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NATURE AS EXPRESSIVE SYNTHESIS: THE SENSIBLE AWAKENING OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL BETWEEN KANT, HUSSERL AND MERLEAU-PONTY

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The critical insights of transcendental philosophy and phenomenology evolve out of a tension in the nature of consciousness. On the one hand, consciousness is a synthetic *activity* or intentional that discloses the horizon in which meanings and objects have conditions of possibility. On the other hand, in perception we find the workings of sense that point to a dynamic, expressive origin prior to the pure activity of consciousness. Our investigation is concerned with explaining how this passivity of consciousness is itself a synthesis that arises out of our expressive bodily nature. There is a clear logical connection between the ways Immanuel Kant, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty conceive of a synthesis within sensibility and bodily affectivity, where each thinker requires us to conceptualize nature as a mode of expressivity, with the implication that transcendental conditions of possibility must, mysteriously, happen within the very intercorporeal and temporal fields that they render possible.

Key words: Phenomenology, transcendental idealism, Kant, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, consciousness, temporality.

ПРИРОДА КАК ВЫРАЗИТЕЛЬНЫЙ СИНТЕЗ: ЧУВСТВЕННОЕ ПРОБУЖДЕНИЕ ТРАНСЦЕНДЕНТАЛЬНОГО У КАНТА, ГУССЕРЛЯ И МЕРЛО-ПОНТИ

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Критические усмотрения трансцендентальной философии и феноменологии произрастают из напряжения внутри самой природы сознания. С одной стороны, сознание есть *деятельность* синтеза или интенциональность, раскрывающая горизонт, на котором смыслы и предметы об-

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ретают свои условия возможности. С другой стороны, в восприятии можно обнаружить работу смысла, указывающую на динамические и выразительные истоки, предваряющие чистую деятельность сознания. Наше исследование затрагивает то, каким образом эта пассивность сознания сама является синтезом, возникающим из нашей выразительной телесной природы. Существует отчетливая логическая связь между представлениями Иммануила Канта, Эдмунда Гуссерля и Мориса Мерло-Понти о синтезе в рамках чувственности и телесной аффективности, причем каждый из этих мыслителей призывает нас рассматривать природу как модус выразительности, что подразумевает, что трансцендентальные условия возможности должны парадоксальным образом иметь место внутри тех самых межтелесных и темпоральных сфер, которые они делают возможными.

Ключевые слова: Феноменология, трансцендентальный идеализм, Кант, Гуссерль, Мерло-Понти, сознание, темпоральность.

1. INTRODUCTION

The critical insights of transcendental philosophy and phenomenology evolve out of a tension in the nature of consciousness. On the one hand, consciousness is a synthetic *activity* or intentionality that discloses the horizon in which meanings and objects have conditions of possibility. On the other hand, in perception we find the workings of sense that point to a dynamic, expressive origin prior to the pure activity of consciousness. Our investigation concerns how this passivity of consciousness is a synthesis that arises out of our expressive bodily nature. There is a clear logical connection between the ways Immanuel Kant, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty conceive of a synthesis within sensibility and bodily affectivity, where each thinker requires us to conceptualize nature as a mode of expressivity, with the implication that transcendental conditions of possibility must, mysteriously, happen within the very intercorporeal and temporal fields that they render possible.

Kant's provocative concept of "transcendental affinity" in his 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* reveals a level of kinship between our pre-reflective experience of nature and the pre-conceptual *association* of sensation by the imagination. The primordial associative workings of the imagination resonate with a pre-objective nature that is not yet determined by concepts, but rather prepares itself to be thought. As a bridge between cognition and sensibility, imaginative synthesis as *immanent to the field of experience* breaks down the logical distinction between a priori and a posteriori. For Husserl, the very form of experience is temporally dynamic, and consciousness as a necessary condition of experience is manifest in and through an *affective awakening*. Husserl works, like Kant, in his *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* exposes a level of immanent, flowing synthesis, termed operative intentionality. Consciousness emerges through a call-response structure and is animated by this level of

affective bodily synthesis at which the dichotomies of activity and passivity, a priori and a posteriori, self and world, do not hold. For Husserl, transcendental consciousness *happens* out of an affective, pre-conceptual awakening.

In Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Institution* lectures we find a combination of these two problems. Merleau-Ponty explores consciousness, like Husserl, as a temporally emergent and awakening field of sense, but like Kant, Merleau-Ponty finds this imaginative proto-production of sense to be the mark of a deep affinity between consciousness and nature as expressive *institutions*. Kant's affinity with nature is phenomenologically manifest through the natural generality of the lived body, and the expressive, acquired depth of its natural past. Consciousness must emerge from nature, and must awaken through emotion, and this requires driving the implications of Kant's critique of the imagination and Husserl's phenomenology of operative intentionality to their furthest logical conclusions: an overcoming division of dualisms of activity/passivity, fact/essence and contingency/necessity, past/present, by showing nature itself, and its institutions of life and consciousness, to be an expressive movement from nonsense to sense. This way of thinking resituates transcendental conditions of possibility as transformative events *within* histories of local, divergent forms of life and consciousness. If we drive these philosophical methods to their furthest logical conclusions, transcendental idealism and phenomenology mutually illuminate the radical embeddedness of transcendental conditions of possibility *within* a generative time of natural expressivity.

2. KANT: THE TRANSCENDENTAL AFFINITY OF NATURE AND EXPRESSION

What makes experience possible is an elemental kinship between sensory intuitions and concepts, but sensation and the understanding are functionally opposite. Sensation is passive, receptive, disparate, bodily, empirical and emerges contingently, where understanding is active, spontaneous, unifying, mental, transcendental and operates according to necessary principles. Kant's insight is to render sensation and understanding moments of experience that, though we can later analyze them as separate poles of experience, are originally derivative features of a synthetically experienced whole.

The two editions of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, in particular the two versions of "The Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding", offer two explanations of this synthesis. The B Deduction of the 1787 *Critique* proposes a solution that hearkens back to Cartesian rationalism. Kant's famous maxim that concepts without intuitions are empty but that intuitions without concepts are blind

amounts to a phenomenological *reduction ad absurdum*. The very structure of experience demands, as its condition of possibility, an already accomplished synthesis of mind and body, sensory difference and conceptual unity. Kant's stance toward experience is reflective. Approaching experience as a hypostasized object of reflection, we can notice the mutual necessity of sense and concept. This approach, however, assumes that the form of our experience is something that we detachedly encounter from the outside in an already complete act, but thereby we conflate the product of synthesis with its *production*.

Kant's argument in the B Deduction rests on a retrospective illusion, the projection of a completed act of synthesis and an already-formed object of experience, back into the ontological conditions of possibility for that experience. The necessity that we encounter within experience as the product of experience is taken to be its condition of possibility. This kind of argument not only takes for granted the stance of a detached, reflective self-conscious act, but also amounts to question begging, because here one-side of the experience, the necessity of its conceptual unity, is being retroactively taken to be its condition of possibility. Kant errs in his revised Deduction by hypostasizing experience as an object of judgment, and tautologically concludes that this act of judgment is the source of the total experience that enables it. This circular reasoning also preserves an untenable dualism: by rendering consciousness the ground of experience, we cannot account for the constitutive role of difference, contingency and alterity in experience.

We encounter another way forward in the 1781 A Deduction. Instead of conceiving sensation and understanding as extrinsically related, Kant calls for us to think of this difference as self-articulation from within experience. A logical precondition of this unity of opposites is a common source out of which these opposites can be related. Kant's argument in this earlier version rests on recognizing a level of experience prior to the explicit separation of sensation and concept, activity and passivity. There is an intrinsic, generalized relationship between sensations as such, prior to their being thought in a concept, and Kant terms this pre-conceptual linking the work of a productive power of imagination. There is a readiness to "converge" into an object of experience, prior to there being an actual object thought (Kant, 1998, 235–236, A 113). This pre-conceptual congruence and affiliation between sensations is not only discovered on the side of consciousness, but in the objects of our experience, in nature, we necessarily encounter a "readiness" to be thought. Kant terms this kinship between originary association in consciousness and the preparation for thinking in nature a "transcendental affinity" of the two. There is a transcendental, not contingent, linkage between the productive imagination and nature.

Affinity is a peculiar notion in Kant's logic, because it points to a state between identity and difference. We can infer an affinity between difference and identity, out of which they can be related. Here Kant speaks, for example, of there being a common ground between the variegated manifold of sensations and the ideal unity of the concept, that being the transcendental possibility of association between different sensations. There is a manifold of disparate, incompatible sensations, and in order for these differences to be manifest in a unified concept, there must already be some lateral affiliation between them. This lateral relatedness is not yet ideal unity. Affinity mediates between difference and identity¹. Prior to any particular association of sensations in a concept then, there are these *general, ambiguous associations* among them.

