MERLEAU-PONTY AND METAPHYSICAL REALISM

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Global metaphysical anti-realism (or 'anti-realism') is often thought to entail that the identity of each and every concrete entity in our world ultimately depends on us – on our adoption of certain social and linguistic conventions, for instance, or on our use of certain conceptual schemes. Drawing on the middle-period works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I contend that metaphysical anti-realism entails nothing of the sort. For Merleau-Ponty, I argue, entities do not ultimately owe their identities to us, even though – as he puts it - their 'articulations are the very ones of our existence.' Once this is recognised, I maintain, certain interpretations of phenomenology are revealed to be caricatures and certain general objections to anti-realism lose their force.

Metaphysical realism is sometimes taken to be a view about what exists. In this sense of 'realism', a realist about xs – fairies, quarks, universals or whatever - is someone who holds that xs exist. In the following, by contrast, I will take metaphysical realism to be a view about the *manner* in which entities exist. I will suppose that the realist holds, of some set of concrete entities, that there is some way that those entities are in themselves, independently of the language used to describe them, the conceptual schemes employed to distinguish them

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from one another, the practical concerns of any conscious beings who might be interested in such distinctions – independently, indeed, of any subjective or intersubjective factors.[1]

The realist's thesis is partly about *identity*. Realists will acknowledge that the identities of some entities depend on subjective factors – that, for instance, the entity we call 'Egypt' would not be the entity that it is were it not for the concerns of political animals like us. Yet they hold that the identities of some other entities are not so dependent. In their view, some of the entities that populate our world are what they are independently of any subjective factors.

Global metaphysical anti-realists (hereafter 'anti-realists') typically hold that *no* entities are what they are in splendid isolation from such factors. To be sure, an anti-realist of this sort could consistently suppose that the identities of some entities depend on the thoughts, feelings, interests or social practices of beings other than us. Maybe she would accept that the entities that constitute chimpanzee worlds, for example, are what they are because of the thoughts, feelings, interests or social practices of chimpanzees. My main concern here, however, is with what anti-realists have to say about the entities that populate *our* world, the one we inhabit. To what or whom, in their opinion, do those entities ultimately owe their identities?

The prime suspect is of course *us* under some description – us human beings, for example, or us thinking subjects. Accordingly, anti-realists say that we have made the world (Nietzsche 1967: 272; Goodman 1978).[2] They speak of our choosing to label certain arbitrary slices of space-time with names (Garfield 2002: 25) or of our cutting, slicing or carving reality up into entities (Bergson 2012: 388, James 2000: 111, Putnam 1981: 52, Eco: 1999: 20, Varzi 2011). Realists, for their part, protest that 'We don't make the world' and that our world is not entirely 'an expression of ourselves'; however, they tend to share the basic assumption that to be an anti-realist is to suppose that each and every one of the entities in

our world is what it is because of our activity – because we have cut the world up into entities by applying certain conceptual schemes, for instance, or by establishing certain social conventions.[3] That is to say, both anti-realists and realists typically assume that anti-realism entails:

(A) For any concrete entity in our world, the identity of that entity ultimately depends entirely on us.

(A) is a very contentious claim; yet it is unclear how an anti-realist could tweak it to make it less contentious while retaining her commitment to anti-realism. It might seem, at first sight, that she could drop either the 'ultimately' or the 'entirely' - or both. If she adopts any of these three strategies, though, she compromises her commitment to anti-realism. Take that 'ultimately'. If the anti-realist concedes that the identity of some entity does *not* ultimately depend entirely on us, then the realist will demand to know on *what* exactly it is supposed ultimately to depend. On pain of inconsistency, the anti-realist cannot appeal to how the world is independently of us; so, given that she cannot appeal to us and our concerns, it is not clear how she is to answer the realist's question. And if she tries to remove the 'entirely' from (A), she will run into similar trouble.

At first sight, then, it would seem that the usual assumption is correct. It would seem that anti-realism really does entail (A). In what follows, however, I suggest that that impression is false. I argue that there exists at least one anti-realist who could consistently deny that the entities in our world ultimately owe their identities to human subjectivity. That anti-realist is, I propose, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. To make my case, I focus on his middle-period works, such as *Phenomenology of Perception*, since it is, I suggest, in these works that his anti-realism is most apparent.

