An Ontology of Grace

The Doctrine of Creation and the Becoming of Phenomena

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And to all things that stood around the portals of my flesh I said,

"Tell me of my God.

You are not he, but tell me something of him."

Then they lifted up their mighty voices and cried,

"He made us."

My questioning was my attentive spirit,

and their reply, their beauty.

Then toward myself I turned, and asked myself, "Who are you?"

Augustine, *Confessiones* 10.9

Philosophy is the set of questions wherein he who questions

is himself implicated in the question.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 27

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Preface

This thesis is submitted to the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, for the degree of Master of Philosophy. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text. With 18,579 words, excluding bibliography, it does not exceed the limit of 20,000 words stipulated by the Degree Committee.

Prologue

The purpose of this essay is to bring Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and ontology of embodiment into critical dialogue with Augustine's theology and philosophy of creation. It is a curious fact that while Merleau-Ponty's use of theological concepts has often been noted, no attempt has been made to seriously relate his thinking to the theology of creation or to the thought of Augustine. This is doubly curious in view of the fact that for both thinkers questions about the origin and the *becoming* of the world and human beings are of such central importance. In what follows these themes will be traced out and explicitly related to the theology of creation and the philosophy of embodiment, so as to lay the groundwork for the development of what I will call an ontology of grace. Hitherto unrelated themes of theological and philosophical thought will thus be brought together, critically compared and related so as to generate another vision, a new way of conceptualizing, and a new area for intellectual exploration, in touch both with contemporary philosophy and the Christian theological tradition.

The essay is composed of four chapters. In the first I outline Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy of embodiment, the problems it tries to answer and the questions it gives rise to in doing so. Although in fundamental agreement with the way Merleau-Ponty understands human embodiment, I problematize certain aspects of his ontology, particularly vis-à-vis the adequacy of the notion of *flesh* and its relation to Christian theology. In the second chapter I undertake a brief archaeology of the Christian story of origins as it is drawn from the Hebrew scriptures and receives its most precise formulation in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, with a view to understanding how the idea of creation is related to the Christian understanding of God. In order to facilitate a critical discussion with philosophy I try to bring out the metaphysical consequences of the doctrine as regards the being or existence of God and the world and their relation. The third chapter continues with an investigation into Augustine's creational hermeneutic, as laid out in his key writings on creation. The purpose of the chapter is to see how, starting from the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, Augustine develops it with a particular emphasis on temporal *becoming* and its relation to absolute *coming to be*. With this in place, I proceed in the final chapter to draw these themes together and lay the groundwork for a mutually critical discussion between Augustine and Merleau-Ponty, or more broadly between theology and philosophy, on the topics of the origin of the world, the role of human embodiment in becoming, and the question of transcendence and its relation to immanence.

1. Introducing the Bête Noir: the Darkness of Ontology

1.1 THE PARADOX OF IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

The path of Western philosophical thinking twists back and forth between two fundamental metaphysical and epistemological poles: on the side of *immanence* we can locate subjectivity, interiority, presence and the phenomenon; on the side of *transcendence* we can locate objectivity, exteriority, absence and the noumenal. In traditional modern philosophy these poles crystallized into *rationalism* and *empiricism*, but today we are perhaps more familiar with them under the terms *idealism* and *realism*. I paint with such broad brushstrokes only to indicate the ubiquity of the tension between immanence and transcendence for the Western mind and the basic level at which these concepts function. Nothing less than the fundamental relation between human beings and the world is at stake here: Is the world in fact contained within our minds – immanent in them – such that we construct the world or form it and make it what it is? Or does the world stand over and against us so as to transcend our minds, such that it is what it is regardless of the presence of human consciousness?

Rather than straightforwardly analysing the arguments for and against these positions to try to determine the most reasonable philosophical stance, Merleau-Ponty realizes that there is a reason for why highly sophisticated thinkers have held both positions, and the reason is that they both articulate a certain truth about human being in the world.[1]

Idealism tells the truth about the fact that we know of no world that is not given to a subject so as to be immanent to this subjectivity. There is simply no experience to be had of anything – not even using advanced scientific technologies and methods – that is not the experience *of* a subject. We have never heard of, nor can we strictly speaking even think of a place or an object experienced by no one: even the most desolate place is present to my mind when I think it. To this basic insight can be added the observation that different conceptual paradigms are used by different peoples in different times and places and they produce different ways of relating to the world – ranging from slight variations (e.g. colour perception) to incompatible differences (e.g. vitality versus inertia in matter). This suggests a strong creative role for humans in the constitution of the world. However, idealism misses one crucial point: the world gives itself as real rather than constructed. In other words, when we experience the world, we experience it as being what it is regardless of us. Surely, if they could articulate it, almost everyone would say that the world is transcendent in relation to their consciousness of it and so not reducible to subjectivity. Idealism

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[1] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002) *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge (henceforth *PhP*), pp. 29, 42.

seems to be a position you have to educate yourself into; furthermore, you will have to rehearse your arguments every morning when you open your eyes to the world in all its transcendence – the sunlight through the blinds, the smell of coffee from the kitchen. Hence the paradox: the world can only be had within the immanence of subjectivity, but there it gives itself in full transcendence.

Realism, on the other end of the pole, tells the truth about this one undeniable fact of everyday life: that the world meets us as something already there, something with its own mode of existence independent of being experienced by human subjects, as we have already seen. (One must admit, of course, degrees of independence.) To this may be added the surprising stability and coherence of the world, making possible such human projects as scientific exploration in the first place. However, realism now faces the threat of global scepticism, the possibility that what we take to be real is only chimera. Against the possibility of a radical gap of delusion between human minds and the world, the realist can do no better than simply to assert the correspondence of mind and world and work out of that major presupposition. (We are speaking here of *global* scepticism, not of the sort of *regional* scepticism that might plausible be met by a regional epistemology. Unfortunately there are no successful global epistemologies, which is why most epistemologists today are so called fallibilists.) Idealists have usually not been satisfied with this situation. But a still graver problem for realism is the fact that it has no real room for subjectivity, and since it does not know what to do with it realism tends to reject subjectivity, trying to reduce it to the objective world, thereby obviously losing what was to be reduced. We thus meet the paradox again: the world is indeed transcending our consciousness of it, but it can only be had within the immanence of our subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges both the irreducibility of immanent consciousness and the transcendence of the world; his philosophical project could be described as an attempt to understand the way in which these two poles must somehow be held together.[2] Rather than rejection or embrace he tries to redeem the truths of both idealism and realism in a sort of Hegelian *Aufhebung*. We must now try to see how this develops in Merleau-Ponty's thinking.

1.2 FIRST APPROXIMATION: THE BODY AND THE PHENOMENAL WORLD

The subject is the main character of Merleau-Ponty's major work, *Phenomenology of Perception* and the key into his thought, but he conceives of the subject in a radically new way. He was not the only twentieth century philosopher who tried to overcome the dualism of subject and object; however, his proposed solution is so original as to set him apart and it has caused a renaissance of contemporary interest among

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[2] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964), *Eye and Mind*, in *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern UP (henceforth *EM*), p. 16.

philosophers, cognitive scientists and theologians alike.[3] He found that the clue to the paradox of immanence and transcendence, which is a paradox of the subject, lay very close at hand: the human body itself. What is so striking about the human body (and from a phenomenological point of view we are always speaking about the conscious human body[4]) is that it is at once subjective and objective; it is that with which we engage the world, as well as something we can perceive as any other object *in* the world. The body thus stands at the threshold of the subjective and the objective and mediates between them.

Contrary to classical modern philosophy from Descartes to Husserl, which had conceived of the subject as a Cogito or a transcendental Ego that applies its thinking, its concepts and categories, to the world so as to imbue it with meaning, thus constituting it, Merleau-Ponty realizes that the first subject is the lived body moving and acting in a world. This is not to reject the thinking Cogito as such, but only to insist that when the Cogito comes on stage as a self-reflective and meaning-giving subject it is grounded and rooted in a primordial subject who is already in a meaningful relation to its world.[5] To realize the truth of this claim we need only think about the birth of a human baby, which in its early stages of development is related to the world in all sorts of meaningful ways – tangibly, kinaesthetically, and so on – long before it has any concepts to apply or any kind of developed self-reflectivity. The burden of constituting a meaningful world, according to Merleau-Ponty, falls upon the relation between this *silent cogito* and its perceived world.[6] This entails a radical shift away from intellection to perception.

Now, if the subject has been radically reconceived as an embodied subjectivity, it follows that perception will have to be reconceived in turn. No longer can perception be thought of as an external relation between two discrete entities – subject and object. Rather, since the subject as body is itself a part of the perceived world as object, perception must be thought of as a sort of intimate communion within the same perceptual field; the subject-object distinction cannot be a clear cut as it has often been thought to be. Merleau-Ponty expresses this rapprochement in terms of a circularity between body and world, a system, an organic tie, a relation of

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[3] E.g. Blond, P, "The Primacy of Theology and the Question of Perception", in Heelas, P. (1998), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, Blackwell; Candler, P. and Cunningham, C. (2008), *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, SCM Press; Clark, A. (1998), *Being There: Putting, Brain, Body and World Together Again*, MIT Press; Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999), *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Though*, Basic Books, p. xi; Hass, L. and Olkowski, D. (2000), *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays Beyond the Continental-Analytic Divide*, Humanity Books; Milbank, J., "The Soul of Reciprocity", Modern Theology 17:4, October 2001.