The concept of affinity points back to a different kind of synthesis, a truly passive synthesis that underlies the relationality of concept and intuition. Synthesis is passive here because there is not already a causal *actor* in place: Kant has already thoroughly rejected the dogmatic argument for experience being the product of an external cause², but this transcendental argument equally entails that consciousness or the mind cannot constitute experience from the outside, in a prior moment of judgment. In experience, then, we find an association of sensations that allows different sensations to be brought together without, thereby collapsing their difference into abstract conceptual identity. We experience this productive differentiating power within our experience prior to our rational judgment and self-conscious agency³, yet this linking and yoking within experience is not a brute empirical given either. This pre-conceptual orientation is not only found within consciousness, but it also must,

¹ There is thus an association or commonality between specificity and homogeneity, a generality between particularity and universality: "Reason thus prepares the field for the understanding: 1. by a principle of sameness of kind in the manifold under higher genera, 2. by a principle of the variety of what is same in kind under lower species; and in order to complete the systematic unity it adds 3. still another law of the affinity of all concepts, which offers a continuous transition from every species to every other through a graduated increase of varieties" (Kant, 1998, 598, A 658/B 686). Kant points out that association is not a separate act with affinity its product, nor is there a pre-existing affinity that we discover association within. Affinity is an ongoing work of association, and this work of association only ever unfolds empirically, within experience.

² For Kant there must be an objective side to the originary association of the productive imagination: "For then I would not know whence we should obtain the synthetic propositions of such a universal unity of nature, since in this case one would have to borrow them from the objects of nature itself. But since this could happen only empirically, from that nothing but merely contingent unity could be drawn, which would fall far short of necessary connection that one has in mind when one speaks of nature" (Kant, 1998, 236, A 114).

³ Kant argues that the productive synthesis is original and a precondition for later acts of sensory apprehension and conceptual judgment: "But only the productive synthesis of the imagination can take place a priori; for the reproductive synthesis rests on conditions of experience. The principle

transcendentally define our bodily experience of nature as a tacit, pre-conceptual sense of orientation and preparation for thought.

On the subjective side we find the “association of representations” that gathers together sensations in a non-indifferent, non-abstract manner⁴. This association shows that some affectations are akin, and that these relationships are not arbitrary but actually depend upon the particular sensory content. On the objective side, prior to objectifying nature and understanding it as a causal system, we experience a kinship through which nature can be thought in the first place, in and through offering us regular, perceptible affinities in our basic givenness. This proto-activity of the imagination, then, is equally a proto-objectivity in nature. Nature does not immediately have an affinity with the concept, but with the productive imagination, so we should not conceive of this nature with the terms of realism. It is evident that here we must conceive of nature, like the imagination, as a principle of *production*.

In his *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Martin Heidegger suggests that instead of conceiving the reproductive synthesis of the imagination as a third stem alongside the apprehension of sensations and recognition of concepts, Kant conceives of it as a common root, out of which sensation and concept can be synthesized (Heidegger, 1997, 190, 282–283, § 21). Kant makes clear that this unit is neither given from the outside nor constituted from within a unitary act of consciousness:

If the objects with which our cognition has to do were things in themselves, then we would not be able to have any a priori concepts of them at all. For whence should we obtain them? If we take them from the object (without even investigating here how the latter could become known to us), then our concepts would be merely empirical and not a priori concepts. If we take them from ourselves, then that which is merely in us cannot determine the constitution of an object distinct from our representations, i.e.,

of the necessary unity of the pure (productive) synthesis of the imagination prior to apperception is thus the ground of the possibility of all cognition, especially that of experience” (Kant, 1998, 237–238, A 118).

⁴ Kant argues that association cannot be abstract and conceptual, but must be concrete. The necessary orderings we find through the imagination are, oxymoronically, only revealed empirically. Here Kant is, however unintentionally, blurring the distinction between necessity and contingency, as well as a priori and a posteriori, because this synthesis has both transcendental and empirical sides: “Since, however, if representations reproduced one another without distinction, just as they fell together, there would in turn be no determinate connection but merely unruly heaps of them, no cognition at all would arise, their reproduction must have a rule in accordance with which a representation enters into combination in the imagination with one representation rather than with any others. This subjective and empirical ground of reproduction in accordance with rules is called the association of representations” (Kant, 1998, 239, A 121).

be a ground why there should be a thing that corresponds to something we have in our thoughts, and why all this representation should not instead be empty. (Kant, 1998, 244, A 130)

Kant points back to a common productive source that is beneath the level of awareness, whether sensory or conceptual, out of which the sense of intuition and concept emerge. The imagination is both productive and receptive, which leads Heidegger to argue that it exists as temporally ecstatic or active in a moment prior to conscious experience, but a moment that is leaping-ahead of itself in the process of its own production: “the pure concept of understanding is not given at all through a pure formal-logical function of judgment. Rather, this concept springs from the imaginative synthesis which is related to intuition and that means to time” (Heidegger, 1997, 193). To conceive of synthesis as temporal then, drives Kant’s logic of the imagination to undermine some of the conceptual distinctions upon which the whole edifice of his critical arguments depend: namely the difference between *a posteriori* and *a priori*, as well as the presupposition that time is defined as a manifold of continuous, uniform events.