I proceed as follows. After arguing that Merleau-Ponty is an anti-realist, I move on, in Section 2, to explain how he is able to square his anti-realism with a commitment to what he calls the 'aseity' of entities (see, e.g., 2012: lxxix). In Section 3, I distinguish his position from 'mentalistic', 'representationalist' and 'Promethean' varieties of anti-realism. In Section 4, I argue that Merleau-Ponty holds that the identity of each and every entity in our world does not ultimately depend on us – not entirely. Once this feature of Merleau-Ponty's position is recognised, I suggest, two things become clear: (i) that it is false to suppose, as some do, that all phenomenologists portray the world's articulations as deriving entirely from our 'constituting' activities, and (ii) that one cannot refute anti-realism using arguments that presuppose that it entails (A). I end with the tentative suggestion that Merleau-Ponty might not be the only anti-realist who could consistently reject (A). Heidegger and Zhuangzi might, I propose, be two others.

1. The perceived thing and the thing in itself

The claim that Merleau-Ponty is an anti-realist might seem dubious, for one might think that the phenomenologist's goal is simply to describe experience, rather than to speculate about whether any of its objects are what they are in themselves, independently of any subjective factors. One might think, with Amie Thomasson (2007: 90), that the 'phenomenological approach does not and cannot involve us in the denial that there is a mind-independent world' since its method 'essentially involves bracketing all questions (and claims) about the real existence and nature of the world represented.'

Although her reference to representation is misleading, Thomasson's claim is partly true: Merleau-Ponty really does think that one must suspend one's commitment to any theories, metaphysical or otherwise, if one is to do phenomenology. Be that as it may,

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Thomasson's portrayal of a metaphysically quietist Merleau-Ponty is very hard to accept, for the man's method really does seem to propel him towards certain substantive metaphysical conclusions (compare Sparrow 2014: 26). In particular, as I will try to show below, it leads him to the anti-realist conclusion that there is no way that the world is independently of any subjective factors.

To understand Merleau-Ponty's anti-realism, it may help to reflect on a particular instance of perception. So consider the following example. As I type these words, I have on my desk a rock, a piece of slate roughly the size and shape of three stacked beer mats. It is natural to assume that this rock, this cold, hard, ancient and thoroughly nonhuman thing, is the entity I perceive it to be not just independently of me, but independently of any subjective factors. Whatever it essentially is, we assume, it is 'in itself'.

Such assumptions are, however, hard to justify. It may be granted that the rock is what it is because it possesses certain qualities. Yet Merleau-Ponty notes that each and every one of those qualities reflects certain of our features. I see the rock as graspable, for instance; yet I would not do so were my hands tiny or huge. Through a sort of synaesthesia, I see it as heavy; but, again, I would not do so were I extremely strong. The quality of heaviness, like that of graspability, seems to be essentially subject-dependent.

The realist is unlikely to be troubled by such familiar appeals to subject-dependence. Confronted by them, she may well appeal to a distinction between primary and secondary qualities. She may argue that although some of the rock's qualities are subject-dependent, others – the *primary* ones – belong to the entity in itself.

Merleau-Ponty, for his part, would not be convinced by that sort of response since he rejects the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. However, interestingly, he does distinguish between those qualities that belong to the entity – its real (*réelle*) ones - and those that do not (see, e.g., 2012: 318). He does so by arguing that in perceiving any

particular concrete entity, one senses what one would have to do in order to achieve a better perceptual grip (*prise*) on it. As Sean Kelly (2005: 86) explains, for Merleau-Ponty

> each presentation of the color in a given lighting context necessarily makes an implicit reference to a more completely presented *real* color, the color as it would be better revealed if the lighting context were changed in the direction of the norm. This real colour, implicitly referred to in every experience, is the constant colour I see the object to *be*.

For example, in the failing evening light, I perceive the rock as black. Yet I feel a tension in that perception, a sense that the rock is not really black and that it could only reveal its real colour if I were to turn on a light or in some other way try to optimise my perceptual grip on it. That's a contentious claim, of course. But there is no need for us to investigate it in any more detail here. The crucial point to note, for our purposes, is that the rock's real colour, on this conception, is not taken to be subject-independent. It is thought to refer essentially to the subject's capacity to achieve optimal perceptual grip.