[4] Cf. Henry, M. (2000), *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair*, Éditions du Seuil, p. 8f.

[5] *PhP*, pp. 242, 296, 414, 469

[6] *PhP*, pp. 451, 469f., 475

reciprocity, or a dialectic.[7] The intentional relation that Husserlian phenomenology posited between the transcendental Ego and the world, to bridge the gap between subject and object, thus inscribing itself into dualism, is here replaced by a lived intentionality, a relation between bodies within the same sphere; the subject and object are found within the same world.

The upshot of all this is that the meaningful world of phenomena – a spacious world with its objects, an acting self, other living beings – is seen as arising in the reciprocal relation between the body-subject and the perceived world. It is not simply the activity of a mind on some raw material, or the impression of an objective world on a passive mind. This is borne out in a number of phenomenological analyses[8], which establish a pervasive *ambiguity* at the heart of the world of phenomena.[9] In other words, the phenomena are always in a process of becoming in the pre-reflective and pre-noetic realm of the perceptual field, where the embodied subject reciprocally interacts with the perceived world. They *are* not as such.[10] From a Merleau-Pontian perspective there are no stable *beings* either in the subject's mind or in the objective world; any such thinking takes us right back to dualism and the paradox of immanence and transcendence. Needless to say, this meaningful phenomenal world will later be sedimented and worked over by the thinking Cogito, it will be made much more static. But this is a later conceptual process and one that has its *sine qua non* in the still ambiguous perceptual field of becoming.

By conceding the fundamental ambiguity of the perceptual world and the embodied subject Merleau-Ponty in fact safeguards both the subject and the object; neither is allowed to swallow up the other in unbridled subjectivism or objectivism. But the point is that this ambiguous duality is held together in a reciprocal or circular unity, which has only been made possible by conceiving of the subject as an embodied subject. How is this so? Because, if a body *is* consciousness such that no real distinction can be made between it and (perceptual) consciousness, then, strangely, it is both subject and object at the same time. Or, not quite; it is rather that the body evinces a unity that contains within it a duality. Phenomenologically, this can be brought out by considering the phenomenon of double sensation: If I touch my left hand with my right hand I am simultaneously touching and being touched in such a way that, (1) my body gives itself as both subject and object in a unity, and (2) this unity nevertheless does not give itself as a complete identity – the ambiguous duality

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[7] *PhP*, p. 235; *The Primacy of Perception*, in *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern UP (henceforth *PriP*) p. 20; cf. Madison (1981), *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, Ohio UP, pp. 21-44.

[8] *PhP*, especially the analyses of spatiality (pp. 112-170), sexuality (pp. 178-201), intersubjectivity (pp. 403-425), and temporality (pp. 476-503).

[9] See, De Waelhens (1967), *Une Philosophie de l'ambiguïté: l'existentialisme de Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Louvain, which takes this as the central motif of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

[10] Madison (1981), p. 263.

will be felt like a shuttling back and forth between points of view.[11] In other words, since the body-subject is both subject and object, is so to speak a conscious bit of world, it can articulate while being articulated, constitute while being constituted, such that a meaningful world emerges from this primordial interaction, a world which is not reduced to subjectivity or objectivity, but a phenomenal world in the making. The body, as both subject and object, is the agent of this mystery: a real and meaningful world.

This is as far as *Phenomenology of Perception* takes us with regard to the becoming of phenomena, but here we must raise a serious question, which is the question Merleau-Ponty found himself asking in the aftermath of the *Phenomenology*.[12] If the real world, which is the phenomenal world with which we continuously interact and where we live our lives, is to be understood as a dialectic of the embodied subject and the perceived world, then must not this circular dialectic itself be enveloped in an all-encompassing reality able to contain their relation? In other words, is it not the case that the phenomenal world is somehow grounded in a sort of unitary pre-world? The brilliance of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the ambiguous emergence of the phenomenal world notwithstanding, a deeper ontological question now demands our attention. From what ontological depth does the phenomenal world arise? Where is it in fact rooted? We are beginning to glimpse the *bête noir* of phenomenology itself – the darkness of ontology.[13]

1.3 DEEPER INTO BEING: *LA CHAIR DU MONDE*

In Merleau-Ponty's later thinking, particularly *Eye and Mind* and the unfinished and posthumously published *Visible and the Invisible*, properly ontological questions are explicitly taken up and the search for a ground for the phenomenal world is begun. Whereas the early writings focus on being in the world, the later works focus on Being itself, now capitalized to indicate that it is intended to include everything, as opposed to this or that regional being.

The unresolved question lingering from *Phenomenology of Perception* is this: How can it be that we are as perceivers perfectly attuned to the perceived world; i.e. why does the dialectical relation give rise to the phenomenal world at all? This seemingly innocent question hides a nexus of truly fundamental philosophical problems: How can there be a meaningful correlation between subjects and objects? Whence this "inspired exegesis" that my body makes of the world causing it to yield its truths? Indeed, there seems to be a "pre-established harmony" between me and the

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[11] *PhP*, p. 105f.

[12] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968), *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern UP (henceforth *VI*), p. 200.

[13] Cf. Cataldi, S. (1993), *Emotion, Depth and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space. Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment*, State University of New York Press, p. 60f.; Madison (1981), p. 32.

world, and Merleau-Ponty puzzles over how this can be.[14] The question regards the very meaningfulness of the world; to ask how there can be meaning for us in the world is really to ask how there can be a world at all, cosmos instead of chaos. In the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty had been content to posit this strange communion between the body-subject and the perceived world as a sort of brute and groundless fact, phenomenologically describable but ontologically incomprehensible, but now he is drawn deeper into the Being of this world.

The tentative interpretation Merleau-Ponty gives, grounded in his phenomenological analyses, is that the body and the world must be *of the same flesh*, where *flesh* describes, not some materialistic notion, but the ultimate Being in which the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world are both included and inhere.[15] To know each other this intimately the body and the world must be the same, although never identical. Rather meaning arises from a "fission" or rupture in the flesh between the flesh of the world and the flesh of the body. To explain, Merleau-Ponty takes the human body as the "proto-type of Being"[16] as such, its "exemplar sensible"[17]: in its microcosmic operations it seems to reflect the macrocosmic operations of the world.[18] The body, as we have seen, is characterized by its ability to turn back on itself and experience itself as both subject and object in a differentiated unity; Merleau-Ponty now extends this to include the whole world, such that just as the body belongs to the order of the world, the world in turn is a universal flesh.[19] Meaning is an organic phenomenon that arises within this flesh – that is between the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world, in the fission causing a rift in Being. Or in other terms, the sensible world turns back on itself as sentient, just like the body, and a specific Visible/Tangible in itself – the world – emerges between the body and the whole of the visible, something more real than either of them.[20]

The whole that encompasses the embodied subject and the perceived world, and which is their unitary ground, is here conjured up as an invisible reality – the flesh. It describes a new sort of monism – "one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it."[21] Merleau-Ponty calls it by different names: an element, a general thing, a general emblem of Being, an incarnate principle between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea. It is probably not unfair to say – we are after all dealing with an unfinished manuscript – that Merleau-Ponty is searching for a new idiom with which to express or at least invoke the ontology of flesh, without fully succeeding. However, the principle ideas seem to be clear enough: *First*, to account for

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[14] *VI*, p. 133
[15] *VI*. p. 134
[16] *VI*. p. 136
[17] *VI*. p. 135
[18] Cf. Dillon, M. (1988), *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, Evanston, Northwestern UP, p. 35.
[19] *VI*, p. 137; cf. Madison (1981), p. 183f.
[20] *VI*, p. 139
[21] *VI*, p. 139

the harmony of the seer and the seen we must think of them as primordially one and the same – one flesh. *Second*, for a meaningful world to emerge from this Being, we must allow that it comes to thematize itself at a very fundamental level, that a sort of primordial distinction occurs within the flesh, and the case of our own body is the one instance where this is in fact phenomenologically accessible. *Third*, the flesh is therefore an ultimate notion of unity, modelled on the human body, which in itself contains the ability to create the reversal or distinction needed for meaning to emerge, and it can thus be described as a qualified ontological monism.

Here it is important to be clear about method. We have already seen the nature of Merleau-Ponty's regressive reasoning, i.e. starting in the *Phenomenology* from the Cogito and working his way down to a more primordial origin in the silent cogito and its dialectical relation to the perceived world. Then in the later works he follows the threads of our being in the world all the way back to "Being itself", as he thinks. But this entails a rejection of a phenomenology that privileges the visible in favour of the invisible, a moving away from interrogating only that which gives itself in full positivity to a sort of negative philosophy; in short, a transition from strict phenomenology to interpretation. In other words, the ontology of the flesh is a negative ontology insofar as it thematizes that which does *not* give itself as visible and positive, but only as invisible and negative.

