism,” \textit{Mind} 103 (1994): 351-72.
\item Clark and Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” 13.
\item Clark and Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” 10.
\item Clark and Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” 8.
\item Clark and Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” 8.
\end{enumerate}
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xiii One frequently cited example involves the video game Tetris, in which players, who are required to quickly figure out how variously-shaped blocks fit together, solve the problem by actually manipulating the blocks on-screen as opposed to first figuring out mentally how they should be turned in order to fit into the puzzle.


xviii Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 173.

xix Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 175.

xx Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 177.


xxii Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 13. This passage is quoted by Varela et al. on p. 174.

xxiii While sympathetic to Gestalt theory, Merleau-Ponty is not fully in agreement with its basic premises. The central tenet of Gestalt theory, namely that the mind is able to generate whole forms which are in some way other than the sum of their parts, means that Gestalt-oriented research in psychology is oriented toward an understanding of the cognitive processes that gave rise to such forms. In addition, it focuses on the analysis of conscious phenomena in their totality, in an attempt to discern basic principles which could, in turn, be related to neural activity.

While he finds the Gestalt theorists’ notion of whole forms instructive, Merleau-Ponty rejects their assertion that the forms and structures around which their research program is centered somehow exist in the natural world. Instead, he asserts that

Taken as a being of nature, existing in space, the form would always be dispersed in several places and distributed in local events, even if these events mutually determine each other; to say that it does not suffer this division amounts to saying that it is not spread out in
space, that it does not exist in the same manner as a thing, that it is
the idea under which what happens in several places is brought
together and resumed. This unity is the unity of perceived objects
(Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 143-44).

In other words, the whole forms of the Gestalt theorists are not things that
exist in the world, about which we gather information with our senses, so
that we can create representations of them in our minds. It is not
surprising that Merleau-Ponty is unwilling to adopt the naturalistic stance
of the Gestalt theorists, since at this point he is arguably moving in the
direction of transcendental philosophy. It is not until his later work that
he makes a clear break with it and begins to rethink the possibility of a
naturalistic understanding of reality.

For the seminal introduction to Gestalt psychology, see Wolfgang
Kohler, *Gestalt Psychology: The Definitive Statement of the Gestalt

Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 19.

Rowlands, *The New Science of Mind*, 70-75. See also Mark Rowlands,
“Understanding the Active in ‘Enactive’,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive


See, for example, Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: MIT, 2004) and

Daniel Hutto and Erik Myin, *Radicalizing Enactivism: Basic Minds without


They do acknowledge the possibility that phenomenal states might be entirely
internal.


For example, if I were attempting to discern the essence of a square, I would
focus on a particular square and imagine removing or altering its various
features on at a time, and then determining whether each variation caused it to
cease being a square, as would changing its number of sides, or whether its
“squareness” is preserved under the transformation, as it would be under a
change of color, for instance. See Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment:
Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1973), 340-348,
for a concise explanation of the method. A more thorough discussion of the
eidetic reduction and related methodological issues in Husserlian
phenomenology can be found in Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction
to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Routledge,
2012), 125-137.


Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 174.

Hutto and Myin, *Radicalizing Enactivism*, 137.

Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xiii. He believes that this fact makes Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, or the “bracketing” or suspending judgment about questions concerning the existence of objects in the natural world, an exceedingly difficult task: “The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction. . . . If we were absolute mind, the reduction would present no problem” (xiv).


Hutto and Myin, *Radicalizing Enactivism*, 44.

Hutto and Myin, *Radicalizing Enactivism*, 137.


Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, 68.

See, for example, his argument in the *Logical Investigations* that the content of mental acts is not always immanent in the mind, as Brentano had held. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 2 vols., trans. J. N. Findlay (New York: Routledge, 2001). See especially the First Investigation, “Expression and Meaning.”

The concept of intentionality plays a particularly important role in the *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas*.


Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 9.

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