On the basis of such reflections, Merleau-Ponty draws the general conclusion that the entity's 'articulations are the very ones of our existence' (2012: 334). The realist might very well accept that claim. 'We have been considering the entity *as it is perceived by us*,' she will point out. 'And of course the entity as it is perceived by us must reflect us and our concerns.' Yet Merleau-Ponty is making a broader and bolder point. The 'perceived world is', in his view, 'the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence'; hence he maintains that what applies to perceiving applies to any way we might take an entity to be an entity (1964: 13; compare 2012: 334). It is not just the case, therefore, that anything we could perceive will reflect certain subjective factors; for Merleau-Ponty, the same holds true

of anything of which we could *conceive*. Thus he dismisses the very notion that an entity might have some identity in itself, in abstraction from any such factors (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 456). Granted, he admits that an entity might *seem* to be what it is 'in itself' if it is regarded in the light of 'a metaphysical and disinterested attention' (2012: 336). But he quickly adds that because its articulations are the very ones of our existence, it could not really be what it is 'in itself' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 334).[4]

2. The aseity of things

When Merleau-Ponty claims that no entity could be what it is 'in itself', independently of subjective factors, he seems to be making a point about *identity*. Yet he seems to think that entities also depend for their *existence* on such factors. That, presumably, is why he famously refused to endorse A. J. Ayer's claim that 'the sun existed before man' (see Bataille 2001: 112).[5]

Such claims might be taken to imply that Merleau-Ponty believes that the world is merely what we make of it – that, in other words, entities are nothing more than reflections of us and our concerns. But that is not Merleau-Ponty's view. In fact he sometimes rebukes other anti-realists for portraying entities as being *too* dependent on us. In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, for instance, he criticises transcendental idealism on the ground that it portrays the world as being 'immanent to consciousness', thus stripping it of its 'opacity and its transcendence' and occluding the 'aseity' of entities (2012: lxxix, lxxv). 'The world', he writes, 'is not an object whose law of constitution I have in my possession', but an 'inexhaustible' context which my consciousness 'neither encompasses nor possesses' (2012: lxxiv, lxxxi-lxxxii).

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For Merleau-Ponty, then, it would seem that entities both do and do not depend for their existence on subjective factors. Yet his views on this issue are not contradictory. To see why, consider, once again, the example of the rock. As we saw, the rock's identity seems partly to depend on certain subjective factors. It seems to display 'the human face it acquires in a human gaze.' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 54) Nevertheless, as we saw, I perceive it as existing independently of me. To perceive an entity as such is, Merleau-Ponty suggests, to perceive it as exceeding what is revealed to one in one's perception of it. It is, he writes, as if I were 'to sense, teeming beneath my gaze, [an] infinite mass of more detailed perceptions that I anticipate and upon which I have a hold.' (2012: 354)

To perceive a thing as independently existent is, in Merleau-Ponty's view, to perceive it as having sides which, though not currently visible, would be visible – visible to oneself, perhaps, were one to take a step to one's left, or to some other person already standing at that spot.[6] It is, moreover, to see any particular aspect of any one of those sides in the light of other, currently hidden aspects. So, for example, when I observe the rock with its largest side perpendicular to my face, my perception of the dark sliver with which I am presented is conditioned by a sense of what I would perceive were I to turn the thing through 90 degrees on its horizontal axis. And to perceive an entity's aspects as implying others in this way is, again, part of what it means to perceive that entity as existing independently of one. 'It is not accidental', writes Merleau-Ponty, 'for the object to be given to me in a "deformed" way, from the point of view [*place*] which I occupy. That is the price of its being "real".' (1964: 15-6) A disc-shaped rock which did not seem to reduce to a sliver when viewed from the side would not be behaving in the way one would expect such a thing to behave. It would not be behaving in the way a *real* or *independently-existent* rock would behave.

In these respects, the look of the rock from one perspective is conditioned by how it would look from other perspectives. It is also conditioned by the testimonies of other senses.

For example, when I see the rock, the content of my perception is shaped by a sense of how the entity would feel. In seeing it as independently existent, I *see* its surface as smooth. I *see* the thing as heavy. These relations can, moreover, run in either direction. Not only, for instance, do I see the rock as feeling a certain way: I feel it as looking a certain way (see, e.g., Merleau-Ponty 2012: 238). To find one's perception of an entity through one sense modality entangled with perceptions of it through others is part of what it means to perceive the entity as existing independently of one. (Conversely: 'If a phenomenon – such as a reflection or a light breeze – only presents itself to one of my senses, then it is a phantom, and it will only approach real existence if, by luck, it becomes capable of speaking to my other senses, as when the wind, for example, is violent and makes itself visible in the disturbances of the landscape.' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 332))[7]

