THEORETICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL PAPER

Ontology and Politics: Interdependence and Radical Contingency in Merleau-Ponty's Political Interworld

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Abstract

This paper takes as its point of departure Merleau-Ponty's assertion: "everything will have to begin again, in politics as well as in philosophy". In pursuing his later work, Merleau-Ponty signalled the need for a reconfiguration of his philosophical vision, so it was no longer caught in Cartesianism and the philosophy of consciousness. This required a turn towards ontology through which he consolidated two key ideas: firstly, a pervasive interdependence articulated in his reversibility thesis and the ontology of 'flesh'; secondly, a radical contingency at the heart of existence. This paper interrogates the political implications of these ideas, and specifically regarding humanism and human progress. Relatedly, I address the question – how might recognitions of ontological interdependence and radical contingency support a flourishing democracy? Merleau-Ponty's early political work concerned the issues of his day – Nazism, Marxism and the status of humanism – and did not engage extensively with these emerging onto-political concerns. Nonetheless, there are indicative reflections in the writings and interviews; the political implications of his ontological interrogations become more thematic in the later works. There is no rupture between the earlier and later works regarding his philosophical vision, although he later distanced himself from Marxism with revelations of the gulags under Stalin and the Korean War. The overarching claim of this paper – we need to rethink politics from the ground up beginning with ontology; ontology is political and the political is intrinsically ontologically informed. Getting the ontology 'right' is a matter of discovery and not theory choice.

Keywords Politics · Ontology · Interdependence · Contingency · Humanism · Merleau-Ponty · Democracy

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Introduction

In the year 2020 the world faced the first iteration of the unprecedented pandemic of COVID 19, directly and indirectly impacting economies, social structures and political systems. This pandemic, moreover, brought into sharper focus the already catastrophic disasters wrought by climate change, threats to biodiversity, the folly of war, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the corruption of the media, and the corruption of political institutions and processes. The COVID years have called into question like few other years before the desperate hopes for 'human progress' and the power of democracies to withstand actual and potential subversion from without and from within.

In re-reading Merleau-Ponty's essays "The War Has Taken Place" and " A Note on Machiavelli," I was struck by how his concerns for post-World War II Europe, his reflections on antisemitism and the destructive complicities between leaders and their supporters, remain disturbingly pertinent today;[1] notably, but certainly not exclusively, in the USA which is still reeling from the events leading up to the end of the Trump presidency – a seditious president who was without question, the most incompetent, narcissistic, dishonest and villainous president in the history of that democracy. It is sobering to remember that he was voted into power in 2016 by a significant number of Republican senators and American voters, many of whom, despite the litany of lies, notably concerning his indisputable defeat in 2020, continue to treacherously and violently support his wilful delusions and lust for power.[2] As for other citizens? Lulled into non-comprehending naivety and complacency, many others have refused to fully acknowledge the social undercurrents which underwrote these events and trusted that humanity, good will and truth would rule the day. And in some other democracies there are these same pernicious dynamics at play corrupting the ideals of independent journalism, justice and political institutions.[3] The devastating consequences of *laissez-faire* democracy conjoined with the evident and easy propagation of lies through media should serve as a wake-up call to all nations that aspire to democracy; democracies must be guaranteed not only by rule of law but also by a citizenry capable of thinking critically and participating ethically in politi-

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[1] "Antisemitism is not a war machine set up by a few Machiavellis and serviced by the obedience of others. It is not the creation of a few people any more than language is, or music. It was conceived in the depths of history. In the last analysis, that cops and con-men conception of history which emphasises agitators and elemental forces, cynicism and stupidity, is naïve; it attributes too much awareness to the leaders and too little to the masses. It does not see any middle ground between the voluntary action of the former and the passive obedience of the latter, between history's subject and object. The Germans made us understand, on the contrary, that leaders are mystified by their own myths and that the troops are their half-knowing accomplices, that no one commands or obeys absolutely" ("The War Has Taken Place" - *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*: 44; please note that I am depending on *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* – hereafter MPR - for many of the texts and essays, which I have as a portable pdf, because at the time of writing I was stuck behind closed borders due to COVID and away from my books).

[2] I prepared the initial draft of this paper during the impeachment trial of Donald Trump and am sickened by the failure in morality and courage of the Republican senators who, while acknowledging his guilt in the violence of the Capitol insurrection, still chose to acquit him.

[3] The shocking military coup in Myanmar, leaders in Russia, Byelorussia, China, Brazil, and Venezuela who are effectively dictators controlling dissent through corruption and violence. And now in 2022, finalizing this paper we have the brutal invasion of Ukraine by Putin.

cal processes. It is increasingly clear, moreover, that the viability of any democracy requires ongoing interrogation and recalibration of the instruments of state to meet the changing social, environmental, and political landscapes of the world; the establishment of a democratic constitution is only the essential beginning.

This paper aims to go beneath the political structures and dynamics to disclose and interrogate their underlying ontological bases; getting the ontology 'right' I propose will support and potentially galvanize efforts to get the politics 'right' for a flourishing democracy, thereby mitigating against the seemingly endless cycles of violence. Some might complain that philosophy is impotent in the face of political forces and that what is needed is activism not philosophy. While this is an understandable stance to take, it is also somewhat simplistic and short-sighted. It fails to recognize that any action is at some point motivated and justified by ideas and ideals behind which people rally, and that these are underpinned by implicit conceptions of human agency, reality, and world. Merleau-Ponty himself responded to just such a criticism clarifying that "the action of the philosopher is much more long-term [than that of the political activist], but it is action all the same"; he rejects the "sort of purism of action which would oblige us to choose between action and truth, [which] is ultimately a caricature of action" and, furthermore, " the philosopher does not have the right to take up residence in the inner life [as does the writer]. The philosopher claims to think the world of everyone" ("Merleau-Ponty in Person," MPR: 379, 380); all perspectives and interests must be taken into account by the philosopher.

