EXPERIENCE, EDUCATION AND SUBJECTIVITY
A COMPARISON OF JOHN DEWEY’S AND MAURICE
MERLEAU-PONTY’S CONCEPTIONS OF EXPERIENCE AND
THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

By

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Abstract
This thesis compares John Dewey’s philosophy of experience and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and illustrates how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can strengthen and further Dewey’s philosophy of education. I begin by drawing the connection between Dewey’s philosophy of experience and his philosophy of education, and illustrate how Dewey’s understanding of growth, and thinking in education, is rooted in and informed by his detailed philosophy of experience. From there, I give an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology with a focus on his descriptions of subjectivity that he presents in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Following this, I outline some of the implications Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has on our understanding of rationality, expression and existence. In the final chapter, I make the comparison between Dewey’s philosophy of experience and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. After demonstrating how these two philosophies are not only similar but also complementary, I then look to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to provide insight into and to advance Dewey’s philosophy of education. I will illustrate how Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjectivity helps to support, and reinforce the rationale behind Dewey’s inquiry-based approach to education. Furthermore, I will show how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and its implications for rationality, expression and existence support Dewey’s democratic ideal and add a hermeneutical element to Dewey’s philosophy of education.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

John Dewey, the great American pragmatist, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who Paul Ricoeur described as “the greatest of the French phenomenologists,” share remarkably similar views of experience and approaches to philosophy despite emerging from different traditions.¹ These similarities appear even more striking when we recognize how little dialogue these two traditions had with each other. In their philosophies, both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty were attempting to articulate a more faithful account of experience than what had preceded them, and thus were responding to the artificial descriptions of experience given by British empiricists. Dewey and Merleau-Ponty were both dialectical thinkers who were greatly indebted to Hegel (particularly Dewey), though both drifted away from absolute idealism and began to root their philosophies in lived experience. They were both critical of Cartesian dualism, in all its lingering forms in modern philosophy, and sought to redefine the relationship between subject and world. Furthermore, both shared affinities with each other’s traditions, with Dewey’s approach to understanding experience verging on phenomenology, while Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of our prereflective understanding and engagement with the world resembled elements of pragmatism.

Despite this common sensibility, and their overlapping approaches to tackling philosophical problems, comparisons between Dewey and Merleau-Ponty have tended to focus on the similarities between their later aesthetic writings (another point of convergence), or between Dewey’s Art as Experience and Merleau-Ponty’s early phenomenology.² Less work has been conducted comparing Dewey’s earlier views on experience (which evolved through his

mature works) and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Likewise, although some continental thinkers have been brought into dialogue with Dewey’s philosophy of education (most notably Hans-Georg Gadamer), the implications that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has on Dewey’s approach to education has yet to be elaborated.

The purpose of this thesis is to draw a comparison between Dewey’s philosophy of experience and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and to illustrate how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can provide insight into, and can strengthen, Dewey’s philosophy of education. I will begin by drawing a connection between Dewey’s philosophy of experience and his philosophy of education. The sophistication and depth of Dewey’s philosophy of education is often overlooked when one fails to see its connection to his philosophy of experience. Abstracted from its context and its underlying principles, Dewey’s philosophy of education gets reduced to simple sayings such as “learning by doing,” and is lumped in with the structure-less, child-centered forms of education of which Dewey was equally critical.

In the second chapter, I present Dewey’s principles of experience—which make up the core of his philosophy of experience—through contrasting the approaches taken by traditional and progressive education, which Dewey outlines in *Experience and Education*. Following this, I illustrate how Dewey’s understanding of growth, and thinking in education, which he describes in *Democracy and Education*, is rooted in and guided by his philosophy of experience.

In the third chapter, I give an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology with a focus on his descriptions of subjectivity that he presents in his major work, the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In my view, Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of subjectivity get to the core of what he is trying to describe in the *Phenomenology*—the embodied subject’s relation and engagement with the world—and is the part of his philosophy that most closely aligns with Dewey’s
understanding of experience. Following this, I outline some of the implications that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has on our understanding of rationality, expression and existence, through an analysis of a few of his notable essays from *Sense and Nonsense*, the work he wrote after the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

In the final chapter, I make the comparison between Dewey’s philosophy of experience and Merleau-Ponty phenomenology, where I compare Dewey’s principles of experience and Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of temporality and perceptual experience that emerge through his descriptions of subjectivity. Following a brief comparison of Dewey’s view of the self and Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjectivity, I put forward a synthesis of their ideas by illustrating how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can be applied to and can enhance Dewey’s philosophy of education.

Throughout this thesis, in line with the contextual nature of both Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s style of thought, I have attempted, whenever possible, to give a historical background to their ideas, and to provide context for their views. I do this more extensively with Dewey, as the complexity and richness of his philosophy of experience and his understanding of growth and thinking becomes clearer when they are connected back with Hegel’s philosophy and the Bildung tradition. I rely on James Good’s detailed intellectual history, *A Search for Unity in Diversity*, to help provide context for Dewey, while I use several of Gary Madison’s essays and commentaries to support my analysis of Merleau-Ponty.

In demonstrating how Dewey’s philosophy of education is guided by his philosophy of experience, and in highlighting the relation between Dewey’s philosophy of experience and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology—showing how they are not only compatible but also complementary—I can then look to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (and its implications) to
provide insight into, and to further, Dewey’s philosophy of education. I will illustrate how Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjectivity helps to support, and reinforce the rationale behind Dewey’s inquiry-based approach to education. Furthermore, I will show how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and its implications for rationality, expression and existence support Dewey’s democratic ideal and add a hermeneutical element to Dewey’s philosophy of education.
CHAPTER 2: JOHN DEWEY

2.1 Traditional and Progressive Education

In 1938, twenty-two years after *Democracy and Education* was published, Dewey published *Experience and Education*, which on the surface appears to be a short restatement of his earlier views on education. But the purpose of this book extends well beyond the recapitulation of Dewey’s earlier views. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey seems chiefly interested in clarifying his understanding of ‘experience.’ Since the publication of *Democracy and Education*, many of Dewey’s followers in the educational reform movement (the progressive movement) had adopted his views on education while misunderstanding the underlying principles of his philosophy, which led to various forms of child-centered education consisting primarily of free play and structure-less activity. This had the damaging effect of discrediting the progressive movement.

In the preface to *Experience and Education*, Dewey warns of the temptation to fall back onto tradition—back onto the “beaten path”—when trying to construct and enact new social practices and institutions. It seems that part of Dewey’s motivation behind writing this book was to protect the progressive movement from being tossed aside by those who held allegiance to the traditional modes of education and who had seen Dewey’s followers make a mockery out of education—education based on structure-less free play that failed to produce results. Dewey appears to be fighting off this temptation (to fall back onto tradition) by clarifying what he means by ‘experience’ and through emphasizing that a new philosophy of education must be grounded
on a detailed philosophy of experience that is faithful to how we actually engage and interact
with the world.

In Experience and Education, Dewey outlines his principles of experience, which ground
and give substance to his philosophy of education. In rejecting traditional education and its
methods of teaching, Dewey recognized the need for educational reformers to develop a
philosophy of education to justify their new practices—otherwise, the direction these practices
would lead toward would either be blind or reactionary. Dewey also warns that reform ought to
be guided by thinking about education itself and its concrete practices, rather than be guided by
some “ism.” In the preface of the book, he writes,

For in spite of itself, any movement that thinks and acts in terms of an ‘ism becomes so
involved in reaction against other ‘isms that it is unwittingly controlled by them. For it
then forms its principles by reaction against them instead of by a comprehensive
constructive survey of the actual needs, problems and possibilities.  

Here, Dewey highlights the reactive tendency of political and social movements, where groups
are no longer building their beliefs and ideas from the subject-matter or the problem itself, but are
merely constructing their view in reaction to their opponents. This tendency to revert to what
Dewey calls ‘either-or’ philosophies is a recurring theme in Experience and Education.

In this chapter, I will begin by outlining the conflict between traditional and progressive
education. Comparing the views of both traditional and progressive education helps to clarify
and reinforce Dewey’s call to construct a positive philosophy that can guide educational reform.
Next, I will outline Dewey’s principles of experience, which ground his philosophy of education.
These principles can be found throughout Dewey’s mature thought on education as they help to
determine the value of educational experiences. Following this, by way of background, I will
draw a connection between Dewey’s principles of experience and his earlier functionalist

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psychology (which he developed through his reading of Hegel), using James Good’s book *A Search for Unity and Diversity* as my guide. I will then connect Dewey’s principles—his philosophy of experience—to his conception of growth, and his approach to thinking in education. The aim of this chapter is to show the connection between Dewey’s philosophy of experience and his philosophy of education—to illustrate how his understanding of experience guides and structures his approach to education.

Dewey begins *Experience and Education* by setting up the conflict between traditional and progressive education, and illustrating the need for a new positive philosophy to ground educational reform (rather than merely a negative or reactionary philosophy). Dewey begins this comparison by relating it to the old nature versus nurture debate: should we view education as a purely internal process, the cultivation of one’s interests and capacities, or is it an external process of forming good habits through discipline and the imposition of highly structured material? Traditional education has taken the latter approach whereas progressive education has adopted the former. Traditional education, Dewey explains, has typically consisted in the transfer of highly structured bodies of knowledge with the aim of preparing students for the future by instilling discipline and skills in line with rules of conduct. As Dewey notes, traditional education instills a passive and receptive character in students. The structure of the classroom and the methods of instruction leave little room for active engagement. For the most part, static bodies of knowledge (complete in themselves) are imposed onto the students, irrespective of the original context in which they are acquired or applied. Traditional education places a value on subject matter, in and of itself, where students are meant to be transformed through their contact with it.

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4 Ibid., 3.
In contrast, progressive education seems to have emerged from a fundamental dissatisfaction with the traditional approach, and because of this, it appears its ideas and approach have developed in direct opposition to it. Whereas traditional education focuses on formation from without, with a deep respect for the subject matter itself, progressive education has focused on formation from within: the cultivation of one’s talents and capacities with less focus on structured subject matter. Progressive education, with its value placed on free and spontaneous action, views structured activity and organized subject matter as a limitation on the students’ freedom, and thus an impediment to growth. This either-or approach overlooks the elements of truth in the opposing views and loses track of the bigger picture. As Dewey notes,

There is always a danger in a new movement that in rejecting the aims and methods in that which it would supplant, it may develop its principles negatively rather than positively and constructively. Then it takes its clew in practice from that which is rejected instead of from the constructive development of its own philosophy.\(^5\)

Dewey’s insight into the tendency to fashion one’s position in reaction to what one rejects, and to lose sight of the bigger picture through allegiance to one’s side is as relevant today as it was eighty years ago.

Rather than getting caught up on some “ism” or labels that define one’s position, Dewey wants to reorient us back onto the bigger picture: our interests in wanting to improve educational practices. In order to do this, Dewey argues that we need to construct a positive philosophy of education that can guide our approach to methods of instruction, choice of subject matter, and the organization of the educational environment. For Dewey, the guiding principle of this new philosophy is the “intimate and necessary relation between processes of actual experience and education.”\(^6\) Therefore, the new philosophy of education must be grounded in a detailed and

\(^5\) Ibid., 6-7.
\(^6\) Ibid., 7.
accurate understanding of the processes of experience. One-sided views of experience have led both to highly formal and abstract forms of education (with little connection to their original context or how their material is to be applied), and also disorganized and superficial forms of education that give no structure or direction to the way capacities and habits of mind are formed and developed. In order to ground and justify educational reform, we need to develop a philosophy of experience that is faithful to how we actually experience the world.

Dewey’s style of thought here in attempting to unite these conflicting approaches to education is in line with the American offshoot of the Bildung tradition, which saw philosophy as a fundamentally practical discipline aimed at addressing and solving social issues by incorporating conflicting views into a more inclusive whole—finding harmony in division, unity in diversity. There are elements of truth in both the traditional and progressive approaches to education, which are easily overlooked when we are blinded by or fixed to a position or label. Rather than simply reacting to what one instinctively opposes, educational reformers need to construct a positive philosophy that appropriates the positive elements of both approaches, and which is faithful to the processes and structures of our lived experience.

One of Dewey’s criticisms of the progressive movement is its uncritical acceptance that all experiences have educational value. In reacting to the rigid structure of tradition education, progressive education placed an inherent value on experience itself without discriminating among the various types of experience. Dewey agrees with the organic connection between experience and education, but we must distinguish between experiences that hold educational value and those that do not. Dewey argues that not all experiences are educative, and a sheer quantity of experience will not necessarily ensure the cultivation of the students’ interests and capacities. He notes that traditional education still provides students with experience, but experience of the
wrong kind. What is important is the quality of experience, and thus we must find criteria for judging the quality and value of educational experiences. As Dewey notes, experiences can be mis-educative:

Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce a lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted.\(^7\)

For Dewey, education should be aimed at enriching the experience of the student by continually broadening their horizons, integrating their experiences into a more inclusive whole, and leading them into newer and more sophisticated areas. Any experience that stunts the potential growth of the student, by producing bad habits of mind, or leading them nowhere or into undesirable areas, is mis-educative.

Furthermore, Dewey argues that experiences need to be integrated and connected to each other in order to have value. Isolated experiences, even if they are stimulating, will not enrich a student’s experience—they will be inaccessible as tools for coping with future experiences, and will thus lead to bad or useless habits. According to Dewey, “every experience lives on in further experiences. Hence, the central problem of an education based on experience is to select the kinds of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.”\(^8\)

Therefore, progressive education, in order to be true to its principles, must find a way to distinguish which experiences lead to growth—which experiences will draw upon the past experiences of the student and their existing capacities, and will lead students into broader and more sophisticated areas of study and exploration.

\(^7\) Ibid., 13.
\(^8\) Ibid., 16-17
This is where Dewey’s principles of experience come into play. Dewey’s principles describe the basic structure of our experience. Together they form what Dewey calls the “longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience.” These principles capture the fluid and dialectical nature of our experience. By developing an accurate understanding of experience—what goes on when we have an experience (i.e. how the individual and environment are changed)—we are in a better position to select the kinds of learning experiences that enable growth.

Dewey’s first principle is the principle of continuity of experience (the experimental continuum). Dewey writes, “the principle of continuity of experience means every experience both takes something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after.” Unlike the British empiricists, whose atomistic interpretations of experience led them to view experience as a series of isolated pictures or moments that were later strung together, Dewey, following William James, views experience as fluid and contextual. We do not experience the world as a series of fragmented experiences that just happen to be connected. We experience the world as a fluid whole, with one moment flowing seamlessly into the next with no clear mark of separation. And what we do in one experience is brought with us and influences how we approach and engage with future experiences.

Dewey describes experience as a “moving force”—the weight of our past experience bears down on how we interpret and respond to future situations. Part of Dewey’s understanding of the continuity of experience comes from his biological interpretation of habit. Dewey writes, “The basic characteristic of habit is that every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we like it or not, the quality

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9 Ibid., 42.
10 Ibid., 27.
of subsequent experiences. For it is a somewhat different person who enters them.\textsuperscript{11} Dewey was influenced by the recent development of evolutionary biology and social Darwinism, and viewed humans as biological creatures of habit. Every experience modifies what has come before, and changes how one interacts with new situations through the formation of habits. Habits, when given a biological rather than purely mechanical interpretation, include more broadly the formation of intellectual and emotional attitudes, which form the groundwork of our character and determine how we act in any given situation. Rather than a collection of static responses that have been collected within us, these attitudes are fluid and constantly changing as we engage in new experiences. These are the kinds of things that makes us more sensitive to particular aspects of our experience, making our focus more selective, while ignoring other aspects that are irrelevant to our current situation.

For Dewey, the cultivation of positive emotional and intellectual attitudes represents one of the primary functions of education. Educators must figure out which experiences lead to the growth of these positive habits (as well as what these attitudes are). Dewey argues that the guiding idea behind selecting experiences that will elicit positive habits of mind in students is the concept of growth. Educators need to be selecting the kinds of experiences that will lead to the expansion of the students’ existing capacities and interests into new areas. But growth in and of itself is not enough. One must be sensitive to the direction these experiences are leading the student. For example, an individual with an aptitude for computing and programming may take his skills in the direction of identity theft and internet fraud, though these would not be areas that one would consider as examples of positive growth. Therefore, the value we place on growth needs to be given a caveat. According to Dewey, emphasis needs to be placed on continued

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 26
growth. The question that needs to be asked is whether the experience will lead to future areas of growth. Will this experience lead to broader areas of inquiry and the cultivation of habits that will facilitate future learning? Or will it lead to narrower fields that lead nowhere and promote bad habits? As Dewey notes, it is the quality of experience—which habits are formed and what direction it leads into—which determines how the principle of continuity is applied. Educators must be aware of both the students’ past experiences, as well as the direction these experiences are heading. By being sensitive to what has come before and where experiences may lead, educators are in a better position to decide which experiences will best cultivate the existing capacities and interests of their students.

Dewey’s second principle of experience is the principle of interaction. Dewey argues that there is both an active and passive component to experience. Experience is not a purely internal phenomenon occurring within the mind of the individual. Nor is experience purely driven by the mind and the internal aspects of the individual. Every experience is also fed by the surrounding environmental conditions in which the experience takes place. The principle of interaction describes the active and dialectical exchange between the internal conditions (the individual’s habits, capacities and interests) and the ‘objective’ or external conditions (the physical and social environment) of the situation; both are modified and changed in the process. Experience is not merely a passive process of the world acting on the mind. Experience also actively affects the objective conditions of the situation. Every situation is made up of this dialectical interplay between internal conditions and objective conditions, where the internal conditions act to modify the objective conditions, and the objective conditions modify the internal condition of the individual.
Here, as earlier, Dewey is responding to the atomistic interpretations of experience made by British empiricists who separated mind from world. Dewey argues that the mind should be understood in a more naturalistic and biological way. The mind is not completely separate from the world. In separating mind from world, we abandon any hope of understanding how these two aspects of reality connect and communicate with each other. The separation of mind and world was a philosophical dualism that Dewey attacked throughout his life as a philosopher. Influenced by his Hegelian philosophical roots and the rise of evolutionary biology, Dewey viewed the mind as an integral part of the world instead of separate from it. The mind is a much more active force than earlier empiricists held, and contributes to the constitution and modification of its environment. Every action modifies the objective conditions under which future experiences take place. The objective conditions include everything from the physical environment, the social set-up and the individuals involved, to the tools and subject matter being used. Rather than viewing the individual as separate from the environment, Dewey views the individual (or organism) as continuous with it; no organism lives apart from its environment. This is another way of saying that we cannot define the individual in the abstract, isolated from its environment. The objective conditions play an equally important role to the internal conditions in defining the individual. It is the objective conditions of any situation that interact with the individual, which in turn determines what the individual will become.

According to Dewey, what we learn from the principle of interaction is that both the internal conditions and objective conditions are significant when determining which types of learning experiences will be conducive to growth. Equal weight must be given to both the internal conditions (the habits, capacities and interests of the students) and the objective

conditions (the overall physical and social environment) of any educational experience. What is critical for the new philosophy of education is to pay attention to the ways in which these two aspects of experience interact. Traditional education has erred in the past by placing all their focus on the objective conditions of the learning environment, without being sensitive to the different ways in which the particular capacities and interests of the students would respond to such an environment. As Dewey notes,

It was assumed that a certain set of conditions was intrinsically desirable, apart from its ability to evoke a certain quality of response in individuals. This lack of mutual adaptation made the process of teaching and learning accidental. Those to whom the provided conditions were suitable managed to learn. Others got on as best they could.\(^\text{13}\)

When we disregard the influence that the interests and capacities of students have on the quality (and the success) of the learning experience, we begin to believe that certain subjects and methods of instruction are inherently valuable. Those who do not excel in these inherently valuable learning environments, traditional education labels these students as individuals who struggle with a lack of focus or discipline, with little reflection or accountability (on the part of traditional education) regarding how the subject matter or method of instruction played a factor in the failure of the learning experience. Dewey correctly labels the kind of learning that occurs in this type of environment as accidental. Without focus being given to the ways the subject matter will interact and engage the existing interests and capacities of the students, the type of learning that goes on will be a matter of luck (not purposeful or intended).

For Dewey, there is no subject matter or method of instruction that is intrinsically valuable: “there is no such thing as educational value in the abstract.”\(^\text{14}\) In pragmatic fashion, Dewey argues that subject matter and method hold no value apart from the effects they have on

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\(^{13}\) Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 44-45.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 46.
students (the types of responses they elicit in the students). Educators must understand the current interests and capacities of students (as well as the types of experiences that contributed to their formation) so they can thoughtfully construct learning environments that will interact well with these conditions, and guide these interests and capacities into broader and more sophisticated areas of inquiry.

In contrast to traditional education, the progressive movement, Dewey believed, erred in rejecting the need for any control of external conditions. In responding to the rigid and oppressive nature of traditional education, educational reformers have over-corrected by placing all their focus on the cultivation of the interests and capacities of the students, with little focus on the objective conditions that will shape these capacities. The progressive movement viewed any form of external control as a restriction on the students’ freedom, and would thus be harmful to their potential growth. This is exactly the kind of reactionary approach that Dewey wishes to correct. Dewey writes,

The trouble with traditional education was not that it emphasized the external conditions that enter into the control of the experiences but that it paid little attention to the internal factors which also decide what kind of experience is had. It violated the principle of interaction from one side. But this is no reason why the new education should violate the principle from the other side.\textsuperscript{15}

What we have learned from both of Dewey’s principles applies here. Based on the principle of interaction, educators must pay close attention to both the internal and objective conditions that make up the learning environment. Since the aim of every learning experience is growth, the educator must construct objective conditions that will challenge and engage the interests and capacities of their students, thus leading them into richer fields of experience. This involves playing close attention to where experience is leading and what sorts of habits are being acquired.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 39.
through this process. Therefore, constructing no external conditions to challenge and interact with the internal conditions of the students is equally mistaken as the error committed by traditional education—as Dewey states, this is merely violating the principle of interaction from the other side. In each case, learning is accidental. In traditional education, those who succeed are the lucky ones whose constitutions mesh well with the rigid system, while in progressive education, those who succeed are the lucky ones whose learning took a healthy path (a positive direction). By not controlling the external conditions in which the learning experience takes place, educators give up the only resource they have for guiding the direction of their students’ growth.

By way of comparison, one lesson that the principle of continuity teaches is that every experience is leading somewhere and that we need to be aware of the various directions experience may lead. Traditional education, in trying to prepare students for the future, has ignored the quality of the student’s present experience. The idea of having school prepare students for the future is right in some sense, but traditional education has approached it in the wrong way. It is a mistake to think that the acquisition of abstract bodies of knowledge and various skills, separated from the context of their use will be sufficient for preparing students for the future. The only way these bodies of knowledge and skills will be of use to students is if situations arise that are similar to the ones in which the skill or piece of knowledge was originally learned. Otherwise, these tools for engaging and coping with situations are too abstract to be of any use. We cannot assume that teaching students isolated skills and bodies of knowledge will be sufficient training and preparation for their use in novel contexts in the future. The principle of continuity teaches us that knowledge needs to be given context and must be learned and

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16 Ibid., 47-48.
integrated into situations where it is used in order for it to be retrained and accessible for use later.

I will address this issue in greater detail in the section on “thinking.” For now, it is enough to state that traditional education erred in focusing too much on preparing students for the future and not paying close enough attention to the present experiences of students and where they are leading. Dewey explains,

When preparation is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future. When this happens, the actual preparation for the future is missed or distorted. The ideal of simply using the present to get to the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. We always live at the time we live, and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each moment the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing so in the future.17

According to Dewey, progressive education is right to shift the focus of education from merely preparing students for the future to focusing on cultivating the present experience of the student, and teaching them to draw the most out of their present experiences, but this does not mean we should pay no attention to the future. The value of an experience does not lie in itself but in where it leads. Only a reactionary philosophy would respond to traditional education’s over-emphasis on the future by ignoring it altogether.