This is also why we cannot say that the flesh is more real than what it gives rise to, the visible and the sentient; rather, the flesh is the invisible and incarnate principle *in them* without which they would not have been, and would not have been for each other. In other words, the flesh is not the thing in itself, a noumenal and inaccessible reality, but a depth, a ground or a possibility which is the always presupposed other side of all seers and all things seen – in short, the ontological depth of the world. Perhaps then, we can only state the Being of flesh negatively or by allusion: it is that from which phenomena emerge, from out of which they become in the reversibility of the flesh; it is the invisible *of* the world, the Being *of* beings (bodies, others, objects).

This is where I take issue with some of the recent a/theological appropriations of Merleau-Ponty's work and it is to a critique of that and a general theological appraisal of his philosophy we must now turn.

1.4 THEOLOGY: PROBLEMS AND POTENTIALS
There have been some recent theological engagements with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, which in itself is appropriate. He himself said that "it is in confrontation with Christianity that philosophy best reveals its essence."[22] However, these engagements often turn on a rather shallow reading of the philosopher which leads to misrepresentations and distortions. The notion that Merleau-Ponty's later work is

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[22] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1960), "Partout et nulle part", in *Signes*, Éditions Gallimard, p. 176.

some sort of disguised or unaware incarnational theology, suggested for instance by Phillip Blond and by Conor Cunningham[23], is explicitly gainsaid by the author himself in the last of his working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*: "[it] must be presented without any compromise…with theology."[24] But equally mistaken, I believe, is Dominique Janicaud's reading, which sees Merleau-Ponty as the last stalwart defender of pure phenomenological method unpolluted by theology and firmly committed to immanence.[25] It is a curious fact that Merleau-Ponty can be claimed in this way by opposing parties. Without in any way being able here to do justice to this complex debate let me briefly outline how an insufficient understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical method as well as his notion of transcendence makes this conflict of interpretations possible.

As to method, Merleau-Ponty moves, as we have seen, from a rather explicit phenomenological method in the *Phenomenology* to a much more "hermeneutical" approach in his later works. The later method is *negative* insofar as it thematizes that which does not give itself in phenomenological positivity, something which runs deeper than we can ever perceive and which must rather be invoked or thematized as that which allows phenomenological positivity in the first place – "the psychoanalysis of Being"[26]. This means that the later philosophy of Merleau-Ponty cannot be seen as a strict phenomenology at all; it is a much more speculative enterprise with affinities in pre-Socratic thought about wholeness or the One. So Janicaud's appropriation of Merleau-Ponty as the pure phenomenologist (if such there be) is misguided as it does not account for his methodological transition. And for the same reason, the theological appropriation is mistaken, because it treats the analysis of the invisible or the flesh in the later works as if this was something phenomenologically given in positivity. From that perspective it becomes possible to say that Merleau-Ponty saw a transcendence in immanence but was unable to correctly interpret it, and then to proceed with one's own theological interpretation of this putative given. This approach fails to see that the invisible was never *given* in the first place, it was always an *interpretation*; in other words, there is no (positive) phenomenon there of which to give a theological interpretation.

What then are we to make of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in relation to Christian theology? The ontology of the flesh is a persuasive ontology in its own right; its emphases on the ecological setting of the world, on the unity of creation, on embodiment as the human way of being in the world are all salutary and, I believe,

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[23] Blond, 1998; and "Perception: From Modern Painting to the Vision in Christ", in Milbank, J. et al., eds. (1999), *Radical Orthodoxy*, Routledge; Cunningham, C., "Suspending the Natural Attitude: Transcendence and Immanence from Thomas Aquinas to Michel Henry", in Candler and Cunningham (2008), p. 287.

[24] *VI*, p. 274; cf. p. xxv

[25] Janicaud, D. et al. (2000), *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn*, Fordham UP, pp. 22-28.

[26] *VI*, p. 270; cf. Madison (1981), p. 193

essentially correct. However, the transcendence he sees at the heart of reality is not the Christian God; the invisible is not a faint flicker of the divine; the flesh does not open up beyond the whole. The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty can be characterized as "immanent holism"[27] and the transcendence he espouses is in the end a this-worldly transcendence. It is not that all types of divinity are rejected out of hand, but the only God Merleau-Ponty could allow is one that does not stand over and against the world, but is rather part of it. As Madison puts it: "It is difficult to dissociate the "God" he speaks of from the "Being" of his late philosophy… Being is underneath man and only expresses itself in him…human history…is the history of the becoming of Being itself."[28] This understanding of Being and the divine is to be sharply distinguished from that of the so called "Christian distinction", which I will explicate in the next chapter.

Merleau-Ponty's regressive interrogation does indeed reach the unfoundedness of the subject and traces this back to an opening within Being itself; like the Platonists before him, he gestures beyond what can be explicitly thematized, towards an abyss from which the logos of the phenomenal world emerges. However, the ontology of the flesh – of Being – remains the ultimate setting of his thought and this cannot be assimilated with the more radical Christian distinction between God and the world. It is possible to be deeply appreciative of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy without collapsing it into theology; indeed, this is truer to his own intentions. However, from a theological perspective there are some problems internal to the philosophical position itself that need to be addressed.

If what prompted Merleau-Ponty to develop his ontology was dissatisfaction with simply positing the harmony between the body-subject and the world as a brute and unexplainable fact, it seems a similarly brutish fact must be posited with regard to the flesh. For how are we to understand the fission in the flesh which causes the subject and the world to appear for each other? Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has no other resources than to posit that as a brute fact – it happened (or rather, it is happen*ing*). Furthermore, could we not have imagined a fission in Being which did not result in a harmonious intertwining of subject and world? If the problem is to understand the upshot if meaning in the world, the flesh does not seem to be a sufficient answer, but only a deferring of the question to a deeper ontological level. Theology might want to ask: Can the question be resolved at all within a discourse of the ontological?

Add to this that Merleau-Ponty is interested in accounting not only for a meaningful world, but also for a certain teleology in this world: from the silent cogito, to the self-reflective Cogito, to language, to knowledge and to culture. This does not mean that he envisages a definite *telos* to this development, but an upward

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[27] I take the expression from Desmond, W. (2008), *God and the Between*, Blackwell, p. 251.
[28] Madison (1981), p. 236

development nonetheless. Now we could ask how the fission in the flesh helps us to understand this movement. Even granted that it explains how there can be a harmonious relation between the embodied subject and the world, it does not explain, it seems to me, the continuous movement of development, the teleology of human consciousness in the world. Let me stress at this point that I do believe Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analyses are often very insightful descriptions of *how* this happens; that is not the issue here. What Merleau-Ponty finally asks, and what I want to know, is *why* it happens.

Another worry is to do with the crucial notion of difference. If the flesh is the ontological depth of the world, the underlying unity of everything, is there not a sense in which difference will be seen as merely the surface of an original sameness? Alternatively, difference can be seen as the outworking of an original negation within Being itself, but if this is the proposed solution we might want to ask if the unity of the flesh must not be absolute for it to secure the original harmony between subject and world. What is the use of saying that they are one flesh if it already contains within itself an agonistic duality? This strategy would seem to take Merleau-Ponty back to the problem of the *Phenomenology* and the dialectic of body-subject and world. If the former solution was unsatisfactory, so will the latter be, and by virtue of the same fault only transposed to a different ontological level. The conundrum is as old as philosophy itself: How can there be both unity and difference? The logic of Merleau-Ponty's ontology seems to demand a choice: Either we understand the flesh as absolute unity, but then the upsurge of meaning becomes incomprehensible and difference takes on an illusory character; or we posit a duality within the flesh itself and thus understand the origin as somehow primordially agonistic, but then it becomes hard to see how this same flesh makes unity possible. The theological challenge, therefore, is this: Can we think the source of the world as an original difference in unity without positing a negation within that source itself?

In what follows I want to relate the phenomenology and ontology of Merleau-Ponty and the problems that they raise to the theology of creation and suggest that the key to the theological *and* philosophical inadequacies in Merleau-Ponty's thinking is a failure to distinguish between *coming to be* and *becoming*.[29] I begin with an "archaeology" of the idea of creation *ex nihilo*, working toward the crucial understanding of the distinction between God and the world.

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[29] I borrow the distinction from Desmond (2008), pp. 248ff.