This paper takes as its point of departure Merleau-Ponty's assertion not long before his untimely death in 1961 that "everything will have to begin again, in politics as well as in philosophy" ("Merleau-Ponty in Person," in MPR, 2007: 390). It is well known that in pursuing his later work Merleau-Ponty signalled the need for a reconfiguration of his philosophical vision so that it was no longer caught in Cartesianism and the philosophy of consciousness. This required a turn towards ontology through which he consolidated two key ideas that were already implicit in the earlier work: firstly, a thoroughgoing interdependence articulated in his reversibility thesis and the ontology of 'flesh';[4] and secondly, a radical contingency at the heart of existence. And it is important to recognise that these ideas are delineating the same world; they are offering interdependent lenses through which to understand this world. This paper seeks to interrogate the implications for these ideas in the domain of politics in general and specifically with regard to the notions of humanism and human progress. Relatedly, I seek to address the question – how might a recognition of ontological interdependence and radical contingency support the viability of a flourishing democracy? Merleau-Ponty's early political work was concerned with the political issues of his day, notably, Nazism, Marxism and the status of humanism, and did not engage extensively with these emerging onto-political concerns. Nonetheless, there are indicative reflections in the writings and interviews; the political implications of his ontological interrogations become more thematic in the later works. There is thus no rupture as such between the earlier works and the later ones with regard to the direction of his philosophical vision, although he did later distance

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[4] For an analysis of 'The Reversibility Thesis,' which also addresses key critiques from Claude Lefort and Emmanuel Levinas, see Daly 2016b.

himself from Marxism with the revelations of the gulags under Stalin and the Korean War.[5] The overarching claim of this paper is that we need to rethink politics from the ground up beginning with the acknowledgement that ontology is political and that the political is intrinsically ontologically informed; and furthermore, that getting the ontology 'right' is a matter of discovery, and not theory choice as some claim (Coole & Frost, 2010; Mikkola, 2015). Perhaps through these interrogations the very notion of 'human progress' might be salvaged despite recent events, despite the erosion of trust due to the escalation of violence, the destruction of the biosphere, widespread poverty, the corruption of leaders, institutions and media, and despite the challenges faced by democracy, arguably the most evolved of political systems.

Before tackling the political implications of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, I set out below some of the interrelated key ideas that inform this ontology – reversibility, 'the flesh of the world,' interdependence and radical contingency; the interworld is the world to which these ideas belong.

Reversibility and the 'Flesh' of the World

In his general philosophy Merleau-Ponty was aiming to address the two most entrenched problems in the history of philosophy – scepticism and solipsism, and the respective ontologies of dualism and idealism. He begins this task with his analyses of perception,[6] the lived body and the lifeworld. In rejecting the acosmic, disembodied subject of rationalism, Merleau-Ponty returns subjects and consciousness to the particular physical, cultural and historical situation; subjects are located in time and place and in virtue of being embodied, percipient creatures they represent a point of view on the world (Pri.P: 5). Scepticism and solipsism and their ontologies are thus shown to be unsustainable in light of the understandings that consciousness is incarnated and bodies are conscious, that there are no absolute disjunctions between interiorities and exteriorities. This seems, however, to render Merleau-Ponty's account vulnerable to the accusation of perspectivism. If bodies are situated physically, historically and culturally, then perception is perspectival and there may be many pos-

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[5] "If it happens tomorrow that the U.S.S.R. threatens to invade Europe and to set up in every country a government of its choice, a different question would arise and would have to be examined. That question does not arise at the moment" ("Humanism and Terror," in MPR: 184f.). Such a reflection is eerily prescient for today after the annexation of Crimea, of puppet governments in Chechnya and Belorussia, and now Ukraine under brutal siege by Putin."It is always unbecoming to cite or to comment on oneself. But, on the other hand, anyone who has published his opinions on vital problems is obliged, if he changes them, to say so and to say why. In such matters, one cannot give an author the right to produce his ideas as a locomotive produces smoke; he must relate what he thought yesterday to what he thinks today. Just as he would be wrong to look to his former writings for all the ideas he holds today – this would be to admit that he has not lived, that he has learned nothing in the interim – so he must explain the change" ("Epilogue to Adventures of the Dialectic" in MPR: 313). Merleau-Ponty here alerts his readers that his views have indeed changed and that he no longer supports Marxism.

[6] "… since the beginning, the choice of perception as the major theme of his work is subordinated to the problem of the relation between the soul and the body; perception is one of the best ways of expressing this 'mélange' of the body and mind" (de Aubert, 2005). And further, I would add that Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how perception also reveals the intertwinings of self and other, mind and world (Daly, 2020).

sible conflicting perspectives. And so, the epistemic status of perception is reduced to a relativism. It is with the reversibility thesis presented notably in *The Visible and the Invisible* that Merleau-Ponty begins to address these interconnected problems of perspectivism and relativism. What is reversibility? Reversibility proposes an inherent relationality between selves, others, things and world; that these are co-constituted due to the internal relations that hold between them. For example, it is impossible to apprehend a 'self' without 'another'; ipseity and alterity are interdependent; and worldless selves are unfindable in our experience.[7] One of the metaphors Merleau-Ponty uses to describe such reversibilities is that of "the finger of a glove – that is turned inside out" (VI:263); we do not need to reverse the finger in order to know that there is an invisible inside. The invisible is the lining and depth of the visible (VI:149); they are "the obverse and reverse of one another" (VI:152).

Importantly, reversibility is to be understood as dialectical or aesthetic, not as a literal or mechanistic reversal. Reversibility brings together the erroneously assumed disjunctions of body-mind, immanence-transcendence, self-other, and "the most difficult point" (VI:149), the ultimate reversibility (VI:155) which Merleau-Ponty argues is at play between *the Visible* (the originary, phenomenal world) and *the Invisible* (the cultural worlds of language, reflection and expression).