To conclude this section, Dewey consistently returns to the idea, in stating these principles of experience and their implications, that the focus of education should be reoriented towards cultivating a richer present experience for the student. This is the guiding idea behind a progressive education that is grounded on a philosophy of the actual processes of experience. This does not mean ignoring the need to prepare for the future. According to Dewey, cultivating the present experience of the student, with a keen focus on where this experience is leading, is the

17 Ibid., 51.
only way to properly prepare for the future. For Dewey, preparation simply means that “a person, young or old, gets out of his present experience, all that there is in it for him at the time in which he has had it.”

Only by learning to get the most out of one’s present experience, is one prepared to do so in the future. For Dewey, this habit is perhaps the most important to instill in students—the habit of continuing to learn and to draw meaning from one’s experience.

Before going into a deeper analysis of Dewey’s conception of growth in education, and how Dewey’s philosophy of experience informs this model, I will give a historical background to Dewey’s philosophy of experience. Understanding Dewey’s philosophical roots in Hegel and the American Bildung tradition provides a deeper appreciation for Dewey’s philosophical project in education and gives context to the upcoming sections on growth and thinking.

### 2.2 Historical Background

Dewey’s philosophy follows with the American Bildung tradition. This is a philosophical tradition that developed an historical and humanistic interpretation of Hegel’s writings in the United States in the mid to late nineteenth century. Most notably, the “St. Louis Hegelians” developed an historical reading of Hegel that appropriated his style of thought and his philosophical method, drawing mostly from The Phenomenology of Spirit, rather than his later metaphysics. The St. Louis Hegelians viewed Hegel as an inherently practical and politically liberal philosopher, and thought philosophy ought to be aimed at addressing social issues.

According to the St. Louis Hegelians, philosophy “gives meaning to the lives of individuals and

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18 Ibid., 50.
unity to society.”

James Good, in his intellectual history *A Search for Unity in Diversity*, traces the various elements of Hegel’s thought that remain in Dewey’s philosophy. It has often been thought that Dewey officially broke all ties with Hegel around 1891 when he began rejecting all transcendent realities. But Good demonstrates that this merely marks a shift away from British neo-Hegelianism towards a humanistic and historicist reading of Hegel—not dissimilar to the interpretations given by the St. Louis Hegelians. Here, Dewey began to develop a functionalist psychology through his historicist reading of Hegel that views mind as situated within the world, rather than in some separate metaphysical realm, and adopted Hegel’s “organicism” which views subject and object, not as ontologically distinct entities, but as part of a more inclusive whole.

The purpose of this historical background is to give context to Dewey’s later views, rather than to provide a detailed analysis of his earlier works. Because of this, I will merely address some of the themes as they appear in Dewey’s earlier works, and attempt to draw connections to some aspects of his later thought. For this section, I will primarily focus on how Dewey’s functionalist psychology relates to his principles of experience (using Good’s intellectual history as my guide). Through this process, I hope to provide a better understanding of how Dewey developed his principles of experience, as well as to give background to some of his other ideas on growth and thinking in education.

The first paper of Dewey’s worth noting is “The New Psychology” (1884), which he wrote while at Johns Hopkins University. In this paper, Dewey criticizes the British empiricists for fragmenting and over-simplifying experience and the processes of the mind. Good notes, “Empiricists analyzed thought abstractly, dividing the flux of experience into isolated, atomic

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19 Good, 63.
sensations, ideas or autonomous faculties.” The British empiricists gave reductive interpretations of how thought and experience function, and preferred simple and clean explanations in the form of abstract principles rather than complex interpretations of ambiguous phenomena. While criticizing the British empiricists, Dewey praised the ‘new psychology’ for its emphasis on physiological psychology and for its use of experimentation (rather than speculative introspection). The new psychology also reinforced for Dewey the intimate and dynamic relation between the organism and the environment. Good writes, “Dynamic, vital, and realistic in its approach, the new psychology, declared Dewey, abandoned all preconceived ideas, placed the organism in its environment, and threw itself on experience.” This earlier paper helps give context to the approach he would take moving forward in philosophy. Dewey seemed to be moving in the direction of combining Hegel’s idealism with the new psychology, to study human experience through descriptive analysis and experimentation—to find the reason, or rationality, latent in experience—rather than empty speculation. We also see Dewey responding to the mechanistic and reductive interpretations of experience given by British empiricism, which led to an abstract view of man as separate from nature and society. As Good remarks, “[Dewey’s] primary motivation was the healing of philosophical dichotomies and man’s alienation from nature and from his fellow man.”

In 1886, a few years after writing “The New Psychology,” Dewey published “The Psychological Standpoint” while instructing at the University of Michigan. Here, Dewey attempted to draw out and synthesize the best elements of British empiricism and neo-Hegelianism. In this paper, Dewey argued that the psychological standpoint is what British

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20 Ibid., 118.
21 Ibid., 119.
22 Ibid., 120.
23 Ibid., 134.
empiricists and neo-Hegelians have in common. The psychological standpoint is the view that the focus of all philosophical study should be on what experience directly reveals to one. Dewey argues that the British empiricists should not be attacked for beginning with the psychological standpoint, but rather for not staying true to its principle. The psychological standpoint states that philosophy should limit itself to describing and explaining what goes on in experience; positing or attempting to explain things that go beyond experience is purely speculative and cannot be grounded or justified. The empiricists’ appeal to ‘things-in-themselves’ (i.e. Locke’s “substances”) is a violation of the psychological standpoint, and makes empiricists into metaphysicians. Dewey argued that if empiricists stayed true to the psychological standpoint, and let go of these ontological assumptions, they would be neo-Hegelians.

What we take from this article is Dewey’s commitment to a more honest philosophy of experience than is found in British empiricism. We also get a glimpse of the beginning of Dewey’s functionalist psychology. Good writes,

The basis of Dewey’s argument is that philosophical notions like sensation are the result of our analysis of experience, but we have no justification for reading the results of our analysis into experience as though they were there all along. For Dewey, many philosophical puzzles have been created because philosophers fallaciously assumed that terms they created for analytical purposes actually refer to real, static objects rather than functions within a process.24

According to Dewey, the things that we analytically abstract from experience are not real entities, but are merely functions within a process; these are things we use to make sense of experience. This is relevant to Dewey’s critique of faculty psychology, which I will address later.

In 1887, Dewey published a textbook entitled Psychology where he attempted to flesh out his new functionalist psychology that he developed through his reading of Hegel—an understanding of self and how we develop. The book is neo-Hegelian in form, as Dewey still

24 Ibid., 135.
posits a transcendent self, though Good notes, much of this could be stripped away without
taking away from the substance of its most essential ideas; it is an example of how Dewey’s
mature thought can be presented in “Hegelian garb.”25 One of the main focuses of this book is
Dewey’s conception of the self as activity (rather than a metaphysical substance). In contrast to
the Cartesian or Kantian idea of a transcendent self, Dewey developed through Hegel the idea of
self as activity. The self is not some metaphysical substance, which acts; it is the activity itself.
We never come in contact with some metaphysical substance that we truly are, but rather come to
know ourselves through our actions in the world. Good writes, “We know the self by its qualities
or relations, or perhaps more plainly, by its effects in the world. For Dewey, the essence of self
is will and the goal of will is perfection which is to be understood as self-realization or self-
actualization.”26 Here, Dewey describes the self as a “self-determining” activity, which seeks to
give itself content and form through escaping itself and acting in the world. The goal of this
activity is self-realization (the formation of self).

Another theme in Psychology is his functionalist account of the mind. Throughout the
book, Dewey discusses different aspect of the mind such as the intellect, feeling and the will.
Despite Dewey’s discussion of these aspects of mind, he emphasizes that these are not real
existences, but rather are concepts (or analytical tools) for understanding the processes of the
mind as a whole.27 These are not true distinctions, but are functions, or stages that operate within
the whole of mind as activity. In the same way, for Dewey, subject and object (self and world)
are not true distinctions, but rather are divisions created in the mind. In reality, they are merely
functions within the larger whole of experience. This relates back to the idea of self-realization:
what Dewey calls “the process of idealization.” Good writes,

25 Ibid., 144.
26 Ibid., 139.
27 Ibid., 140.
The will, the principle of organic unity of these seemingly disparate elements realizes itself by relating subject and object. These dualisms arise in consciousness, but they are not ontological distinctions; rather they are psychological divisions to be overcome through self-realization, or awareness of the original unity of the subjective and objective.\(^\text{28}\)

The active will is what connects the “subjective” and “objective” elements of experience. This integration is achieved through acting and experimenting in the world. The active self ventures out into the world, and through its action, comes in contact with foreign elements, which it then incorporates into its larger experience.

This conception of self bears elements of both Dewey’s principle of interaction and his principle of the continuity of experience. For Dewey, the self is not some passive agent or substance that merely receives impressions from the world. Here, Dewey is rejecting the empiricist conception of self as a passive receiver of isolated sense data, which it then associates and constructs in the mind. But nor does experience occur purely in the subjective realm (constructed purely by the mind)—here rejecting Kant’s transcendental idealism. For Dewey, experience is always dialectical; it is the active exchange and interplay between the “subjective” and the “objective.” The self actively goes out into the world to find connections, and modifies previous conceptions and understandings in light of new experiences. This touches on Dewey’s principle of the continuity of experience. The self is in a constant state of flux, with each new experience modifying its character. For Dewey, experience is a moving force. The meaning the self draws from experience is always connected to its past experiences—what harmonizes with our past experience. The things that are discontinuous with our past experience are what we call meaningless. These are the things that we struggle to make sense of through experimenting and striving to make new connections. By integrating the seemingly meaningless back into our experience, we develop a broader understanding and experience a growth of the self. This is one

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
of the reasons why Dewey places emphasis on overt action and experimentation. It is only through action and participation in the world that we grow and come to know ourselves. The end, or aim, of all experience is the growth and realization of the self. This relates to the German conception of Bildung, which refers to growth, cultivation and self-development (I will discuss this idea in full detail later). The mind is constantly in search of a richer experience. It is striving for connections in search for unity; the goal of the search is the richest, most integrated experience.

Through overcoming the divisions of subjective and objective, and reaching a complete unity of one’s experience, one would attain total self-realization—identification with the absolute. This is the part of the book that makes it neo-Hegelian, as it posits a transcendent self, and the part most contemporary followers of Dewey would reject (as Dewey would later). But we can still defend Hegel’s model of development, a conception of Bildung, while recognizing that the perfection of the will—the reaching of an absolute perspective—is not possible. This is still the movement of existence, how we develop, and we should still strive for the most complete perspective. But with that, we must recognize there is no set end (no absolute guaranteed), but merely a striving for completion and richer meaning. This is the sense in which Dewey’s ideas in his Psychology can be stripped of their idealistic tendencies and can seen as a precursor to his mature thought. By removing the absolute (transcendent self) we find a dynamic functionalist psychology that aligns with Dewey’s principles of experience that we find in Experience and Education. According to Good, by 1894, as Dewey shifted away from absolute idealism, in favor of what he called ‘experimental idealism,’ Dewey dropped the notion of ‘self-realization’ in favor of what he called self-expression: a function in the process of self-development where the self encounters a problem and is forced back upon itself in order to reflect on, reconstruct and re-
harmonize its experience.\textsuperscript{29} This idea of self-expression would play a fundamental role in Dewey’s philosophy of education, particularly in relation to his thoughts on growth and thinking in education.

One final paper worth noting is “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” (1896), which can be viewed as Dewey’s attempt to naturalize his functionalist psychology, and to undermine the mechanistic interpretations of behavior being given by physiological psychologists during his time. The reflex arc concept was a theory of how the organism interacts with its environment. According to Dewey, the reflex arc concept was too simplistic to capture the complexities and dialectical nature of experience; it gave a mechanical and linear interpretation of how the organism interacts with its environment, and rested on ungrounded metaphysical assumptions (self-world dualism). Dewey’s critique of the reflex arc concept was his attempt to empty psychology of its lingering metaphysics and to undermine the mechanistic interpretations of experience and behavior passed down from the British empiricists.\textsuperscript{30} In this paper, Dewey argues that the reflex did not begin with the organism passively receiving impressions from its environment, but rather begins with the action or task the organism is engaged in. In explaining Dewey’s reflex example of a child reaching for a candle, Good writes,

\begin{quote}
According to Dewey, the process did not begin with the external stimulus of the light from the candle, but with a ‘sensori-motor co-ordination,’ the child’s act of seeing. When the act of seeing stimulates the act of reaching, both acts fall within a larger co-ordination. Sensation/movement is not a fixed and bound event; rather it is contained within a larger temporal process, the act.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Rather than the linear exchange of two static entities, Dewey interprets the subject and its environment as two functions that operate within the larger whole of experience. These are not two ontologically distinct entities (which creates the puzzle of how these ontologically distinct

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 187.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 185.
\end{flushright}
things interact), but rather two functions within the larger whole of experience. One of the things we take away from this critique is that knowledge is relational: “learning is a process of comprehending relations, not discrete entities.”

The way one interprets and engages in a situation depends on the context: one’s past experience, the task one is engaged in and the social setting. We do not learn ideas from experience stripped of their context. The knowledge or meaning that we draw from experience is always relational, and is the product of the dialectical interplay between the subject and its environment.

“The Reflex Arc Concept” also touches on what Dewey called the historical fallacy—when one artificial breaks down a temporal process. Good writes,

actions seem mechanical when they are analyzed in a fragmentary manner. When we are sensitive to process, the mechanical events of stimulus and response appear as moments within a larger, more complex whole. All acts proceed out of a prior coordination, a habit, in which we never distinguish between stimulus and response. We only become aware of stimulus and response when a problem arises that interrupts our usual coordinated interaction with the environment.

Dewey’s interpretation of the reflex arc concept put his functionalism in clear view. Mind-Body, organism-world, stimulus-response—these are not discrete or ontologically distinct entities, but merely functions for understanding experience. From this broader view, we begin to see the reflex as a circuit, as circular and dynamic, rather than a linear arc. Good notes that Dewey’s dynamic understanding of process is similar in style and form to Hegel’s dialectic:

An original unity of stimulus and response, world and mind, which Dewey called habit, is disrupted by a problem or a conflict of some kind. The Self, or in biological language, the organism, takes steps to restore this unity. The self seeks knowledge in that situation, but only as a means to the restoration of the integrity of its unified relationship with the world.

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32 Ibid., 185.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 186.
This paper of Dewey’s reinforces his functionalist psychology (now in naturalistic form) and the dialectical nature of experience. As well, elements of Dewey’s principles of experience can be seen in his description of habit, as well as his view of the contextual and relational nature of knowledge, learning, and meaning. The meaning we give a stimulus or object is not complete in and of itself, but only has context and meaning in relation to the subject, and the project it is engaged in. Through understanding behaviour and experience as dynamic, dialectical and circular, rather than static and linear, Dewey thought we would develop a richer and more comprehensive view of experience and ourselves.

### 2.3 Education as Growth

In *Democracy and Education*, in his chapter on ‘Education as a Social Function,’ Dewey writes, “Education is a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating, process. All these words mean that it implies attention to the conditions of growth […] the word education means just a process of leading or bringing up.”\(^{35}\) For Dewey, education, at its core, is about growth (or self-development)—cultivating and directing the capacities of students. It is process that is continuous with life, further reinforcing Dewey’s view of the natural connection between experience and education. Education should serve to enrich the experience of students through the cultivation of habits, capacities, and dispositions that enable them to better cope and learn from their present and future experience. Dewey begins his chapter on ‘growth’ in *Democracy and Education* by discussing the notion of immaturity, which he views as the primary condition of growth.\(^{36}\) Dewey wants us to think of immaturity as something positive: it signals the capacity for growth, the ability to

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., 46.
grow. When we take it in its negative sense, as a lacking, we tend to view growth as a passive process. This is connected to the idea of thinking of the adult as representing the fixed end of development for the child. Dewey wants to reorient our understanding of immaturity back onto its active and positive sense. Dewey writes, “Growth is not something done to them; it is something they do.”

Growth is an active and continuous process (rather than a passive process imposed from the outside), which education is supposed to facilitate. In a similar vein, Dewey views dependence as a positive trait: “dependence denotes a power rather than a weakness; it involves interdependence.” We all initially grow from a state of immaturity and dependence. But dependence signals a connection with others. It involves a social element of interacting and learning from others—a capacity and willingness to learn. These conceptions of immaturity and dependence reflect Dewey’s views on the social nature of learning and his active and dynamic view of experience.

Dewey’s understanding of ‘plasticity’ is also relevant to his thoughts on growth. For Dewey, plasticity refers to the organism’s ability to adapt to its changing environment. Dewey writes,

> It is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one’s experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to modify actions on the basis of results of prior experiences, the power to develop dispositions. Without it, the acquisition of habit is impossible.  

As Dewey notes, plasticity, the capacity to modify one’s habits for more effective use in varying situations, is what enables us to grow. Without this, one would be unable to acquire new habits and dispositions; one would be stuck with one’s instincts and native capacities as they are in their

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37 Ibid., 47.  
38 Ibid., 48.  
39 Ibid., 49.
original form. We all begin with our ‘original endowment’ (our instincts, talents and capacities) but as we develop, these are modified and directed towards particular ends. Dewey continues,

In learning an action, instead of having it given ready made, one of necessity learns to vary its factors, to make varied combinations of them, according to change of circumstances. A possibility of continuing progress is opened up by the fact that in learning one act, methods are developed for good use in other situations. Still more important is the fact that the human being acquires a habit of learning. He learns to learn.  

This passage reflects the idea that experience and learning are active and dynamic processes. In defining each of these terms, Dewey emphasizes their active sense, while criticizing their static interpretations, a common theme throughout Dewey’s mature thought. It is our plasticity that enables us to adapt and modify our habits as we confront new situations as well as build on our past experiences. In short, plasticity underlies our capacity to learn and grow. What is important for continued growth (the aim of education) is to remain open and sensitive to our nature—to retain our plasticity throughout our development and as we grow old.

This leads into Dewey’s discussion of habit. The cultivation and reconstruction of habit constitutes the primary means of education—habits both enable and represent the primary effects of growth. For Dewey, “a habit is a form of executive skill, of efficiency in doing. A habit means an ability to use natural conditions as means to ends. . . [T]he measure of the value of these qualities lies in the economical and effective control of the environment which they secure.” As Dewey notes, habits represent one’s ability to adjust to, and to control one’s environment. Once again, what is crucial for Dewey is that we retain an active understanding of habit. The construction of habits through experience is not a mere passive process that affects the organism—it is not a blind process of molding to the environment. When thinking of habits, we need to recognize that both the organism and the environment are changed through their

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40 Ibid., 50.  
41 Ibid., 51.
acquisition and use, and that their function is to seek out control and effect change in the
environment for achieving ends. In Dewey’s words,

If we think of habit simply as a change wrought in the organism, ignoring the fact that this
change consists in ability to effect subsequent changes in the environment, we shall be led
to think of ‘adjustment’ as a conformity to the environment as wax conforms to the seal
which impresses it.42

This passive understanding of habit comes from thinking of the environment as some fixed end,
which the organism can merely adjust to, but not change. This understanding violates Dewey’s
principle of interaction by claiming that only one side of experience is modified through action.
When habits are more passive—when they are not directed at achieving ends—we call this
habituation. What habituation lacks is the active and intelligent component of selectively
modifying its environment for its own purposes.

From this broader understanding of habit, we come to recognize education as the
formation of active and intelligent habits that facilitate the student’s ability to navigate, cope and
effect change in his or her environment. This helps to correct the caricature of Dewey’s
philosophy of education, which describes it as the blind training of habits (in their passive sense)
that are in conformity to the desires of the state. Dewey would call this indoctrination: merely
being habituated to one’s environment rather than learning to effect change in it. Dewey’s
understanding of habit also aims at correcting the tendency to view habits as merely physical and
fixed responses. Dewey holds a broader conception of habit that encompasses modes of thought
(judging and reasoning), the way we observe and interpret situations, as well as things like taste.
Unlike narrow conceptions of habit, Dewey views intellectual and emotional dispositions as
paradigm examples of habit.

42 Ibid., 51.
With regard to fixity, fixed habits are what Dewey would like to avoid and overcome with his vision of education. Unlike active habits, which are flexible and can adapt to a wide variety of situations, fixed habits inhibit growth by fixing individuals on a set pattern of behavior. Rather than enabling one to have more efficient control over their environment, as habits should, fixed habits act as a liability: “[they are] habits which put an end to plasticity.”43 They inhibit our ability to adapt and change according to circumstance. As Dewey notes, the negative connotation often associated with habits may reflect this understanding of them. Fixed habits are blind and mechanical, and represent an absence of intelligent activity (intelligent in the sense of involving mind). The positive sense of habit that Dewey wants to retain and foster is its active sense: habits that seek to achieve efficient control of their environment through their continual modification.

With a proper understanding of habit, in its active sense, we are in a position to understand what Dewey means when he refers to education as growth. For Dewey, life and growth are continuous with each other; they represent the same process. Dewey writes,

life is development, and that developing, growing, is life. Translated into its educational equivalents, this means (i) that the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end; and that (ii) the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, and transforming.44

For Dewey, life is growth: it is the continuous process of adapting (modifying one’s actions and responses) to our constantly changing circumstances, and through this process, creating a richer and more integrated experience that we carry with us into future situations. There is no end to education beyond growth—the aim of education is continual growth. Ideally, education should turn students into life long learners (individuals who continue to learn from their experience after they leave school). This idea of life as growth also reflects both of Dewey’s principles of

43 Ibid., 54.
44 Ibid., 55.
experience. Life is a continuous process that builds on what has come before, and which we carry with us into the future. And we grow through the continuous interaction with our environment—we cannot grow in isolation. For Dewey, education is meant to help students remain open and sensitive to their environment; to instill the capacity to continue to learn from others and one’s own experience. It should help us retain our original plasticity, rather than hardening us and fixing us into a set way of behaving.

For Dewey, growth (development) just means the cultivation of one’s powers through the formation and restructuring of habits, which produce a richer and more integrated experience. When thinking of growth, and how to facilitate this process, we need to pay close attention to both the internal and objective conditions of the situation. If we ignore the internal conditions, as tradition education has typically done, we squander the potential of the individual. This results in the imposition of artificial habits that lack the flexibility and active character that our natural, self-formed habits possess, and thus they fail to help students navigate and cope with future experience.

As Dewey notes, the ideas he has criticized (i.e. immaturity as ‘lack’ and habit as fixed and blind adjustment) all stem from the false understanding of growth as “a movement towards a fixed goal. Growth is regarded as having and end, instead of being an end.”45 Rather than viewing growth as an end in itself, and a continuous process that extends beyond the classroom, traditional education has typically viewed growth as the fixed end of the learning process. The idea is that school is supposed to prepare students to be active contributors to society and the economy, by preparing them with the right skills and mental capacities that they will need for their jobs. When students leave school, they still have to learn ‘on the job’ (in their occupations)

45 Ibid., 55.
but their education, their growth, has ended; they have reached the stage of maturity. Dewey wants to correct this view of growth and education, which he views as a product of a false understanding of experience—one that views experience as a passive process with a fixed and unchanging end.

Dewey lists some of the educational implications that arise from this false understanding of experience. When we view education and growth as a passive process, we tend to ignore the internal conditions (the interests, capacities and talents of students) when constructing the educational environment. This approach ignores the fact that growth is an active process that starts with the individual. For students (as for everyone), experience begins with one’s internal conditions. These habits actively seek out their use and expression in one’s experience and are then modified and reconstructed in light of their interaction with the environment. By ignoring the internal conditions of the students, one is blind to the direction the students’ growth will take; their growth will be lucky or precarious because one is completely unaware of the nature of the interaction (between the internal and objective conditions). By ignoring the internal conditions of the students, one is also squandering the potential growth of their native capacities and unique individual talents. Rather than having conscious influence on the direction these powers will grow in, they are most often stunted in exchange for artificial habits that are so disconnected from one’s character and context of use that they are too alien to be of use in future experience.

Traditional education has typically viewed the instincts and impulses of the young as something negative, and as something to be corrected. Because of this, traditional education places a value on conformity. Dewey writes, “Since conformity is the aim, what is distinctively individual in a young person is brushed aside, or regarded as a source of mischief or anarchy. . . . Consequently, there are induced lack of interest in the novel, aversion to progress, and dread of
the uncertain and unknown.” In these circumstances, interest as a guiding and driving force in education is lost, which leads to stagnation and indifference. Students become complacent, unengaged in what they are learning, and thus lack the drive to cope with uncertainty or mystery. And within this state of indifference, educators have to resort to external impositions of subject matter—the blind and brute training of mental skill and discipline used to motivate and to drive students towards an end external to the learning process.