There is something ambiguous in the workings of the imagination, because it functions between contingency and necessity, and straddles the difference between empirical and transcendental consciousness. Kant argues that even though the imagination is a necessary principle, it cannot be exhaustively determined by or subsumed under a unitary concept in advance of its actual productivity. The work of the imagination is thus only manifest as trace, that is to say retrospectively, in the empirical regularities it conjoins and affiliates within experience:

It is this apperception that must be added to the pure imagination in order to make its function intellectual. For in itself the synthesis of the imagination, although exercised *a priori*, is nevertheless always sensible, for it combines the manifold only as it appears in intuition, e.g., the shape of a triangle. Through the relation of the manifold to the unity of apperception, however, concepts that belong to the understanding can come but only by means of the imagination in relation to the sensible intuition. (Kant, 1998, 240–241, A 124)

This claim requires us to shift the terms of where Kant situates the transcendental. There is not a top down synthesis from the concept, nor a bottom up construction from empirical sensations, but rather an intermediary linking together of sensations that retrospectively manifest, through the specific regularities we encounter in natural perception, principles of order and necessity from within the field of experience. One example of such a locus of associations would be our pre-reflective attunement to other living bodies. There is thus an irreducibly empirical moment in synthesis,

but not an abstract one. Instead of reducing materiality to pure, uniform potentiality, Kant begins to conceive of this materiality as an internal auto-production within sense and nature⁵. The empirical events we naturally encounter unfold an ordering within themselves, and we experience an affinity with this unfolding and gathering of sense.

Husserl's analysis of the lived body reveals how, already at the level of affectivity a tacit synthesis is happening, and that we can understand this synthesis as a prereflective ground of consciousness. Husserl situates consciousness itself as a becoming and awakening within time, thus beginning to definitely shift the terms of synthesis away from an external relationship of consciousness to nature, and of necessity to contingency. But this requires us to conceive of sense as an original absence and call to consciousness, and to understand sensibility as a prereflective, affective field, of which consciousness is a moment of expression.

3. HUSSERL: THE AFFECTIVE AWAKENING OF TRANSCENDENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In Edmund Husserl's *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* consciousness is conceived of as emerging through a temporal flow. Time is the "universal formal framework in which all other possible syntheses must participate" (Husserl, 2001, § 27). Consciousness is an emergent phenomenon, and thus to understand it as a synthetic act we have to phenomenologically interrogate not only its immediate givenness, but also its genesis in affective awakening. Sensations for Husserl are already associated and productive, but they point to an affective level beneath perceptual consciousness. The moment of sensation is not something of which we are explicitly, punctually conscious. Sensation is not yet present, but is a kind of temporal stirring, a pre-conscious moment which nevertheless calls, animates consciousness to attention. There can be no isolated moment in which a sensory impression could be given, because temporal moments are part of a non-objectivating, flowing awareness, or *operative intentionality*⁶. We are only tacitly aware of this operative flow, we sense according to it and are affectively oriented within it, but it is not a direct object of consciousness.

⁵ David Morris develops a similar argument, where he sees Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger as relocating the Kantian synthesis of the imagination to place and time, respectively (Morris, 2008).

⁶ Christina Schües insightfully argues that intentionality must be conceived of at this deeper level, which is wholly active and passive: "Intentionality is simultaneously an openness to diversity and an ordering process understood as a synthesizing constitution, that is, it is both intuition and constitution" (Schües, 1998, 146).

Affect explains the awakening of consciousness as a responsive movement of sense. The focal insight of Husserl's analysis of passive synthesis is that impressions are not only temporally expansive, but they are not neutral, inert contents that impress themselves on consciousness. From the beginning, impression is charged "affectively", such that it can awaken consciousness. Consciousness is not some absolute constitutive activity that acts on neutral contents. Instead, these contents are associatively animative from the outset: "within every living present (and restricted initially to the sense-data that are being unified within it), affections are constantly at work beyond themselves; we always find affective awakenings, that is, associations" (Husserl, 2001, 206, 158). In this sense, passive synthesis renders a field of affects that are not foreign to the ego, but whose newness the ego attentively turns toward: "The wakeful life of the ego is such that the ego is explicitly affected, affected by special unities that are, precisely through this affection, given to, graspable or grasped by the ego" (Husserl, 2001, 208, 160). There is no alien impression that somehow enters into relation with consciousness. Sensibility's meaning has changed from impression to affect, such that it is always already a pull on the ego, which is why Husserl calls passive genesis the lowest level of generative activity.