2. Archaeology of a Distinction: Creatio ex Nihilo

2.1 SCRIPTURAL EXEGESIS

In polyphonous voices the Hebrew scriptures testify that the God of Israel is also the creator of the world, and nowhere is its rhetoric as majestic as in the opening two verses of Genesis:

> In the beginning God created [בָּרָא] the heavens and the earth. Now
> the earth was formless and empty [תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ], darkness was over the
> surface of the deep [תְהוֹם], and
> the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Gen 1:1-2)

However, we must be careful not to read into this the doctrinal developments of a later age, especially since that development is so very instructive both for understanding the content of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* itself and for glimpsing the theologians of the early church at work doing constructive theology. That we must not read the *ex nihilo* clause into all the biblical statements about creation becomes clear when we see the freedom with which the biblical texts use different creation motifs in different contexts to make different points, as a brief survey of key passages indicates. There are indeed powerful statements of an effortless bringing-into-being by the very word of the creator:

> By the word of the Lord [בִּדְבַר יְהוָה] were the heavens made [נַעֲשׂוּ]
> the starry host by the breath of his mouth…
>
> For he spoke [אָמַר] and it came to be;
> he commanded [צִוָּה], and it stood firm. (Ps 33:6,9)

There are also passages which simply speak of God as *maker*, often with brilliant poetical imagery:

> He alone stretches out the heavens
> and treads on the waves of the sea.
> He is the maker [עֹשֶׂה] of the Bear and Orion,
> the Pleiades and the constellations of the South. (Job 9:8-9)

These ways of creating are sometimes juxtaposed, such that the most majestic verb "create" [*baraʾ*], signifying the effortless bringing into being, is put next to the verb "form" [*yṣr*], signifying the material engagement of artistic creation.[30] This indicates the fluidity of these concepts and the ease with which they cohabit the same field of imagination:

> For thus says the Lord,
>
> who created [בּוֹרֵא] the heavens…
>
> who formed [יֹצֵר] the earth and made it… (Is 45:18)

But nor, on the other hand, do the Hebrew scriptures shy away from the motif of chaos and struggle, so common in the creation narratives of the ancient cultures of the Near East[31], though it has to be pointed out that this is a muted or transformed theme in the Hebrew scriptures.[32] Ancient Israel did not shy away from the realities of chaos, struggle and evil, but nowhere in its scriptures is it indicated that the power of the Most High is in any way threatened by these realities.

> It was you who split open the sea by your power;
>
> you broke the heads of the monster in the waters.
>
> It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan
>
> and gave him as food for the creatures of the desert.
>
> It was you who opened up springs and streams;
>
> you dried up the ever-flowing rivers,
>
> the day is yours and yours also the night;
>
> you established the sun and moon. (Ps 74: 13-16)

As a general rule, the Hebrew scriptures deal with the topic of creation to make a point about Israel's life in the present.[33] This is particularly clear in Isaiah of the exile, who uses the creation motif as consolation in a time of political oppression and faith in the creator (probably expressed in liturgy) as an act of resistance. The perspective goes straight from the cosmic to the everyday reality of the people:

> This is what God the Lord says –

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[30] Brueggemann, W. (1997), *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, p. 146f.

[31] E.g. *Enuma Elish*, in Pritchard, J. (1969), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton UP, p. 60-72.

[32] Brueggemann (1997), p. 147; Jenson, R., "Aspects of a Doctrine of Creation", in Gunton, C., ed. (1997), *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, T&T Clark.

[33] Cf. Jenson (1997), p. 19

he who created [בּוֹרֵא] the heavens and

stretched them out [וְנוֹטֵיהֶם],

who spread [רֹקַע] the earth and all that

comes out of it…
I will keep you and make you
to be a covenant [בְּרִית] for the people,
and a light for the Gentiles,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon
those who sit in darkness. (Is 42: 5-7)

Creation is thus related to the covenant, such that the assurance of the effectiveness of the covenant is a consequence of the immense power of the one who created the world. For the one who created the world is always the one who created a people and entered into covenant with it:

But now this is what the Lord says –
he who created [בֹּרַאֲךָ] you, O Jacob,
he who formed [וְיֹצֶרְךָ] you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you
are mine. (Is 43: 1)

In view of passages such as these the interpreter has to "tread gently". Clearly there are several fields of imagination at work here – the immediate effortless creation by utterance; the fashioning or forming of the world on the model of an artist; the victorious struggle of Yahweh against the primeval forces of chaos, the assurance of covenant relationships – but, as Walter Brueggemann observes, they all have this in common: they are governed by a grammar of strong verbs of action where God is the subject.[34] The God of Israel is the one who by his actions is responsible for the creation of the world; the cosmos is willed by him and have him as its ultimate source. This realization of the absolute centrality of the motif of creation in the Hebrew scriptures has ushered in an "enormous shift" in Old Testament scholarship:[35] Whereas the theme of creation used to be interpreted, e.g. by Gerhard von Rad, mainly as Israel's polemic with Canaanite religion, of little importance compared to the themes of, say, salvation history and covenant theology, creation is now

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[34] Brueggemann (1997) p. 145
[35] *ibid*. p. 159

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increasingly understood as the theological horizon against which the faith of ancient Israel must be understood. It is from creation that salvation history and covenant relationship flows, as well as the relentless insistence of the prophets on the ethical obligations following from being thus created.

However, to the question of whether there is a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in the Hebrew scriptures, there is no clear answer; much will depend upon how we understand doctrinal development. On the one hand, it seems that the ancient Hebrews did not, in contrast to the Greeks, ask the question of whether there was any matter or primal stuff from which God formed or organized the world as we know it. Some passages indeed seem to suggest it, while others seem to contradict it.[36] On the other hand, all scholars agree that creation *ex nihilo* can be drawn from the bible one way or the other, ranging from the opinion that the texts admit the doctrinal development to the opinion that the texts require it. What we can be certain of is that a recognition of what I take to be the *ex nihilo*-implication of the texts occurs in Hellenic Judaism at the time of 2 Maccabees and in non-Hellenic Judaism at about the same time.[37] It is also clearly evinced in Philo of Alexandria, who on several occasions uses this language (even though his testimony on this score is somewhat ambiguous).[38]

The early Church could initially simply take over the Jewish conception of creation, but the New Testament, even though it does not explicitly teach creation *ex nihilo*, nevertheless presents passages that must be seen as lying closer to the fully fledged doctrine:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made [ἐγένετο]; without him nothing was made that has been made. (Joh 1:1-3)

> (God) gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist [καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα]. (Rom 4:17)

> By faith we understand that the universe was formed [κατηρτίσθαι] at God's command, so that what is seen was not made [γεγονέναι] out of what was visible. (Heb 11:3)

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[36] Cf. Gen 1:2; Job 26.7; Is 44.24; Prov 8:23; Wis 1:14a; Wis 11:17 etc.

[37] 2 Maccabees 7:28; Soskice, J. (2006), "Athens and Jerusalem, Alexandria and Edessa: Is there a Metaphysics of Scripture?", International Journal of Systematic Theology, Volume 8, Number 2; O'Neill, J. (2003), "How Early is the Doctrine of *Creatio ex Nihilo*?", Journal of Theological Studies, NS, Volume 53, Pt. 2.

[38] Cf. Soskice (2006) with May, G. (1994), Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought, T&T Clark, pp. 9-21.

> You are worthy our Lord and our God
>
> to receive glory and honour and power,
>
> for you created [ἔκτισας] all things
>
> and by your will they were created [ἐκτίσθησαν]
>
> and have their being [ἦσαν]. (Rev 4:11)

In view of such statements, and accustomed as we are to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, it is surprising to learn that the early Church did not present a unified view on the matter, but that many theologians and preachers seem to have held the belief in God as creator in tandem with the Platonic doctrine, so prevalent in Hellenic culture, of the eternity of matter.[39] If forced to think about it, these Christians must have thought about God's creative act as a forming of an already existent stuff, like the potter a lump of clay.

2.2 RECEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT

In Gerhard May's decisive study of the development and rapid acceptance of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* it is established that it was in the confrontation with gnosticism on the one hand and with Middle Platonism on the other that the early Christian thinkers first had to become explicit about what their faith entailed about creation.[40] Even though May's strong emphasis on the gnostic crisis of the second century causes him to be overly sceptical about earlier references to the doctrine, such as in Philo and the Shepherd of Hermas, he succeeds in showing the extraordinary importance of the clash with the Greek mindset which finally led to the expulsion of any notion of an *Urstoff* existing in parallel eternity with God the creator.[41] Indeed, even as the Christian doctrine of creation constituted a real break with the philosophical thought of its day, it nonetheless needed Greek philosophical conceptuality to arrive at and express this novelty.[42]

Ever since Parmenides, Greek thought had operated on the principle classically formulated as *ex nihilo nihil fit* – nothing comes from nothing.[43] This meant that even though the emergence of new things was seen to happen all the time, this was naturally understood against the background of some sort of eternally existing

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[39] May (1994), p. 147; see Vannier, M-A. (1991), *"Creatio", "conversio", "formatio" chez S. Augustin*, Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse pp. 3-5, who indicates some philological reasons for why this may have been so: the Hebrew term *bara'* has no precise equivalent in the Greek.

[40] May (1994), p. 179

[41] Cf. Jenson (1997), p. 19

[42] May (1994) p. xii; in contrast to May's exaggerated "cognitivism", I would emphasize that basic concepts can be operative even in the absence of explicit formulations, in virtue of their unthematized place in our web of beliefs. This is why I would argue that there is an implicit logic in the belief in creation long before this logic has been explicitly stated.