Through correcting our understanding of growth, we stop viewing education as this passive and banking process. Dewey writes, “When we abandon this notion [of immaturity and growth], we are also forced to surrender our habit of thinking of instruction as a method of supplying this lack by pouring knowledge into a mental and moral hole which awaits filling.” By giving up these notions, we give up the idea of education being the passive transfer and accumulation of static knowledge, and the training of empty capacities. This understanding reflects Dewey’s view of experience as dynamic and dialectical, as well as his functionalist psychology, which is critical of the idea of the existence of independent and static faculties in the mind. For Dewey, these faculties are merely functions—tools we use for understanding experience—and we ought not to confuse these for real entities in the mind.

For Dewey, growth (education or development) is a never-ending process that is continuous with life. We grow through our interaction with our environment and with other people. This growth comes in the form of new (or modified) habits, which enable better coping and engaging with future situations, and cultivate a richer and more integrated experience. The enrichment of one’s experience involves the broadening of one’s horizons (a more encompassing and nuanced perspective) as well as a greater harmony among one’s beliefs. Dewey argues that

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46 Ibid., 55-56.
47 Ibid., 56.
there is a drive within us for unity, for cultivating a kind of harmony among the discordant parts of ourselves. For Dewey, the function of education is to guide, facilitate and strengthen this drive: “education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age.”

Before turning to discuss Dewey’s views on thinking in education, and his instrumentalism, I would like to draw a connection between Dewey’s understanding of growth, and the German Bildung tradition. I will illustrate that Dewey’s views on growth can be seen as a biological (or naturalized) version of Bildung.

The word “Bildung” has many connotations, but it is most often translated as ‘self-development,’ ‘cultivation,’ and ‘education.’ It can also be interpreted in the pluralistic sense of the collective cultivation of a people. James Good and Jim Garrison, in their paper, “Traces of Hegelian Bildung in Dewey’s Philosophy,” draw on the views of Johann Herder, Johann Goethe and Hegel to explicate an understanding of Bildung that closely aligns with Dewey’s philosophy of education: “For these thinkers, Bildung was an organic model of education […] they viewed education as the developmental formation of an individual’s unique potential through participation in the social practices and institutions of their culture.” These thinkers share a view of Bildung as the continual process of self-realization through immersion in social practices.

For Herder, philosophy, at its core, is the theory of Bildung: “[It is] the theory of how individuals develop into a sort of organic unity that unceasingly works toward the full development of their talents and abilities, driving social Bildung as well.” Herder had a profound influence on Goethe, who sought to depict in his novels the story of the self-development of its protagonists

through their interaction with others and participation in social practices. Goethe’s novels, such as *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* and *Wilhelm Meister’s Travels*, are examples of the *Bildungsroman* (novels that depict the self-formation of their protagonist), which illustrate the social dimension of development, and emphasize the need to find a vocation, ‘a calling,’ that can help to cultivate and form one’s own talents and capacities while also contributing to the growth of one’s culture and society.

Moving on to Hegel, Good and Garrison note that Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be read as an example of a *Bildungsroman*—the successive development of self (the education of consciousness). From Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, we learn of the social nature of consciousness. According to Hegel, self-consciousness emerges through social struggle and interaction, where individuals seek recognition from another: “This struggle for recognition is the ‘formative’ activity that gives birth to self-consciousness because it teaches individuals that they actively shape their world.”51 The mind emerges within experience, through this interaction with others and struggle for recognition, rather than being present prior to experience.

With Hegel’s dialectic, we begin to see more parallels between Hegel and Dewey’s mature thought. Both Hegel and Dewey view self as an activity (rather than a substance), which is always engaged in a project. According to Hegel, when engaged in a project, the individual is in complete harmony with the environment; one does not feel separate from it. But when the self encounters an obstacle, it places the object of issue over against itself, creating a functional distinction between “subject” and “object.” This obstacle, what Hegel calls a negation, signals a disruption from the normal flow of activity, and something that needs to be resolved before one can continue with one’s project. This process of alienation and return, where the self is thrown

51 Ibid., 48.
back upon itself in order to resolve the disruption is the main process of the dialectic. The self then constructs a solution to restore its original harmony with the environment:

[T]he self formulates solutions that alter both its project and the object, achieving a reunification of consciousness that allows the self to resume its project. Upon reunification, the self eliminates the otherness of the object, regaining a holistic vision of its place in the world.52

This process of alienation and return, from disruption back into harmony, acts to incorporate the foreign elements of the ‘other’ (the object) back into a more encompassing perspective. Good and Garrison explain that this process is both Hegel’s dialectic and Bildung—it is the philosophy of how we learn and grow: “Education is a dialectical process of alienation and return, according to Hegel, in which the mind continually stretches beyond its ordinary point of view.”53 The function of this process is the continual reconstruction of self, with the aim of becoming a free and self-formed individual.

Now, if we look at Dewey’s views on growth and development, we can see its connection to the Bildung tradition, and can come to view it as an appropriation of Hegel’s dialectic translated into biological terms. As Good and Garrison note, Dewey retained the concept of negation from Hegel, “which he ultimately translates into the Peircian language of the inquiry-doubt process.”54 When an organism confronts an obstacle, a doubt emerges as to how to achieve its ends, which the organism actively tries to resolve. Good and Garrison write,

When consciousness doubts how to achieve its ends, it inquires to overcome creatively the disruption. Dewey understood that Hegel’s dialectic is the pattern of a universal (for example, the self) breaking itself up (particularization) through alienation and estrangement when it encounters obstacles to action that are sublated (Aufhebung) by an emergent habit as a unity in diversity. The basic biological and psychological pattern is a movement from functional coordination (equilibrium) to disruption of coordination (disequilibrium) to restoration of coordination (equilibrium).55

52 Ibid., 49-50.
53 Ibid., 51.
54 Ibid., 55.
55 Ibid., 55.
Dewey translates disruption into biological terms (disequilibrium), which emerges in the form of doubt. The culmination of this process is the construction of a new habit that resolves the doubt and results in a new unity (equilibrium) between the organism and the environment, and provides a sense of harmony and fulfillment in the organism. And rather than a mere return to its previous equilibrium, the organism and its environment are both changed, with the organism developing a richer and more integrated experience that incorporates the foreignness of the problem into its enlarged perspective.

Like Hegel and Goethe, for Dewey, development and growth require social interaction. One’s capacities and talents are merely potentialities (in and of themselves) waiting to be actualized through interaction with the environment and immersion in social practices. It is through interaction with the environment, encountering resistance, and creatively adapting to overcome the resistance that potentials become actualized and a ‘self’ is formed. This is what is meant by Dewey’s conception of self-expression discussed earlier. Self-expression means the cultivation of one’s powers through creatively overcoming obstacles and resistances. Dewey thought that education should be guided by the premise of creating an environment that encourages the self-expression of its students: “educators must learn to seek the self-expression generated by the child’s natural interests to encourage reflection, problem solving and growth.”

It is through self-expression that individuals actualize their potential by forming new habits to overcome challenging situations. Through this process, individuals form a new self (their projects and habits are modified) and develop a greater understanding of who they are. Like Hegel, Dewey thought that there was no self prior to action; the self is the activity itself. As

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56 Good, 188.
individuals, we only come to know ourselves through participating in the world, and seeing the effects of our actions.

Dewey, like Goethe and Hegel, recognized the importance of finding a vocation, as this provides individuals with an ideal opportunity for creative self-expression. Work, learning through structured doing, is an invaluable resource for forming and reconstructing habits in students. Unlike a lot of classroom settings, which are often too sterile to engage a student’s natural impulses and capacities, the practical and end-directed nature of structured work enables students to problem solve, and modify their habits for the purpose of accomplishing the project. When immersed in the activity, the problem is clear and one feels motivated to resolve the disruption of the task. This type of engagement can be hard to replicate in the traditional lecture format style of teaching.

Hegel thought that we actualize ourselves through fulfilling a role in society and receiving social recognition. Through this immersion in a social practice, we also develop our distinctive capacities as individuals and cultivate and enrich self-understanding. Dewey seems to have appropriated Hegel’s dialectic into his own philosophy of self-development, and learned from him the social nature of development and importance of engaging in social activities and joint enterprises for the cultivation of one’s capacities, and for broadening one’s perspective. As Dewey notes in *Democracy and Education*, when we participate in a joint activity, we naturally begin to take account of the attitudes and actions of others. Assuming that the activity has drawn in the interest of the individual, he or she becomes increasingly sensitive to the responses of others, since the success of one’s own contribution to the activity depends on effectively responding to the actions of others.
Dewey gives the example of playing catch with someone else. If the activity is merely automatic, catching the ball and blindly returning it, very little learning goes on. But as soon as one participant begins to take an interest in what the other is doing, the individual begins to reflect back on himself, and takes an interest in how his actions are related to the other person’s actions—i.e. how his catching movement is coordinated with the other’s throw. When each individual begins to take account of what the other is doing, Dewey notes, “The behaviour of each would then be intelligent; and socially intelligent and guided.” This reciprocal exchange and taking interest in the attitudes and actions of others underlies Dewey’s focus on the importance of participating in social activities for self-development. Through this dialectical exchange with the physical and social environment, one’s attitudes are modified and one’s interests are directed into new areas. We become more sensitive to our surrounding environment as we take an interest in others, and through this process, we develop a richer perspective, one that incorporates the views and attitudes of others into one’s own.

Like Hegel, Dewey argues we only develop a mind (or self) when we participate in joint practices and shared meanings—through engaging in the world and responding to the meaning of the actions of others. What we call the formation of mind is the construction (or modification) of active habits (both emotional and intellectual) that enable one to participate in shared activities. These habits incorporate within them a shared understanding of the means and ends of action of the group. Dewey’s emphasis on participation, interaction and engagement in social practices in facilitating growth relates to the democratic ideal in his philosophy of education. For Dewey, democracy is intimately related to education and to the growth of both individuals and society. The guiding premise behind Dewey’s democratic ideal is that we learn and grow through our

57 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 36.
contact and interaction with others. The greater the isolation and segregation of groups in a society, the more their habits and aims become static, sterile and routine. Individuals in this condition stagnate; they blindly adhere to custom rather than remaining open and flexible to change. Isolation hardens individuals, whereas interaction and more varied points of contact with diverse groups creates novel experiences and forces individuals out of their narrow perspective. Encountering the perspectives of others throws into question one’s own point of view and thus challenges one to see things differently.

Dewey lists two criteria that ground democracy, and which can be applied to the social set-up of the classroom. Dewey writes,

The first [criterion] signifies not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control. The second means not only freer interaction between social groups [...] but change in social habit—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse.  

Both a variety of shared interests and free interaction between social groups are needed for a well functioning democratic society (and classroom). First, shared interests bring people together—whether it be through dialogue or shared projects—and affect a kind of social control (a shared way of understanding). Next, free interaction among groups ensures a balanced exchange of ideas and influence in society. It enables individuals to have a variety of experiences, as well as contact with groups which have perspectives much different than one’s own. Last, the change in social habit emphasized in the second criterion touches on our capacity to grow (our original plasticity). As individuals undergo a variety of experiences, each new experience should modify our habits of action and understanding. What is important is that one remains sensitive and open to modifying one’s habits to meet every new experience.

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58 Ibid., 92.
The reason for Dewey’s emphasis on democracy extends far beyond some American ideal. According to Dewey, “A democracy is more than a form of government, it is primarily a mode of association, of conjoint communicated experience.” The reason Dewey places so much emphasis on democracy is because of his belief that the democratic organization of society provides conditions that are most conducive to the growth of both individuals and society as a whole. Dewey continues,

The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.

Democracy enables individuals to overcome the barriers that isolate social groups, and contributes to richer shared meanings in society. Greater interaction among groups results in more individuals taking an interest in the attitudes and actions of others, and taking these into account when directing one’s own actions. This socially guided activity leads to the integration of ‘the other’s’ perspective into one’s own, and contributes to the cultivation of broader and richer perspectives among individuals and groups.

The democratic organization of society also helps to instill a democratic attitude in its citizens, which facilitates growth in individuals and reinforces the effectiveness and cohesiveness of the system. For Dewey, the democratic attitude (or character) means an openness and sensitivity to the views and opinions of others (an interest in listening and learning from others), and a willingness, not only to engage in discussion with others, but also to express one’s unique experience. To cultivate the democratic character means to remain sensitive to one’s experience (in all its varying forms), and to have both the capacity and willingness to learn from others,

59 Ibid., 93.
60 Ibid., 93.
particularly those whose views one does not share. Rather than viewing diversity or difference as something negative or a threat to one’s own views, the democratic attitude embraces diversity and difference, and recognizes these as opportunities for growth. They lead to a broader, richer and more integrated experience, as well as the cultivation of more sophisticated social habits. As Good and Garrison note, Dewey’s allegiance to the democratic ideal is an extension of the pluralism found in the Bildung tradition—the idea that we grow both as individuals, and as a society, through our engagement and immersion in social practices.61

2.4 Thinking in Education

In this section, I will begin with a discussion of Dewey’s views on ‘thinking’ in Democracy and Education. Here, Dewey illustrates the intimate connection between thought and experience, and is critical of the one-sided accounts of experience which rest on an underlying dualism and distort our understanding of thought, i.e., how it is acquired and how it functions in experience. Next, I will lay out Dewey’s theory of inquiry and the various stages involved in this process. Unlike other forms of logic, Dewey’s instrumentalism is a philosophy of learning rather than an epistemology aimed at universal rules of logic. Dewey is concerned with what goes on when we try to solve a problem, and particularly what goes on when we are successful. I will then show how Dewey views we should incorporate this understanding of thinking into education. Dewey wants to restore the organic connection between experience and thought, and between thought and action.

61 Good and Garrison, 63.
Dewey begins his chapter on ‘Thinking and Experience’ in *Democracy and Education* by describing his understanding of the nature of experience. According to Dewey, experience is both an active and passive process: it involves a “trying” or “doing” (the active side) and an “undergoing” (the passive side). Dewey writes, “When we experience something, we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer and undergo the consequences.”⁶² This active and passive element to experience reflects Dewey’s principle of interaction. This understanding of experience informs Dewey’s views on what it means to learn something. For Dewey, learning is intimately connected with activity: “To ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy and suffer from things in consequence.”⁶³ Therefore, Dewey draws a natural connection between learning and experimenting—acting in the world and drawing a connection between our actions and their consequences. Dewey restates these ideas in the form of conclusions that have important implications on how we view thinking and learning in education. Dewey writes, “(1) Experience is primarily an active-passive affair; it is not primarily cognitive. But (2) the measure of the value of an experience lies in the perception of the relationship or continuities to which it leads up.”⁶⁴ This relates to Dewey’s second principle of experience—the principle of continuity. For Dewey, thinking is a process of drawing connections and developing a greater continuity in our experience—integrating our experiences, ideas and beliefs into a more coherent whole. In laying out these ideas of experience and learning, Dewey is responding to traditional education’s understanding of learning. Traditional education treats students as passive spectators and views acquiring knowledge as a purely intellectual or cognitive process. This approach disconnects

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⁶³ Ibid., 147.
⁶⁴ Ibid.
learning from doing, and reflects an underlying dualism—a separation of mind and body. As Dewey notes,

The former [the mind] is then thought to be purely intellectual and cognitive; the latter to be an irrelevant and intruding physical factor. The intimate union of activity and undergoing its consequences which leads to recognition of meaning is broken. Instead, we have two fragments: mere bodily action on the one side and meaning directly grasped by ‘spiritual’ activity on the other.\(^\text{65}\)

This separation has some important consequences, which Dewey lists. The overarching theme of the consequences is that by separating mind and body and setting up a teaching environment that reinforces this dualism (through separating learning from doing) we limit our natural ability to grasp meaning from experience, and learning remains at a superficial level. The first two consequences have to do with the body. By claiming that learning is purely a cognitive process, the body is treated like a liability, and educators resort to discipline in order to suppress the impulses of their students. The second consequence, related to the first, is that any use of the body that is required for learning becomes mechanical; it lacks any connection to thought or intelligent behavior, which comes with recognizing the ends of action. Teaching then becomes the blind training of mechanical habits that lack adaptability. The final and most significant consequence of this mind-body separation, is that education focuses on discrete and static things rather than relations. This reflects an analytic understanding of perception. Dewey writes, “It is alleged that the mind receives things apart from relations; that it forms ideas of them in isolation from their consequences—with what goes before and comes after.”\(^\text{66}\) Since we passively receive these discrete elements, the function of the mind is to connect these disparate parts. In contrast, Dewey holds a much broader and holistic understanding of perception and learning. Rather than perceiving discrete entities, isolated from their context (which are then reconnected in the mind),

\(^{65}\) Ibid.  
\(^{66}\) Ibid., 150.
we experience wholes and relations. It is only after the fact that we analyze things and break them down into parts. This relates to Dewey’s historical fallacy. Through the act of inquiry and analysis, we break down experience into parts. But it is mistake to read these parts or functions back into the very nature of experience, as they only appear through our analysis.

By focusing on things rather than relations, students are working with a very narrow understanding of meaning—they are taught things divorced from context. But despite this, most educators agree that drawing connections and finding relationships is one of the primary functions of education. Why does traditional education adopt such a narrow approach to teaching? Dewey explains, “The failure arises in supposing that relationships can become perceptible without experience—without that conjoint trying and undergoing of which we have spoken. It is assumed that ‘mind’ can grasp them if it will only give attention, and that this attention may be given at will, irrespective of the situation.” According to Dewey, the issue with traditional education is that it bases its approach to learning on a one-sided understanding of experience. Traditional education abstracts learning from its context, which makes learning superficial and mechanistic. In highlighting these consequences, Dewey wants to restore the natural connection between experience and thinking. Thinking requires activity, something to stimulate and engage it, and something that can test it.

For Dewey, thought and experience are continuous; thought naturally emerges from the flow of experience. Dewey defines thinking as “the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two become continuous.” Thinking is the making explicit of the reason implicit in our experience—the intelligent aspect of our experience. As Dewey notes, it gives one foresight and enables one

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67 Ibid., 151.
68 Ibid., 152.
to see where experience is leading. Once we have the ends of action in view, we can actively modify our approach in light of this to produce a more effective response.

Dewey explains that all thinking starts with a problem—a situation that is incomplete and open-ended. He explains that the meaning that we draw from this situation is not complete in itself, but rather lies ahead in what the situation is going to become. Dewey contrasts this with the approach taken by traditional education, which, building on the passive spectator view, attempts to teach discrete and static pieces of knowledge which are complete in themselves. Dewey writes, “To fill our heads, like a scrapbook, with this and that item as a finished and done for thing, is not to think. It is to turn ourselves into a piece of registering apparatus.”\(^{69}\) Dewey continues, “To take it by itself as a complete existence is to take it unreflectively.”\(^ {70}\) Dewey opposes this passive receiver approach to teaching as it leads to unreflective behavior and barely constitutes learning.

In contrast, Dewey views thinking as an active process that is best stimulated by an open-ended situation. Thinking begins when we take an interest; it occurs in the face of doubt or a problematic situation. Thinking is the active search to resolve this problematic situation. This is what Dewey calls “inquiry.” Dewey writes, “Since the situation in which thinking occurs is a doubtful one, thinking is a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of investigating. Acquiring is always secondary and instrumental to the act of inquiring.”\(^{71}\) As Dewey emphasizes, thought is not an end in itself. Its value lies ahead in guiding action and future inquiry. Inquiry is an active search, not with some end goal, but the continuous search for cultivating a richer and more integrated experience. Furthermore, thinking is not completed until one acts and tests this thinking. Dewey explains, “[at the end of inquiry] some active steps are taken which actually

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 153.
\(^{70}\) Ibid., 154.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 155.
change *some* physical conditions. And a part from such steps and the consequent modification of the situation, there is no completion of the act of thinking.\textsuperscript{72} Dewey argues that learning does not truly take place until we act on and test our ideas—only then do we truly understand the consequences and draw connections. Before this, all we have are inferences that have yet to be justified; no modification of the environment or the individual has taken place.

Dewey’s stages of reflective experience, of inquiry, are as follows: we begin with a problematic situation which arouses doubt and interest. Next, we take a survey of the aspects of the situation and formulate a hypothesis. Following this, we go back and re-examine the facts of the situation in light of the hypothesis, looking for things, which may clarify the issue at hand (deduction). After this, we modify our hypothesis in light of the situation. Last, we test our reformulated hypothesis—act to see if our inference is correct. The results will then either confirm our hypothesis or force us to modify it. As Dewey notes, it is the third and fourth steps (deduction and reformulating the hypothesis) that make this process intelligent and distinguish it from mere trial and error.

For Dewey, thinking is fundamentally a process of drawing connections between activity and its consequences, and developing a great continuity, or harmony, in our experience (integrating our experiences with our ideas and beliefs). The greater the continuity, and the richer the integration, the better-equipped students will be in approaching and negotiating future experience. As stated earlier, inquiry is a process with no set end. The culmination of inquiry ends in an idea or understanding that should lead into further inquiry. With this, no idea is set or guaranteed. These are contingent and working ideas that are always up for revision. The purpose

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 157.
of inquiry is not to reach some set end, but to facilitate action and the navigation of future experience and inquiry. Dewey states this eloquently,

> While all thinking results in knowledge, ultimately the value of knowledge is subordinate to its use in thinking. For we live not in a settled and finished world, but in one which is going on, and where our main task is prospective, and where retrospect—and all knowledge as distinct from thought is retrospect—is of value in the solidity, security and fertility it affords our dealings with the future.”  

I will now give a brief analysis of the historical background that Good gives to Dewey’s instrumentalism in *A Search for Unity in Diversity* to provide context to Dewey’s theory of inquiry. According to Good, Dewey’s logic, his instrumentalism, is a logic of learning (of inquiry). In contrast to traditional (epistemological) logic, which attempts to find universal rules of thought (or reason), and is concerned with proof, Dewey’s instrumentalism focuses on the processes of thought—what occurs when we successfully work through a problem, and the various stages of this process. In this sense, Dewey’s instrumentalism can be viewed as a kind of phenomenology of thinking (in the broadest sense of the term). Dewey wanted to study logic in the concrete—“In its emotive and working context.”  

Dewey believed that when we abstract logic from its working context, we distort the process and ignore the influences that feeling, history and past experiences have on thinking.

Dewey’s instrumentalism can be seen as a response to traditional logic and an attempt to overcome the dualisms that emerge from it, particularly the idea that thought and being are ontologically distinct. This dualism leads to the idea that there are universal principles of logic and that rational thought lies in an area separate from experience. As Good notes, Dewey’s rejection of traditional logic is tied to his functional psychology—the idea that “Knowledge is a function of experience; it is always involved in the reconstruction or transformation of a specific

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73 Ibid., 158.
74 Good, *A Search for Unity and Diversity*, 211.
problematic situation.” Rather than viewing thought and being as two distinct realities, Dewey thinks they should be seen as functions within the organic whole of experience. For Dewey, thought is continuous with being, as it naturally flows from the context of one’s experience and is always involved in its reconstruction or modification. When we separate thought and being, we fall back onto a form of metaphysics. Good writes,

    Epistemological logic, Dewey explained, is a commitment to a particular form of metaphysics because it studies ‘the relation of thought as such to reality as such,’ and is, therefore, the study of absolute entities and relations […] Because instrumental logic is concerned with absolute entities and relations, it is concerned with proof and certainty. In contrast, Good continues, “Instrumental logic is a logic of experience; it studies inquiry, how we solve problems and dilemmas that arise in specific situations.” In comparison to traditional logic, Dewey’s instrumentalism makes no metaphysical assumptions. Whereas traditional logic posits two closed off separate worlds, complete in themselves, Dewey’s instrumentalism posits nothing and is purely focused on how we think and how we learn. Dewey calls this approach, or starting point, ‘the naïve point of view,’ which Good notes is an extension of his psychological standpoint discussed earlier. Dewey wanted to eliminate metaphysics from logic and overcome the ontological dualism of thought and being. From the naïve point of view,

    Thought and being occur within experience, and we experience interrelated situations, wholes rather than discrete, atomistic sensations. Further, situations are experienced in a temporal flow…. [T]here is no mystery about the relationship between thought and reality; we think about anything and everything and there is a certain rhythm of direct practice and derived theory.