This level of generativity, affective allure, operates by a call-response, or motivational structure, in which the moment of sensation is tacit, and only manifest retrospectively in the acts it awakens. In place of empirical givenness and objects, Husserl argues that the affective field of sensation is structured with "pre-given" "object-like formations" (Husserl, 2001, 210, 162)⁷. These formations of sense are not objects of experience, but contrasts and reliefs in a field of affective allures. This language of proto-objectivity closely parallels Kant's doctrine of an affinity between imaginative association and the generally structured sense of our empirical experience of nature.

Husserl systematically lays out the different levels at which affects are active. The most basic level of passive synthesis occurs *as absent* from the standpoint of egological awareness. Husserl describes affect in its most simple form as "tendency" or a ray which reaches out from the objectlike formation in the direction of the ego, "send[ing] as it were, affective rays of force toward the ego pole, but in their weakness do not reach the ego pole, they do not actually become for it an allure that awakens" (Husserl, 2001, 196, 148). These potential, unacknowledged affects can become retro-

⁷ This passive constitution marks a teleological drive within consciousness, that it drives itself from the beginning toward intelligible intentional experience. Anthony Steinbock writes that "receptivity" must be regarded as a "self-giving intuition" but insists that while there is a "pre-constituted" object-like formation, precisely how this becomes constituted as an object depends on other factors, such as the recognition of the ego (Steinbock, 2004, 32).

spectively awakening for the ego⁸. Husserl writes of a “modal transformation” which precedes the active “turning toward”, such that the affect “has come into relief for the ego, even if only in the antechamber of the ego”. The ego tacitly detects the affect before it is ever present or grasped in an attentive way (Husserl, 2001, § 35). This is an ecstatic moment where, before coming into explicit presence, the affect is ahead of itself, beckoning conscious attentiveness in a meaningful but not-yet-explicit, furtive way. We *live* sensations in advance of *perceiving* them⁹. Some affects can reach the ego and exercise an explicit pull on consciousness. Here consciousness is *receptive* to the affect, its interest sparked and *motivated* toward the objectlike formation.

Husserl argues at once that an affect can come to be in affective relief that comes about in a “contrast” of material conditions of sensation, but that these materially conditions can only form a contrasting context because they are united with each other affectively. On the one hand, “all particulars are set off from one another” in this synthesis, and yet: “Only by virtue of affective force does connection come about at all... Within the streaming living sphere of the present there cannot be individuated intuitions” (Husserl, 2001, 224, 175). This “hyletic core” of affects is always “multiple” yet “unified”, always affecting us with a “unitary vivacity” (Husserl, 2001, 184, 138)¹⁰. There is thus an irreducible materiality and bodily dimension of synthesis, out of which our consciousness is affectively awakened.

Our attentiveness to affect, what strikes us as alluring, hinges not only on the integration of sensory contents, but even on the ego’s particular patterns of attentiveness: “The same contrast can, for instance, actually exercise an allure on the ego, another time it can be that the ego will not be reached by the affective tendency” (Husserl, 2001, 197, 150). Husserl argues that our motivation in taking up certain affective vivacities depends in part upon “valuations of the heart” (Husserl, 2001, 178). Here affect becomes an incomplete striving that is rendered fully manifest with *my* attention. As we have seen, affect occurs in a field, and is not a determinate value or valence, but is always cast as a relief and in a relativism of other affects. Husserl depicts

⁸ Natalie Depraz helpfully points out that the ego is a “narrow” or static kind of intentionality that constitutes explicit objects. This is akin to what Husserl takes to be intentionality in much of his earlier writings. Here we see that this model of intentionality depends upon a more foundational, genetic analysis (Depraz, 1998, 38).

⁹ For a discussion of this structure see Schües (1998, 150).

¹⁰ Dan Zahavi explains that affect is synthetic in that it is not “ontologically independent” from the ego, while it is equally passive as “a facticity which is passively pre-given without any affective participation or contribution of the ego” (Zahavi, 1998, 217).

any given present as filled with multiple allures, but notes that our attention only singles out some of them explicitly, such that in a given moment:

...particular coloured figures becom[e] quite prominent affect us; affecting us at the same time are noises like the sound of a passing car, the notes of a song, prominent odours, etc. All this takes place at the same time, and insofar as we turn to it alone, listening to it, the song wins out. But the rest still exercises an allure. (Husserl, 2001, 197, 150–151)

Husserl's incisive discovery is that we can turn back to this affective context as remembered and animate attentively, for the first time, an object which was, at the time, an unrecognized object-like formation. This also happens with objectlike formations in a temporal succession: when my friend stops whispering in my ear, I hear the faucet dripping, and realize it had been dripping the whole time she was speaking to me. Husserl argues that hearing a stunning, "mellifluous" note can point us backward to a pre-given melody which is "still living within the field of the present". Our attentiveness can "radiate back into the retentional phases" (Husserl, 2001, 203). My affective awareness does not take the form of explicit presence, but a rich contrast of tensions and reliefs, a moving texture of rhythms and possibilities, only some of which awaken full consciousness. There is thus a depth to our experience of the past, not just as an object that exceeds our full perception, but as a rich and multi-layered affective topography harboring imperceptible possibilities. The field of passive synthesis lasts and sustains, but ultimately exceeds the reach of our consciousness.