For Merleau-Ponty, the shared world is revealed through the harmonious and conflictual interactions experienced in meaningful expression. Merleau-Ponty stresses that while there are trans-social and trans-cultural structures of our bodily experiences that are irreducible to personal psychological specificities, "… to be a consciousness, or rather to be an experience, is to have an inner communication with the world, the body, and others, to be with them rather than beside them. To concern oneself with psychology is necessarily to encounter, beneath the objective thought that moves among ready-made things, a primary opening onto things without which there could be no objective knowledge" (PPb: 2012: 99; PPa: 111). Articulating these insights Merleau-Ponty acknowledges is problematic, most particularly due to the reifying tendencies of language which had perpetuated some of the Cartesian issues in his earlier philosophy. Finding an adequate language to communicate the insights is paramount, because as he has proposed – "language accomplishes thought" (PPa; 207; PPb: 183); without language thought remains obscure and incomplete. For these reasons he sought a more evocative and poetic mode of articulating the difficult ontological ideas; vision replaces perception, 'wild logos' replaces expression, 'wild being' replaces the pre-reflective world, reversibility replaces dialectic, and 'flesh' articulates the relationality that holds between things, entities, bodies, ideas, language and expression (Daly, 2016a: 123).

The choice of the term 'flesh' to articulate his ontology may seem puzzling to many; however, it serves Merleau-Ponty's purposes well in highlighting the generativity of existence – why there is 'something' rather than 'nothing' and that this 'something' is radically fecund – it is "a pregnancy of possibles" (VI: 250). Despite Merleau-Ponty's careful articulations of this concept, there has been a tendency to

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[7] See Daly 2016b which examines the notion of reversibility in depth and defends it against the criticisms that there may be asymmetries and non-reciprocity, and that the defined alterities are incompatible with ontology.

give substantive misinterpretations to the idea of 'flesh'. He cautions: "We must not think flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit – for then it would be a union of contradictories – but we must think it …. as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being" (VI:147).[8] Our responsiveness to the world, like the metaphor of the glove, fits exactly, like "flesh responding to flesh" (VI:209). 'Flesh' reveals that apparent oppositions are not absolute disjunctions, but rather reversible, they belong to each other – the visible and the invisible, the phenomenal and the cultural, the sensible and the intelligible, facticity and logos; these disjunctions are modalities of flesh, distinguishable but inseparable. The inherent reversible relationality between the dyadic terms achieves Merleau-Ponty's non-dualist, non-monist ontology. Interdependence at the level of ontology underwrites the interdependencies in external relations; the external relationalities are instantiations of the relational ontology; beings instantiate Being; existence as life-world is the appearing of Being.[9]

In contrast, the ontology of dualism maintains the absolute disjunctions between interiority and exteriorities, between mind and body, between self and other, between self and world; the ontology of reductive materialism banishes interiority, reducing consciousness and inner life to material processes and conditions. Both ontologies when translated into human interactions and collective life establish and sustain the habits of self-interest, greed, entitlement and prejudice, which are only somewhat constrained by religious and secular humanist ideologies. To reverse and undo these deleterious habits from a non-ideological basis we must begin with self-conception and world-conception; not ideal (supernatural or utopian) but real. Hence the necessity "of a return to ontology" (VI: 165, 183, 200); and again, as stated above, ontology is not mysterious, it is discoverable, it is everywhere; as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, "it is in the painter's articulation of the world, in the scientist's flashes of insight drawn from things, in the passions in the modes of labour and sociality, and so forth" (TD: 10).[10] How then does radical contingency fit into this account? If things, entities, events, processes, subjects and worlds are defined by interdependence, they are not self-subsisting and independent but rather depend on external causes and conditions which are always changing; because of this, radical contingency is an essential and unavoidable part of this account. We know these facts of change and contingency well at the intellectual level; however, at the level of affect and action we behave as though this was not in fact the case; we are ever in denial of finitude and uncertainty – and this denial is perhaps most starkly demonstrated in the domain of politics.

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[8] For an insightful discussion and defence of this interpretation see (Dillon, 1988).

[9] See Daly 2021 for a discussion of *Sein* (Being – the ontological) *und Seiendes* (beings – the ontic) and the regular confusions between these terms.

[10] Recognising the need to address the political implications of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, philosophers have developed various approaches: Diana Coole, for example, has focused on the relation between negativity and agency and how Merleau-Ponty deploys these notions to challenge political rationalism and dualist ontologies (Coole, 2001; 2007); whereas Rosalyn Diprose has chosen to pursue her investigations drawing on the notions of 'institution' and 'passivity' so as to "understand human agency in a way that provides a foundation of normativity and the means of redressing subjection, without recourse to classical notions" (Diprose, 2009: 8); and Jérôme Melançon (2021) has focused on the transformative potential of Merleau-Ponty's ontology for addressing political issues through a reappraisal of humanism.

The account I develop below seeks to reveal how the key notions of interdependence and radical contingency reconfigure our understanding of the nature of political subjects, the defining features of effective political agency and of how the political sphere can evolve to support human progress.

Human Progress, Humanism and Democracy

Grappling with the political domain is a task few of the great thinkers have eschewed, undoubtedly due to the grand architectonics of their philosophical visions which necessitated that collective life be confronted and analysed towards an understanding if not a resolution of conflict and violence in the service of 'human progress'. This idea of 'human progress,' reaching its *apogée* with the Enlightenment and the supreme confidence in the capacity of reason and science to advance humanity towards a glorious future, we now appreciate as simultaneously inflated and disingenuous. The benefits of 'enlightened' advances accrued to the elites and achieved at the expense of reason's others and to their profound detriment are documented in harrowing accounts of the slave trade, vivisections of animals, the treatment of the 'mad' and the entrenched oppression of women, to name the main victims of these times. And have we progressed? Somewhat perhaps? However, despite the 'Rousseauian' optimism of some who extol the "better angels of our nature" (Pinker, 2013)[11] it is evident that, some significant gains in some parts of the world notwithstanding, the same victims still suffer deprivations and violence, and the same elites still enjoy unwarranted privilege. This questionable progress is all the more unsettling given the ease of access to information via the mainstream media and social media, starkly exposing the regular failures in moral courage and political will; ignorance is not a convincing defence. The familiarity of these sickening truths, that the unjust and perfidious are acquitted and the pleas of their victims and the remonstrations of the honourable are dismissed, "in no way diminishes the force with which they strike us every time we meet them with the shock of recognition" (Preface to *Signs*, in *MPR*, 2007: 320).