According to Dewey, there is no mystery of how thought and being interact. When we separate these two and assume that they are ontologically distinct, we are left with the unsolvable puzzle of how two ontologically distinct and closed off realities communicate with each other—how the

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75 Ibid., 212.
76 Ibid., 212.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 213.
contents of being become materials of thought. But when we approach this problem from the naïve point of view, the issue dissolves. There is a kind of continuity to our experience: thoughts naturally emerge as we navigate through our experience, which we use to guide our actions. There is a natural dialectical exchange between thought and reality; these are not truly separate.

Dewey’s instrumentalism can also be seen as an extension of Hegel’s dialectic. Thought emerges when there is a disruption of the natural flow of our experience (in the form of doubt or a problematic situation). According to Dewey, we are always engaged in a project, and in this state, there is a natural harmony between the individual and the environment. The completion of the project is blocked, and this conflict stimulates thought, which is aimed at resolving the conflict. As we reflect, thought acts to modify our understanding of the situation. As Good notes, the measure of the value of thought is the degree to which the disruption is resolved and restores the harmony to our experience. Similar to William James, for Dewey, truth is what functions to resolve the problem. Dewey’s theory of truth is a kind of coherence theory, but not the logical or correspondence kind of coherence. Rather, truth is coherence in our experience—between our ideas and beliefs. For Dewey, truth is what restores harmony to our experience.

For Dewey, this process is the natural method of thought employed by both the ordinary man and the scientist; it is the natural process of how individuals solve problems. Dewey was critical of the epistemological approach to problem solving and learning, which analyzes thoughts in a vacuum (abstracted from context). Dewey called the epistemological logicians passive spectators, as they are divorced from action and the normal solicitations of experience, which the ordinary man and the scientist exploit.79 Dewey argues that when we divorce thought

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79 Ibid., 214.
from its functional context and generating conditions we distance it from the very thing that gives it value and meaning.

I will now return to Dewey’s approach to incorporating his understanding of thinking into education. For Dewey, the cultivation of the students’ ability to think can be seen as the primary focus of education—to teach students how to think for themselves. This may be a bit of a truism, but as Dewey notes, it is more accepted in theory than actualized in practice. In traditional education, there is an artificial divide between the acquisition of skill, the acquisition of knowledge, and the training of thought. By abstracting these and teaching them separately, we divorce these areas of study from their context—the things that supply them with meaning and which make them flexible and adaptable to various situations. By doing this, skills and thought lose their intelligent quality and teaching becomes blind training (disconnected from the ends of action). Dewey writes, “skill obtained apart from thinking is not connected with any sense of the purposes for which it is to be used. It consequently leaves a man at the mercy of routine habits and the authoritative control of others.”

Likewise, knowledge divorced from activity and the ends of action is useless, and becomes more of a liability (in the form of cognitive strain) than something that can facilitate action and future inquiry. In this sense, when we abstract learning from its original context—the situations where it is first acquired—learning becomes stale, as it seems to lack a purpose. Teaching is reduced to blind training, and discipline is required to motivate the students.

Dewey argues that in order to improve education, we need to reorient our practice (of teaching) onto the conditions that “exact, promote and test thinking.” The training of thought should not be viewed as an end in itself. Rather, thought should be trained for the purpose of

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81 Ibid.
improving one’s ability to act, and to cultivate a richer understanding of oneself and the world (which in turn will improve our ability to navigate future situations). It is not what you know that matters; it is what you can do with what you know that has value. These ideas reflect Dewey’s principle of continuity of experience. We should be looking ahead to where experience is leading. The meaning or significance of an idea is not complete in itself (in isolation), but lies in where it leads—what actions and resulting consequences it triggers. In short, its value lies in its effects on modifying one’s experience.

As Dewey notes, in traditional education, there is an artificial divide between thinking and experience. Experience is reduced to mere sensation while thinking is placed in some higher realm. One of the consequences of this artificial divide is the idea that thought can be cultivated in isolation from concrete experience—that lessons can be taught without taking account of the actual experience of the student. Dewey writes, “The fallacy consists in supposing that we can begin with ready-made subject matter of arithmetic, or geography, or whatever, irrespective of some direct personal experience of a situation.”82 Dewey argues that thought requires an actual concrete experience to stimulate it. We cannot cultivate active and intelligent thinking in isolation. We need a certain degree of background experience to furnish our thoughts with the materials needed to guide it into new areas. Dewey wants us to think of the kinds of vital experience students have outside of school, which stimulate thought and engage them.

According to Dewey, education should emulate these kinds of experiences. When first learning something, students should not be working with subject-matter complete in itself (how experts or learned individuals have structured material). Rather, students should start with an activity, and with materials in their most primary form. In the beginning, education should be giving student

82 Ibid., 160.
open-ended activities that provide them the opportunity to test and make connections for themselves. Dewey writes,

The first stage of contact with any new material, at whatever age of maturity, must inevitably be of the trial and error sort. An individual must actually try, in play or work, to do something with material in carrying out his own impulsive activity, and then note the interaction of his energy and that of the material employed.\(^{83}\)

In order for students to learn, there must be a degree of interaction between their impulses (their internal conditions) and the materials (their environment). Learning, for Dewey, is noting the connections of this interaction. This cannot be done if subjects are given ready-made, to be recited and stored. The idea, according to Dewey, is to ‘give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results.’\(^{84}\) The situation ought to be able to stimulate thinking and suggest a path of further inquiry (ways of testing ideas and different areas in which the same ideas apply). This is largely determined by the nature of the problem—the kind of problem that is signaled by the situation. The problem of the situation must interact well with, or emerge from, the internal conditions of the student (their interests, instincts and capacities). The question of the value of the problem comes down to: is it the student’s own problem that emerges from their own experience, or is it imposed upon them by the teacher? When it is the latter case, what results is that the problem is not the student’s own; it carries no weight for the individual, and nor does it spark curiosity or engage the student’s thought. The student is not directly engaged with the subject matter, and is merely adapting to satisfy the demands of the teacher. Rather than cultivating one’s interests and capacities in the form of active habits, the student is subconsciously molding to the conventions of the school.\(^{85}\)

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 160.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 161.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 163.
When selecting the material of the educational environment, a balance is needed. One needs to pick materials that are capable of challenging the individuals and engaging their interests, but also material that is not too difficult as to overwhelm and discourage individuals from future inquiry. Attention needs to be paid to the internal condition of the student—the level of their capacities and interests. As noted earlier, material should be given that has a certain degree of flexibility and incompleteness. It should be something that the students can adapt to their own purposes, and that enables them to find their own solutions. When the material lacks flexibility, and is given ready-made, it leaves no room for thought and leads to a mere banking style of education. This relates back to having the proper understanding of the nature and function of knowledge. Dewey argues that knowledge should be viewed as a means for action and for further inquiry, but it often gets treated in the opposite sense. Dewey writes, “Frequently it is treated as an end in itself, and then the goal becomes to heap it up and display it when called for. This static, cold-storage ideal for knowledge is inimical to educative development.” When treated in this way, the students’ capacities for creative thinking are stifled, and they lack the experience of selecting and understanding what is significant in a situation. The build up of static and isolated bits of knowledge becomes a burden rather than a resource for inquiry and navigating situations.

Dewey contrasts acquired knowledge (facts and data) with knowledge in its active sense (suggestions, inferences and suppositions), which he refers to as ideas. Whereas facts and data clarify what is given, they cannot supply one with an answer or a solution to a problem; suggestions and inferences serve that purpose. Dewey highlights the distinction to illustrate the creative dimension of thought. Dewey writes,

86 Ibid., 165.
a thought (what a thing suggests but is not as it is presented) is creative,—an invasion into
the novel. It involves some inventiveness. What is suggested must, indeed, be familiar
in some context; the novelty, the inventive devising, clings to new light in which it is
seen, the different use to which it is put.87

Creativity emerges out of the novel uses to which ideas are put—it does not lie in the material
itself, but in the way it is applied in novel situations (making connections that others have yet to
see). When there is genuine thought, the quality of our experience changes; like entering into a
new dimension of the same world, it acts to reconstruct our experience. Dewey argues that
thought, in this sense, only emerges when we work with a problem hands on. We may listen to
someone else speak and express her own ideas, but these never qualify as ideas for ourselves.
The mere reciting and storing of ideas of others does not constitute thinking. It is the distinction
between the passive transfer of knowledge and the creative appropriation of one’s situation. If
education truly wants to train thought and cultivate creative thinking, it must supply the materials
and environmental conditions that engage the interests of the student, and that set them on the
path to test their ideas. This means setting open-end activities that present a problem that is
relatable to the student. The aim is to cultivate continuity in the experience of the student—
choosing projects that will engage their interests and capacities, and the send them on a search
into novel and more sophisticated areas.

To re-emphasize what was said before, thinking (or the acquisition of thought) is not the
end or aim of education. Thinking and ideas serve an instrumental role to action and to the
process of inquiry. Dewey writes, “[Ideas] are the anticipations of some continuity or connection
of activity and a consequence which has not yet shown itself. They are therefore tested by the
operation of action upon them. They are to guide and organize further observations, recollections

87 Ibid., 165.
and experiments." Ideas aid in inquiry and guiding action; they are incomplete in themselves. They only acquire meaning through their action and through their role in modifying experience. This reflects Dewey’s principle of interaction. A complete experience involves the modification of both the internal conditions and the objective conditions of the situation. Until an idea is tested—producing an effect on the environment and recognizing the consequences of the effects—the idea remains incomplete and holds merely the status of a conjecture.

Similar to Dewey’s views on growth, inquiry is a continuous process—there is no end outside of further inquiry. One of the aims of inquiry is to cultivate continuity in our experience. This continuity in our experience consists of a harmony, or coherence, amongst our beliefs, and developing a connecting thread between what we have learned (our past experience) and where our experience is leading (our future experience). We do this by using one’s past experience and interests as a starting point to learning, and using the products of inquiry (our ideas and beliefs) as a starting point for further inquiry. In a sense, we can view inquiry and growth as two sides of the same coin: both are an extension of Hegel’s dialectic (in style and process) and both rest on the same principles (the principle of continuity and the principle of interaction). Thought is the creative dimension of this process, which serves to redefine and reconstruct our experience. Thought is creative in that it is a leap from what is merely present in our experience—it is an appropriation of what is implicit, or merely implied by the situation. Thought, when it becomes the mere acquisition and storage of knowledge, loses its vitality and meaning, and it no longer functions to reconstruct our experience.

In education, individuals must find their own path (or method) for thinking. They must develop their own approach to thinking and working through problems. This is not accomplished

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88 Ibid., 167.
by teaching students techniques for thinking (logical rules to be applied universally). Rather, it is achieved through providing an environment that enables students to work through problems themselves—through engaging students in activities, joint enterprises, and immersing them in a thought-provoking environment. When we engage in group activities, it forces us to think of others (their attitudes and how they see things). In doing so, and coordinating our actions in response to them, we begin to incorporate the views of others into our own perspective, thus broadening our horizons.

Education is not about instilling a bulk of information already structured by experts. It is about learning to structure things ourselves, based on our own experience and how we see the world. Each individual has their own approach to thinking (based on their capacities and interests that are unique to their experience). Education should be aimed at cultivating this type of creative thinking: the ability and freedom to think for oneself and come to conclusions that are relevant to one’s own experience.

Further, in education, we want to instill an attitude in students that encourages continued learning—remaining sensitive and open to one’s experience. Education, growth and inquiry—these are all ends in themselves. They are an ongoing process that does not stop once one leaves school. Education should promote learning both inside and outside the classroom. One’s experience in school should help to enrich one’s lived experience outside of school, while one’s experience outside of school should help to provide the materials and tools that will be cultivated inside the classroom. Education should help to build a bridge between these two aspects of a student’s life; they should not be viewed as separate, or closed off worlds that are in opposition with each other.
Through his program of progressive education, Dewey wants to instill a kind of
democratic character in students. In his view, this attitude (or character) facilitates the growth
and progress of both the individual who possesses it, and the groups they engage with. This
attitude consists of an openness and sensitivity—a willingness to engage in discussion, and to
learn from the opinions and views of others. This desire in wanting to instill a democratic
character in students is grounded on the idea that we grow and develop as individuals (and as a
society) through our interactions with others; the more varied points of contact with others, the
richer our experience will be. And we cultivate this attitude by being immersed in an
environment that promotes shared interests in individuals and enables the free exchange of ideas.

For Dewey, education is about providing the conditions that promote growth, free inquiry
and continued learning. Education should encourage students to find their own path, to cultivate
their own perspective, rather than forcing them to see things the way others have before. As
Dewey notes, this is all we can do: providing the conditions that best stimulate the thinking and
growth of individual. The rest is up to the student.
CHAPTER 3: MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

3.1 Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophical Project

The central themes that appear throughout Merleau-Ponty’s works are the relation between consciousness and nature, and the problem of rationality—what grounds our rationality. Together, they comprise the main components of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project, which he was still consumed by and struggling to work through in his last unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Over the course of his life, the type of philosophy Merleau-Ponty engaged with changed—moving from transcendental philosophy to phenomenology, and then later into an ontology to ground his phenomenology—but these central problems remained the same. The purpose of this section is to introduce the central themes of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project, and to outline his approach and what exactly he was attempting to accomplish with his project. Since Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy did make a significant shift towards the end of his life—the development of his ontology in “Eye and Mind” and *The Visible and The Invisible*, which he was unable to fully develop—I am choosing to focus primarily on *The Phenomenology of Perception* and some of his essays that followed in *Sense and Nonsense*. As well, I will briefly touch on some of the themes in *The Structures of Behavior*, his first major work, by way of background and to provide context for where the *Phenomenology* begins.

In *The Structures of Behavior*, the first of his two doctoral theses (the second being the *Phenomenology*), Merleau-Ponty begins the task of understanding the relation between consciousness and nature. Part of the book is a critique of the atomistic interpretations of experience given by classical psychology. Merleau-Ponty appropriated the “new psychology”
out of Germany—Gestalt psychology—and their notion of form (the gestalt) to illustrate how the interpretations of experience given by experimental psychology and behaviorism were reductive, and did not account for how we actually experience the world. According to Gestalt psychology, what we experience is not a series of discrete parts (sense data) that are causally associated and brought together in the mind. Rather, what we experience are wholes, groups of complex structures comprised of interrelated parts, with each ‘structure’ influencing the expression of the others. But according to Merleau-Ponty, despite being an improvement on classical psychology, Gestalt psychology is still a form of objectivism; it is still grounded on an underlying realist philosophy. As a descriptive science, Gestalt psychology adopts the third person “outside spectator” point of view, and assumes that the world is fixed and complete “in itself.” As Gary Madison notes in his book *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*:

[T]he Gestaltians did no more than substitute, in the place of complex, independent, externally related causes and actions, the notion of an integrated whole wherein “causes” are now interdependent but where the motive force is still causality. In a word, they only touched up the notion of cause, and for them, the notion of form remains a real thing which acts by means of physical causality.  

According to Merleau-Ponty’s criticism, Gestalt psychology still operates within a causal and objectivist system with form merely replacing atomistic sensations. In reaching this conclusion, Merleau-Ponty takes up the task of developing a philosophy of form free of unjustified metaphysical assumptions. Merleau-Ponty uses the lessons from transcendental philosophy to overcome the objectivism latent in Gestalt psychology. What transcendental philosophy teaches us is that what we understand as the world is already consciousness of the world; it presupposes a consciousness viewing it. From this, Merleau-Ponty argues that form is not complete in itself, as an element of the world; it exists only as an object of consciousness. Therefore, meaning does

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not exist complete in itself (in the world). Rather, it only exist for a consciousness that grounds it and supports it from below.

At the end of *The Structures of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty arrives at the ‘transcendental attitude,’ though is dissatisfied with this position. According to Merleau-Ponty, the transcendental attitude leaves us with a confused thought about perception; it posits a transcendent consciousness that constitutes and projects in front of it a completely transparent world, but lacks awareness of itself as this constituting power. This lack of awareness brings with it the feeling that one is passively receiving one’s experience, rather than actively constituting it. From here, Merleau-Ponty returns to the notion of form and seeks to understand this passivity in our perceptual experience. Since we lack awareness of this constituting process, form cannot exist purely as an object of consciousness. Rather, Merleau-Ponty concludes, form exists only for perceptual experience—only for a consciousness engaged in the world. As Madison notes, by asserting that forms exists only through being perceived,

> one is forced to acknowledge that a concept such as this can nevertheless not belong to a constituting consciousness which is its own master, rather, such a concept only belongs to a consciousness which finds itself face to face with a world, one which looks about and which, at this stage, is nothing other than its look, one which lives outside itself in the world.

According to Merleau-Ponty, this ambiguous notion of form exists neither in itself (in the world) or for itself (purely for consciousness). Rather, form emerges through the dialectical interplay between consciousness and the world in perceptual experience. And the subject who perceives this form is neither a purely passive spectator, nor an active constituting consciousness. The subject exhibits this ambiguous mix of activity and passivity; we actively explore the world, thus actively shaping the world, while our experience appears already constituted.

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90 Ibid., 17.
This is where the *Phenomenology of Perception* begins, with Merleau-Ponty returning to perceptual consciousness, and trying to rethink this beginning consciousness, our initial contact with the world, prior to any thought about it. We need to recover this immediate experience, and discover how sense emerges here, rather than attempting to explain its ‘conditions of possibility’ (transcendental idealism). In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty carries over these critiques of classical psychology and transcendental idealism in the form of a ‘double polemic’ (to use Paul Ricoeur’s characterization) against empiricism and intellectualism—the term Merleau-Ponty used to refer to transcendental idealism, rationalism, neo-Hegelianism and Husserl’s early phenomenology. ⁹¹ According to Merleau-Ponty, empiricism makes perception into an event in the world, like any other causal or physical event in the world, and reduces the subject into a mere object: the world, complete in itself, acts on the organs of the body with sensation registering this causal event. In contrast, intellectualism turns perception into an intellectual operation that is constituted by a transcendent subject. Whereas in empiricism, perception is an objective event, intellectualism makes it a subjective event.

But as Merleau-Ponty notes, empiricism and intellectualism share a fundamental kinship: “Both maintain the natural or dogmatic attitude, and the survival of the notion of sensation in intellectualism is but a sign of this dogmatism.” Merleau-Ponty continues, “We began from a world in itself that acted upon the eyes in order to make itself be seen by us: we have arrived now at a consciousness or a thought about the world, but the very nature of this world is unchanged. It is still defined by the absolute exteriority of its parts and is merely doubled across its extension by a thought that sustains its.” ⁹² Both empiricism and intellectualism posit an objective and transparent world. Beyond this bias of objectivity, both empiricism and intellectualism skip over

⁹¹ Ibid., xiii
the phenomenon of perception; they reduce it into an empty registering of an event or a purely intellectual operation. Thus, Merleau-Ponty argues we must return to perceptual consciousness—to how we experience objects and the world, and how sense emerges from this immediate contact, prior to our thematization of it.

With regard to the style and approach to Merleau-Ponty philosophy, one may ask about his preoccupation with this double polemic, as well as the obscure and indirect nature in which the material is presented. As Madison explains in his essay, “Does Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?” the Phenomenology can be seen as a kind of “anti-text,” one that puts forward no positive theses, and is thus constructed negatively. Madison explains, “the position Merleau-Ponty seeks to present here is inseparable from the positions he is arguing against and, in fact, exists, and can exist, only in dialectical opposition to these other positions.” Merleau-Ponty is struggling to describe and capture a ‘third way’ of understanding our relation to the world—one that can be only expressed indirectly and negatively out of the other positions. And the ambiguous and metaphorical style to his writing speaks to the fact that in the Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is actively working through this problem and his project as he is writing; this is not a text of preconceived ideas worked out and ordered in a systematic way. As Madison puts it, “in the Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty seems embarked upon a search to discover and master his own thought.”

If we compare Merleau-Ponty’s position throughout the Phenomenology to both empiricism and intellectualism, it will always appear closer to the intellectualist position. We can trace this connection back to the end of The Structures of Behavior. For Merleau-Ponty, the contribution of intellectualism, and its progress beyond empiricism, is illustrating that

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consciousness is a correlate of the world. What we call the world is already consciousness of the world, and it makes little sense to talk about the world in itself—we have no experience of what that could be. But despite the similarities, we find Merleau-Ponty leveling a stronger critique against intellectualism. According to Merleau-Ponty, the mistake of intellectualism, particularly Kant’s transcendental idealism, is its approach in trying to explain the ‘conditions of possibility’ of the world—what must be the case to make sense of our experience of the world—rather than trying to describe our contact and lived experience of it. As Madison notes,

[Transcendental philosophy] claims to follow in an inverse direction a path of prior constitution and thereby return to certain a priori structures, behind experience, which make it possible. It thus wants to ground what is on what must be, and claims to discover a transcendental ego behind experience which has already constituted it without being aware of having done so.\(^95\)

The mistake of intellectualism is going behind experience and explaining what must be the case, rather than finding the logic or reason latent in our experience. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, “they thereby judge what is by what ought to be, or by what the idea of knowledge requires.”\(^96\)

According to Merleau-Ponty, transcendental philosophy is still a naïve thought, one that has not accounted for its own beginning—its rootedness in a particular perspective. It asserts the general conditions that make experience possible for all, without accounting for where this reflection is coming from. As Merleau-Ponty states in his introduction to the \textit{Phenomenology}:

Unless it [reflection] becomes conscious of itself at the same time as becoming conscious of its results, reflection can never be full and it can never be a total clarification of its object. We must not merely settle into a reflective attitude, or into an unassailable \textit{Cogito}, but also reflect upon this reflection, understand the natural situation it is aware of replacing, and that thereby belongs to its definition.\(^97\)

As Merleau-Ponty explains, reflection cannot merely withdraw and assume the artificial position of a transcendent subject, while ignoring the natural situation (the overall context of the

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 152
\(^{96}\) Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Phenomenology of Perception}, 62
\(^{97}\) Ibid., 63.
experience) in which the reflection takes place. A complete reflection, one that is not artificial and reductive, must account for both its result and its total situation. What Merleau-Ponty is attempting to do in the Phenomenology is to develop a truly reflective philosophy, one that is true to our lived experience as embodied beings, and one that does not make claims that attempt to explain and go beyond this lived experience.

Merleau-Ponty writes, “The centre of philosophy is no longer an autonomous transcendental subjectivity, situated everywhere and nowhere, but is rather found in the perceptual beginning of reflection at that point when an individual life begins to reflect upon itself.” He continues, “Reflection is only truly reflection if it does not carry itself outside itself, if it knows itself as reflection-upon-an-unreflected, and consequently as a change in the structure of our existence.”

In this sense, Merleau-Ponty’s project is closer to Hegel’s (in The Phenomenology of Spirit) than it is to Kant’s, though without assuming prior to exploration of the guarantee of reaching an absolute perspective. Merleau-Ponty wants to describe experience, prior to our thought about it; he wants to grasp this immediate contact with the world (perceptual consciousness) and describe it in all its richness. In following Hegel, Merleau-Ponty thinks experience is “pregnant” with sense—with meaning. But this meaning does not exist in itself (objectively in the world), and nor is it imposed on the world by a transcendental subject. Rather, our experience appears pregnant with meaning, with this meaning emerging through our interaction with the world—through the dialectical interplay of embodied consciousness and the world. And similar to Hegel’s project, the task of philosophy is to draw forth the meaning—the

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98 Ibid.
reason or logic—latent in experience: “Experience anticipates a philosophy and philosophy is but an elucidated experience.”