There is a generative richness to the past that is still alive in perception, and also a way in which consciousness is ecstatically ahead of itself in affective sensings. Husserl temporalizes consciousness, making past and present intertwine in a productive synthesis of the imagination that exceeds Kant's thinking about time. Where Kant finds an affinity of consciousness and nature, Husserl sees consciousness as awakening out of the variegated textures and rhythms, the rich and layered affective topography of our bodily, material existence. Genetic analysis opens up this pre-reflective level of consciousness and allows us to fully work out the logic of Kant's productive imagination. Husserl has disclosed a bodily, rhythmic, multiply layered flow of affects prior to the level of conscious attention, a moving attunement to nature. Yet Husserl remains installed within the transcendental horizon of consciousness, such that genetic phenomenology remains framed within limits of the ego and its pre-reflective "antechamber." This analysis points back to a more original analysis, a becoming of sense out of nonsense, and the emergence of presence from non-presence, and the development of contingency into necessity.

4. MERLEAU-PONTY: THE EMBODIED, EXPRESSIVE EVENT OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL

Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes how passive synthesis arises in a true moment of passivity prior to the subject, an originary absence of fully determinate existence, a non-sense which nevertheless summons forth and orients a sense to come. This new concept of “institution”, a take on Husserlian *Stiftung*, resituates Husserl’s call-response structure of the awakening of meaning within being, between events and bodies themselves. This entails that we reject the idea that consciousness, or anything else for that matter, can play the role of a pre-established, a priori form of experience: “This real-form content analysis and the position of the form as the a priori condition of the content are illusory” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, 5). For Merleau-Ponty the movement of sense will only become present retroactively, because it is a process of the dynamic emergence of events which set their own conditions of possibility. These events simply cannot happen as such, because they inaugurate a new register in which anything like an event makes sense. These institutions only unfold as events, within the wake of their own happening: “Therefore institution [means] establishment in an experience (or in a constructed apparatus) of dimensions in relation to which a whole series of other experience will make sense and will make a *sequel*, a history” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, 7–8, 4–5, 3). This act of institution is not the creative act of a world constituting consciousness, which would only make sense for in individual, isolated self. Sense is not constituted from an isolated source or already established cause or intending-act, but emerges dynamically within already structured fields of sense.

The principle of synthesis happens, argues Merleau-Ponty, *within the very field of its synthetic production*. Synthesis thus does not unfold from a unitary source or principle because, in shaping, it is always already shaped by what it shapes. That is to say, there is a reciprocal relationship between activity and passivity here, but also of form and content, such that there can be no a priori synthetic principle, anywhere, that is not shaped by the materiality and interbodily dynamics of field of time in which it unfolds. The principle of synthesis is thereby historical and embodied, and it is only ever manifest within specific institutions of time. Thus instead of a pure synthetic principle that constitutes, there is instead, Merleau-Ponty argues, always an instituting-instituted. Being is always mediated, such that individual causes and activities always exist relationally, and must always emerge developmentally as self-articulating structurings within time. Even our activities of contemplation are mediated by acts of linguistic expression and signs. Institution, as a principle of passive synthesis that is not localizable in a body, organism, or self, but rather between them, thus avoids

the pitfalls of subjectivist philosophy, as in Kant and Husserl, because the “instituted makes sense without me” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, 8, 5, 4).

For Merleau-Ponty, the affective is not a level of consciousness or an antechamber of the ego, but an ambiguous zone between our awareness and the world. Perception is, initially in its pre-reflective mode a “natural subject” defined not by personality but by anonymity: “It is never self-enclosed but never transcended. Whether it is a question of the other person’s body or of my own, I have no other means of knowing the human body than by living it, that is, by taking up for myself the drama that moves through it and by merging with it. Thus, I am my body, at least to the extent that I have an acquisition, and reciprocally my body is something like a natural subject, or provisional sketch of my whole being” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 205–240). There is the trace of an acquired organic style and history within bodily movement. My body presents an anonymous, natural self and general world, prior to being grasped in an explicitly self-conscious act. In Heideggerian terms, we have a pre-ontological understanding of being, but a developmental one. Consciousness is temporal: it not only awakens but emerges through growth and development. We are born out of this time that is a field in which events themselves take on finite, contingent, and yet formatively shaping arrangements. Thus it is within time that synthetic dimensions of form, as well as conditions of possibility for new events, unfold as a transformative movement within the content itself.