To accept this account is to deny that the rock, or anything else for that matter, is any way 'in itself', independently of subjective factors. But it is not to deny that the rock exists independently of me or, indeed, any group of subjects. On the contrary, to perceive the entity in the manner sketched above is, arguably, part of what it *means* to perceive it as so existing. Merleau-Ponty claims that to perceive the entity as existing independently of us is to perceive it in the light of various ways of *engaging* with it – turning it this way and that, viewing it from different locations, reaching out to touch it, observing others' reactions to it, and so forth. On his account, then, we are perceiving the entity in the light of us and our concerns, even when we perceive it as existing independently of us.[8]

That, I propose, is why Merleau-Ponty rejects the realist's talk of how entities might be in themselves, for the phrase 'in themselves' serves implicitly to cut off reference to any form of engagement through which anything could reveal itself to us as existing independently of us. To say that a particular entity exists in itself is to imply that it exists in some way independent of any process of exploration through which it could be revealed to

exist in that way – and it is precisely this notion which baffles Merleau-Ponty. That is why he declares that 'Nothing will ever lead me to understand' what any entity might be in the absence of 'an Existence [i.e., a human or other subjective existence] that bears its structure' (2012: 456).

Merleau-Ponty is not, therefore, contradicting himself by holding that all entities both do and do not depend for their existence on subjective factors. To say that an entity depends on such factors is, in his view, equivalent to saying that it is *not* what it is 'in itself' in the realist's metaphysically-loaded sense of 'in itself'. Nonetheless, such an entity could still disclose itself to us as existing independently of us.

3. Classifying Merleau-Ponty's anti-realism

Merleau-Ponty denies that any entity is what it is independently of subjective factors. Even when we take something to exist independently of us, we do so, he claims, in the light certain ways of engaging with it. So he is an anti-realist, in my sense of 'anti-realism'. But what *sort* of anti-realist is he?

Merleau-Ponty's position lacks several of the features commonly attributed to anti-realism. For instance, he does not hold that '[t]he world is dependent on the existence and/or activities of *minds* for all of its structure.' (Smith 2002: 414; my emphasis) Nor does he maintain that the identities of entities necessarily depend on how we *conceive* of them (see, e.g., Lowe 2008: 9). Merleau-Ponty would reject both those options as unacceptably 'intellectualist'. To endorse either, he would say, is to fail to appreciate the fact that 'The world is not what I think, but what I live' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxx).

So Merleau-Ponty's anti-realism is not 'mentalistic' in character. Nor is it 'representationalist'. He does not express his commitment to anti-realism by denying 'that

there is a way the world is independent of our representations of it.' (van Woudenberg 2002: 123) Instead he rejects the underlying assumption that we are condemned to encounter, not entities, but merely our representations of them.

In *Retrieving Realism*, Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor note that Merleau-Ponty rejects that representationalist or 'mediational' picture; but they then move on to claim that once that picture is set aside, 'the whole complex of issues around "realism" and "antirealism"' lose their 'sense' (2015: 131). That claim is, however, misleading, since, as Dreyfus and Taylor immediately proceed to acknowledge, Merleau-Ponty cannot countenance any talk of how 'the things in the universe… are in themselves, independent of their relation to our bodily capacities and coping practices.' (2015: 131-2) So, although Merleau-Ponty is neither a 'mentalistic' nor a 'representationalist' anti-realist, he remains an anti-realist, in my sense of 'anti-realism'. So, again: what sort of anti-realist is he?

A third option is that his anti-realism is Promethean in character. I use the word 'Promethean', here, in David E. Cooper's sense, to denote the sort of anti-realism which portrays the world as having been cut, carved, shaped or sculpted in accord with our interests, perspectives, cognitive faculties, etc (see further, Cooper 2002: Chapter 4). It is the sort of view implied by Bergson's claim (2012, 388) that '[e]ach being cuts up the material world according to the lines that its action must follow' or William James's statement (2000: 111) that we 'carve out everything… to suit our human purposes', or Hilary Putnam's proposal (1981: 52) that we 'cut up the world' into entities by means of 'conceptual schemes'. For the Promethean, then, there can be no question of our cutting up the world at *its* joints, for '*we* carve up the world and the joints are where we carve.' (Spohn 2014: 256)

Promethean anti-realism raises a lot of difficult questions. What exactly might it *be*, this formless stuff which we are supposed to carve into entities? And how, if it is admitted that we belong to the world, are we to account for our own identities? Are we supposed to

carve *ourselves* into existence? Yet Merleau-Ponty, for his part, does not need to answer such questions, for his anti-realism is not Promethean in character. In his view, we are not contingently related to the world as carvers to carved, shapers to shaped or sculptors to sculpted. Instead he follows Heidegger in maintaining that we and our world are internally related – that, indeed, one must speak of being-in-the-world rather than of two elements – such as carver and carved - which just so happen to be connected.