[43] "ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος οὐδὲν γίνεται", quoted in O'Neill (2003), p. 450; cf. Desmond (2008), p. 250.

being giving rise to change and the emergence of new things. This can be seen in Parmenides and Plato as well as in Aristotle and the Middle Platonists. By the time Christianity came to itself intellectually, Middle Platonism (c. 50 BC to 250 AD) had realized the full religious potential of Plato's writings, not least the *Timaeus*, and espoused a doctrine of three ontological principles equal in rank as constituting the world: God, ideas and matter.[44] This entailed, of course, an idea of matter akin to that of the ancient cultures of the Near East, insofar as matter was given an absolute ontological status on a par with the divine (or part of the divine). But the concept of God that this entailed is hard to reconcile with the Judeo-Christian notions of the absolute power of the Most High and of his unparalleled freedom. It became clear that if you allow matter to assume an ontologically absolute status, the concept of God suffers a radical diminishment. Creation, then, is not some freestanding peripheral doctrine, but intimately connected to the central doctrine of God.

The gnostics seem to have realized the implications of creation earlier than orthodox Christians. For the gnostics it was important that creation and its creator were not confused with what they held to be the real God. Since created reality was conceived of as inherently evil, the god who created it must have been evil too. Gnosticism's solution to this problem was to reject the demiurgical powers responsible for creation and to posit a divinity over and above it all, the real redeemer of mankind and final destructor of material reality. Matter, then, had to be seen as a derivation from God's original plan, the working of evil powers, and it could therefore not be seen as eternal.[45] Major gnostic teachers such as Marcion, Basilides and Valentius thus rejected the eternity of matter for reasons very different from the Judeo-Christian ones, especially since their teaching also implied the rejection of the Hebrew scriptures with their identification of the Creator with the highest God.

In their battle against heresy, Christian theologians often thought of the heterodox as dependent upon Greek philosophy, and so when the struggle against gnosticism in the second century hardened so did the anti-philosophical rhetoric. In relation to philosophical and gnostic thinking Christian thinkers had to begin to grapple with the question of the principles of being in a quasi-philosophical manner. Finding themselves confronted with the dangerous dualistic consequences of the idea of the eternity of matter, their task was to uphold the omnipotence and the unity of God, the very God of Israel, the Creator of the world. May suggests that the doctrine of creatio *ex nihilo* was bound to emerge clearly as soon as the biblical witness to God began to interact seriously with the philosophical doctrines of the principles of being, and surely this is a point well made.[46] This claim is supported by the fact of the very quick acceptance of the doctrine in the Christian churches: If Theophilus of Antioch

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[44] May (1994), p. 3f.
[45] *ibid*. p. 39f.
[46] *ibid*. p. 150

and Irenaeus of Lyon were the first Christian theologians who unambiguously stated the doctrine in the second half of the second century, the doctrine was already more or less beyond dispute by the beginning of the third, only a few decades later.[47] Once drawn out in full, the Christian churches immediately embraced this understanding of God's creative act.

2.3 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

I shall now try to bring out the internal logic of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, its conceptual architectonics as it were, with a view to how the doctrine of God and the biblical idea of creation are intertwined. This will also help us understand why the doctrine seemed so obvious to the Christian church once it had been fully formulated. Karl Barth schematises creation *ex nihilo* as a logical argument in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*:[48]

1. God created all things (heaven and earth).
2. Did he create out of nothing or out of something?
3. If out of something, was this "stuff" itself created or uncreated?
4. If created, an infinite regress ensues.
5. If uncreated, this would entail an eternal quantity other than God.

The first premise is a simple biblical statement that does not make any commitment on the question of an original *Urstoff*; it is basically Genesis. The second premise posits a mutually exclusive choice between creation *ex nihilo* and creation out of some available material, and the rest of the argument proceeds to draw out the consequences of the latter alternative. The third premise posits another mutually exclusive choice, between assuming this available material was itself created or uncreated. If the former is chosen, conclusion four applies; i.e. it merely takes us back to premise two and we must begin again. If the latter is chosen, that the available material was uncreated, then conclusion five applies and we have to reckon with two eternal "principles" – God and matter. Since this conclusion is incompatible with the orthodox doctrine of God, it is shown how impossible theological consequences follow from assuming that God created everything out of some available material, rather than out of nothing.

Now, I do not want to press this as a logical argument, but it does nicely illustrate the internal logic of the doctrine and the way in which this question is intertwined with the doctrine of God. Again, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is not a

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[47] *ibid.* p. 178f.
[48] Barth, K. (1960), *Church Dogmatics* III.2, T&T Clark, p. 153.

peripheral doctrine but is absolutely central to our understanding of God and the God-world relationship.

That there is a fundamental intellectual relationship between the idea of creation and the idea of God is further brought home if we compare the Judeo-Christian understanding with the prevailing antique pagan understanding. As Sokolowski observes, pagan deities are always thought in a relation of dependence to the world; even if they are seen as the highest and best and freest agents, the idea that they could be what they are in the absence of the world never occurs.[49] The Christian understanding of the God-world relationship is very different. This fundamental difference is brought out by what I, following Sokolowski and Burrell, call the "Christian distinction".[50] Ordinarily when we make distinctions, we have a cognitive grasp of two things which we separate in thought; we separate X from Y in virtue of knowing what X and Y is. In other words, we master the distinction. This sort of thinking works very well when we are dealing with things in the world, things in principle available for our knowledge. However, it looks very different when one of the terms of the distinction is the whole world itself and the other is the world's creator. The distinction must now work very differently: there is no vantage point from where we can master the distinction as a whole, for one of the relata (God) is the condition of the whole world, us and the distinction itself included. While ordinary distinctions presuppose the world as their ultimate horizon, the Christian distinction assumes that the world as distinguished from God can be thought as non-existing (and vice versa, of course). Rather than a necessary brute fact and horizon for all our thinking, the Christian distinction manages to think the radical *contingency* of the world in a wholly new way. Now, if it is thinkable that the world could not have been, it is *ipso facto* possible that God could have been all there was, and that God could have been all that God is without the world. Compared to the pagan understanding, then, the Christian distinction ushers in a new understanding of the world (radical contingency) and a new understanding of God (radical independence). How was it possible to achieve this new distinction in the first place? By drawing out the consequences of the belief that the world is a creation, the result of the free act of a Creator, who, not meeting any need in himself, simply gave the world to be out of sheer generosity. In addition to the Aristotelian sense of wonder in the face of the world, there is added a Judeo-Christian sense of gratitude.[51] The consequences of this understanding are manifold.

The most obvious consequence is perhaps to do with *language*: If human language arises within the matrix of the world and there have its native home, then

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[49] Sokolowski, R. (1995), *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology*, Catholic University of America Press, pp. 12, 18.

[50] *ibid*, chap. 3-5; Burrell, D. (2004), *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective*, Blackwell, chap. 9, 14.

[51] Sokolowski (1995), p. 19

any human talk of God must look very peculiar, since it cannot assume that what language means for us in the world is applicable to the God who is distinct from the world. An awareness of this and a strategy is needed if theological talk is not to misrepresent what it is talking about. An even subtler consequence is that the Christian God cannot simply be thought of as *other* than the world, since that would inscribe God as one term of a masterable distinction: world here and God there, both, as it were, observed from a single vantage point. In this case sameness and otherness are still at work within the ultimate setting that comes naturally for human thinking, that of the being of the world, since in ordinary distinctions each term is defined by not being the other. In other words, the being of the terms are normally interdependent. With the Christian distinction, on the other hand, God's being is not defined by being other, since God would be God just as much even in the absence of the world. Put another way, God would be God even in the absence of the distinction.[52] As well-intentioned as talk about God as wholly Other may be, it always risks positing God as another *object* located somewhere else. (And as we will see, this is the presupposition of Merleau-Ponty's rejection of theology.)

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* seen in the light of the Christian distinction implies that the world in its entirety must be seen as a gift: to be is to be gifted with existence. How is this so? Because, if the world were to be seen as created to meet a need in God, or as some kind of unfolding of God's own being, then the distinction would be violated; a sort of necessity would then step in to bridge the distinction and the contingency of the world would be rejected. In other words, the distinction would disappear and God would be reduced to the highest entity in a hierarchy of Being, conceived of as an object within the matrix of Being.[53] This is why the Plotinian understanding of the One is always a temptation; while subtly gesturing beyond Being, it nonetheless views Being as the necessary outflow of the One, on the model of a conclusion drawn from a set of premises. A gift, on the other hand, implies the freedom of the giver.