After the war in Algeria, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> In politics, one has the oppressive sensation of a breakthrough that always has to be remade. We are not even speaking of chance and the unforeseen …. the case is really more serious; it is as if some evil mechanism whisked events away at just the moment they appeared on the scene, as if history …. half opened up to the truth only in brief moments of disarray, the rest of the time ingenuously

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[11] Pinker asserts: "The decline of violent behaviour has been paralleled by a decline in attitudes that tolerate or glorify violence, and often the attitudes are in the lead" (Preface to Pinker, 2013). Such a view is completely unconvincing when we know that we are in fact living through the pornification of violence in our television, film and gaming medias, conjoined with a laxity in the juridical system which regularly fails to adequately constrain and punish those who act out these 'fictitious' entertainments. Furthermore, the failure to recognise the deep corruption of our minds through exposure to such violence (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Doidge, 2007, 2010; Krahé et al., 2011; Estrada et al., 2020) can only be regarded as a devolution, not progress.

working to block all the things "surpassed", working to bring back the stock formulas and roles, and to persuade us in short that nothing comes to pass. (Preface to *Signs*, in *MPR*, 2007: 319)

This pessimistic statement from Merleau-Ponty demands closer examination. "Chance and the unforeseen" are most certainly key existential elements of life as we know it, and these are reflective of Merleau-Ponty's recognition of radical contingency in the political domain. On the one hand corrupt and tyrannical leaders seek to reduce their vulnerability to these elements through the violent exercise of power and on the other hand democratic leaders and institutions seek to lessen the negative impact of such uncertainties on the populace through rule of law, policy and social programs. But as Merleau-Ponty cautions, the situation is far more serious than existential contingency. If not merely "chance and the unforeseen" but more seriously an "evil mechanism," we must ask is he invoking an external "evil mechanism" in the manner of Descartes' evil demon or is he pointing to an "evil mechanism" internal to the political subject, such as greed. Keeping faith with Merleau-Ponty's secularism, this "evil mechanism" is not to be found in some other-worldly entity or force, but is rather founded in ignorance, which underwrites greed and aggression; specifically, the ignorance that fails to recognise the deep and pervasive interdependencies at the heart of socio-political life, and I propose it is this ignorance which stymies efforts towards human progress.[12]

The notion of human progress outside of theological Garden of Eden narratives of the fall, purification and redemption take off with the enlightenment State of Nature accounts. These diverse non-theological accounts typically seek to explain existence as originating in either dystopian or utopian pre-histories, the first from which we are advancing through the necessary constraints of a social contract and the second the untainted past of innocence and natural goodness towards which we need to return through an enlightened social contract; these are both invested in a linear conception of time and anchored in justifications that have their roots in the past. The anguish of trying to escape from the Hobbesian brutish life, the anguish of nostalgia for the Rousseauian utopia, as much as the anguish of Germany in the 1930s seeking solutions in anti-Semitism, as much as the anguish of large swathes of the American population in 2020 and beyond seeking relief in racism and conspiracy theories, will all fail irretrievably in Merleau-Ponty's analysis because as he insightfully observes, despite the rhetoric of future flourishing and greatness, anguish is mired in past loss, harm and trauma and "always turns away from the future" ("A Note on Machiavelli," in MPR: 45). While Marxism offers something new in Merleau-Ponty's view because it avoids equivocal principles and aims to ground progress in material conditions which set the stage for a revolutionary power aimed at overcoming oppression and

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[12] Some might recognise a parallel here with 'Socratic intellectualism' and its key claim "No one knowingly does wrong". However, it is important to be clear, the ignorance, the failure in knowledge here is not a rational Platonic knowledge. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between what he refers to as the 'true' and the 'real' - and these generate two different kinds of understanding. In the first, the knowledge is of a purely rational, intellectual kind – exemplified in domains like geometry and logic – and with this kind of knowledge there is potential closure. In the second, which depends on perception, the knowledge gained is progressive and never final.

exploitation, it too is a flawed vision of the human situation ("A Note on Machiavelli," in MPR: 133). Merleau-Ponty describes the peak of optimism with regard to the human enlightenment project, when "human nature had truth and justice for attributes, as other species have fins or wings" ("Man and Adversity," in MPR: 191) and questions whether the problems of a real humanism can ever be solved with either Machiavelli or Marx. Even in rejecting both political projects, what is clear for Merleau-Ponty is that they have formulated some of the conditions necessary to articulate a *real* humanism not hostage to Enlightenment thinking. As Jérôme Melançon points out, 'humanism' as generally understood is not the humanism of Merleau-Ponty; Merleau-Ponty revives a more extended conception of humanism as found in Machiavelli, Montaigne and Marx which "confronts the relationship of man to man and the constitution of a common situation and a common history between men as a problem" (*Signs*: 223; and see Melançon, 2010: 624). Here we see the political presentation of a characteristic move across all Merleau-Ponty's works – he is rejecting the *pensée de survol* that looks on from above; the rationalist spectator mode that pretends to offer an objective view. Without understanding the real nature of subjectivity of the political agent, the real nature of intersubjectivity "man to man,"[13] the forces that animate political events become mysterious. Furthermore, the embodied, percipient, co-constituted subject described in all Merleau-Ponty's writings can never be the pure rationalist, spectatorial subject of Enlightenment humanism because this Merleau-Pontian subject is always immersed in a radically contingent, messy, shared world.