4. The event of articulation

Let us pause to take stock. As an anti-realist, Merleau-Ponty denies that there is any way that any entities are in themselves, independently of subjective factors. He does not suppose, however, that this is because (a) the world's joints are exclusively *mind*-dependent, (b) we can never get beyond the world of *representation* and/or (c) we are the ones who have, so to speak, *carved* or *cut* reality up into entities.[9] Merleau-Ponty's anti-realism stems, rather, from his conviction that we are so intimately related to the world we inhabit that it makes no sense to speak of entities whose identities are wholly independent of our subjectivity (just as, he would add, it makes no sense to speak of pure subjects, whose identities owe nothing to the worlds they inhabit). Merleau-Ponty's anti-realism is, one might say, 'holistic' in character, rather than mentalistic, representationalist or Promethean.[10]

True, Merleau-Ponty would concede to the Promethean anti-realist that we *do* sometimes carve up reality in line with our interests – as when, for example, a colonial administrator plots the boundaries of some new country with a pencil and ruler. Yet he would add that that sort of carving has meaning only by way of contrast with - and indeed presupposes - a more basic pre-reflective encounter with the world which cannot be conceived of in such Promethean terms.

To see his point, return, one last time, to the example of the rock. As we noted, I perceive the entity as existing independently of me. And, as we saw, to perceive the rock as such is to perceive it in the light of certain ways one could engage with it: to perceive it as having sides that would be visible were one viewing it from a different location; as having aspects which would alter in certain expected ways were one to move one's head in a particular way; as having a form that could be felt and not just seen – and so forth.

In some cases, though, one need not speak of how the entity *would* seem were one to engage with it in some way, for one has in fact either engaged with it or is in fact engaging with it in the relevant way. For example, although, when I look at the rock, I cannot see its underside, that side becomes visible if – as I have just done - I pick the thing up and flip it over. To adopt Husserl's idiom, my 'anticipation' has, in this instance, been 'verified'.[11] Consequently, I continue to perceive the rock as existing independently of me. If, by contrast, I had looked underneath the thing and found nothing but empty space, then my anticipation would not have been verified and the entity's independence from me would have been thrown into question. Perhaps I would have come to perceive it as illusory. Perhaps I would have wondered what's in my coffee.

I considered the possibility of my turning the rock in my hand to expose its hidden side; however, the sorts of engagement through which we perceive entities as existing independently of us are not usually so deliberate. So consider how I might have perceived the rock had I not been reflecting on my perception of it. While typing, I might – let us suppose – have been pre-reflectively aware of an indeterminate presence at the edge of my visual field. When I looked up from the keyboard to search for a book, the rock would have moved towards the centre of that field. It would not, however, have attracted my notice because it would have been behaving exactly as one would expect it to behave were it an independently existing entity. As I shifted in my seat and turned my head, some of the rock's sides would

have come into view while others would have disappeared. The aspects of its visible sides would have changed shape in certain anticipated ways. As expected, its colour would have transformed from a vague darkness at the edge of my visual field into a more determinate grey. These anticipations would have been verified as I shifted my posture or moved my eyes. That is not to say that I would have *chosen* to change my posture and move my eyes in order to optimise my perceptual grip on the entity; rather, I would have made the required adjustments unthinkingly. Thus when eventually I reach for the rock, there is no need for me to deliberately move my head and eyes in order to check that it really is an independently existent entity, for my body, working beneath my explicit awareness, has already done that work for me. I find, for example, that my eyes have already settled on the appropriate level of focus. I find that my fingers have already assumed the appropriate attitudes, that they are already extended towards the rock in anticipation of its cold, hard, slightly granular surface. Merleau-Ponty claims that my senses have already responded to certain 'solicitations' *from the entity itself* – that, indeed, in such instances 'it cannot be said that one acts while the other suffers the action, nor that one gives sense to the other.' (2012: 323, 221-2). It is not the case, then, that *I* am shifting my posture or moving my eyes in an effort to achieve optimal perceptual grip on the entity. '[I]f I wanted to express perceptual experience with precision,' writes Merleau-Ponty, 'I would have to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive.' (2012: 223; see further, Kelly 2005: 101-2)

If that account is accurate, then it is misleading to speak of perceptual acts, for to do so is to imply that perceiving is something we do (see, e.g., Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxiv). On Merleau-Ponty's account perception is, at the most basic level, more like an event: a 'communion' between one's 'natural' self and the world it pre-reflectively inhabits (2012: 334, 464). So it is not as if I use my fingers as instruments with which to explore a world that is constituted independently of me and simply there, waiting to be explored. It is true that

when my fingers make contact with the rock's surface, the world is articulated in a way that reflects my ability to touch. Yet, strictly speaking, that articulation is not my doing. It is not as if I am the one who, even unconsciously, gives the world its joints. Paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, it would be more accurate to say that my natural self was caught up in a basic event of articulation - a moment of 'tangibility', perhaps, in which it was involved but of which it was not the author (compare 2012: 224).