A consequence of this way of thinking about the God-world relationship from the vantage point of creation is that the relationship must be understood as one of *non-reciprocal dependence*.[54] This is what Thomas Aquinas means when he talks about a "mixed relation", where the world is said to be *really* related to God, but God only *formally* related to the world.[55] From the point of view of creation *ex nihilo*, then, God must be absolutely independent – the world receives its existence as a gift bestowed freely by the creator, not as the necessary outworking of some lack or need in God. The world, on the other hand, is absolutely dependent on the creator, both for

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[52] *ibid*., p. 33
[53] Cf. with the quote from Merleau-Ponty on p. 10
[54] Desmond (2008), p. 253
[55] *Summa Theologica* I, q.47, a.3, ad.1; see Sokolowski (1995), p. 34; and Cunningham (2007), p. 267.

coming to be in the first place and for continuously being sustained in being. This is something we shall see clearer in Augustine; suffice it to say here that the doctrine of God prohibits us from understanding the way God exists in the same way that other things exist. Everything other than God must be seen as deriving its being from God, and even having come into being the world nonetheless borrows this very being, it does not own it.[56] No second positivity can be erected on a par with God; this would be a rejection of monotheism. The world, in other words, must from the point of view of creation and the doctrine of God be seen as at every instant depending on the very source of its being. We must say with Aquinas: for created beings to be, is to be-towards-the-creator (*esse ad creatorem*).[57]

A final conceptual clarification of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* has to do with the immanent groundlessness yet integrity if the created world. As opposed to the Aristotelian notion of substance as that which subsists in itself, we have seen that creation implies that nothing created subsist in itself, but that everything borrows its being from God, it subsists only by participating in its divine source. Christian thinking properly informed by the doctrine of creation must therefore give up the notion of stable substances in the world, and this is a radical (and oftentimes unappreciated) shift. But here we must be careful to underline that this does not imply that the world is only flux, disorder and construction. The Scylla and Charybdis to be avoided here is a secularized metaphysical realism on the one hand and an extreme constructivist relativism on the other. I shall have more to say about this presently in discussing Augustine, but here we may note that everything in the Christian theology of creation points to a good and ordered world, having in full its own integrity as created. The theological task is to hold these two together: the existential groundlessness and the manifest integrity of creation. With this background of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in place we now turn to Augustine's creational hermeneutic, which deftly weaves together many of the themes of philosophical ontology, theology and the doctrine of creation.

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[56] Cf. Cunningham (2007), p. 261
[57] Burrell (2004), pp. xxf.

3. Augustine's Creational Hermeneutic

3.1. THE THEME OF CREATION

Augustine returned again and again to the biblical narratives of creation and their theological and philosophical consequences; he published theological commentaries on Genesis 1-2 no fewer than five times.[58] Perhaps this is because he came to understand the Christian doctrine of creation as quite literally the *coup de grâce* of the Greek mindset, especially as regards the God-world relationship. The doctrine of creation also bears directly on an issue Augustine had to struggle with all his life to understand and embrace: the unequivocal affirmation of the goodness of embodiment and of matter in general, as explicitly stated in the creation account in Genesis: God saw that it was good. Indeed, it is possible to read Augustine's spiritual and intellectual development in terms of a progressive moving from a Platonically inspired suspicion of the body in the *Cassiciacum Dialogues* to a biblically inspired embrace in the later works.[59] Having said that, however, it is important to recognize that Greek patterns of thought remain in Augustine's thinking of creation, such as the Platonic notion of *participation* and the neo-Platonic doctrine of *return* or *conversio*.[60] But in the subtle mind of Augustine a metamorphosis occurs and the Greek tradition as well as the theological *hexameron*-tradition are thoroughly reworked.

Augustine's "philosophy of creation"[61] can rightly be called a *hermeneutic*, since it is expressed in the context of biblical interpretation, specifically of the first chapters of Genesis. But it is a hermeneutic also in the sense that the theme of creation serves as the horizon against which human life in general and in relation to God in particular is interpreted. Perhaps it is not hyperbolic to say that creation was the very matrix of Augustine's thinking, a point that is further substantiated by Marie-Anne Vannier's thesis that for Augustine creation is intertwined with salvation.[62] In

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[58] *De Genesis contra Manichaeos* (388/389); *De Genesis ad litteram liber unus imperfectus* (393-395); *Confessiones*, books 11-13 (397-401); *De Genesi ad litteram* (401-416); *De civitate Dei*, book 11 (c. 416). The three explicit commentaries are found in Rotelle, J., ed. (2002), *On Genesis*, New City Press.

[59] This development is of course tainted by the late Augustine's negative views on sexuality. His aversion was, however, not so much on account of the embodied nature of sexuality as of its manifest irrationality. The problem is not with the body, but with too narrow a conception of reason. See *De Trin.* 13.23; Miles, M. (1979), *Augustine on the Body*, American Academy of Religion Dissertation Series, p. 76.

[60] O'Toole, C. (1944), *The Philosophy of Creation in the Writings of Saint Augustine*, The Catholic University of America Press., p. 106.

[61] *ibid.*

[62] Vannier, M-A. (1991), p. xxv; cf. Smith, J. (2000), *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, Intervarsity Press, pp. 26, 133-148; Hart, D. (2003), *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, Eerdmans, p. 254.

what follows I shall assume this point of view and regard Augustine's creational hermeneutic as an attempt to say something about the most fundamental conditions of the being of the world and humanity, such that it can be brought into dialogue with the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. In other words, I shall regard the theme of creation as an ontological outworking of Augustine's theological thinking – *fides quaerens intellectum*.[63]

A brief outline of Augustine's interpretation of the genesis narratives is in order, from which we will later extrapolate the ontological implications. The first thing to note is Augustine's full acceptance of creation *ex nihilo*: he reads the first verse of Gen 1 as saying that there was no primordially existing matter out of which God formed the world. However, to the *nihil* in question Augustine significantly adds that everything that comes into existence from it, must have had a sort of previous existence in the mind of God, in the divine ideas that served as the archetypes of things which were to come into being in their own right by God's creative act. But as Barth reminds us, this does not mitigate the force of the *ex nihilo*, since Augustine firmly believes that before creation there is no reality distinct from God; it does however give a very particular Platonic twist to the story.[64]

Second, when God creates everything and gives it existence, Augustine understands this according to a twofold pattern. God creates unformed matter (*materia informis*) logically prior to creating the forms by which the world appears as a cosmos from out of a chaos. This lets Augustine interpret Gen 1:2 ("the earth was *tohû wabohû* and darkness was over the surface of the deep") as unformed matter, and the six days creation of Gen 1:3-31 as the formation of this chaotic mass into the world. As well as being a congenial interpretation of the biblical text it also manages to find room for the Greek and Near Eastern traditions of a dark and chaotic deep from which the world was made. Only this time, chaos is itself the creature of God.[65] It also has affinities with the Aristotelian hylomorphic scheme, though in contrast to Aristotle, Augustine does not think of unformed matter as pure potentiality. The creation of matter and form Augustine sees as simultaneous and only logically or causally separable; the six days of formation is therefore taken to be repetitions of the same event bringing out its different aspects. All of this cannot be said to happen in time as we know it, but must rather be seen as occurring "in the roots of time".[66]

Third, the formation of primal matter that results in the ordered world is however not finished in the sense that it is a static whole were everything is determinate and fixed. Augustine believes that part of God's creative formation is putting into the earth the so called seminal reasons (*rationes seminales*). These are seeds which in the course of time and in the right circumstances are going to evolve into

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[63] Cf. Vannier (1991), p. xxv
[64] Barth (1960), p. 154
[65] *Pace* Keller, C. (2003), *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, Routledge, p. 16.
[66] *De Gen ad litt*. 5.11

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new things and species, such as vegetation, animals and human bodies.[67] If the creation of matter and form takes place in the roots of time, the unfolding of the seminal reasons is a temporal process guided by the providence of God. While Gen 1:1-31 is about the simultaneous creation in the roots of time, Augustine sees Gen 2:6-25 as the unfolding of creation in time from the seminal reasons having been created from the beginning. Formation, then, is both instantaneous and developing.[68]

Finally, one of the most original and interesting features in Augustine's account of creation is the way he envisages the formation of things from formless matter according to the scheme: (*re*)*vocatio, conversio, formatio*.[69] Things become themselves, what they are meant to be, by *responding* and turning to God who *calls* them (back) to himself. To the degree that they turn to God they are illumined by him and receive their *form*. So, creation for Augustine is richer than just coming to be *ex nihilo*; it involves the creator and the creature in an ongoing relationship of grace, which for human beings has as its goal nothing less than God-likeness. This is a continuous process that admits of degrees, such that it makes sense to speak about formation as something that is happening, rather than as something that has happened once and for all, Creation is both completed in the "roots of time" and awaiting its completion when that which was "folded into the universe" finally unfolds.[70]

I shall now proceed to draw out and discuss some of the ontological consequences of Augustine's understanding of creation.

3.2. GOD, BEING AND NOTHING

Augustine is sometimes criticized for failing to properly distinguish God from the world in positing God as the highest being, or as *idipsum*, thus inscribing himself within the Western tradition of ontotheology.[71] The Pseudo-Dionysius is then invoked as the one who overcomes ontotheology by insisting with neo-Platonism that God must be beyond being. In my opinion this is mistaken since it operates with too literalistic an understanding of the terms: pace Heidegger, it is not enough to find the word "being" connected somehow to God to justify an accusation of ontotheology.[72] What is important is how the words are used and their intention. In the case of Augustine it is clear that he preserves the Christian distinction between the Creator and the world: "For every substance that is not God is a creature, and that is not a

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[67] *De Gen ad litt.* 6.4-5
[68] *De Gen ad litt.* 5.7
[69] *De Gen ad litt.* 1.9
[70] *De Gen ad litt.* 5.20. Human being has the dubious privilege of being the only creature which is of both these orders, as both body and soul. This is a peculiar problem which we will get back to in the following sections.
[71] Marion, J.-L. (1991), *God Without Being Hors-Texte*, The University of Chicago Press, p. 73, 215, note 50.
[72] Marion, J.-L. (2001) *De surcroît: études sur les phénomènes saturés*, Presses Universitaires de France, p. 175.

creature is God."[73] In fact, Augustine holds that properly speaking only God really *is*; God is not so much beyond being as we are below it, created things do not quite attain to being. "He is called being truly and properly in such a way that perhaps only God ought to be called being. He alone truly is…"[74] Being for Augustine is therefore not a univocal concept and he consequently avoids the accusation of ontotheology.