We encounter this “lateral kinship”¹¹ of time in the animal style of our own body, in the depth of movement folded into the dimensions of our perception of the world. For Merleau-Ponty the self-articulating movement of time amounts to a thickness and depth of time, whereby formative past events endure in the present, and they have a posthumous life insofar as they continue to exist, not as objects of memory or in any form of explicit presence, but rather as the character and style of our bodily possibilities¹². For Merleau-Ponty, synthesis occurs in this interbodily matrix, between bodies, generations and species. There is in time a movement of becoming, a sedimentation of sense that is immanent to relationships in time. Sense-making oc-

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “lateral kinship of all the ‘nows’ which makes for their confusion, their ‘generality,’ a ‘trans-temporality’” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, 7, 4, 3).

¹² Toadvine explains sensibility as rooted in a past that we have always already passed over in our perception and action. This past is present through the evolved organic dimensions or institutions of our natural body and its temporal rhythms: “Sensibility as an organic inheritance is therefore the generative ground of experience, even as it remains for each of us, in our reflective lives, a past that has never been present [...] This prehistory is fundamental to understanding our biological continuity with and difference from other forms of life, as I have argued elsewhere, since it is due to the lateral kinship of this organic prehistory that other animals speak through our voices and gaze out through our eyes” (Toadvine, 2014, 275).

curs as a productive difference that enables a continuous experience: we experience in the wake of these becoming *institutions*. Experience is always a product of this affinity between the events themselves:

Therefore by institution, we were intending here those events in an experience which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable sequel or history—or again events which deposit a sense in me, not just as something surviving or as a residue, but as the call to follow, the demand of a future. (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, 77)

Events do not just elapse, but formatively open a future in ongoing, unpredictable ways. As immanent to time, the principle of synthesis is multiple and cannot be circumscribed by an act of knowledge. Synthesis is open, transformative, and exists in a modality of genuinely novel possibility¹³. This living possibility emerges within time, as transformative inheritance, a transformation that continues the past while giving it new expression and enabling the possibility of different, new future significances.

“Trans-temporality”, as Merleau-Ponty deems it, is this mellifluous possibility for the rhythms and textures of institutions to be transformatively taken up in emergent structurings of possibility. Thus the field of multi-layered possibility extends deeper than our own preconscious affective attunement, to an affective affinity between all bodies, and even to a deeper imperceptible natural time. It is always within the movement of events then, that our organic, perceptual, and cognitive activities are awakened:

I can learn to know the surrounding better through science, but this will always be the reworking of the perceived world, the employment of its structures. Therefore [there is an] instituted and instituting subject, but inseparably, and not a constituting subject; a certain inertia — [the fact of being] exposed to [...] but [this is what] puts an activity en route, an event, the initiation of the present, which is productive after it. (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, 6, 3, 2)

Consciousness exists not only in a temporal flow, an operative non-objectivating intentionality, but also exists as an emergent, self-transforming, finite, material institution. Institutions, as temporal rhythms and structurings of fields from within, take time to emerge. But this emergence gives rise to polyvalent possibilities. The body is one sedimented institution of possibilities, but it points back to a becoming of sense out of nonsense, just as originally arbitrary developments, like the evolution

¹³ See Vladimir Jankélévitch’s commentary of Bergson for an account of this new modal category of an “organic possibility” that exceeds given conditions of possibility or “logical possibility” (Jankélévitch, 1959, 216). For a full discussion of this concept, and Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of it, consult the discussion in *The Birth of Sense* (Beith, 2018, chapter 2, section 5).

of the opposable thumb and the grasp, become necessary for entire worlds of culture and technology¹⁴.