5. Merleau-Ponty's anti-realism revisited

In *Phenomenology of Perception* and his other middle-period works, Merleau-Ponty espouses a certain form of anti-realism. Because – he reasons – the 'articulations' of any particular entity are 'the very ones of our existence', there is no way that any entities are in themselves, independently of any subjective factors. Those articulations are, it is true, sometimes the results of our deliberate *articulating*. In some cases – think of the tellingly straight border of Egypt and Libya - it really is we humans who deliberately carve the world up into entities. Yet Merleau-Ponty would hold that such acts presuppose a more basic articulation of the world – one that is not our doing.

Granted, he does not always refer to perception in this way. In some passages of *Phenomenology of Perception* he portrays our experience of the world in more Sartrean terms – as, for instance, a 'lacuna' in the world, a 'flaw' in that 'great diamond' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 215; see further, Toadvine 2009: Chapter 2). Yet it was the non-Sartrean theme which was to win out. In later works such as *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty further explored the notion that what we call our experience of the world might ultimately not be ours at all – not entirely – but rather a 'coiling over' or 'intertwining' in an 'element' which he calls 'flesh' (1968: 139).[12]

There is insufficient space, here, to give a thorough account of Merleau-Ponty's views on that topic. But enough has been said to allow us to reconsider the debate with which we began.

As we saw in the opening section, both anti-realists and realists typically assume that anti-realism entails:

(A) For any entity in our world, the identity of that entity ultimately depends entirely on us.

That assumption is false. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty is an anti-realist: he holds that the world's articulations depend on us in the sense that they 'mirror… human modes of behaviour' (2002: 53-4). On the other hand, however, he maintains that when we interrogate our most basic relation with the world – namely, perception – we find that the world's articulations *ultimately* depend, not on us, but on a more basic event of articulation. His form of anti-realism does not therefore entail (A). So, more generally, it is not the case that anti-realism entails (A).

To be sure, even if she accepts these points, the realist may continue to have reservations about Merleau-Ponty's account. She may accept that he does not portray the world's articulations as depending *entirely* on us. She may also accept that on his view it is the anonymous natural self, rather than one's personal self, which is involved in the basic articulating of the world. She may even acknowledge that, according to some plausible interpretations of the man's work, some intertwinings of the flesh do not involve us humans at all.[13] Nonetheless, she will argue that Merleau-Ponty continues to think that something suspiciously like subjectivity necessarily plays a role in the basic articulation of the world. And to her mind, any such view is unacceptable. To contend that subjects of any sort,

whether human or nonhuman, are necessarily involved in giving the world its joints is to betray one's allegiance to the opposing faction. It is to express one's commitment to anti-realism.

The realist is therefore likely to lump Merleau-Ponty's flesh-ontology together with the various other forms of anti-realism we touched upon in Section 3. She would, however, be mistaken to do so; for to fail to distinguish between Merleau-Ponty's form of anti-realism and those of Putnam *et al* is to obscure the distinctive role the Frenchman accords to *us* – we corporeal perceivers – in the articulation of the world. As we saw above, standard forms of anti-realism portray us as cutters, carvers, shapers or sculptors of the world. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, our role is not so active. Take his account of solicitations, for instance. As we saw above, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the world is tailored to us in the sense that its articulations necessarily reflect certain of our features, such as the natures of our bodies. Yet he also claims that entities solicit those responses from us that will optimise our perceptual grip on them. If they are to do *this*, however, then they must in some sense precede and so exceed those responses. For example, as I glance in its direction, the table calls for me to focus my eyes in order the better to perceive its shiny varnished surface. But that focusing is not entirely my doing. It is *the table itself* that 'already invites me to a particular focus and calls forth the focusing movement that will give it [its] "true" appearance.' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 331-2; compare 248-9) It is the table itself, one might say, which calls upon me to allow it to coalesce into a determinate thing. More generally, it is the world *itself* which draws forth those of our responses that give it its articulations.