This raises the question of the being of the created world – in what way does the world exist? The straightforward answer is that it exists as created and thus does not subsist in itself. The world exists because God creates it and continuously holds it in existence. Augustine's word for this divine activity is *gubernare*, and it specifies the continuous creative act of God as the condition of the world: "God is working until now in such a way that if his working were to be withheld from the things he has set up, they would simply collapse."[75] The initiative here is always God's: God creates and holds in existence out of his love for creation: "There are two things, in fact, on account of which God loves his creation: in order that it should be, and in order that it should abide."[76] So the world, in a sense, lives between the God who alone really *is*, and the nothing from out of which the world was lovingly drawn and called into being. This is a fragile existence between being and nothingness, in which creatures are sustained by God's grace – that is to say, illuminated – as they turn back to God as to their beginning and end.

Now we must also ask what this nothing "is" which threatens creaturely existence. Here we can distinguish between *absolute non-being* and *relative non-being*. The former refers to the *nihil* which is merely the absence of any existence whatsoever; it is that from which the world was created in the absolute beginning in God's creative act. Hence to call it no*thing* is strictly speaking a misnomer. The second "nothing" refers to the unformed matter Augustine sees as created in Gen 1:2, and from which the cosmos arises through the formation of God. It is not yet something determinate and in that sense real, but rather something hovering "midway between form and nothingness."[77] As such Augustine understands it as invisible, as only intelligible things, things having some form or other, are visible. For him, to really *be* is always to be something, in other words, to be formed in a particular way, which means that formlessness is understood as a sort of nothingness; to lose one's form would mean to no longer be. Therefore, the nothing that (primarily) threatens creatures would be to lapse into the unformed state of primal formless matter.

As Barth reminds us, this is where creation *ex nihilo* finds its existential and experiential thrust.[78] For as human beings we are only too aware of the nothing from

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[73] *De Trin.* 1.9
[74] *De Trin.* 7.10; cf. *Conf.* 11.4; O'Toole (1944), p. 105
[75] *De Gen ad litt.* 5.40
[76] *De Gen ad litt.* 1.7
[77] *Conf.* 12.6
[78] Barth (1960), p. 154f.

which we come and the nothing for which we are bound. Augustine observes that our being is a being toward death, yet in the midst of this predicament he sees the greatness of human being: "So great is the faculty of memory, so great the power of life in a person whose life is tending toward death."[79] While all created things live in the shadow of nothingness, Augustine believes that human beings have a very peculiar place, since they alone can properly be said to be created in the image of God. This means that human beings have more to gain and more to lose in the process of becoming and de-becoming than other created things. It is at this specific point we may locate the phenomenon of human being as something which at a certain moment emerges as the image of God, and thus as what it is supposed to be. The phenomenon returns to its beginning in God. Or to put it differently, continuous formation results in the actualisation of the image of God in human beings, such that the image must be seen as something dynamic rather than static. Provocatively, we could say that the image *becomes* in the process of formation. Furthermore, the image of God in humankind is its most fundamental ontological determinant, which, as we saw in chapter two, would put into question the appropriateness of stable essences in a Christian anthropology.[80]

However, here Augustine's texts seem to be somewhat at odds with one another, affording us the opportunity to at least indicate where a deconstructive reading is needed, reading Augustine against himself.[81] For Augustine views the human soul as created complete, while the human body unfolds from the rational seeds; the two are then joined together at a specific point in time.[82] This is a strategy to remove what is essential to human being from the process of becoming and it is in obvious tension with the overarching scheme of formation through a continuous act of *conversio*, which we would naturally read as involving the whole human being, including the soul. The static is here poised against the dynamic and human beings have the dubious privilege of belonging to both these orders. The reasons for Augustine's reluctance to admit a *becoming* of the human soul as well as body are no doubt complex, but it seems to me that nothing in his overall theology of creation necessarily implies such a move. Perhaps, then, we can remain true to Augustine's best insights even if inspired by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the embodied subject we reject his static view of the soul and insist that soul and body are inescapably

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[79] *Conf.* 10.17
[80] See Vannier (1991), pp. 74-82. To do justice to this topic one would have to discuss the classical distinction between image and likeness, as developed by Gregory of Nyssa, but this is not the place for that. Suffice it to say that I do not believe the distinction is able to do full justice to Augustine's idea of the image as ontologically determinative as well as in some sense *in via*. If this is correct the consequences for the development of a "Christian humanism" would be potentially far-reaching.
[81] Cf. Smith (2000), p. 135f.
[82] *De Gen ad litt.* 7.35, 43

intertwined. The best way to keep Augustine's creational hermeneutic may be to reject his dualistic anthropology.

To summarize: Augustine views God as the only one who really is, and formlessness as a sort of nothing. The world and human beings inhabit the space between and can be said to be to the degree that they turn toward God, the gracious giver of their existence, or not to be to the degree that they turn away from this source. In view of this essentially dynamic ontology, which privileges the movement of becoming or de-becoming of created beings, Augustine's static understanding of the soul must be problematized.

3.3. THE GROUNDLESSNESS AND INTEGRITY OF CREATION

While Augustine exploits to the limit the notion of creation's dependence on the creator, some would worry that he does not manage to account for the integrity of creation in its own right and as distinct from God, complete with secondary causality and so on. Let us see if there is a way to hold these two poles together.

That the world rests upon a dark abyss seems to follow from the first creation account in Genesis; this is what in relation to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy I have called the darkness of ontology. It also follows, of course, from the explicit doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*: the world rests on no substrate, it has no sure ground or foundation, it emerges out of nothing. Faced with this scenario some would say that God must be the sure foundation of the world: Barth calls the divine ideas of the world the "objective foundation of things"[83] But this must be severely qualified. In one sense it is obviously true that if God created the world after the archetypes of his own ideas, then they have an impeccable foundation, but two considerations considerably mitigate the usefulness of this move. First, the Augustinian scheme posits no strict necessity between divine ideas and created things; rather, there is a "hidden inspiration"[84] to which creatures must respond and turn back for this analogical correspondence to be effected. This is especially true of human beings, since their *conversio* is a result of their freedom, but also in some sense for other created beings. We are dealing here with a hidden ontological dimension, never clearly explicated by Augustine, and as far as I can see, the possibility of nothingness always remains a live option for him. Second, when philosophy routinely speaks of foundations, it has in mind something that must be unequivocally within our reach as human beings, since the task of the foundation is to secure us in being. This is why the supposed foundation must be found within being as a whole, which is all we have access to, it is the horizon of our thinking. And this strategy is precisely what we have come to know as ontotheology. For Augustine, on the other hand, if God is the

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[83] Barth (1960), p. 154
[84] *De Gen ad litt*. 1.5

foundation of our being we can never secure this epistemologically or otherwise; it will be a matter for faith not mastery:

> "Nor, on the other hand, could we pass from being among the things that originated to eternal things, unless the eternal allied himself to us in our originated condition, and so provided us with a bridge to his eternity… As it is, our *faith* has now in some sense followed him in whom we have believed…"[85]

It should be obvious that this sort of foundation is not the desire of philosophy and certainly not the aspiration of ontotheology; this is rather an ontology of grace, in which nothing can be owned that has not been given.

Thus the ungroundedness of creation bespeaks primarily *our own failure* to secure ourselves in the face of nothingness, which is the existential condition of humankind. Nowhere is this more evident, for Augustine, than in relation to time. Since all of creation is in time, time will be a basic condition of creation.[86] But time never really *is*, its being is balancing on the point of a needle, and its draws all of creation with it into the predicament of constant change.

> If, therefore, the present's only claim to be called "time" is that it is slipping away into the past, how can we assert that this thing is, when its only title to being is that it will soon cease to be? In other words, we cannot really say that time exists, except because it tends to non-being.[87]

Time, as a creature of God, shares this with the world and human beings in it: its being tends to nothing. But if the being of the world as temporal is so radically ungrounded what are we to make of the integrity of creation? Will the world not be seen as a mere flux of appearances? The first and obvious answer from the perspective of creation *ex nihilo* is that the integrity of creation will depend on the integrity of the creator. Again, the doctrine of God is inseparable from the doctrine of creation, and in so far as Augustine's philosophy of creation is a hermeneutic of the Genesis-narratives he has strong reasons not to veer toward anti-realism, which he does not: "…far be it from us to doubt the truth of things we have learnt through the senses of the body."[88] For us, however, being in the cultural matrix we are in, care must be taken lest the desire for integrity masks a desire for manipulable Cartesian *res extensa* severed from their being-toward-the-creator, and thus for an autonomy that

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[85] *De Trin.* 4.24 (my emphasis); cf. 13.24, 14.3
[86] Vannier (1991), p. 138
[87] *Conf.* 11.14
[88] *De Trin.* 15.21

cannot be had within a creational hermeneutic. If the world is real, for Augustine, this is not because we have a firm grasp of its being and its substances; it is because the world discloses a depth of being that does not rest in itself and it is because the beauty of its forms cries out for the recognition in faith that they were made.[89] Furthermore, that the world is meaningful and coherent is given already in that it is visible; for Augustine primal unformed matter on the other hand is invisible; visibility, as we have seen, is conditioned upon a degree of formation.[90] The fact that the world is there to be perceived means that it has a degree of formation and coherence, and again, this is because of grace – God calls and enables the creature to turn its creator, which process gives it form and thus integrity as an existing being. This can rightly be called an ontology of grace.