3.2 Subjectivity

I will now turn to Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of subjectivity from the *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Throughout the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty is describing the subject’s commerce with the world—the various ways, we, as embodied beings, interact with and relate to the world. As mentioned earlier, Merleau-Ponty builds his position in opposition to both the empiricist’s and intellectualist’s understanding of how we stand in relation the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, we are neither pure objects, like all other objects in the world (the empiricist position) or pure subjects in full possession of ourselves (the intellectualist position). We are this ambiguous mix of subject and object.

In the first part of the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty reveals the connection between consciousness and the body and illustrates that these are not really separate. Rather, they form a dialectical relation with each other, with each influencing and mutually defining the other. Consciousness and the body are two dimensions, or poles, of a single process; they form a system with each other. This ambiguous and dialectical relation is similar to the conception of “nonduality” found in the Indian philosophical tradition of Advaita Vedanta (*advaita* meaning nondual). Nonduality in the tradition of Vedanta simply means “not-two.” It refers to an internal relation between self and world, where the two comprise an all-encompassing system without being reduced to a simple monism; it respects the differing dimensions of the whole. In the same

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99 Ibid., 65.
way, for Merleau-Ponty, our consciousness is not reduced to the body, or the body to consciousness; these are dimensions of ourselves that mutually define each other. They represent an internal relation (two poles within an encompassing process) and together they form ourselves as embodied beings. As Madison notes, with this conception of an embodied self, Merleau-Ponty is overcoming the dualism found in modern philosophy, which states existence has only two forms: things either exist as a consciousness or as an object. Madison writes,

The perceiving [embodied] subject, does neither; its mode of existence is, therefore, essentially ambiguous. Existence is ambiguous because it calls into question the traditional distinction of subject and object and, in doing so, one of the central, foundational principles in philosophy, the so-called law of the excluded middle (a thing must be either this or that). According to Merleau-Ponty, this ambiguous relation is mirrored at the level of self and world. He writes, “One’s own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within, and forms a system with it.” We cannot define the subject or the world in the abstract. As with consciousness and the body, self and world form a system with each other, with each mutually defining the other. Merleau-Ponty writes, “existence as subjectivity is identical with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because ultimately, the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and from this particular world.”

Merleau-Ponty illustrates this ambiguous relation, at the level of consciousness and the body, in his discussions of “double sensations”:

When I touch my right hand with my left hand, the object ‘right hand’ also has this strange property, itself, of sensing…. [But] the two hands are never simultaneously both touched and touching. So when I touch my hands together, it is not a question of two sensations

100 Madison, “Does Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception,” 89.
102 Ibid., 431.
that I could feel together, as when we perceive two objects juxtaposed, but rather an ambiguous organization where two hand can alternate between the functions of ‘touching’ and ‘touched.’”

This experience of double sensations reveals the strange phenomenon of the body reflecting (turning back on itself) and taking itself as an object. It illustrates this ambiguous mode of living where one can alternate feeling like a subject and an object, but these two processes can never fully coincide. I can never be conscious of both touching and being touched with the same hand. I am never a pure subject and never a pure object. I experience myself as this dialectical and ambiguous mix of for-itself (subject) and in-itself (object). This relation is circular in nature, with neither process capable of being reduced to the other.

This ambiguous mode of living illustrated through double sensations reveals that we, as subjects, are never in full possession of ourselves; we are never fully transparent to ourselves. Madison writes, “Consciousness, perceptual, or other, is not a pure self-presence; the subject is present to and knows itself only through the mediation of the body, which is to say that this presence is always mediated, i.e. is indirect and incomplete and thus is never (as Derrida might say) a ‘full presence.’” As Madison explains, our knowledge of ourselves, and presence to ourselves, is always mediated by our body and its relations to the world—its actions and effects in the world.

This leads into Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of subjectivity as a ‘transcendence.’ Related to the dialectical nature of oneself, and the intentional threads that link subject and world, Merleau-Ponty characterizes subjectivity as an ‘active transcendence’: “The acts of the I are of such a nature that there is no private sphere of consciousness. Consciousness is entirely transcendence, not a transcendence that is undergone—we have said such a transcendence would

103 Ibid., 95.
be the end of consciousness—but rather an active transcendence.”\textsuperscript{105} The kind of transcendence Merleau-Ponty is referring to is not of the religious kind or a transcendence towards the absolute (beyond one’s finite perspective). Rather, he characterizes subjectivity as an active transcendence, one that escapes itself towards the world. The subject is not a self-contained entity or metaphysical substance that is completely separate from the world. Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of the subject being dialectically and internally related to the world already takes a step in refuting this conception of an enclosed self. Rather, the subject lives in the world, is at home in the world, and is constantly throwing itself forward into the things around it. Merleau-Ponty writes, “My life continually throws itself into transcendent things; it happens entirely on the outside.”\textsuperscript{106} Merleau-Ponty adopts Heidegger’s use of the term “ekstace” (a going beyond) to characterize this movement of transcendence. Subjectivity is constantly transcending itself forward into the things around it, towards what it is not; this is the essence of existence. Subjectivity is not some static self-enclosed entity; it is an act, or a movement. When we examine our experience, what we find is not some transcendent ego, or a bundle of perceptions arbitrarily strung together, but rather an embodied being immersed in a world; a subjectivity going beyond itself, and living outside itself in the world: “What is discovered is the profound movement of transcendence that is my very being, the simultaneous contact with my being and with the being of the world.”\textsuperscript{107} For Merleau-Ponty, it is this very movement of transcendence which sketches out meaning in the world. He writes,

\begin{quote}
  insofar as existence is the very operation by which something that had no sense takes on sense [...] by which chance is transformed into reason, or in other words insofar as existence is the taking up of a de facto situation. ‘Transcendence’ is the name we shall give
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{105} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Phenomenology of Perception}, 395.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 387.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 396.
to this movement by which existence takes up for itself and transforms a *de facto* situation.\(^{108}\)

Transcendence is the movement through which meaning emerges in our experience. It is the movement where the subject and the world interact or ‘commune’ with each other. Through perceptual consciousness (embodied experience), subjectivity is thrown forward and enters into a dialogue with the things around it, and through this exchange, sense emerges. This dialogue, this movement of transcendence, constitutes our presence to the world. Madison explains,

> The ‘relation of active transcendence’ which is the circularity between the subject and the world is what makes it be that there is a *meaningful* world, that there is meaning. The meaning of the world is the meaning of man’s existence in the world: those ‘natural’ meanings we call colors are, for instance, expressions of the different ways in which the subject inhabits the world; they are expression of his presence in the world.\(^{109}\)

As noted earlier, meaning does not exist in itself (objectively in the world) and nor is it completely projected onto the world by a constituting consciousness. Meaning emerges through our dialogue and interaction with the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, “The thing can never be separated from someone who perceives it; nor can it ever actually be in itself because its articulations are the very ones of our existence, and because it is posited at the end of a gaze or at the conclusion of a sensory exploration that invests it with humanity.” He continues, “every perception is a communication or a communion […] a coupling of our body with the things.”\(^{110}\)

This meaning, which belongs to neither the subject nor the world, but to perceptual consciousness, is as Madison mentioned, an expression of our presence in the world—our being in the world.

As Madison notes, the type of transcendence that characterizes subjectivity is not only a horizontal transcendence—a transcendence towards the world—but is also a vertical

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 176.


transcendence. Subjectivity transcends itself as a mere object; it is an expressive object, “[an] in-itself that exists for-itself,” that can grasp and create meaning through its movement and interaction with things. Merleau-Ponty often refers to subjectivity as a kind of “hollow” or “fold” in the world, an object that opens onto the world out of which subjectivity emerges and projects forward. For Merleau-Ponty, this movement of transcendence not only sketches out meaning in the world, but it is through this transcendence that we come to know ourselves. This connects back to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjectivity as a mediated presence. As mentioned before, we, as embodied beings, are not in full possession of ourselves; we are not pure subjects. Our presence and understanding of ourselves is mediated by our bodies. There is a certain ambiguity that hangs over ourselves; we feel like strangers to ourselves. We are not aware of all the underlying motives that direct our actions, or why we hold certain opinions, or why we see the world the way we do. We feel a certain separateness that prevents us from understanding the depths of who we are.

According to Merleau-Ponty, we overcome this separateness, and come to know ourselves through transcending ourselves into the world: “I only touch myself by escaping from myself.”

Subjectivity is at home in the world, and it comes to know itself through its interactions with things—through its effects in the world and its associations with things. We are continuously thrown into situations that we did not create, and our task is to take these up, to live them, and to be open to the solicitations called forth by experience. Madison expresses this idea poetically: “It is only in this way, by listening to an echo of ourselves in the world, that we are able to know ourselves.”

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111 Ibid., 430.
This feeling of separateness I have just mentioned touches on the last fundamental feature of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of subjectivity—what Madison refers to as “rootedness.” For Merleau-Ponty, one of the defining features of subjectivity derives from the fact that, as a subject, I always find myself confronted with a world that appears already constituted. To use Heidegger’s term, we are thrown into the world, not of our own creation, and left to find our bearings through our associations with things. Our understanding of ourselves is mediated by our confrontation and interaction with this obscure world, which always appears in front of us as already constituted. I will return to this momentarily.

In the final section of the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty returns to Descartes’ *Cogito* as a way of characterizing subjectivity. This may seem puzzling at first, since Descartes’ *Cogito* represents the epitome of the modern conception of subjectivity that Merleau-Ponty is attempting to overcome. But as Madison explains, “[For Merleau-Ponty] Descartes was one of those great thinkers who cannot be merely overcome and refuted, and who can be fought only by means of a creative reappropriation and a faithful correction of what they thought.”

In contrast to the postmodern approach, which called for “the death of the subject”—a complete rejection of modern subjectivity—Merleau-Ponty wanted to strip subjectivity of its metaphysical qualities and ground it in our lived experience. As Madison also notes, Descartes was the modern figure who initiated the tradition of reflective philosophy and recognized the need for a radical starting point to ground our reason. But rather than basing the certainty of one’s existence on the consciousness of one’s thoughts, Merleau-Ponty reversed the *Cogito*. For Merleau-Ponty, one’s existence (and the existence of one’s thoughts) is grounded on one’s contact with the world—one’s presence in the world. Rather than placing the reality of consciousness above the reality of

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114 Ibid.
the world, Merleau-Ponty has reversed the relation: “The reflecting subject discovers that he is present to himself only by being present to the world, that he is reflective only insofar as this reflection is a reflection on a prereflective experience.”115 The subject is given to himself, immersed in this obscure and already constituted world as something to be thought—something to be reflected. Here, we are reminded of the passage in the introduction to the Phenomenology: “Reflection is only reflection if it does not carry itself outside itself, if it knows itself as reflection-upon-an-unreflected, and consequently as a change in the structure of our existence.”116 For Merleau-Ponty, reflection is not some abstract process of separating oneself from one’s lived experience and looking at it in an impersonal way. Rather, reflection is the act of recovering this pre-personal existence; to grasp and capture our fundamental engagement with things prior to thought. For Merleau-Ponty, the task of the philosopher is to reveal and express this unreflected aspect of our lives—our pre-personal anonymous life, which is another way of saying our unique presence to the world.

An awareness and understanding of the unreflected aspects of our lives comes to the fore when we reflect on the reality of thoughts themselves. Phenomenologically speaking, thoughts just come to us. In contrast to Descartes, who argued that the reflecting Cogito is the creator of all thoughts and intentions—who is conscious and in control of the thought constitution process—it appears as though thoughts just emerge from within, without us, as reflective subjects, ever being the ones who constitute or choose them. Merleau-Ponty writes, “The problem is to understand how I can be the one constituting my thoughts in general, without which it would not be thought by anyone, would pass by unnoticed, and would thus not be a thought—without ever being the one constituting any particular one of my thoughts, since I never see them

115 Ibid., 155.
116 Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, 63.
born in plain view, and since I only know myself through them.” As Merleau-Ponty explains, the problem is to understand the mystery of thought—its source and how it functions. If we reflect on our experience, we are not consciously picking each individual word when we speak, like some metaphysical controller from above. If we catch ourselves mid sentence, we cannot explain why we chose one word rather than another—they just freely emerge within the flow of our thinking.

Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between two different Cogitos—the spoken Cogito and the tacit Cogito—which helps to explain the mystery of our thoughts. Merleau-Ponty argues that the Cogito that Descartes describes in his Meditations is a spoken Cogito, whereas what he was really aiming for was the tacit Cogito—the dimension of ourselves that grounds all thought and reflection. According to Merleau-Ponty, we confuse these two and fail to recognize the tacit Cogito underlying the spoken Cogito, when we skip over the nature of thoughts and expression: “[when] the expressive operation is taken for granted.” For Merleau-Ponty, expression is not an empty or passive operation of translating already constituted thoughts to speech. Rather, expression always takes us beyond ourselves, beyond already constituted thought, and carries us into areas of thought and understanding that we had not previously known. Merleau-Ponty explains, “The Cogito that we obtain from reading Descartes […] is a spoken Cogito, put into words and understood through words; it is a Cogito that, for this very reason, fails to reach its goal, since a part of our existence—the part that is busy conceptually determining our life and conceiving it as indubitable—escapes this very determination and conception.” The tacit

117 Ibid., 422.
118 Ibid., 423.
119 Ibid., 423-424.
Cogito cannot be put into words; it is the silence “which animates and directs all our expressive operations.” He continues,

Beyond the spoken Cogito … there is clearly a tacit Cogito, an experience [épreuve] of myself by myself but this indeclinable subjectivity has but a fleeting hold upon itself and upon the world. This subjectivity does not constitute the world, it catches glimpses of the world around itself; it does not constitute the word, it speaks in the manner one sings when one is joyful; nor does it constitute the sense of the word, for this sense springs forth for subjectivity in its commerce with the world and with the others who inhabit it.

According Merleau-Ponty, thought is not constituted by this tacit Cogito. Rather, thought is motivated by the tacit Cogito’s vague grasps on the surrounding world it is immersed in, with meaning and sense emerging from its dialectical exchange (its commerce) with the world. This motivating silence is taken up by the spoken Cogito, our reflective consciousness, and put into words.

For Merleau-Ponty, the purpose of the spoken Cogito (reflection), is not to return to the tacit Cogito, for this is not possible, and nor is it even the goal. Rather, the spoken Cogito completes the tacit Cogito; it accomplishes what the tacit Cogito cannot; it brings it to expression.

He writes, “this first perspective waits to be reconquered, fixed, and made explicit through perceptual exploration and through speech. Silent consciousness only grasps itself as ‘I think’ in general in the face of a confused world that is ‘to be thought.’ … The tacit Cogito is only a Cogito when it has expressed itself.” The tacit Cogito, the motivating silence, is our ‘being in the world’—our presence in the world. And the spoken Cogito, its utterances, are an expression of this underlying Cogito—expressions of our presence in the world. It is this mediated presence of ourselves to ourselves that emerges through our presence in the world, and is the active transcendence that opens onto the world, that is in dialogue with the world, and which is only

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120 Ibid., 424.
121 Ibid., 426.
122 Ibid.
vaguely aware of itself as such. Furthermore, the tacit *Cogito* requires the spoken *Cogito* to make it explicit, and bring itself to awareness. The relation between the tacit *Cogito* and the spoken *Cogito* is captured by Husserl’s technical term, *Fundierung* (founding):

The founding term (time, the unreflected, fact, language, perception) is primary in the sense that the founded term is presented as a determination or a making explicit of the founding term, which prevents the founded term from ever fully absorbing the founding term; and yet the founding term is not primary in the empirical sense and the founded term is not merely derived from it, since it is only through the founded that the founding appears.\(^{123}\)

As mentioned before, the spoken *Cogito* is not a return to perceptual consciousness (our being in the world). Rather, the aim of reflection is to reveal and to understand this underlying dimension of ourselves. To express our prereflective experience is to reveal the logic or reason latent within it—to bring about its full meaning. Through expressing our immediate experience, we transcend the limits of our prereflective life. We not only make it appear, but we bring about its full meaning or complete it.

Merleau-Ponty reaches the conclusion at the end of the *Phenomenology* that the subject, this active transcendence that is united to the world, and tends toward it, is time. The subject is this one temporal flow initiated from birth, which roots us in a particular perspective:

I am not a series of psychical acts, nor for that matter a central I who gathers them together in a synthetic activity, but rather a single experience that is inseparable from itself, a single ‘cohesion of a life,’ a single temporality that unfolds itself [s’explicite] from its birth and confirms this birth in each present.\(^{124}\)

According to Merleau-Ponty, we do not possess time. Time is not an object for one, implying that one is separate from it, or transcendent to it. Rather, the subject is time, and lives time—it is firmly situated in time. The subject’s rootedness in a present perspective enables there to be a past and a future, which would not exist from an absolute perspective. Time is an “ek-stace” (a

\(^{123}\) Ibid., 414.

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 430.
going beyond itself): an active present that opens onto and projects forward into the future and back into the past. For Merleau-Ponty, the subject being temporality helps to clarify how subjectivity makes contact with itself. He writes,

Time is “self-affection of itself”: time, as a thrust and a passage toward a future, is the one who affects; time as a spread out series of presents, is the one affected. […] Subjectivity is precisely this ek-stase, or this projection of an indivisible power into a term that is present to it. The originary flow, says Husserl, does not merely exist, for it must necessarily give itself a manifestation of itself.  

The subject is this single temporal flow becoming conscious of itself through its commerce with the world and through reflecting back on itself. Reflection, in this sense, is time turning back on and becoming conscious of itself. For Merleau-Ponty, this is the essence of lived time: a present open to what it is not (a lived past or an anticipated future). This temporal flow is always transcending itself towards the past, which remains on the horizon of one’s experience, thus re-interpreting it from one’s present perspective, and tending forward towards the future through one’s expectations and anticipations of what is to come. Each of these reflections enters back into the flow of one’s life, and weigh on one’s present experience—how one perceives and interprets one’s present experience.

As subjects rooted in time, as being time itself, we are grounded in a finite perspective. But as Merleau-Ponty explains, our rootedness in time, this finite perspective, rather than being a limitation, is what enables there to be a meaningful world: “My point of view is much less a limitation on my experience than a way of inserting myself into the world in its entirety.”  

For Merleau-Ponty, there is no meaning abstracted from a perspective; nor is there meaning from an absolute perspective. If one could somehow achieve a complete synthesis of all of one’s perspectives, and reach some absolute perspective, the world would lose all its texture and

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125 Ibid., 450.
126 Ibid., 345.
meaning. From an absolute perspective, facing a complete and determinate world (a closed system), there would be no room left to engage with things and to take things up; nor would there be any point of relation. As Merleau-Ponty notes, “it is essential for the thing and for the world to be presented as ‘open,’ to send us beyond their determinate manifestations, and to promise us always ‘something more to see.’”\textsuperscript{127} For Merleau-Ponty, one of the essential features of meaning is that it takes us beyond what is present. Meaning emerges through going beyond what is given, and through grasping what is merely implied by the situation. He writes, “There is sense for us when one of our intentions is fulfilled, or inversely when a multiplicity of facts or signs lends themselves to us in our act of taking them up together, or in any case, when one or several objects exist as … representatives or as expressions of something other than themselves.”\textsuperscript{128} Thus, in order for there to be meaning, there needs to be a degree of incompleteness; things need to be able to refer beyond themselves. A complete and determined world would leave no room for this. We also need to be situated in a perspective for meaning to emerge. In order to ‘take things up,’ we need to be taking them up \textit{from somewhere}. Merleau-Ponty continues,

\begin{quote}
The only way we have of knowing what a painting is and what a things is, is by looking at them, and their \textit{signification} is only revealed if we look at them from a certain point of view, from a certain distance, and in a certain direction [sens], in short, if we put our involvement with the world at the service of the spectacle.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

What the \textit{Phenomenology} teaches us is to embrace our rootedness—to embrace our perspective. Reason is rooted in our experience of the world (in the phenomenal world): “The world is the homeland of all rationality.”\textsuperscript{130} There is no reason beyond this; there is no transcendent reason that explains everything. Both realism and idealism have limited our understanding of meaning and reason by abstracting our perspective or by looking for reason

\begin{footnotes}
\item[127] Ibid., 348.
\item[128] Ibid., 452.
\item[129] Ibid., 453.
\item[130] Ibid., 454.
\end{footnotes}
outside of one’s experience. What we come to see is that reason is rooted in our unique presence to the world, but this presence is itself unmotivated—it is a contingent fact. As Madison explains,

> It is only within the subject-world relation that the world is a “world” and that the subject knows himself and knows evidences; and thus this presence, this foundation of all rationality, is itself without a foundation, without justification or reason. Beneath perceptual rationality, beneath the brute presence of the world, there exists no transcendent reason, and thus this presence appears to be a totally gratuitous and contingent fact having no possible justification.\(^{131}\)

In the end, what the *Phenomenology* calls for is a return to subjectivity, a return to our unique presence in the world, our prereflective experience, in order to understand it and find the reason implicit within it. All meaning and reason in one’s life rests on one’s presence in the world, but this presence itself lacks a justification. Our presence in the world, this contingent fact, can only be traced back to the “unmotivated upsurge of the world”—one’s birth. Rather than shying away from this unsettling fact, and retreating back onto the search for some transcendent truth or reason to ground our experience, Merleau-Ponty wants us to embrace our contingency and be true to our experience:

> The contingency of the world should be understood neither as a lesser being, a gap in the tissue of necessary being, a threat to rationality, nor as a problem to be resolved as soon as possible through the discovery of some deeper necessity…. Ontological contingency, or the contingency of the world itself, being radical, is on the contrary what establishes once and for all our idea of truth.\(^{132}\)

In giving a description of who we are and the nature of our situation, Merleau-Ponty has defined the task of philosophy and outlined its limitations. In the end, what the *Phenomenonology* calls for is a return to subjectivity, a return to our unique presence in the world (our prereflective experience) in order to understand it and to find the reason implicit within it.

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\(^{131}\) Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 67-68.

3.3 Rationality

In the preface to the Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty characterizes rationality as a “mystery” as opposed to a problem. This distinction is significant, as it will help us to understand Merleau-Ponty’s unique approach to grappling with rationality. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Rationality is not a problem; there is no unknown behind it that we would have to determine deductively or prove inductively beginning from it.” He continues, “The world and reason are not problems; and though we might call them mysteries, this mystery is essential to them, there can be no question of dissolving it through some ‘solution,’ it is beneath the level of solutions.”133 This distinction between problems versus mysteries is a reference to Gabriel Marcel. For Marcel, problems are things that can be separated from oneself—held at a distance like an object—and which can be solved, typically through the use of ‘techniques’ (analytical methods). As well, the nature of problems do not change when approached by different people; they can be solved by all through the use of the same techniques. Mysteries, on the other hand, are a part of one’s very being, and for that reason, they cannot be separated from oneself, dissolved, or approached like a problem. As Merleau-Ponty notes, “We witness, at each moment, this marvel [rationality] that is the connection of experiences, and no one knows how it is accomplished better than we do because we are this very knot of relations.”134 Mysteries, like rationality, are an inextricable part of one’s existence—they are a part of who we are—and for this reason, they lack solutions. We will never one day solve the mystery of rationality; all we can do is find better ways of understanding it and dealing with it.

133 Ibid., lxxxv.
134 Ibid.
In noting this distinction, we are in a better position to understand Merleau-Ponty’s unsystematic approach to rationality. Merleau-Ponty is not looking to construct or explain rationality, such as by looking for its conditions of possibility. His search for the meaning of rationality is not the uncovering of some prior or transcendent truth that will universally ground or guarantee our powers of rationality. As Merleau-Ponty notes in the preface, which is echoed at the end of the *Phenomenology*, “the only logos that preexists is the world itself.”\(^{135}\) For Merleau-Ponty, reason does not exist outside the world, but rather is firmly rooted in the world. Meaning and reason do not exist prior to the world; they emerge through our engagement and participation in the world—through our movements of transcendence.