So although, for Merleau-Ponty, we are involved in the intertwining of flesh, our most fundamental role is not that of cutter, carver, shaper or sculptor. Just as the world's role in any intertwining of flesh is to solicit our responses, so ours is to respond to those solicitations.[14]

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6. Implications

Much more would need to be said to explain, let alone justify, Merleau-Ponty's views on this issue. For instance, more would need to be said to convey the natures of these mysterious invitations, summons or solicitations to which we are called to respond. I will not say more about these matters here, though. My main aim in this paper has been to show that Merleau-Ponty could consistently have rejected (A). If true, that claim has at least three interesting implications, the first of which is as follows.

It is sometimes said that to be a phenomenologist is to suppose that each and every one of the entities in our world owes its identity to our 'constituting' activities. That, at least, is one implication of Wolfgang Spohn's claim that phenomenologists regard the 'constitution of objects as something done by us' or Panayot Butchvarov's judgement that phenomenology is a form of 'antirealism' which portrays the world as having been 'made by us' (Spohn 2014: 256; Butchvarov 2015: 3) It should now be evident that such general claims about the nature of phenomenology are false. Even in as early a work as *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty did not hold that all of the world's articulations derive ultimately from us.

The second implication concerns a certain way of criticising anti-realism. When realists criticise anti-realism, they sometimes do so using arguments which seem to presuppose that anti-realism entails (A). Take arguments to the effect that one should not endorse anti-realism because doing so would indicate a lack of 'humility', an 'anthropocentric conceit', 'the worst kind of arrogance', an impoverishment of one's 'soul' or some other flaw in one's character (Nagel 1986: 109; Sparrow 2014: 87; Gray 2002: 55; Russell 1967: 92). In the wake of the arguments presented above, such objections lose much of their force. For, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty endorses anti-realism while rejecting the

hubristic notion that all of our world's articulations derive ultimately from us. Of course, the realist may well reply that the fact that Merleau-Ponty does these two things merely indicates that his philosophy is incoherent. But that allegation would need to be supported by reasons. In their absence, one is perfectly entitled to dismiss arguments to the effect that anti-realism should be rejected because it entails (A). Maybe anti-realism really should be rejected; but it is not at all clear that it should be rejected for that reason.

The third implication concerns the direction of future work on anti-realism. Suppose that Merleau-Ponty's anti-realism really does not entail (A). It is natural to ask whether the same may be said of any other forms of anti-realism. Though I lack the space to prove the point here, I would like to suggest that it could. Consider Heidegger, for instance. As Lee Braver (2007: chapters 5 and 6) has shown, Heidegger remains an anti-realist throughout his career. In both his early and his later works, Heidegger holds that that the world's articulations necessarily reflect our concerns. Even claims that entities exist independently of us make no sense, he suggests, in the absence of some 'understanding of Being'.[15] Yet in his later works, he proposes that the world's articulations ultimately derive, not from our acts of willing, but from *Seyn*, the mysterious 'wellspring' of the world (1971: 50). A second example is that of Daoism. Daoist writers often imply that our world's articulations reflect our distinctively human interests, a point they often seek to bring out by comparing the articulations of our world with those of various nonhuman worlds (see, e.g., Zhuangzi 2009: chapters 1 and 2). For instance, as Joel Kupperman (2007: 134) notes, Zhuangzi's work is 'permeated with metaphysical anti-realism.' But although, on such accounts, the world's articulations reflect us and our concerns, they have their ultimate source not in our will but in the *dao* which both flows through and gives rise to all entities. Much more argument would be needed to prove the point, of course; however, here, again, we seem to have a form of anti-realism which is compatible with the denial of (A). In the figure of Zhuangzi, as in that of

Merleau-Ponty or the later Heidegger, we seem to have an anti-realist who would deny that all of the world's articulations ultimately derive from us.[16]

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[1] Two points: (a) following Plantinga (1982: 48) I suppose that 'exists' does not simply *mean* 'exists subject-independently'; (b) in what follows I will use 'subjective factors' instead of the more accurate but less elegant 'subjective or intersubjective factors'.

[2] Goodman describes himself as an 'irrealist'. Nonetheless, since he denies that there is a 'ready made world', he counts as an anti-realist in my sense of 'anti-realism' (see further, McCormick 1996: 167, 204).

[3] The realists quoted are Crispin Sartwell (2015) and Nicholas Wolterstorff 2009: 39.