Merleau-Ponty identifies the failure to embrace the *inherent* contingency and vulnerability of collective existence as undermining all totalizing political projects whether fascist, Marxist or the classical humanist. The universalist ideologies they expound aimed at an ideal future are not grounded in reality, and it is fear of contingency which motivates their ideals and efforts. And to be clear, both evil and good are contingent. Even the hopes for classical humanism are doomed to failure because it is a "humanism of necessary progress [which is no more than] a secularized theology" ("Man and Adversity," in MPR: 203). Nonetheless, a 'real' humanism[14] might be possible in an ongoing engagement with radical contingency and interdependence through which the "astonishing junction between fact and meaning, between my body and myself, my self and others, my thought and my speech, violence and truth"[15] is confirmed ("Man and Adversity," in MPR: 205).

It might be asked – does human progress in the political domain depend on democracy? Although an extensive justification for such a claim is beyond the scope of this paper it is clear that we evolve together, not in isolation, and this is central to the

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[13] Merleau-Ponty is of course speaking the language of his time; this is not aiming to elide women and their role in political life – and in fact it is the work of Merleau-Ponty that has contributed some notions that have become key to feminist theorising.

[14] 'Humanism' is typical of the language Merleau-Ponty is using at this juncture, and later this is replaced with the notion of interanimality (N: 189, 271, 307, Note 11; VI: 274); human exceptionalism is thus rejected explicitly in the later works.

[15] This last dyad invites consideration of the wider context of Merleau-Ponty's concern with the uptake of truths and the aggression that has been historically (and currently) manifest in the violence towards truth-tellers, such as towards the many writers, thinkers, philosophers, artists, reformers and activists.

arguments for interdependence. Efforts to progress independently, one nation over another, one individual over another, have inexorably led us to the problems we face today. Democracy with its egalitarian ethos and egalitarian structures depends on the implicit recognition of interdependence. Furthermore, democracies in virtue of their dynamic nature have a built-in instability – or perhaps better *multistability*; the leaders are never intended to have lifelong tenure, but through the contingent processes of elections leadership will change over time and tenure depends not on the violent exercise of power but on the often unpredictable will of the people. In this way legitimacy is assured; not by divine grace, but through the acquiescence to be ruled by a leadership that represents the interests of the people as the people themselves understand these interests. Dictators have neither of these sources of legitimation. Although this seems obvious to state – no one wants to live under a dictatorship. Why else do people try to escape? Dictatorships are thoroughly retributive in nature; retrospective retribution directed to those who have opposed the dictator in the past, ongoing retribution to those who oppose the dictator in the present, and pre-emptive retribution anticipating those who might oppose the dictator in the future. The retributive mindset of dictators across time is thus respectively driven by hate, fear and paranoia. Dictatorships only serve the dictator; we can even say that a dictatorship is the political instantiation of ontological solipsism. A flourishing democracy, in stark contrast, instantiates ontological interdependence and is driven by the dual *ethea* of distributive justice and restorative justice; success is measured in the effectiveness of the social, political and legal structures and processes to support just distribution and the restoration of harmonious social relations. So too, the *multistable* structures and processes of a *true* democracy ensure it has the resources to respond with agility to the contingencies of existence. On the bases of such recognitions, it is not unreasonable to assert that *true* democracy is the political system that is best able to support human progress because it works within and with the realities of interdependence and radical contingency, not against them. Importantly, the efforts towards progress are never finally completed, they remain lived tasks requiring ongoing interrogation and recalibration to meet the particularities of the common situation at hand. Utopia is not the destination in Merleau-Ponty's account.

Interdependence in the Political Domain

Positivistic ontologies such as those that underpin enlightenment science and enlightenment politics, conjoined with an inflated promotion of a human progress measured against very select criteria that favour the elites, unfortunately continue to inform present day conceptions and have become both obfuscatory and obstructive. This is why Merleau-Ponty's critiques and interrogations continue to remain highly relevant today.[16] The ontologies of dualism, idealism and reductive materialism with

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[16] See also Melançon: "the reason why *Humanism and Terror* is not anachronistic in 1947, and it is not outdated today, is that it describes how war and chaos are never already inscribed in people's spirits – and that there is still a chance for peace and humanity, which we must defend" (2010: 632). As indicated in the abstract and in this paper, there is a shift for Merleau-Ponty in his commitment to Marxism towards a

their rationalist epistemologies were the persisting targets of Merleau-Ponty's critical analyses throughout all his works. These ontologies have led to misapprehensions within various theoretical frameworks informing the 'worlds' of philosophy, science, medicine and politics, and downstream further into practices and institutions; these are the "evil mechanisms" that continually undermine progress.[17]

The consequences of erroneous ontologies are explored at length by Merleau-Ponty, notably in his discussions of Descartes, one of his most regular philosophical interlocutors. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the early Descartes and the post-cogito Descartes. In the beginning of his meditations, Descartes harnessed doubt for his interrogations, not with the aim of enshrining scepticism as his final destination, but solely to serve his method to achieve his aims of finding certain knowledge, and as such Descartes grappled like no Western philosopher before with the radical contingency at the heart of existence and the epistemological correlate – doubt. Whether his later abandonment of radical doubt in favour of a "non-deceiving God" is pure political and existential necessity in the face of the inquisitorial machinations of the Catholic Church remains in question. What is clear, however, is that after the *cogito* moment his philosophical reasoning in the published *Meditations* begins to equivocate and falter, only regaining rigour in the exchanges of letters with his interlocutors, notably with Mersenne and Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia.