Merleau-Ponty wanted to not only understand the mysterious nature of rationality, but wanted to enlarge our modern conception of it. His approach to dealing with rationality can be seen as an attempt to overcome the objectivism predominant in modern philosophy. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty’s project can be seen as an extension of Hegel’s. In his short essay, “Hegel’s Existentialism,” in *Sense and Nonsense*, Merleau-Ponty analyzes Jean Hyppolite’s lecture on Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and highlights the elements of Hegel’s philosophy that can be seen as existential, which have since been either ignored or overshadowed by his later metaphysical thinking. As Hubert Dreyfus notes in his introduction to *Sense and Nonsense*, at the time Merleau-Ponty was writing, Hegel had only recently been introduced to France, so French thinkers were able to give Hegel’s philosophy a fresh set of eyes, unbiased by its current reputation in England and Germany. For Merleau-Ponty, Hegel represented the modern philosopher who influenced all the great philosophies of his time (Marx, Nietzsche, Existentialism) and was the first philosopher to expand our notion of reason from its narrow

\(^{135}\) Ibid., lxxxiv.
modern conception. Merleau-Ponty writes, “it was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason which remains the task of the century.” He continues, “He is the inventor of that Reason broader than the understanding, which can respect the variety and singularity of individual consciousnesses, civilizations, ways of thinking, and historical contingency, but does not give up the attempt to master them in order to guide them to their truth.”

Hegel wanted to explore experience from within and integrate the problems and inconsistencies that naturally arise within it into an “expanded reason”—a broader more holistic understanding of experience. In exploring experience from within, rather than imposing abstractions from without, Hegel’s philosophy was sensitive to context such as individual differences and history, and looked at the internal logic of the content of experience.

Although the early Hegel can be praised for his sensitivity to context and his approach to working with concrete experience, less can be said to the later Hegel. Like Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty is critical of Hegel’s later metaphysics in its attempt to try to fit the world and experience into some predetermined logic. As Merleau-Ponty notes, “This last Hegel has understood everything but his own historical situation; he has taken everything into account except for his own existence, and the synthesis he offers is no true synthesis precisely because it pretends ignorance of being the product of a certain individual and a certain time.” In ignoring his own situatedness, his inherence in history, the later Hegel does not stay true to his early approach, and fails to produce a complete synthesis. For Merleau-Ponty, a complete synthesis requires reason to be radical, in the sense of taking account of its own beginning—one cannot pretend to be analyzing from an absolute perspective.

137 Ibid., 64.
As noted before, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project aligns closer to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here, Hegel was trying to capture a ‘total sense of history’ through an analysis of the progression of the spirit. In his *Phenomenology*, Hegel was after the absolute (self-realization) though he never succeeded. Looking back from Merleau-Ponty’s perspective, we would say nor was it attainable. We cannot become equal to what we are in our spontaneous life, or to use Merleau-Ponty’s terminology, we cannot return to the prereflective and live there—there will always be a divide between our prereflective and reflective life. But as Merleau-Ponty notes, it is the approach and the attempt that matters: a striving for the most complete perspective, starting from within experience, rather than from behind or above. He writes, “Hegel clearly states that philosophers do not create history but always give voice to a situation already established in the world before their appearance on the scene.”138 As philosophers, we are not constructing history from above. Rather, we are reflecting on an unreflected experience given to us, which we are immersed in. Unlike his later work, Hegel in the *Phenomenology* was not trying to force history into some pre-established framework. He was letting the content of experience speak for itself, and was attempting to express its own internal logic.

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, this is one of the factors that makes Hegel’s philosophy existential. Instead of attempting to explain experience through the imposition and the connecting of concepts, Hegel was attempting to reveal “the immanent logic of experience” through expressing “man’s fundamental situation in the face of the world and other men.”139 The other reason that justifies calling Hegel’s philosophy existential is its constant struggle to understand itself. Merleau-Ponty writes,

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138 Ibid., 64-65.
139 Ibid., 65.
Hegel’s thought is existentialist in that it views man not as being from the start a consciousness in full possession of its own clear thoughts but as a life which is its own responsibility and which tries to understand itself. All of the Phénomonologie de l’esprit describes man efforts to reappropriate himself.”

For Merleau-Ponty, Hegel’s dialectic is the endless task man faces of trying to return to himself—trying to reappropriate and return to his obscure and spontaneous life. Man’s consciousness is marked by its refusal to be satisfied with its prior truths: “his refusal to limit himself to one or another of his determinations.” As long as there remains a split between one’s spontaneous life and one’s conscious (reflective) life, the search continues. But for Merleau-Ponty, this divide between one’s spontaneous life and one’s reflective life—between the prereflective and the reflective—is one of the defining features of being human. We are never guaranteed from the outset of reaching some absolute perspective, or becoming equal to our spontaneous life. Rather, we are destined to be a divided self, thrown into a world, trying to find our bearings in order to understand ourselves. As Madison expresses its, “To be alienated, separated from oneself, to be as it were a stranger to oneself, to be at odds with, indeed, not only ourselves but with nature and with other as well—this is the very definition of what it means to be human.”

What we take away from Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Hegel is a similarity between their philosophical projects. Like Hegel, Merleau-Ponty wanted to expand our conception of reason through becoming immersed in concrete experience and describing it from within. Furthermore, comparing the Hegel of the Phenomenology to the later Hegel reinforces the importance of our situatedness with regard to rationality—that reflection, in order to be complete, must take account of its own beginning. Last, in recognizing that we are a divided self—that this

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140 Ibid., 65.
141 Ibid., 66.
is part of the nature of our being—we realize the search for reason in experience is an endless
task. It is a constant striving for the most complete perspective without the guarantee of ever
being satisfied.

The themes discussed in “Hegel’s Existentialism” are carried over into “The Metaphysical
in Man.” In this essay, Merleau-Ponty puts forward his own unique conception of what he means
by “metaphysical”—a kind of pragmatic sense of the term that he calls “metaphysics in action.”
The first part of the essay addresses how Gestalt psychology has undermined the ‘implicit
ontology of science,’ which, in his view, requires us to revise our understanding of objective
knowledge. According to Merleau-Ponty, the sciences of man—psychology, history, linguistics,
and anthropology—have all stagnated due to their methodology oscillating between empiricism
(treating their subject matter like objects that are governed by natural laws) and intellectualism
(treating their subject matter as being guided by a conscious idea or logic). In Merleau-Ponty’s
view, Gestalt psychology provides a third way or a new path for understanding subject matter
that overcomes this dichotomy. Merleau-Ponty writes,

By revealing ‘structure’ or ‘form’ as irreducible elements of being, [Gestalt psychology]
has again put in question the classical alternatives between ‘existence as a thing’ and
‘existence as a consciousness,’ has established a communication between and a mixture of,
objective and subjective, and has conceived of psychological knowledge in a new way, no
longer as an attempt to break down these typical ensembles but rather an effort to embrace
them and understand them by living them.143

Through its notion of form, Gestalt psychology has overcome the dichotomy between
consciousness and object and has revealed a new way of being. What we learn from Gestalt
psychology is that the meaning we draw from phenomena does not exist in-itself (objectively in
the world), but nor is it projected onto the world by a transcendental consciousness. Rather, the

143 Merleau-Ponty, “The Metaphysical in Man,” in Sense and Nonsense (Evanston: Northwestern University Press,
1964), 86.
meaning arises through one’s interaction with the phenomena, i.e., a mixture of subjective and objective.

Furthermore, we do not experience objects in the abstract, isolated from their surrounding environment. Instead we experience interrelated wholes that give mutual expression to each other. The meaning that we attribute to a certain object is the product, or function of the way it relates and interacts with its surrounding environment. As Madison puts it,

Not only is a thing a certain ‘significance’ for the perceiving body, but the ‘significance-thing’ is itself a function of the figure-background dialectic. The positive significance that a thing has at any given moment is a function of the way that that ‘thing’ profiles itself against an indeterminate, but determinable background. When the relations of determinate and indeterminate are altered, as they always can be, everything becomes something other than it was: the duck becomes a rabbit, the vase becomes two faces confronting one another.¹⁴⁴

What Gestalt psychology teaches and reinforces for Merleau-Ponty is the ambiguity of the world, which realism and idealism strips away; they take away its depth and the various ways or ‘styles’ things have of inhabiting the world. Science wants to make everything clear, but in stripping the world of its relations—handling it in isolation and reducing it to atomistic sensations—we falsify the thing and strip it of its more encompassing meaning. Metaphysical consciousness, in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of it, makes room for the ambiguity of things and for the paradoxes that we face in our experience.

Yet, despite all the potential of Gestalt psychology, and its innovative way of conceiving of perception and our relation to phenomena, it failed to stay true to its principles. Due to the influence of scientism, Gestalt psychology began to privilege the quantitative over the qualitative, despite claiming to be a descriptive science, and reduced its complex forms to simple physiological processes. As Merleau-Ponty notes, “They preferred to affirm—by a pure act of

faith—that the totality of phenomena belonged to the universe of physics and merely to refer to a more advanced form of physics and physiology to make us understand how, in the last analysis, the most complex forms have their foundations in the most simple.\textsuperscript{145} Gestalt psychology succumbed, through an ‘act of faith,’ to the realist bias, and as a consequence, studied sensation merely in the abstract, an area more conducive to quantitative research than the more complex forms that involved the total body and which provide more fruitful insight into human behavior.

Merleau-Ponty also gives a critique of the methodology of history, which begins to reveal his expanded notion of rationality that he is attempting to articulate in this paper. Due to the nature of the subject matter, the historian is less susceptible than say the sociologist, to falling for the trap of trying to capture an absolute perspective. That said, history is still open to the threats of scientism, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, can have the paradoxical effect of locking people into their most subjective views.\textsuperscript{146} It can have the effect of giving one a very narrow understanding of history, unaware of being guided by one’s own biases, and often assuming there is an external logic guiding history. As Merleau-Ponty explains, by ignoring the subjective lived experiences of individuals immersed in history and placing significance only on facts, we imply there is some logic (or some linear causal order to history), while ignoring the wider social context that gives meaning to these facts. According to Merleau-Ponty, “true objectivity demands that we examine the subjective components of the event—the way it was interpreted by its contemporaries and protagonists—in order to assign them their rightful role.”\textsuperscript{147} Merleau-Ponty argues that if we want truly to understand the nature of the behavior of man, and revitalize these disciplines, we need to embrace our subjectivity, and be honest about the situatedness of our view, rather than pretending ignorance and fleeing from these things. He writes, “We arrive

\textsuperscript{145} Merleau-Ponty, “The Metaphysical in Man,” 85.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 91.
at the universal not by abandoning our particularity but by turning it into a way of reaching others, by virtue of that mysterious affinity which makes situations mutually understandable.”

This mysterious affinity that Merleau-Ponty speaks of is what he means by rationality.

For Merleau-Ponty, the sciences of man take for granted an absolute observer and the belief in an explicit and objective world. But in experience, and the actual practice of these human sciences, what we find is not a meditating ego observing a fully transparent world from above; rather, we find an incarnate subject immersed in an obscure world. Because of this, Merleau-Ponty notes, “all knowledge of man by man, far from being pure contemplation, is the taking up by each, as best he can, of the acts of others, reactivating from ambiguous signs an experience which is not his own … of which he forms no distinct concept but which he puts together as an experienced piano player deciphers an unknown piece of music.” He continues, “Here, we no longer have the positing of an object but rather we have communication with a way of being—a certain ‘style’ or presence in the world.”

In recognizing our condition as situated selves immersed in an ambiguous world, the assurance of universal knowledge that is connected to the idea of everyone possessing the same transcendental ego, disappears:

The universality of knowledge is no longer guaranteed in each of us by that stronghold of absolute consciousness in which the Kantian “I think”—although linked to a certain spatio-temporal perspective—was assured a priori of being identical to every other possible “I think.” The germ of universality or the “natural light” without which there could be no knowledge is found ahead of us, in the thing where our perception places us, in the dialogue into which our experience of other people throws us by means of a movement not all of whose sources are known to us.

Here, Merleau-Ponty is undermining the traditional conception of reason, what he often refers to as “la pensée objective” (objectivism). According to Merleau-Ponty, we need to move beyond

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148 Ibid., 92.
149 Ibid., 93.
150 Ibid.
the idea of reason being the correlation between thought and reality. The type of universality he speaks of in this passage is not the modern conception where a thought comes to mean the same for all, and becomes universally true in all situations (thus becoming an objective truth). Rather, universality just means our capacity to reach others and to come to a mutual understanding of things. For Merleau-Ponty, rationality means this capacity for communication and dialogue with others. As Madison puts it, “human beings are rational, not because what they say and do has a transcendent guarantee in things, but simply because of the fact that, despite all the difference which set them apart, they can still, if they make the effort, communicate with and understand one another.”

Rationality does not exist outside the world with a transcendent or absolute foundation; it exists in the world, “out there” so to speak, in the context of our experience and emerges through our dialogue with others and our movements of transcendence—through our subjectivity.

For Merleau-Ponty, ‘metaphysics in action’ means remaining open and sensitive to the radical contingency of the world and embracing subjectivity as our access to truth and rationality. He writes, “Metaphysics begins from the moment when, ceasing to live in the evidence of the object—whether it is the sensory object or the object of science—we apperceive the radical subjectivity of all of our experiences as inseparable from its truth value.” He continues on the following page, “Metaphysical consciousness has no other objects than those of experience: this world, other people, human history, truth, culture. But instead of taking these as all settled, as consequences with no premises, as if they were all self-evident, it rediscovers their fundamental strangeness to me and the miracle of their appearing.” For Merleau-Ponty, metaphysical consciousness is this sensitivity to the ambiguous and mysterious quality of the world; it is not

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153 Ibid., 94.
trying to make our experience of the world into problems, which have definitive and universal solutions. Rather, it means overcoming the faith we have in the objectivity of the world, and making room for the idea that there is always another side to things. Metaphysical consciousness means recognizing that our subjectivity is our access to reason, of going beyond what is immediately given, and making contact with others (reaching agreement with others).

As Merleau-Ponty explains, even if there did exist some absolute truth in a given situation, the only resource I have for judging and assessing things are my own experiences and my communication with others:

It remains just as hard to reach agreement with myself and with others, and for all my belief that it is in principle always attainable, I have no other reason to affirm this principle than my experience of certain concordances, so that in the end, whatever solidity I have in my belief in the absolute is nothing but my experience of agreement with myself and with others.\(^{154}\)

Rationality rests on this communication we have with ourselves and with others, where mutual understanding is never guaranteed. Furthermore, for Merleau-Ponty, the desire for some absolute truth or foundation to ground our reason is misguided, and actually undermines rationality. When we reduce things to one way of appearing, or when we revert to some absolute truth, we place this above all else, and we surrender our thinking to it. Thus, we give up our thinking, and with it, the motivation to listen to others and to reach any form of consensus or mutual understanding. But when we relinquish our desire for the absolute and embrace the contingency of the world, things regain their depth. I will quote Merleau-Ponty at length here:

If, on the other hand, I have understood that truth and value can be for us nothing but the result of the verifications or evaluations we make in contact with the world, before other people and in given situations of knowledge and action, that even these notions lose all meaning outside of human perspectives, then the world recovers its texture, the particular acts of verification and evaluation through which I grasp a dispersed experience resume their decisive importance, and knowledge and action, true and false, good and evil have

\(^{154}\) Ibid., 95.
something unquestionable about them precisely because I do not claim to find in them absolute evidence.¹⁵⁵

As Madison explains, the new conception of reason that Merleau-Ponty outlines in this paper is a kind of postmodern reason, though it is unique because this “properly postmodern conception of reason has nothing postmodernistic about it.”¹⁵⁶ In Merleau-Ponty, we do not find any desire to reject reason or to undermine its significance. Rather, we find him trying to give it a new foundation in our lived experience, and to enlarge our understanding of it—to give it back its depth that is derived from the variations of human experience. Madison relates Merleau-Ponty’s rationality to Jürgen Habermas’s “communicative rationality” and describes it as a kind of “reasonableness”: “the attempt to reach uncoerced agreement with others by means of unrestricted dialogue.”¹⁵⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, this is how we experience rationality in the world: through our unique contact and presence in the world and through our uncertain dialogue with ourselves and others.

### 3.4 Being and Expression

To conclude this section on Merleau-Ponty, I will briefly discuss two final essays from Sense and Nonsense: “Cézanne’s Doubt” and “Man, the Hero.” Merleau-Ponty begins Sense and Nonsense with “Cézanne’s Doubt,” a character study of Cézanne and his artistic project, which acts to introduce many of the themes of his early phenomenology—being in the world, expression, and freedom—while also marking the first of his aesthetic writings. For the purposes of my discussion, I will focus primarily on the descriptions Merleau-Ponty gives of Cézanne’s project—

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.
¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 72.
what he was attempting to do, and how it contributed to his doubt and uncertainty—and will relate this to Merleau-Ponty’s own philosophical project. This will help to introduce Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression, which builds on the previous sections on subjectivity and rationality.

Merleau-Ponty begins the essay with a description of Cézanne’s artistic struggle and his temperament. For Cézanne, painting was more than just a vocation. As Merleau-Ponty describes him, “Painting was his world and his way of life.”  

Here, Merleau-Ponty gives a portrait of a tragic artist, always trying to perfect his work, while never feeling satisfied. Cézanne was plagued with doubt throughout his life, and continued to question his abilities even up to his death. As Merleau-Ponty notes, Cézanne was anxious by nature, constantly living in fear, and was prone to fits of temper. As he grew older, he became more sensitive and withdrawn; he lacked the capacity to adapt to novel situations or social settings, even with his friends. According to Merleau-Ponty, it would not be a leap to suggest he was suffering from some form of schizophrenia, judging from his instability and his withdrawing from the world. But as he explains, to attribute the meaning or significance of his work to his underlying constitution would be a mistake: “The meaning of his work cannot be determined by his life.”

We cannot reduce the meaning of his work to his psychology or temperament, thus implying some causal link between the two. As Merleau-Ponty explains, the meaning of his work emerges once we understand the nature of the project he was undertaking.

Cézanne was trying to find a middle path, or third way, between classical painting (realism) and impressionism. In impressionism, the study of appearances, Cézanne found an advance over the classical method. Impressionists were trying to capture “the very way in which

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159 Ibid., 11.
objects strike our eyes and attack our senses.” But Cézanne quickly moved beyond impressionism, as its approach isolated colors from their surroundings, thus distorting the objects. It failed to take account of how colors contrast with their surroundings, so the scene lost its reflections and atmosphere.

In moving beyond impressionism, Cézanne wanted to retain its aesthetic of ‘painting from nature’ while returning to the objects themselves. Thus, his approach to painting was “paradoxical”: “he was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without following the contours, with no outline to enclose the color, with no perspectival or pictorial arrangement.” As Madison puts it, “He wanted to rediscover the object itself in its appearances.” His approach was an ambiguous mix of capturing the scene in-itself and for-itself. Cézanne was not imposing a foreign method that would limit and falsify the spectacle. He was letting nature speak for itself. In his method of combining art and nature, Cézanne “wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization.

It seems Merleau-Ponty found in Cézanne a model for what he wanted to achieve in philosophy in describing, and thus trying to understand, the nature of experience. Cézanne’s approach to finding a third way between realism and impressionism is comparable to Merleau-Ponty trying to overcome the dichotomy between empiricism and intellectualism. As Cézanne retained the impressionist aesthetic, Merleau-Ponty retained elements of idealism. Furthermore, just as Cézanne returned to the objects trying to capture their solidity and depth, Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, wanted to return to “the things themselves”—to grasp and express the world

160 Ibid.
161 Ibid., 12.
162 Madison, The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, 72.
as it spontaneously emerges through our interaction and engagement with it. Both Cézanne and Merleau-Ponty were after this primordial world, out of which all of our ideas, constructions and sciences are built. Both were trying to grasp our lived experience—how the total spectacle naturally arises in our experience—while not abstracting the subject’s unique perspective, and its contributions to the emerging order that appears. As Merleau-Ponty notes, “it is Cézanne’s genius that when the over-all composition of the picture is seen globally, perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging or, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes.”164 As Madison explains, Cézanne was practicing what Gestalt psychology would later adopt in using the structures and perspectives that exist only for him—only for perceptual consciousness—to bring nature back to life.

For both Cézanne and Merleau-Ponty, capturing this primordial world as it appeared was an arduous task. There is always more to see, always another side, with each perspective adding to and revealing more to what has come before. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Expressing what exists is an endless task.”165 It is a task that is never complete, as one can never express something that captures all perspectives. There is always a degree of indeterminacy in the spectacle and our perspective is always changing.

As Merleau-Ponty explains, Cézanne’s paintings undermine “la pensée objective” (objectivism): our belief in a determinate and explicit world, complete in itself. He writes, “We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakeably. Cézanne’s paintings suspend these habits of thought and reveal the base of human nature upon which man has installed himself. This is why Cézanne’s people are strange, as if viewed by a creature of another

164 Ibid., 14.
165 Ibid., 15.
species.”¹⁶⁶ The way Cézanne’s paintings undermine our belief is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s approach in the *Phenomenology* in revealing how our interactions with things change their appearance—how approaching things from the other side allows us to see things in a new light.

Cézanne’s painting was not a mere reflection of this primordial and indeterminate world. As Merleau-Ponty quotes Cézanne, “I realize that the painter interprets it…. The painter is not an imbecile.”¹⁶⁷ The expressive act is neither a pure reflection of this primordial world nor a pure creation. Madison writes, “It is both a representing of nature and a human creation.”¹⁶⁸ For Merleau-Ponty, the true artist, such as Cézanne, is the one who is able to grasp and capture this ambiguous world, and conjure up its meaning for others to see; he turns it into a cultural object. He writes, “Just as the function of words is to name—that is, to grasp the nature of what appears to us in a confused way and to place it before us as a recognizable object—so it is up to the painter, said Gasquet, to ‘objectify,’ ‘project,’ and ‘arrest.’”¹⁶⁹

This discussion of Cézanne’s art, being a mix of representing nature and creating it; and the grasping of this elusive primordial world leads us into Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression. Merleau-Ponty explains that an artist such as Cézanne is not content with being a mere man of culture, of pre-established meanings; he wants to appropriate its core and give it a new expression: “he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before.”¹⁷⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, artistic expression is not the mere translation of a prior constituted thought in the mind, thus making the act of expression an empty operation (adding nothing to the thought). Rather, what is expressed does not precede the expression. He writes,

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¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 16.
¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 15.
¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 19.
What he expresses cannot, therefore, be the translation of a clearly defined thought, since such clear thoughts are those which have already been uttered by ourselves or by others. ‘Concept’ cannot precede ‘execution.’ There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself completed and understood, is proof that there was something rather than nothing to be said.171

Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of artistic expression brings us back to what was said earlier on the relation between the tacit Cogito and the spoken Cogito, as well as Husserl’s technical term, fundierung (founding). For Merleau-Ponty, artistic (or creative) expression is not the mere translation of an already constituted idea. Rather, it is the grasping, the appropriation of one’s prereflective experience—one’s being in the world. It is one’s attempt to express the dialogue one has with the world. Madison writes, “The work of art exists as a symbol or a sign: it translates and expresses existence (being in the world), and it is only by its means that man comes to an awareness, comes for the first time to the full awareness of his own existence, grasps reflectively what he is.”172 This is connected to Husserl’s paradoxical term, the fundierung: expression (the founded term) emerges out of existence (the founding term), but we only become aware of our existence through reflecting and attempting to express it: ‘it is only through the founded that the founding appears.’ Therefore, it is only through expression that we come to an awareness of ourselves.

Relatedly, Merleau-Ponty notes that the meaning of the expression does not exist in one’s prereflective experience, thus making expression a mere representing. He writes, “The meaning of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere—not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life. It summons one away from the already constituted reason in which ‘cultured men’ are content to shut themselves, toward a

171 Ibid.
172 Madison, The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, 80.
reason which contains its own origins.”173 According to Merleau-Ponty, the meaning of the expression only emerges through the expression itself; the expression emerges from one’s prereflective experience, but it also transcends it. Expression, in this sense, accomplishes what one’s prereflective experience could not; it expresses it, brings it to awareness, and gives it a meaning. As Madison puts it,

The work of expression addresses an appeal to our actual existence whose meaning it wants to grasp, but this immediate meaning of our being in the world manifests itself as a meaning only by and in the act of expression. We become conscious of our existence only by expressing it; before expression the meaning of existence is confused and is concealed in the everyday experiences which have not yet been thematized. 174

Therefore, the meaning of the work of art does not pre-exist in the world, or in the artist’s unformulated life; it exists ahead of him in the expression, which itself gives a meaning to this unformulated life. This understanding of expression helps to explain the doubt and anguish Cézanne faced. He was trying to express a meaning that did not yet exist: “Cézanne’s difficulties are those of the first word.”175 Rather than his constitution and his disposition, it was the project he was undertaking that better describes the meaning of his work and his struggle.