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[4] In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes that 'Only at very great distances are the things [vision] gives us pure things, identical to themselves and wholly positive, like the stars…' (1968: 83) The implication, as Eric Matthews (2002: 169) suggests, is that things seem to exist in themselves only 'when they are far enough removed from our bodies to have no practical meaning for us.' Merleau-Ponty's example is a good one, since stars really do seem to be what they are in themselves, independently of us and our concerns. That probably explains why realist critics took such exception to Nelson Goodman's notion of 'starmaking' (see further, McCormick 1996).

[5] In refusing to endorse that claim, Merleau-Ponty did not mean to deny that the world existed before *Homo sapiens* evolved. He meant to deny that there could be any sense to speculations about how the world might be 'in itself', independently of subjective factors. To put the point in Kantian terms: he did not mean to question empirical claims about the prehuman world; he meant to challenge dogmatic claims about how the world is in itself.

[6] Although Merleau-Ponty's view on this issue owes much to Husserl, the two thinkers' accounts are in some respects very different. Imagine that one is looking down at the cover of a closed book lying on a desk. On Husserl's account, the perceived thing has certain 'proper features' that are determinately presented by the raw data of sensation (*hylé*). One sees the book's cover as being of a determinate colour, shape, size, etc. Moreover, since one interprets the *hylé* as presenting a book (rather than, say, an image of a book's cover that has been painted onto the desk's surface) one takes the perceived thing to have a currently-hidden back cover. This 'improper feature' of the perceived thing is 'co-apprehended' with the proper features; however, for Husserl, it is *not* present in my perceptual experience. The 'improperly appearing moments of the object are', he claims, 'in no way presented.' (1997: 48; see further Kelly 2003: 122-5) For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, those features Husserl calls 'improper' *are* present in one's perceptual experience: they are presented *as* indeterminate. So, to return to our example, Merleau-Ponty would say that one's current visual experience of the book contains something that is itself an indeterminate presentation of the back cover (compare Kelly 2005: 81, Merleau-Ponty 1964: 14).

[7] On this issue, Merleau-Ponty's account once again differs from that of Husserl. For Husserl, the real thing can only be 'understood intellectually' (Kelly 2005: 94). For Merleau-Ponty, it haunts our every perception of the thing, offering us a norm from which we feel the perceived thing to be deviating (Kelly 2005: 95). The less the perceived thing is taken to deviate, the more real it is perceived as being.

[8] Shannon Vallor (2009) draws on Merleau-Ponty's work to argue that the act of taking scientific entities to exist independently of us should also be considered in the light of certain attempts to achieve optimal perceptual grip on them. The scientists' acts of 'taking' should, she suggests, also be considered in the light of certain ways of engaging with the world – such as turning down the laboratory's thermostat or turning up the magnification on a microscope.

[9] I include the 'and/or' to make it clear that the categories of mentalistic, representationalist and Promethean anti-realism are not mutually exclusive. For example, one could be a mentalistic, representationalist and Promethean anti-realist.

[10] I am grateful to David E. Cooper for suggesting the name 'holistic anti-realism' for this family of positions.

[11] See Husserl 1977: 114. Though Merleau-Ponty implicitly rejects Husserl's talk of anticipations (at 1964: 14), that idiom provides a useful way of making the point I am trying to make in the main text.

[12] Such claims suggest that we are fundamentally in contact with so-called 'external' things since we are of the same 'stuff' as them (see Merleau-Ponty 2003: 218; 1964: 163). That suggestion does not indicate any form of metaphysical realism, however. In his later works, Merleau-Ponty remains opposed to any suggestion that there is what Putnam (1981: 123) once called a 'ready-made world'. So he remains an anti-realist, in my sense of 'anti-realism', even though he becomes increasingly uneasy with the subjectivist terms in which anti-realists, including his middle-period self, tend to couch their views.

[13] See, e.g., Toadvine 2009: 96: 'Animal being is… just as much as human being, an interrogative fold in the world's flesh.' (See further, Merleau-Ponty 2003)

[14] I would like to thank one of the Journal's anonymous reviewers for prompting me to consider these issues.

[15] Heidegger 1962: 255. Like Theodore R. Schatzki (92-4) and Braver (2007: 192-4), I do not believe that the relevant passage expresses Heidegger's commitment to realism. For a different reading, see McDaniel 2013: 338.

[16] I would like to thank David E. Cooper, Ian J. Kidd and one of the Journal's anonymous referees for the helpful comments they gave on drafts of this paper. I presented my views on Merleau-Ponty and metaphysical realism to the members of Durham University's Applied Phenomenology research cluster and to audiences at the University of East Anglia and the University of Essex. I am grateful for the feedback I received from audience members on those occasions.