There is an ultimate reversibility between contingency and necessity, a priori and a posteriori, fact and essence. This is because institutions unfold as a progression from nonsense to sense. Transcendental structures are events, situated within, albeit as self-transformations of, space and time. Events are not intrinsically sense-bearing or sense-causing, but rather take on sense through interaction, relationally. There is thus a trajectory of becoming, such that any kind of foundation is retrogressively established. The past of development then, was not present in advance of what it eventuates. There can be no beginning as such, even though there will have been one in the future anterior, or backward becoming of sense. Synthesis is always already underway, multiply, richly, dispersed through fields across developing constellations of sense. The opening of the future, of a domain of sense and possibility, is what equally renders a developmental past determinate. The past itself here is cast in a living field of relief, and awakens out of the present. This past is neither there in itself, nor a spontaneous, transcendental act that constitutes the present:

The relation to the past is different also: consciousness has no consciousness of being *born*. Birth: the passage from the moment where nothing was for X to the moment where everything is also for X. Such is the translation consciousness makes of it, i.e., birth [means] first of all the openness of a future, from a background of non-being from which what was projects itself. (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, 6, 3, 2)

The formative past of consciousness, while organically significant, had to develop and emerge as a human significance out of cultural and evolutionary developments. Similarly the dimensions of sense in the living body must develop and evolve through birth, growth, reproduction and adaptation.

¹⁴ This logic of institution is already being rehearsed in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, where at the end of the chapter on sexuality, Merleau-Ponty explains how our whole existence as a consciousness is thrown into, and emerges from the shared, ambiguous and contingent developments of our inter-bodily life: “Everything is necessary in man, and, for example, it is not through a simple coincidence that the reasonable being is also the one who stands upright or who has opposable thumbs — the same manner of existing is expressed in both of these cases. And everything is also contingent in man in the sense that this human way of existing is not guaranteed to each human child through some essence acquired at birth, in the sense that it must be continuously renewed in him through the accidents of the objective body. Man is an historical idea, not a natural species. In other words, there is no unconditioned possession in human existence, and yet neither is there any fortuitous attribute. Human existence will lead us to revisit our usual notion of necessity and of contingency, because human existence is the change of contingency into necessity through the act of taking up. [...] Why else would our body be, for us, the mirror of our being, if not because it is a *natural self*, a given current of existence, such that we never know if the forces that carry us belong to us or belong to our body—or rather, such that they are never entirely our body’s or entirely ours” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 174–209).

Like birth, institution names the way in which activities take time to unfold and become themselves. Transcendental conditions of possibility must themselves become possible. As much as they are enabled by a past, they are also expressive transformations of the very sense of this past, such that the past is only manifest as trace. The organic body thus only survives as trace, in for example the generalized style of my walking, the anonymous self of my sleep, my deep immersion in a hike, or my sense of losing the limits of my own body as I blend into my aikido partner and sense the dynamic possibilities of our new shared, moving interbodily schema. We live out of an affective immersion in new possibilities, and our consciousness always exists in the wake of this self-articulation happening in nature:

Birth [is not an act] of constitution but the institution of a future. Reciprocally, institution resides in the same genus of Being as birth and is not, any more than birth, an act. There will later be decisionary institutions or contracts, but they are to be understood on the basis of birth and not the reverse. (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, 7, 4, 3)

Note how closely this language echoes Kant's description of the imagination, where acts of perception and judgment are possible only on the basis of an a priori imaginative production or associative synthesis. And with Husserl, here we see that, via birth, our consciousness as such is an organic awakening, and remains undergirded by the anonymous organic self, the "natural subject" we find in the temporal flow and generality of perception. This naturalness, as we saw in Kant and Husserl, is dynamic and multi-layered, an unfolding, self-grounding depth within events. Time is itself expressive, and so we can unite the features we found in the imagination and in nature, but only if we overcome the idol of an absolute a priori, and instead see the transcendental as a movement between events in time, a movement that births and sometimes awakens new institutions of sense.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of sensibility opens the problem of the relationship of consciousness and nature. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, in its earlier form, set the terms to conceptualize synthesis as a productive, generative power undercuts and founds the distinctions between mind and nature, activity and passivity, sensation and understanding, and ultimately, even if Kant does not explicitly say so, fact and essence. By situating consciousness in the flow of time, Edmund Husserl's *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis* reveal how the very structure of sensibility is one of temporal expression. The moment of sensibility is not isolated and punctual, not a given content, but rather calls to consciousness out of a rich, multi-layered

affective field. Where Husserl conceives of this field as an implicit zone of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty sees this dynamic texturing of sense from within as a movement within nature. Nature here is lived generally and anonymously, as a prereflective inter-bodily field where sense develops *between* events. Our affective life points back to this rich field of differences. Instead of structuring experience from the outside, synthesis is a natural, ambiguous proto-production of sense that happens between nature and the imagination. By understanding synthesis as incomplete, as always historically embedded and underway, Merleau-Ponty radically calls into question the distinction between necessity and contingency. Between these three thinkers, then, we can work out the full implications of passive synthesis as a natural affinity between events, a trans-temporality out of which transcendental conditions of possibility emerge as transformative events. The awakening of our consciousness in sensibility is but a species of this continuous *birth* of the transcendental.

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