Merleau-Ponty's critical appraisal of Descartes' failure to persist with his radical doubt and the Cartesianism that ensues with concrete consequences for all disciplines and for understanding the world more broadly, is summarized comprehensively by Diana Coole thus:

> In order to challenge the rationalist foundations of modernity and to restore an appreciation of contingency and intersubjectivity to politics, Merleau-Ponty would need to contest Descartes's first principle and all that follows from it: the ontological split between mind and body and the accompanying epistemological opposition between subject and object; the primacy of a self-coincident, disembodied, rational consciousness (the *cogito*); the solipsistic ignorance of other subjects that follows from it; the rejection of the senses as valid sources of knowledge; the metaphysical guarantee of truth and the transcendental faith in certainty; the reduction of the phenomenal world to a homogenous field of objects linked by quantitative relations; the methodological faith that it is possible or desirable to lay aside one's desires or situation in order to obtain a value-free overview of the world; the belief that mathematics is the privileged route to knowledge about nature; the methodological imperative to analyse complex problems by decomposing them into simple parts, then deductively resynthesising them. On all these issues, he would argue that Descartes's doubting was insufficiently radical and that his unwarranted assumptions are pernicious.

non-communist left stance. His thoroughgoing critique of Marxism and its defenders, notably Sartre and de Beauvoir, is articulated in his later political book, *Adventures of a Dialectic*.

[17] In the account I am presenting here, each of these 'worlds' can be conceived as an 'interworld' according to the terms discussed; and collectively they comprise the 'interworld' of existence. Any 'interworld' (scientific, political, socio-economic, etc.,) also demonstrates interdependencies internally and with all the others.

They survive as ontological prejudices the provisional nature of which is the responsibility of the phenomenologist to expose by returning to the life-world that rationalism occluded, but out of which it emerges. (Coole, 2007: 32, 33)

It is not difficult to appreciate that the consequential list detailed above has provided much grist for the philosophical mill; phenomenologists and enactivists have taken up these tasks, exposing thereby the impoverishment of accounts still caught in dualism, idealism or reductive materialism. In the context of politics, the ontology of dualism underwrites the dichotomous political categories of citizens and foreigners, home-land state and enemy state, leaders and those who are led, and fails to adequately take account of the interdependence between the terms of these dyads. Rather, each of the terms is addressed as an independent sovereign individual or sovereign state, and as such political leadership and institutions are obsessively preoccupied with protecting property and freedoms, constantly securing borders, and more generally seeking protection from uncertainties and violence from within and without. This ongoing obsession comes at a high price and is exemplified well in the story of *The Sword of Damocles* in which the apparent pleasures and privileges of power are exposed as inherently precarious and anxiety-inducing; dictators are joyless, loveless creatures despite the carefully orchestrated demonstrations of 'love' from those motivated by fear, wilful ignorance and stupidity. As this paper proposes, the consequences of the failure to embrace contingency and to recognise the deep and pervasive interdependencies are far-reaching. Leaders who have gained their position illegitimately suffer constant fear of being deposed, and so must ensure they are always feared by the people as Machiavelli cogently observes, violently suppressing dissent and opposition; and even those whose claim to power is legitimate "must be violent and cruel at times, but only episodically, because [they] cannot create or replace the assent that founds [their legitimacy]. No power can be absolute" (Melançon, 2010: 628). Apart from the issue of legitimate leadership there are also the consequences of ongoing wars to secure borders and resources, refugees, avoidable environmental disasters, rampant exploitation, devastating poverty and abuse of the vulnerable. All the catastrophes we know too well, and which call into question what it means to be human, human agency, and the increasingly dubious idea of 'human progress'.

Merleau-Ponty's ground-breaking challenges to positivism, objectivism, dualism, idealism, reductive materialism, and rationalism all depend on his ontology of interdependence, and this serves to radically reconfigure our understandings of key philosophical and political investigations. In the domain of politics, the questions that need to be addressed are the following: if interdependence and internal relations hold between political subjects, both citizens and leaders, and if this interdependence also undergirds the relations between subjects and worlds – what is the nature of political subjects? What are the defining features of effective political agency? How does the political sphere evolve? This evolution begins, according to Merleau-Ponty's analyses, by moving beyond oppositional perceptions of self and other, self and world, in recognizing our deep interdependence and this is a matter of discovery not of ontological theory choice. Why is this important? Some may seek to distance themselves from the idea of an inherent structure of the world (Hacking, 1999; Haslanger, 2012) because it is feared this must be a fixed monolith and it would thereby pre-

clude the idea that things could have been otherwise; and they may imagine that this must imply some hardline deterministic realism in opposition to the claims of constructionism – that cultural meanings and socio-political entities are constructed and so can change. How the inherent structure of the world is conceived resolves this impasse; if it is conceived in phenomenological and enactivist terms then this is not problematic: the world is inherently interdependent and radically contingent. This interdependence and contingency are both discoverable and are regularly disclosed in our encounters with others and our world; they are not remote, mysterious, ideal structures superimposed on reality and experience; we know them well but have forgotten this due to the tendency of perception to efface itself in the process of engaging with the world so that what is perceived appears as distinct independently existing entities and objectively out there, and, also in part due to the mystifications of language.[18] Interdependence and radical contingency are hidden in plain sight.

'Interdependence' and 'interconnectedness' are now increasingly common catch-cries embedded in our everyday discourse and there is an almost unconscious recognition that these do reflect reality. Nonetheless, the fully conscious appreciation of why this is so and the implications for this pervasive relationality are lacking. This is where phenomenology and specifically the phenomenology developed by Merleau-Ponty can offer elucidation.