For Merleau-Ponty, artistic expression and the work of art possess a special power. They not only reveal to us our own existence but can help us transcend our own subjective lives and unite the lives of others. According to Merleau-Ponty, this is what Cézanne was attempting to do with his painting; he was working towards establishing an “infinite logos.” He writes,

It is not enough for a painter like Cézanne, an artist, or a philosopher, to create and express an idea; they must also awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousnesses of others. A successful work has the strange power to teach its own lesson. The reader or spectator who follows the clues of the book or painting, side to side guided by the obscure clarity of a particular style, will end by discovering what the artist wanted to communicate.176

174 Madison, The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, 81.
175 Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 19.
176 Ibid., 20.
As Merleau-Ponty explains, when a work of art is successful, it has the strange power of breaking free from the subjective life of the artist—what would otherwise “remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness”—and becomes a meaning for others.\(^{177}\) He continues,

The painter can do no more than construct an image; he must wait for this image to come to life for other people. When it does, the work of art will have united these separate lives; it will no longer exist in only one of them like a stubborn dream or a persistent delirium. Nor will it exist only in space as a colored piece of canvas. It will dwell undivided in several minds, with a claim on every possibly mind like a perennial acquisition.\(^{178}\)

When the artist is able to capture the meaning of this world—his contact with the world—and make it live on in the lives of others, his project begins to establish an infinite logos—a universal meaning. The artist not only gives a meaning to the world but provides a meaning to all others. His meaning is no longer a lonely subjective meaning but becomes an intersubjective meaning and lays claim on other minds. It becomes a cultural object: others can take it up and transform it into their own meaning, which they can then pass onto the world, thus establishing a culture, a history and a community.

For Merleau-Ponty, it is especially through the work of art and artistic expression that the world and our lives become meaningful. Madison writes, “By bringing the world to expression, by transforming it into signs, man also confers a meaning on his own life, for to define being is at the same time necessarily to define one’s relation to being; it is to contribute to the establishment of a universal logos which, in the last analysis, justifies us and renders our own life meaningful.”\(^{179}\) It is through artistic expression that we come to know ourselves, the world around us, and the meaning of our lives. The expressive act reveals to us our existence—our contact with and presence in the world—and through attempting to understand it, and express it,

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\(^{177}\) Ibid., 18.

\(^{178}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{179}\) Madison, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 83.
we give a meaning to this existence. Without expression, the meaning of our lives would remain merely a potential in our unformulated life.

Expression, for Merleau-Ponty, also takes us beyond ourselves and establishes an infinite logos—a universal meaning—which can be taken up and developed by others. This universal meaning establishes a community and unites lives that would otherwise remain detached from each other. This development of a universal logos and a community of shared meanings feeds back into one’s own life, and further provides it with meaning.

The final essay in Sense and Nonsense, “Man, the Hero,” ties together many of the themes from this collection of essays, as well as from The Phenomenology of Perception, and as Dreyfus notes in the introduction, was “written expressly to conclude Sense and Nonsense.”180 In this short essay, Merleau-Ponty addresses the idea of heroism and what this idea means for contemporary society. Hegel’s hero, the individual who is on the side of world history, and who is doing the work of the world spirit, is gone. This individual, who “sacrificed his personal happiness and introduced chaos into his life [in order to] save history from chaos,” no longer carries any weight.181 We no longer have the guarantee of an absolute or a destiny to history. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[the contemporary hero] is not what Hegel called ‘the steward of the world spirit,’ nor does he believe in any world spirit which arranges everything for his success and points him clearly on his way.”182

But as Merleau-Ponty notes, if our contemporary hero is not Hegel’s hero, neither is it Nietzsche’s. Nietzsche’s ubermensch lives in a chaotic world, a nihilistic world, and lacks any hope of finding a logical order or meaning in things. He writes, “The Nietzschean superman is

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180 Hubert Dreyfus, introduction to Sense and Nonsense by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), xxvi.
182 Ibid., 184.
beyond everything that has been or is to be done; he is interested only in power itself, and since he refuses to devote it to any task, it can only assert itself against someone or something.”\textsuperscript{183}

Merleau-Ponty equates Nietzsche’s superman with Hegel’s master in his “master-slave” dialectic, who is doomed always to be searching and to never be satisfied because he aims for the impossible: “a life which really integrates death into itself, and whose free recognition by others is aroused once and for all.”\textsuperscript{184}

For Merleau-Ponty, it is Saint Exubéry (the French pilot and writer whose memoir \textit{Flight to Arras} he quotes to end the \textit{Phenomenology}) and Robert Jordan from Hemmingway’s novel \textit{For Whom the Bell Tolls}, who exemplify the contemporary hero. Merleau-Ponty describes Saint Exubéry as an individual motivated to serve in the war, not for some absolute principle or to demonstrate his strength in the face of death but because his actions correspond to his being and the meaning that he finds in his life. He writes, “Saint Exubéry plunges into his mission because it is an intimate part of himself, the consequences of his thoughts, wishes and decisions, because he would be nothing if he were to back out.” Merleau-Ponty continues, “Over Arras, in the fire of anti-aircraft guns, when every second of continuing life is as miraculous as a birth, he feels vulnerable because he is \textit{in} things at last; he has left his inner nothingness behind, and death, if it comes will reach him right in the thick of the world.”\textsuperscript{185}

The contemporary hero is the individual who is true to his life—to his thoughts, desires and past experiences that have made him who he is—and thus embraces subjectivity and meets life through it. Rather than withdrawing from the world, the hero is \textit{in} things”; the hero participates and engages \textit{in} the world and finds meaning through this. Here, we are reminded of a passage towards the end of the \textit{Phenomenology}: “In short, we have the experience of a

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 185.
participation in the world: ‘being-in-the-truth’ [être-à-la-vérite] is not distinct from being in the world [être au monde].”  

For Merleau-Ponty, the true hero engages in the world, and follows the meanings that he finds in his own life, and integrates these into his way of being—into the way he conducts his life.

Robert Jordan represents for Merleau-Ponty the individual who remains faithful to his condition (as a living man, an existing individual) and composed in the face of uncertainty. For Merleau-Ponty, to be a hero is “to be and think like a living person for as long as [one] does live, to remain poised in the direction of [one’s] chosen ends.” The contemporary hero is the person who remains an existing individual up until their death. This is the individual who has given up the hope or dream of an absolute truth or value to ground one’s actions and existence, but instead recognizes the contingency of the world: “Today’s hero is no skeptical, dilettantish, or decadent; he has simply experienced chance, disorder and failure…. He lives at a time when duties and tasks are unclear. He has a sharper sense of human liberty and of the contingency of the future than anyone has had before. Taking everything into account, nothing is certain.” In understanding the contingency of the world, without the guarantee of an absolute, the only recourse for the hero is to follow the personal meanings of his own life, and remain faithful to them.

Through one’s participation and engagement in the world, a sense will sometimes emerge from the nonsense—from the chaos and indeterminacy of the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, “But sometimes—in love, in action—a harmony is created among them and events respond to their will.” It is up to the hero, as an existing individual, to follow that harmony (that meaning) and

186 Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, 415.
187 Merleau-Ponty, “Man, the Hero,” 185.
188 Ibid., 186.
189 Ibid., 186.
to integrate it into one’s life and live it for as long as it is meaningful—for as long as it remains significant and holds true to one’s experience in the world. But this meaning, like all others, is never guaranteed, and one must be willing to let it go when it no longer holds true to one’s life.

It is not merely a coincidence that both the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Sense and Nonsense* end by discussing heroism. In understanding our condition, and our fundamental relation to the world, we are in a better position to state what is required of us, or how we should be and live in this world. For Merleau-Ponty, the hero is the individual who embraces his subjectivity rather than fleeing from it, who participates and throws himself into the thick of the world, rather than withdrawing from it in search of some absolute truth or meaning. Merleau-Ponty writes in the final section of the *Phenomenology*:

> It is by being what I am at present, without any restrictions and without holding anything back, that I have a chance at progressing; it is by living my time that I can understand other times; it is by plunging into the present and into the world, by resolutely taking up what I am by chance, by willing what I will, and by doing what I do, that I can go farther.\(^{190}\)

Rather than a limitation, one’s subjectivity—one’s situatedness—is one’s entryway into the world and into meaning. It is only by being an embodied individual, thrown into the world and into history, and inserted into a particular perspective, that I am able to understand others and find meaning in my life. For Merleau-Ponty, the contemporary hero is the individual who embraces this—who is loyal to the movements of subjectivity that throw him forward into the thick of life—and who follows the meanings that naturally arise in his engagement with the world.

\(^{190}\) Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 483.
CHAPTER 4: THE COMPARISON

4.1 Historical Background

Dewey and Merleau-Ponty share remarkably similar views on experience and approaches to philosophy despite coming from different traditions. By looking at the historical context in which both philosophers were writing, we may be able to find some tentative explanations for the convergence, without coming to any definitive conclusions.

To start, both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty were looking to understand the nature of experience and were responding to the reductive and mechanistic interpretations of experience in older formulations of empiricism. This static interpretation of experience, which broke it down into a series of isolated moments, somehow strung together, was the dominant view in psychology at the time both philosophers were writing, and influenced the way in which psychologists were interpreting human behavior. In Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s early writings, we see both philosophers critiquing this static and fragmented understanding of experience and its implications on our understanding of human behavior. For Dewey, we see this most clearly in “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” but also in some of his earlier papers such as “The Psychological Standpoint” and “The New Psychology.” For Merleau-Ponty, we find his critique of empiricism in both his first two books, with it being the main focus of attack in The Structures of Behavior, and part of his “double polemic” in the Phenomenology of Perception.

Dewey and Merleau-Ponty share a similar trajectory of development. In critiquing British empiricism, both philosophers shared idealist tendencies in the beginning, this being more
prominent in Dewey than Merleau-Ponty. Dewey’s *Psychology*, one of his earliest works, is neo-Hegelian in style, though he quickly emptied his philosophy of its transcendent absolute as he further developed his functionalist psychology. As Good affirms, by 1891, Dewey had abandoned the idea of a transcendent absolute, but thought his philosophy still retained significant elements of Hegel’s style and approach. For Merleau-Ponty, at the end of *The Structures of Behaviour*, he was left with the transcendental point of view, but was dissatisfied with this position. The idea of the subject being a transcendental consciousness constituting the world while lacking awareness of these processes appeared to Merleau-Ponty as muddled thought. His *Phenomenology* is his attempt to redefine transcendental philosophy by redirecting his analyses onto the subject of perception. Though he retained the idealist idea that the world that we know and understand is already consciousness of the world, he rooted this consciousness firmly in the world in the embodied subject, the subject of perception, rather than above it or beyond it.

While both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty moved away from absolute idealism, they still retained elements of idealism in their philosophy. Interestingly, in their later philosophies, both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty took a growing interest in aesthetics, with *Art as Experience*, one of Dewey’s later works, bearing a striking similarity to many of Merleau-Ponty’s later essays on aesthetics found in *Signs* and his final published work, “Eye and Mind.”

There are also numerous similarities between pragmatism and phenomenology, which may explain some of the overlap between Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s views. Both pragmatism and phenomenology were trying to develop a more faithful account of our lived experience—how we actually experience the world—and thus were responding to British empiricism. Dewey was following in line with William James, who had developed his “radical
empiricism,” while Merleau-Ponty was building off of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenological descriptions of experience. With this, both traditions were attempting to move beyond metaphysics, and were trying to strip their understandings of experience of their metaphysical assumptions. Most notably, both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty were trying to overcome the subject-object dualism left over from Cartesianism, which remained latent in modern philosophy. Overcoming dualisms and artificial dichotomies remains a constant theme throughout Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical careers. Both Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophies criticize and undermine the sharp divide between mind and body, thought and reality, and theory and practice—dichotomies which, as Nietzsche thought, are the hallmark of metaphysical thinking.

There is another potential link between these traditions, despite their unfortunate lack of contact and dialogue with each other, which is Husserl’s reading of James’s Principles of Psychology (1890), of which he thought highly. In the Principles, James outlines his stream of consciousness metaphor—viewing consciousness as a flowing stream or continuum—which had an influence on Husserl’s understanding of experience and temporality, which he viewed as a flow rather than a chain or divided sequence. With Husserl being perhaps Merleau-Ponty’s greatest influence, and James having an enormous influence on the American pragmatist tradition, including Dewey, it would not be much of a stretch to trace some of the overlap in Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s views back to this meeting of minds. There is no evidence to suggest that Dewey or Merleau-Ponty ever read each other’s works, with Dewey coming to the end of his career (and life) as Merleau-Ponty was just beginning his. Though, if they had, they

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probably would have found many points of intersection and much they would have agreed with in each other’s philosophies.

In addition to common points of attack, and similar aims and trajectories in their philosophies, both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty looked to psychology to inform their philosophical thinking, with Dewey looking to experimental psychology while Merleau-Ponty was inspired by the descriptive sciences, particularly Gestalt psychology, to aid in his phenomenological approach to understanding human behavior. Though both thinkers were scientifically minded, particularly Dewey, they were both against scientism and its growing influence on the social sciences.

Also of great importance here is the common influence of Hegel on Dewey and Merleau-Ponty. James Good has noted a ‘permanent Hegelian deposit’ in Dewey’s philosophy, with traces of Hegel still present even after his split from absolute idealism. For Merleau-Ponty, the dialectical style of his thought and approach in the *Phenomenology of Perception* speaks to a lasting influence left by Hegel, despite his critique of intellectualism. Both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty drew from Hegel a method for doing philosophy. As mentioned before, Dewey’s instrumentalist theory of inquiry was greatly influenced by Hegel’s dialectic, which Dewey interpreted as a philosophy of learning. Dewey developed Hegel’s dialectic into a method of scientific inquiry, interpreted broadly as an approach to dealing with and resolving problems that emerge in one’s experience. For Merleau-Ponty, his phenomenology and his approach to understanding experience was also influenced by Hegel’s dialectic and his expanded understanding of reason—“integrating the irrational into an expanded reason.”

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Merleau-Ponty adopted Hegel’s method of looking for the logic latent in experience, rather than imposing rules or frameworks onto experience itself.

As well, it appears Dewey and Merleau-Ponty developed a similar reading of Hegel, drawing their inspiration more from Hegel’s early philosophy in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* than his later metaphysics. Following in the footsteps of the St. Louis Hegelians, Dewey developed a humanistic and historicist reading of Hegel in line with the American *Bildung* tradition. Evidence of this is found most clearly in what Good calls Dewey’s ‘transitional years’ (1894-1904) while Dewey was the chairman of the philosophy department at the University of Chicago. Here, Dewey delivered an unpublished lecture entitled “Hegel’s Philosophy of Spirit,” where he interpreted Hegel as “a great actualist” rather than “the Grand Metaphysician” he is often taken to be. In this lecture, Dewey argued that Hegel should be seen first as a practical philosopher whose primary interest was in worldly affairs, addressing political and social problems, and “who held facts, rather than ungrounded speculation, in the highest esteem.” He argued that Hegel rejected the passive spectator theory of mind, and with this, the division between thought and being. Dewey would later publish with his colleagues in Chicago, *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903), a collection of essays that critiqued absolute idealism (American and British neo-Hegelianism) for abstracting thought from reality—from the experience it emerges from. Dewey and his colleagues developed their own logical theory, combining Hegel’s dialectic and functionalist psychology, which rooted logic in lived experience rather than resting on metaphysical assumptions. This was the groundwork for Dewey’s instrumentalist theory of inquiry.

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193 Good, 189.
194 Ibid., 190-191.
Evidence of Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Hegel is most clear in his essays in *Sense and Nonsense*, particularly “Hegel’s Existentialism” (which I discussed earlier) and in “The Battle over Existentialism.” In the latter essay, Merleau-Ponty suggests how one might interpret Hegel, which is worth quoting at length:

> Insofar as he reduced history to the history of the spirit, Hegel found the final synthesis heralded and guaranteed in his own consciousness, in his certainty at having understood history completely, in the very realization of his philosophy. … That is the textbook Hegel, but there are other ways to interpret him: he could be, and we think he must be, made much more Marxist; one could base his logic on his phenomenology and not his phenomenology on his logic. But whether it bears the name Hegel or Marx, a philosophy which renounces absolute Spirit as history’s motive force, which makes history walk on its own feet and which admits no other reason in things than that revealed by their meeting and interaction, could not affirm a priori man’s possibility of wholeness, postulate a final synthesis resolving all contradictions or affirms its inevitable realization.\(^{195}\)

Like Dewey, Merleau-Ponty placed greater emphasis on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and rooted Hegel’s philosophy firmly in the world, and stripped it of its absolute. A synthesis is not guaranteed at the outset, and nor should we interpret history, or experience, according to any predetermined logic. According to Merleau-Ponty, we should base “Hegel’s logic on his phenomenology” and only look for the logic latent in history and experience—in its contents and interactions—and nothing else. In dropping the absolute from Hegel’s philosophy, and placing a greater emphasis on his early phenomenology than his later logic, both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty developed an approach for doing philosophy that was grounded in lived experience rather than a separate realm of ideas.

The purpose of this comparison is to highlight the similarities between Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of experience, and thus to justify a synthesis of their views. In the first chapter of this paper, I demonstrated how Dewey’s philosophy of experience informs his

philosophy of education. More specifically, I illustrated how Dewey’s principles of experience guide his understanding of education as growth, and his understanding and approach to thinking in education. From there, I outlined some of the key elements in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, using his descriptions of subjectivity to illustrate our fundamental engagement with and relation to the world. Following this, I drew out some of the implications that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has on our understanding of rationality, expression and existence (our condition as existing individuals). I will now make a connection between Dewey’s philosophy of experience and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Through making this connection and demonstrating a shared sensibility between Dewey and Merleau-Ponty, and having previously demonstrated how Dewey’s philosophy of education is informed by his philosophy of experience, I will then look to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology for its potential to provide further insight into, and support for, Dewey’s philosophy of education.

4.2 Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s Conceptions of Experience

As mentioned before, Dewey and Merleau-Ponty share a similar understanding of experience. Both were responding to the British empiricists’ atomistic interpretations of experience as well as the idealist tendency of reducing experience to cognition. Furthermore, both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty were dialectical thinkers who conceived of experience in holistic terms.

Dewey’s understanding of experience is best articulated in his principles of experience as discussed earlier in this paper. These are: the principle of continuity of experience, and the principle of interaction. Dewey’s principle of continuity describes experience as a fluid whole, and is intimately connected to his understanding of habit. For Dewey, experience is a continuum,
where every experience is a taking up of the past, and a modification of what is to come—how we experience future situations. What we do in one experience, or situation, is carried with us and determines how we approach, understand, and interact with future situations. This knowledge or understanding—the effects of experience—is carried with us in the form of habits, interpreted broadly as intellectual and emotional attitudes, which are plastic in nature, adapting and changing as we undergo new experiences. These habits seek out effective control of the environment and determine which features of experience become salient—which features we respond to and which features we ignore.

Dewey thought of experience as ‘a moving force,’ with every experience building on what came before it. Unlike earlier empiricists, Dewey did not think we could isolate experience and analyze it in the abstract. Understanding experience requires knowledge of what preceded it, and more importantly, where experience is leading: “[An experience’s] value can only be judged on the ground of what it moves toward and into.”

Dewey’s principle of continuity is related to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of temporality. For Merleau-Ponty, the subject is a single temporal flow initiated from its birth. Like Dewey, Merleau-Ponty rejects the British empiricists’ fracturing of experience into a series of isolated fragments. He writes in the Phenomenology, “I cannot conceive of the world as a sum of things, nor time as a sum of punctual ‘nows.’” Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the connection between our experiences—the “synthesis” of our experiences—is expressed a few pages before this: “I do not have one perspectival view, then another, along with a link established by the understanding; rather, each perspective passes into the other and, if one can still speak here of a

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196 Dewey, Experience and Education, 27.
197 Ibid., 31.
synthesis, then it will be a ‘transition synthesis.’”¹⁹⁹ The term “transition synthesis” describes the passive and fluid nature of experience, where each moment flows seamlessly into the next, with every perception appearing already constituted (rather than being actively constituted).

Merleau-Ponty’s transition synthesis is an appropriation of Husserl’s “passive synthesis.” Husserl was in turn responding to the intellectualist idea of an active synthesis of perspectives by a transcendental subject. Husserl realized that we do not actively construct time, or consciously connect one ‘experience’ to the next; rather, there is a passivity to our experience, with each experience flowing into the next rather than artificially constructed.

Like Dewey, for Merleau-Ponty, experience is a fluid whole, with what we do in the present influencing how we engage in future situations. According to Merleau-Ponty, the past weighs on the horizons of our present experience, influencing and structuring how we see things, without ever being fully out of reach. He writes, “For every moment that arrives, the previous moment suffers a modification: I still hold it in hand, it is still there, and yet it already sinks back, it descends beneath the line of presents. … I am not cut off from it, but then again it would not be past if nothing had changed, it begins to appear perspectively against or to project itself upon my present.”²⁰⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, not only does the past weigh on my present and remain there, though slowly receding on the horizon of my experience, but how I interpret this past will depend on my present circumstances. The past is not a static object that has come and gone, an isolated moment in a series of “nows,” which produces the same effect every time it is recalled. Rather, it remains forever open to my present experience, with the potential to weigh on and influence my present actions, and remains open and thus susceptible to being modified and reinterpreted based on my current circumstances.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 344.
²⁰⁰ Ibid., 439.
Despite sharing a similar view of experience as a fluid continuum, with every experience building on itself, Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s views are not entirely the same. For Dewey, the principle of continuity is a structure or function of experience—it explains the fluid nature of experience—whereas for Merleau-Ponty, this fluidity and temporal flow is who we are. For Merleau-Ponty, the subject is time: “[This] single experience that is inseparable from itself, a single ‘cohesion of a life,’ a single temporality that unfolds itself [s’explicite] from its birth and confirms this birth in each present.”\textsuperscript{201} According to Merleau-Ponty, we are a single temporality building on itself, “unfolding itself,” with the past remaining open on the horizon of our experience.

While these are significant differences, in my view, they do not amount to a contradiction. They merely suggest that Merleau-Ponty and Dewey are focusing their analyses on different levels of experience, and are engaged in different projects, while still sharing a similar pattern of thought and sensibility regarding experience. On the one hand, Dewey was developing an epistemology, an understanding of how we learn, and thus was looking at the more conscious (reflective) sides of experience—looking at their effects in the world. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty was looking at a deeper phenomenological level, trying to understand our fundamental engagement with things, and was moving closer in the direction of developing an ontology.

The other side to Dewey’s understanding of experience is illustrated through his principle of interaction. For Dewey, every experience is an interaction, or exchange, between the internal conditions and the external (objective) conditions of the situation, with the internal conditions referring to the habits, capacities and interests of the individual, and the external conditions referring to the total make up of the surrounding environment (both the physical and social

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 430.
environment). Experience, for Dewey, is both an active and passive affair; it is both a “trying” and an “undergoing.” He writes, “When we experience something, we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer and undergo the consequences.” For Dewey, experience is this active and passive process, where both the internal and objective conditions act on each other and are both modified in the process.

Dewey’s understanding of experience is a response to the ‘one-sided’ accounts of it given by both empiricism and idealism (intellectualism). Empiricism made experience into an entirely passive process of the world acting on the individual, whereas idealism made it into an entirely active process (the individual acting on the world). Dewey relates this to the approaches of both traditional and progressive education, which adopt one-sided accounts of experience, while neglecting the other side of experience. Traditional education focuses entirely on the ‘objective’ conditions of the situation, while ignoring the internal conditions of the individual, and thus treats experience as a passive process. Progressive education does the reverse, and focuses entirely on the internal conditions while neglecting the objective conditions, and thus treats it as a purely active process. What the principle of interaction teaches us is to respect both dimensions of experience, the internal and the objective conditions, as both contribute to the constitution of experience.