Political Subjectivity and Political Worlds

Merleau-Ponty rejects political rationalism with its discourse of mastery, violence and obsession with hierarchies and so too the rationalist conception of the political subject: "Nothing authorizes us to believe that the human world is a cluster of rational wills, that it could, like a learned society, be governed by an immutable rule based on a law derived from timeless principles or make its decisions through academic debates in which the most rational end up convincing all the others" ("Merleau-Ponty in Person," in MPR: 389). For Merleau-Ponty, all subjects, including the political subject, are first and foremost embodied, percipient, sentient creatures situated temporally, historically, culturally and socio-economically. The inextricable sociality at the core of subjectivity is perpetually destabilising, even maddening at times so that, as referenced in Merleau-Ponty, Montaigne reflects that there is "a witchcraft in social life" whereby "everyone puts in the place of his thoughts their reflection in the eyes and idle chatter of others" (S: 204). And this is exactly the conclusion Sartre depicted in his famous scenario, *Le regard*; that we must resist the shame-inducing objectifications of others and objectify them first; "hell is other people". But why is this so and must human relations be doomed to conflict? Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty has argued, subjectivity is an intersubjectivity (PP, 2006: xiii; PP, 2012: lxxxiv); we are co-constituted at the level of ontology. Conflict while possible, even

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[18] "Although the world of perception is the core of our life, we have the tendency to forget this because critical thought appears autonomous in that it can stand back and capture perceptual experience in words, '*bare propositions* which it discusses, accepts or rejects,' and all the while this higher order process loses the awareness of the perceived world which underlies and gives meaning to 'the verified true and the false'" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 3).

likely, need not lead inevitably to violence;[19] Merleau-Ponty argues for an account of lateral mutuality and respect. Given these ontological considerations it is clear that we must respond to the imperative to rethink the political in terms of intersubjectivity and interworlds. If we fail to do this, then we remain stuck with Sartre's or Machiavelli's "collective life is hell" ("A Note on Machiavelli," in MPR: 123) in which fear and aggression are inevitable outcomes of individualistic goals underpinned by dualist thinking. Within such individualistic frameworks, despite all efforts and in fact *because* of our efforts to extricate ourselves from uncertainties and vulnerability at the expense of others, we become more deeply mired in violence and suffering. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> I live my fear in the fear I inspire. But by a counter-shock, the suffering that I cause rends me along with my victim; and so cruelty is no solution but must always be begun again. There is a circuit between the self and others, a communion of Black Saints. The evil that I do I do to myself, and in struggling against others I struggle equally against myself. ("A Note on Machiavelli," in MPR: 123)[20]

Human life, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, involves a "double belongingness" to the order of the object but also to the order of the subject, in virtue of being incarnated as a body both sensed and sentient – the two phases of flesh (VI: 137, 138); the intertwining of these two phases is the reversibility which is neither disjunction nor coincidence/ identity because it always miscarries at the last moment (VI: 9, 272) thereby opening up a crack for contingency (VI: 123, 148); the unity-in-difference, the chiasm. Human life involves a "double belongingness," as well in virtue of internal relations, a "double incorporation," the "I" belonging to the ''we,'' and the "we" incorporated in the "I"; a primordial "we" prior to the concrete intersubjective encounter (Scheler, 1913, 1970; S: 175).[21] For these reasons, human agency simply cannot be adequately addressed within individualist frameworks but must take account of our collective constitution; subjectivity is an intersubjectivity and action can only be understood in this deep connectivity with others.[22] As Merleau-Ponty illustrates this, freedom is not an isolated privilege or capacity but is "sustained by

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[19] Melançon proposes in his book, *La politique dans l'adversité* (2018: 145–166), that for Merleau-Ponty conflict is inevitable, but violence is not. Lateral mutuality and respect thus take their meaning from there being answers to conflicts that are different from violence and these might in fact be maintained even in violence; furthermore, the effects of non-violence, Melançon suggests, might be crueler than the immediate use of violence.

[20] See also: "Evil is not created by us or by others; it is born in this web that we have spun between us – and that is suffocating us" (Preface to *Signs*, MPR: 349); or: "Thus, when we look closely at things, we find culprits nowhere but accomplices everywhere; so it is that we all played a part in the events of 1939" ("The War Has Taken Place," MPR: 43).

[21] "… I am introducing transcendental subjectivity as an intersubjectivity to get a sense of the manner in which the first-person perspective is never just a single point of view but is already integrated into an infinite network of other points of view, the open-ended 'nexus' (*Zusammenhang*) of intersubjectivity of what Husserl calls the 'we-community'" (*Wir-Gemeinschaft*, Husserl 1954: 416, in Moran 2020: 25).

[22] Merleau-Ponty points this out as a key difference between himself and Sartre: "In Sartre there is a plurality of subjects but no intersubjectivity … the world and history are no longer a system with several

the freedom of others…. one is not free alone" ("The War Has Taken Place," in MPR: 44). There is also a "double-belongingness" between nations, and so these freedoms and constraints between individuals also transfer to freedoms and constraints between nations. Rigid nationalism is unsustainable. Perhaps it worked better in the past with smaller populations, less mobility and easily distinguishable national identities and borders, but today in the age of globalisation it is entirely untenable; wars, brutalities, repression, the immense global suffering of continuing starvation despite surplus crops and the desperation of refugees seeking a safe home, are all clear evidence of this failure to recognise the need to reconfigure our understandings of nation and nationality. Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'interworld' maps more effectively onto our experience than the notions of sovereign subjects or sovereign nations.[23]

Existence Defined by Radical Contingency and the Implications for Politics

… everything in man is contingency in the sense that this human manner of existence is not guaranteed to every human child through some essence acquired at birth, and in the sense that it must be constantly reforged in him through the hazards encountered by the objective body. Man is an historical idea and not a natural species…. Human existence … is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking in hand. (PPa, 2006: 197–198; PPb, 2012: 174)

The failure to address not only the interdependencies as detailed above, but also the radical contingency at the heart of existence undermines political systems, and correlatively renders socio-political critique and action less efficacious. The idea that there are objective realities independent of causes, conditions, contexts and the knowing subject, is one that Merleau-Ponty challenges throughout his writings and across a number of domains.[24] Relatedly, the reification underpinning justifications for oppression and exploitation has long been a focus for political critique, and with constructionism we have one of the more sustained and successful of these efforts; however, constructionism does not address the fundamental ontological dimensions which either support or challenge oppressions. Enactivism and its progenitor phenomenology have the philosophical resources to address this lacuna.