Dewey explains that these one-sided accounts of experience emerge when we separate mind and world; they are a product of dualism. When we separate these things, we are left with the puzzle of how these two ‘ontologically distinct’ realities interact, and we thus have to

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construct a framework to understand how knowledge is possible; this has been the preoccupation of epistemology since dualism emerged in philosophy.\textsuperscript{203}

Rather than falling for this epistemological trap, Dewey adopted Hegel’s organic holism, and viewed subject-object and self-world (organism-environment) not as ontologically distinct realities but as functions that operate within the larger whole of experience. Dewey thought that these divisions were created in the mind when we try to understand experience, but that it was a mistake to read these categories back into experience as though they refer to real and static entities rather than functions or moments that are part of a larger, more complex process. For Dewey, the individual is not separate from her environment, and her interaction with it points to an internal or circular relation.

Similarly, for Merleau-Ponty, the embodied subject is not separate from the world. Rather, Merleau-Ponty describes the subject as a project of the world; it is at home in the world and is intimately connected to it. He writes,

> The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject who is nothing but a project of the world; and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world that itself projects. The subject is being-in-the-world and the world remains ‘subjective,’ since its texture and its articulations are sketched out by the subject’s movements of transcendence.\textsuperscript{204}

For Merleau-Ponty, the subject and the world are ‘correlates’ that mutually define each other. They form a system with each other, with neither being definable in isolation from the other. Furthermore, our perceptual experience, according to Merleau-Ponty, is neither a passive process of an objective world acting on the subject, nor an active process of a transcendental subject constituting the world. Rather, our perceptual experience, and the meaning that emerges through it, is a dialogue between the embodied subject and the world, with the subject’s movements of

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 302.
\textsuperscript{204} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Phenomenology of Perception}, 454.
transcendence, its interactions with the world, ‘sketching’ out the meaning of the world. This pattern of understanding experience is the enduring theme that runs throughout the *Phenomenology*. Merleau-Ponty’s “double polemic” of empiricism and intellectualism, these passive and active understandings of experience that posit an explicit and objective world, is comparable to Dewey’s critique of traditional and progressive education. Both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty exhibit the same pattern of thought; that experience is neither purely passive nor active but rather is this strange mix.

For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual experience is an ambiguous mix of subject and object. He often describes perceptual experience, such as sensation, as a ‘communion’ with the world, or “as a coupling of our body with things.”\textsuperscript{205} As Madison puts it, “[Sensation] is quite simply a question of a bodily cohabitation with things, of a ‘life in common,’ by which things receive meaning which is the meaning of my life in them.”\textsuperscript{206} Merleau-Ponty’s exploration of perceptual experience undermines this divide between understanding experience as a passive reception or an active constitution. He writes, “We must again question the alternative between the for-itself and the in-itself that threw the ‘senses’ back into the world of objects and disengaged subjectivity, understood as an absolute non-being, from all bodily inherence. This is what we are doing by defining sensation as coexistence or communion.”\textsuperscript{207} Similar to Dewey’s understanding of where we have erred in trying to understand experience, Merleau-Ponty argues that we must question this dualism, this separation of the subject from the body and from the world, which has reduced sensation and perception into physical (and empty) processes in the world rather than a communication, or dialogue, between an embodied subject immersed in a world.

\textsuperscript{205} PhP 334.
\textsuperscript{206} Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 28.
\textsuperscript{207} Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 221.
For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual experience is an internal relation between the embodied subject and the world, with sense emerging through their dialectical exchange. This is the lesson Merleau-Ponty draws from Gestalt psychology. What we learn from Gestalt psychology, when it is stripped of its realist biases, is that forms—the meaning and sense we draw from perceptual experience—do not exist as objective properties of the world, and nor do they exist as objects of consciousness. Forms only exist for an embodied subject immersed in the world, and emerge through the subject’s engagement and interactions with the world—through its movements of transcendence.

If we compare Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s approaches to understanding experience, we see both exhibiting the same pattern of thought: a sensitivity to the dialectical and ambiguous nature of experience, with both characterizing experience as a mix of active and passive, subjective and objective. Furthermore, both thinkers view subject and object, self and world, not as separate realities, but as internally related. Last, both Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s understandings of experience are a response to the dichotomy between empiricism and intellectualism, with both viewing these misunderstandings of experience as a product of a false dualism.

Their differences lie not in their patterns of thought but in the areas in which their thought is directed. Dewey is looking at the reflective side of experience: the effects of experience and the way things interact through our actions. He is focused on building an epistemology—a philosophy of learning—where learning involves connecting our actions to their effects in the world. For Dewey, learning is the grasping of this relation between our actions and their effects, and integrating this knowledge back into how the individual approaches and negotiates future situations. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, is looking at the constitution of perceptual
experience and how meaning arises within it. Rather than looking at the effects of experience, Merleau-Ponty is attempting to understand our fundamental relation to the world and the mystery of rationality—how meaning emerges in our experience.

In this sense, Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s views of experience are not incompatible but illustrate differences in focus stemming from their differing philosophical projects. Rather than taking away from the comparison, and the application of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology onto Dewey’s philosophy of education, in my view, these differences further justify the synthesis. Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s views of experience overlap rather than conflict. Their differences lie in looking at different levels of experience: the reflective and the prereflective. This leaves room for Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to add to and reinforce Dewey’s philosophy of education by approaching it from a different angle.

4.3 The Synthesis

In addition to similar views on experience, Dewey and Merleau-Ponty share a common understanding of the self. I will briefly compare their views as a way of introducing how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and its implications on rationality, expression and our understanding of existence can add to Dewey’s philosophy of education.

Building on what has previously been said, both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty view the self (or subjectivity) as intimately connected to the world; neither holds the view that the self can be defined in the abstract. For Dewey, the self is not a static entity or a separate metaphysical substance. Dewey was critical of Cartesian dualism and its lingering forms, and attempted to move beyond it with his functionalist psychology. Dewey took his cue from Hegel, and his early
view of the self, found in his *Psychology*, posited the self as an activity. The self is not something given, or something one possesses (like a metaphysical substance), but is something one achieves through one’s actions and effects in the world. Dewey thought that we come to know ourselves, and actualize ourselves through our actions—through our effects in the world. The early Dewey thought that the goal of all action was self-realization—the realization of our absolute, transcendent self—though he would soon drop this idea as he moved away from absolute idealism.

Though Dewey dropped the idea of a transcendent self, he retained the Hegelian ‘instinct for unity’ and the dialectic as a model for how the self learns and grows. For Dewey, the self, as this activity, is always searching for the richest, most integrated experience. Related to the German *Bildung* tradition, the self grows through this process of alienation and return, where the self encounters a problem (or disruption) in the normal flow of its engagement in a project. Through overcoming this disruption and restoring harmony in one’s experience, the self experiences growth in the form of a restructuring of its habits, and the integration of the problem into its perspective. For Dewey, these habits constitute one’s self; they are not reducible to these habits but rather determine the nature of this activity that we call the self.

Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjectivity bears similar elements to Dewey’s view that I have just described. Merleau-Ponty was also critical of Cartesian dualism, and its various forms in intellectualism (Kant’s transcendental ego, the neo-Hegelian absolute self, and the early Husserl’s meditating ego). Merleau-Ponty thought the embodied subject was intimately

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208 Good, 139.
209 Ibid., 141.
210 Ibid., 142.
211 Good and Garrison, 55.
connected to the world; they form a system with each other, with each defining and giving expression to the other.

Similar to Dewey’s view of the self as an activity, Merleau-Ponty characterizes subjectivity as an active transcendence, escaping itself into the world. As well, for Merleau-Ponty, the subject is not transparent to itself, and only knows itself through its engagement with the world, through expressing itself and through its relations with things. Last, Merleau-Ponty’s description of the subject’s embodied coping—the subject’s natural ‘holds’ on the world, and its drive toward the optimal perspective to view and engage with the scene, is comparable to the instinct for unity in Dewey’s self, interpreted at the level of perceptual experience.

Where Merleau-Ponty’s description of subjectivity diverges from Dewey’s understanding of the self, and where Merleau-Ponty takes his analysis deeper is through his descriptions of the subject’s mediated presence in the world, and the subject’s rootedness in ‘being in the world’—its embodied presence in the world. There are elements in Dewey’s understanding of self that suggest he might have shared a similar sensibility regarding these ideas. Dewey’s view that the self is an activity that knows itself through its actions in the world, and his conception of habits—that one is not fully aware of or in control of—speaks to viewing the self as opaque or something we only indirectly know. But Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions of the subject as being in the world go beyond Dewey’s understanding. For Merleau-Ponty, all of one’s conscious and reflective experience is a grasping and appropriation of this.

In my view, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjectivity, as being in the world, and its implications for our understanding of rationality, expression and existence provides an additional framework that grounds and justifies Dewey’s progressive approach to education, while also adding a reflexive, self-understanding element to his philosophy.
Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjectivity reinforces the rationale behind Dewey’s inquiry-based approach to education. Dewey thought that education and learning should start from the experiences of the student, from inquiring into the problems that naturally arise in the student’s experience. For Dewey, education is about cultivating a richer experience for students by providing the conditions that enable students to test their thinking, and develop their own method for working through problems that naturally arise in their experience. Dewey was sensitive to the varying capacities, interests and habits of students, and recognized that students need to find their own approach to thinking, rather than imposing methods or techniques on them from the outside.

Dewey’s inquiry-based approach to education relates to his understanding of creative self-expression. For Dewey, individuals experience growth (of habits, capacities, and interests) through encountering problems in their experience and creatively thinking through and overcoming these obstacles. Problems, in this sense, are things that disrupt the normal flow of activity and the harmony of one’s experience. The disruption throws individuals back on themselves, where they are then forced to reflect on the situation to find a solution that will restore harmony to their experience, and which will enable them to resume their project or activity. By thinking through these problems and overcoming these resistances, the individual experiences growth—the restructuring of their habits, and the integration of the problem into a broader perspective.

Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of subjectivity teach us that our understanding is always grounded in a particular perspective. This perspective is always limited and rooted in our ‘hold’ on the world. All reflection and understanding is a grasping of this hold, a grasping of one’s prereflective experience—one’s unique presence in the world. The goal of reaching some
absolute perspective or an “objective” position is misguided. We can no longer pretend
ignorance of our situatedness, acting as if one is reflecting from an unbiased place, or that this
unbiased place is somehow attainable.

The traditional approach to education has encouraged students to be rational, which, for
them, meant to seek objectivity—to bracket the subjective elements in one’s experience with the
goal of reaching an objective point of view. With this, its approach has been to impose problems
from the outside, disconnected from the experiences of the students, with the aim of instilling a
universal understanding in all the students that is predetermined and applies to all. When
approached in this way, education is reduced to a disinterested banking style, where students
passively receive an already organized body of knowledge, and where lessons bear no
significance on the lives of students outside school. Here, learning consists in blind training and
the application of techniques that are disconnected from the vital contexts in which they are
naturally acquired and developed. The knowledge that students acquire is thus static, and they
lack the capacity to adapt it and apply it to contexts outside of the limited context that it was
taught in. As a consequence of this, the growth of the students’ unique native capacities and
interests are stunted as they lack the conditions and proper stimulation for their development.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology teaches us to be more honest about our experience, that
there is no stepping outside of one’s perspective, and we cannot reach an absolute or objective
point of view. There is no objective knowledge, in itself, to be found in the world—there is no
universal knowledge that applies to all in the same way. The meaning that arises in one’s
experience emerges from one’s engagement in the world—one’s unique dialogue with the world.
Rather than abstracting this, and conforming our views to what is “objective,” or to a
predetermined understanding, Merleau-Ponty wants us to embrace our subjectivity—our unique contact with the world.

There is no way to strip ourselves of our subjectivity. Nor should this be the goal. Rather than a limitation, Merleau-Ponty views subjectivity as our insertion in the world and what enables there to be meaning. Things have meaning because we are rooted in a particular perspective: they have meaning because there is a degree of incompleteness and indeterminacy in the world, which leaves something more to see, and because we take things up and engage with things from a prior understanding. Merleau-Ponty argues that we should embrace this part of ourselves as it is what enables us to engage in the world and understand others.

For Merleau-Ponty, embracing subjectivity means following the meanings that naturally arise in one’s experience and being open to the solicitations of one’s experience—how sense emerges through one’s exploration and interaction with the environment and how harmony and sense emerge from the nonsense and ambiguity of the world. In this way, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjectivity and meaning aligns with Dewey’s inquiry-based approach to education: starting with the experience of the individual and inquiring into problems that naturally arise in one’s experience by following the meanings that emerge from within it. This is similar to the approach Merleau-Ponty appropriated from Hegel: immersing oneself in one’s concrete experience and finding the logic or reason implicit within it.

What Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology adds to this, is that by emphasizing the perspectival nature of our understanding and abandoning the search for an illusory objective knowledge, education naturally develops a reflexive and hermeneutical element, where learning is redirected back towards understanding one’s own perspective. As much as education should be about training one’s thought and learning to work through problems, it should also be an
exploration into the nature of one’s own thinking. Based on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of subjectivity, following the meanings that naturally arise in one’s experience becomes not only a search for the meaning in the world, but the meaning of ourselves in the world; it becomes a path to self-knowledge.

When we develop our thinking by working through problems in our life, we also cultivate an understanding of the patterns of our own thought, and the way we intuitively interpret and engage in situations. This includes our biases and our tendencies to approach problems in a certain way. In Dewey’s terms, this means getting a better sense of our habits, or for Merleau-Ponty, it means getting a better grasp of our being in the world—our unique presence in the world—and a window into our cultural acquisitions, and the various ways our subjectivity has been shaped by our past experiences. By emphasizing the perspectival nature of our understanding, and making this reflexive element a greater focus in education, we should produce more balanced thinkers. An awareness and recognition of one’s own biases enables one to try to see things differently, to be open and to try to understand the opposing view.

This added focus on self-understanding in education relates to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression, and the significance he places on the expressive act. The lessons we draw from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression lends support for a greater emphasis on the creative arts in education. For Merleau-Ponty, it is through artistic and creative expression that we develop an awareness of our existence, of who we are. Authentic expression is a grasping of this prereflective experience, of our being in the world. Through attempting to express and understand our unique contact with the world, we deliver up and actualize a meaning for our lives which, without expression, would remain a mere potential in our unformulated life. In this sense,
by adding a hermeneutical dimension to education, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology also provides a justification for placing greater emphasis on the arts.

Education should provide for students the conditions and the space to express their unique contact with the world, because it is through this that we come to an understanding of who we really are. Through attempting to express and understand our own unique perspective—the way we see things that is different from the way that everyone else sees the world—we become more sensitive and experienced at grasping the meanings that arise in our experience. Education ought to encourage students to find their own way of expressing their unique contact with the world. Artistic expression, for Merleau-Ponty, is not limited to painting or fine arts as described in “Cézanne’s Doubt” and includes writing, dance, film, photography, design, drama, comedy, and music. For Merleau-Ponty, we are expressive bodies; we must find a way to express our unique “style,” our unique way of being in the world. This is comparable to a writer or comedian finding his voice, or a musician finding his sound.

By attempting to express these ambiguous signs on the horizon of our experience, we are forced to try to understand and make sense of them. In this way, a renewed interest in the arts in education would align with Dewey’s understanding of preparation—learning to draw the most from one’s present experience. Creative expression encourages students to be more sensitive to the meanings that arise in their own experience, and through expressing them, we actualize their potentials, and collect a record of them rather than having them slip by and fade into the past. Thus, greater emphasis on creative expression would contribute to the cultivation of a richer experience in students, a life of greater significance.

For Merleau-Ponty, art not only reveals to us the meaning of our lives, but can also confer a meaning onto the lives of others. It contributes to the cultivation of an infinite logos—a set of
“universal” or intersubjective meanings that can be taken up by others, and which can add significance to the lives of others. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, art has the power to unite lives that would otherwise remain separate, and helps to develop a community of shared meanings. In this sense, greater emphasis on the arts and creative expression would also help to actualize Dewey’s democratic ideal in the classroom. Creating art together, and sharing one’s unique perspective on the world would help students to develop a greater degree of shared meanings and interests—more varied points of contact among individuals. Furthermore, providing an environment that encourages students to express their unique way of seeing the world would help to create an atmosphere of openness and that encourages the free exchange of ideas. Thus, placing a greater emphasis on the arts and creative expression also has the potential of strengthening the cohesiveness of the classroom and would help to instill a democratic character in students.

In a similar way, Merleau-Ponty’s expanded notion of rationality helps support the rationale behind Dewey’s instrumentalism—his inquiry-based approach to education—and his emphasis on social learning and participating in a shared practice of inquiry. It also helps to reinforce a democratic spirit in the classroom. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it in, “The Metaphysical in Man,” in recognizing the ambiguous and indeterminate nature of our experience, and with this, the perspectival nature of our understanding, we come to reject objectivism—the idea of reason being the correlation between thought and reality. Our understanding is always situated in a perspective, a limited view on the world. There is no way of stepping outside of this perspective to an absolute position, or to an objective point of view that would allow one to see things as they ‘really are.’ Rather, we are condemned, as existing individuals, to being immersed in a world of ambiguous meanings, where all we can do is take things up, “as best we can,” and look for agreement among our own experiences, and in relation to the experiences of others.
Reason, for Merleau-Ponty, requires embracing our situatedness and involves finding the truth or logic of one’s own experience. There is no universal logic or truth that applies to all. All we can do is find the logic latent in our own experience that emerges through our own unique contact and dialogue with the world. In this state of being, rationality rests on our ability to reach agreement among ourselves and with others, to find harmony among one’s own experiences and our ability to communicate with and relate to others. For Merleau-Ponty, rationality, and the universality of knowledge, do not rest in any absolute principle, and our ability to align with this. Rather, it is rooted in the world, in our ability to communicate with others and reach mutual understandings. As Madison puts it, rationality, for Merleau-Ponty, refers to a kind of reasonableness that emerges through understanding the concordances among one’s own experiences, and through our capacity to engage in dialogue and understand others.

In my view, this understanding of rationality aligns with Dewey’s inquiry-based approach to education: working through problems that arise in one’s own experience, following the meaning that emerges through one’s own perspective, and discussing one’s approach and one’s findings with others (among a “community of inquirers,” to use Peirce’s expression). Rather than viewing rationality as reaching the ‘objective’ point of view on the situation, or a predetermined solution set by the curriculum, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding reinforces the importance of communicating with others and making the effort to understand the other’s point of view. By defining rationality in this way, we encourage students to not only express their own point of view but to be open to what others have to say. Education, in this sense, becomes guided by the idea that things are multi-faceted—there is not one correct way of viewing things—and being rational means being able to communicate with and understand others.
This understanding of rationality also resists the tendency of individuals being overly focused on wanting to be right—for their view to be the definitive way of understanding things—which often shuts down communication and makes it less likely for individuals to be open to what others have to say. Likewise, recognizing that things are multifaceted—that there is always another side to things—helps to fight off the tendency of individuals making up their minds too quickly, in thinking that one is right, and thus thinking that there is nothing more to know and closing one’s mind to other points of view.

In this sense, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of rationality helps to reinforce Dewey’s democratic ideal in education and instills a democratic attitude in students. By thinking of rationality in this way, and having inquiry be guided by this understanding, we create an environment that encourages students to learn from the perspectives of others and to integrate these ‘foreign’ ideas and points of view into their own perspective. Thus, it encourages the development of more balanced minds and instills a mentality of being open to what others have to say, since the goal is not to be right but to reach mutual agreements and to understand others.

Merleau-Ponty’s final essay in Sense and Nonsense, “Man, the Hero,” helps to tie these themes together. At the end of the Phenomenology, we come away with an understanding of our condition as existing individuals. We live in an ambiguous world of contingent meanings. The meaning we find in our experience emerges through our unique dialogue with the world—through the movements of transcendence (existence) which sketch out the texture of the world. In this state, we are no longer guaranteed any absolute truth, but neither are we lost in a world of chaos. Rather, we are “condemned to sense,” to meaning, as Merleau-Ponty expresses in it the Phenomenology; we are condemned to a world of ambiguous and transitory meanings.  

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212 Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, lxxxiv.
For Merleau-Ponty, the contemporary hero, his existential hero, is the individual who remains faithful to this condition, who remains an existing individual up until their death. The hero is the individual who follows out these “fragile meanings,” as Dreyfus describes them, and who learns to cope in this state that lies between absolute truth and complete chaos. The hero follows out these meanings and lives them; he integrates these meanings into his way of being in the world, into the way he participates in the world and engages with others. The hero stays true to these meanings for as long as they carry weight for him and align with his experience of the world. But the hero is not tied down to these meanings; they are not a limitation or a burden for him. He is willing and able to let them go when they no longer hold true to his life.

Merleau-Ponty’s existential hero presents Dewey’s philosophy of education with a kind of intellectual virtue. It is a kind of attitude and a way of existing that supports pragmatic inquiry and rationality. It represents being reasonable and open in the face of the complexities of the world, and being able to cope with uncertainty and remaining composed in the midst of it. The hero is the individual who is able to live in this slippery world of “fragile meanings,” without the assurance of absolute truth and without falling back on the security of established and inauthentic meanings. Rather than trying to fit one’s ideas into what one is told one ought to think—what others are telling one to think—the hero follows the meaning of his own life and carves his own path. The hero embraces subjectivity and follows it through into the thick of the world. It is through embracing subjectivity, and participating in the world through it, that we know and become who we are.

In this last sense, Merleau-Ponty’s existential hero aligns with Dewey’s democratic ideal in education. We learn and grow and become ourselves through participating in the world and

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213 Dreyfus, *Sense and Nonsense*, xxvi.
engaging with others. This means immersing oneself in an activity, and being open and taking an interest in the views and the actions of others. Through engaging in the world in this way, we begin to take account of the other’s perspective and integrate it into our own. Taken together, Merleau-Ponty’s hero and Dewey’s democratic character present a mentality and way of existing that supports pragmatic inquiry and helps to combat reductive either-or thinking by opening individuals up to the perspectives of others.

I began this thesis with a discussion of Dewey’s fight against either-or thinking and his reasons for writing *Experience and Education*. Dewey thought that the progressive movement in education, in order not to revert into one of these either-or philosophies, needed to develop a positive philosophy of experience (that was faithful to how we actually experience the world) in order to ground and guide its theories. I have attempted to demonstrate how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, which shares a common sensibility with Dewey’s philosophy, helps to ground and advance Dewey’s progressive education, and further the battle against reductive either-or thinking, not just in education, but in all aspects of life.

In recognizing the ambiguous and contingent nature of our experience, the search for objective knowledge becomes a search for understanding ourselves and others, and with this, the complex and multifaceted nature of the world. The meaning we find in the world is the meaning of ourselves in the world. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy helps to emphasize the importance of understanding our unique contact with the world—our unique presence in the world—and developing it through attempting to express it, and through engaging in the world and with others.

Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the world and our experience complements Dewey’s inquiry-based approach to education and his democratic ideal. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy—his
understanding of subjectivity, rationality and expression—provides a framework that encourages students to express their unique experience and to be open to the views of others. Thus, it supports free inquiry (the free exchange of ideas) and the continued search for knowledge.

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy teaches us to be open to the ambiguities of our experience, and reinforces the idea that there is always more to see. Experience is multifaceted and is overflowing with meaning, which our limited perspective can never capture in its entirety. Rather than to simplify and reduce these ambiguities in our experience, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy encourages us to embrace them—to explore their depth and all their various ways of appearing.

In providing an understanding of the nature of our condition, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy also reinforces the importance of coping with uncertainty. It teaches us that things are rarely black and white, and that the meaning in our lives is never absolute or guaranteed. In this condition, we must embrace our subjectivity—we must follow the meanings that emerge from our unique presence in the world—but also remain open to seeing things differently.

The answer is never the answer. What’s really interesting is the mystery. If you seek the mystery instead of the answer, you’ll always be seeking. I’ve never seen anybody really find the answer, but they think they have. So they stop thinking. But the job is to seek mystery, evoke mystery, plant a garden in which strange plants grow and mysteries bloom. The need for mystery is greater than the need for an answer.214

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