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points of entry but a sheaf of irreconcilable perspectives which never coexist and which are held together only by the hopeless heroism of the I" ("Epilogue of Adventures of the Dialectic," in MPR: 294, 295).

[23] For an insightful analysis drawing on neurobiology which demonstrates the interdependencies in economic inequalities, see: Sapolsky, Robert. M. Nov. 1st 2018, "How economic inequality inflicts real biological harm: the growing gulf between rich and poor inflicts biological damage on bodies and brains," *Scientific American*. Sapolsky, a neuroendocrinologist based at Stanford, tellingly observes that the biological damage caused by the gap between rich and poor, affects the rich as well as the poor.

[24] Nonetheless, this does not constitute a rejection of objectivity *tout court*, see Dermot Moran's scholarly deliberations on this issue "Defending the Objective Gaze as a Self-transcending Capacity of Human Subjectivity," (Moran 2020: 21–43).

> This is an empowering vision—the fundamental is radically contingent. And so being active participants in the sense-making of their worlds which goes against the status quo, is in itself a political act; being able to maintain an active sense-making role despite and against oppressive structures and coercive forces is how the social domain is transformed. And while we might say—well yes—this is obvious, and this is what happens—it is within the enactivist vision that this is ontologically and metaphysically legitimated. (Daly, 2021)

Everything must be forged and reforged; interpretations of our world are always up for negotiation. Merleau-Ponty brings notions of rationality and rational subjects down to earth in his rejection of the *pensée de survol* and its pretensions to objective thought which claims to look on from above without any involvement in the act of looking (PriP: 13); the 'God's-eye-view' or, as Thomas Nagel describes it, the 'view from nowhere' (Nagel, 1986). In virtue of being embodied and as such always situated with regard to time, place and culture, without a 'gods-eye-view,' our freedoms are never absolute but are rather defined by the contingent circumstances of our birth and life; contingency is essential to being the kinds of beings we are. It is the recognition of this core, pervasive contingency that opens up the possibility of a responsiveness to others that is deeply moral, a responsiveness that is generously attuned to the particularities of the other and the given situation (PriP: 26; PriP: 70). Nonetheless, this moral stance does not translate necessarily into the domain of politics which is most often fixated on resisting the impenetrability and contingency of the future through acts of oppression and violence. But there is a paradox here, as Merleau-Ponty has identified, in that such violence deprives those perpetrating these acts of legitimacy and at the same time authorizes violence by those in opposition (HT: xxxvi); the outcome – the endless cycle of violence and retribution.

We must ask then – how is it possible after violence, genocide and oppression to return to the generous meeting of others in the particularities of the given situation? The conflict and reconciliation processes aim to achieve future harmonious co-existence through three stages: firstly, replacing fear with non-violent co-existence; secondly, by building confidence and trust; and finally in the development of empathy. It is clear that each one of these stages depends on the recognition of sameness, of fellow-feeling, of the primordial 'we' – as discussed earlier; that there are deep and unavoidable interdependencies between individuals as much as between different peoples and nations, that we all face the same contingent future, and we all share the same world.

Concluding Comments: Possible Worlds and Possible Futures

Merleau-Ponty's analyses offer a rethinking of the political domain through the lens of his relational ontology. He urges that obfuscation of the ontological level with the consequent distortion of and inertia in the political sphere must be confronted; interdependence and radical contingency are the key ontological truths that are there to be discovered. As I have proposed, interdependence and radical contingency are hidden in plain sight; we know them well. We must ask – what prevents clear and courageous

discovery? If the discovery is only intellectual, it only motivates weakly; discovery must be founded on an unflinching, lived understanding. James Baldwin proposes our reluctance to confront interdependence is revealed in the phenomenology of hate – "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain" (1963). And I further imagine one of the reasons people cling to their ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense, once their ignorance is exposed, they will be forced to deal with their fears. At the political level the most sickening manifestation of this clinging to both hate and ignorance is war. President Dwight Eisenhower (1953) describes the stark and irrefutable interdependencies exposed in political choices that sustain the folly of war and human suffering:

> Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children….
>
> This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron. (Eisenhower, 1953)[25]

This paper began with questioning the aspirations for 'human progress' against the dismal reckoning presented to us regularly in the media. I have proposed there is an intimate relationship between human progress, humanism and democracy. Merleau-Ponty's humanism is not that of the inflated idea promoted in Enlightenment terms of rationality, justice and truth as being innate to humans. Rather, without rejecting these values, he brings them down to earth and articulates a humanism consonant with the thinking of Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Marx in the recognition that the humanism needed is not an ideal but rather negotiated man-to-man, and which takes account of our embodied, historical and cultural situatedness. I have further argued that democracy offers a political system motivated by the dual *ethea* of distributive justice and restorative justice, flexibly attuned to the realities of radical contingency and ontological interdependence. In contrast, dictatorships, autocracies and military juntas instantiate ontological solipsism, they seek to violently resist the realities of radical contingency and ontological interdependence and are driven by an ethos of retribution.

I have proposed that we need to rethink politics from the ground up beginning with the acknowledgement that ontology is political and that the political is intrinsically ontologically informed; and furthermore, that getting the ontology 'right' is a matter of discovery, and not theory choice as some have claimed. Merleau-Ponty's non-dualist, relational ontology of interdependence, articulated in his reversibility thesis

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[25] I include this because it is painfully clear such insights have not been taken up in the political domain – as the generals of the coup in Myanmar continue to slaughter their own citizens on the street and in their homes; as China is amassing warships around Taiwan and the Philippines; as Russia is sending military troops to the Arctic and is amassing tanks and military on the border with Ukraine and opposite Alaska (and now has invaded Ukraine); and Europe, the USA, UK and Australia are ramping up their war-machines in readiness for any potential threat.

and the ontology of 'flesh,' along with his recognition of the radical contingency at the heart of existence, provide us with the resources to reassess questions concerning humanism, human progress and democracy and arguably furnish them with philosophical surety.

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