Against the background of these fundamental ontological notions, it is possible to point to other aspects of Augustine's thinking that clearly evince his sense that the created world has integrity, coherence and meaning, and in view of his radical notion of creaturely dependence it is perhaps well to be reminded of this. Consider his development of the analogy of the created cosmos and the harmony of music: what has more integrity and coherence than a harmonious composition?[91] Or consider his thoroughgoing reading of creation in semiotic terms: if things in the world can be read as signs pointing beyond themselves this is precisely because they are meaningful.[92]

3.4 *RATIONES SEMINALES:* THE COMING TO BE OF BECOMING

It is a disputed issue where Augustine found the idea of the rational seeds; whether in Plotinus' λογοί γεννητικοί or in the Stoics' λογοί σπερματικοί; or indeed closer to hand, as these notions were developed by Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa.[93] Augustine primarily uses the notion of rational seeds to interpret what could be seen as two conflicting stories of creation in Genesis; he is convinced that the first account describes a simultaneous coming into being of all things, while the second account describes a gradual becoming in time. The rational seeds allows him to say that the work of the six days were actually completed and that God rested on the seventh day, while at the same time affirming that God works providentially "until now" in bringing forward things hidden and undeveloped in the first creation.

> "…things were being made over intervals of time, after that first establishment of creatures in which all things were made simultaneously… All the primordial seeds…have within them the most

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[89] *Conf.* 10.9
[90] Cf. *De Gen ad litt.* 1.27
[91] See Catherine Pickstock's argument in "Soul, City and Cosmos After Augustine", in Milbank, J. et al., eds. (1999), *Radical Orthodoxy*, Routledge, p. 247.
[92] *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.4; *Conf.* 10.8
[93] O'Toole (1944), p. 71f.

efficacious numbers, which bring along with them potentialities
consequent upon those perfect works of God, from which he rested on
the seventh day.”[94]

What is so fascinating about the rational seeds is that they make it possible for Augustine to affirm both that everything came into being by one creative act of God, a complete transition from non-existence to existence, and at the same time to affirm that the world was created in potentiality, so as to become what it is to become through a process of development over time. Thus the choice that some try to force upon us between, on the one hand, accepting creation *ex nihilo* and with it a static view of reality as so many stable substances, and on the other, denying creation *ex nihilo* so as to make room for the process of becoming we observe in the world around us and in ourselves – this choice is unnecessary. We have already seen how a creational hermeneutic is in tension with an ontology that trades in stable and self-subsisting substances, and now it becomes even clearer how Augustine's creational hermeneutic not only allows but implies a process of becoming for the world.

> So then, the unchangeable formulae for all creatures in the Word of
> God is one thing, another those works of his from which he rested on
> the seventh day, yet another these which carrying on from those he is
> working on until now; and of these three it is the one I put last that is
> known to us somehow or other through the senses of the body and our
> familiarity with this life.[95]

Interestingly, Augustine holds that it is the processes of becoming that are known to us "through the senses of the body and our familiarity with this life", which nicely ties in with the phenomenological notion of a "life-world" as a horizon for our embodied existence. It seems, then, that what is available to be thematized by a positive phenomenology would be more or less the same for Augustine and Merleau-Ponty: the dynamic becoming of the world of perception. All else will be theology, ontology, hermeneutics, metaphysical speculation, invocation.

Now if we add to this picture of becoming the scheme of *(re)vocatio*, *conversio* and *formatio*, it is clear that just as the simultaneous coming into being of everything is a gift from God and hence grace, so also the becoming of everything is tied up with grace in that God calls things to himself and they respond and so become gradually formed to their own likeness (and in the case of human beings, to the likeness of God). Augustine's ontology is at every turn an ontology of grace.[96]

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[94] *De Gen ad litt.* 5.20
[95] *De Gen ad litt.* 5.12
[96] Vannier (1991), p. 17; *Conf.* 13.5

As we have seen, Augustine's use of the rational seeds is, however, limited; he does not see becoming as a universal phenomenon and the most obvious example of this is the case of the human soul, which he cannot bring himself to believe to be created in seminal form, though he confesses uncertainty at this point.[97] The human body is one thing, but in the end he refuses to let the soul be drawn into the process of becoming, since he believes that the soul is what was called the image of God on the sixth day and as such must be assumed to have been made perfect and complete.[98] As I have indicated, I believe the Augustinian theory of becoming from rational seeds could be extended to include the soul itself. Had Aristotelian hylomorphism not been so misunderstood by Augustine and many of his contemporaries it might have furnished them with a more radical notion of becoming, even of the soul. Be that as it may, in the interest of furthering a rapprochement between Augustine and contemporary philosophy and science I believe that starting from his impetus we are justified in going beyond his conclusions. In the dialogue with Merleau-Ponty we will see that if the becoming of the embodied subject as such is allowed, then the becoming of the perceived world follows in its wake, since the embodied subject and the world are inescapably related. This would mean a radical extension of the Augustinian insight into the *coming to be* of *becoming*.

The important thing to draw from Augustine's theory of rational seeds is that we can affirm with the Christian tradition the creation of the whole of being *ex nihilo* without understanding this to be a static being – God in his wisdom lets becoming come into being, and Augustine's creational hermeneutic is a sophisticated attempt to elucidate this.

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[97] *De Gen ad litt*. 7.29
[98] *De Gen ad litt*. 7.24

4. Conclusion:

Notes for a Discussion between Augustine and Merleau-Ponty

If my reading of Merleau-Ponty and Augustine is essentially correct we are now in a position to appreciate the possibilities for a mutually critical dialogue between these thinkers and to try to advance a rapprochement between Augustine's creational hermeneutic and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. As far as I know this has not yet been attempted; nor has anyone known to me brought the theology of creation to bear on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy with all its questions of the origins of the world. Within the limits of this essay, I offer the following reflections not so much as an attempt to carry out this critical dialogue, but rather as notes for a discussion still to come.

4.1 METHOD AND THE RETURN TO ORIGINS

Starting with questions of method, Augustine and Merleau-Ponty have surprisingly much in common. Both thinkers show an extraordinary attentiveness to the phenomenological dimension of human existence.[99] As a case in point we may refer to Augustine's description of the unity of sense perception in *De Trinitate*, where he observes that the unity between the subject and the object, united as they are by the will or intention of the subject, is so complete as to defy even the judgements and distinctions of reason: "While the substances of these differ so widely, they nonetheless come together in so close a unity that the first two can scarcely be told apart even when reason intervenes as a judge."[100] It seems to me that here Augustine's attention to the phenomenological dimension gets the better of his (skewed) ontology of human being in quite a remarkable way. A very similar description is found in Merleau-Ponty when he talks about sense perception as an intimate communion: "It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand."[101] In the same way, Augustine's descriptions of memory, temporality, grief, and so on are all authentically first person accounts, which singles him out among the ancients as particularly well prepared to enter into dialogue with phenomenology. This also furnishes us with the means to perform a necessary deconstruction, to read Augustine

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[99] See Vannier (1991), p. 134, on Augustine as precursor to the modern philosophies of subjectivity.
[100] *De Trin.* 11.5
[101] Merleau-Ponty (1968), p. 130f.

against himself, his "phenomenological" descriptions against his anthropological dualism.

A second methodological point in common has to do with the regressive method both thinkers employ. *Memoria*, as Augustine uses it in *Confessions* is a turning inward and working back through the layers of experience; it is a recalling of the world, of oneself and one's actions, one's temporality, one's affections and fantasies. This opens up to "enormous wonder" and the mystery of the self:

> "...who can fathom this matter, who understand how the mind works? ...what can be nearer to me than I am to myself? Yet here I am unable to comprehend the nature of my memory, when I cannot even speak of myself without it."[102]

The unsoundable depth of the mind means that no ground or foundation can ever be reached – the mind opens up beyond itself in search of its origins. This tortuous search is the background of books 12-13 of the *Confessions* in which Augustine relates the story of origins as they are accessible to Christian faith; human reason cannot simply think its way back to its createdness, but in the regressive strategy of remembrance reason finds itself ready to receive the grace of revelation, through which it will remember even its creator, the creator of everything that is out of nothing: "...for before ever I was, you were; I did not even exist to receive your gift of being."[103] Such is the regressive strategy of *memoria* in Augustine.

Merleau-Ponty's direction is very similar, though obviously with a different conclusion. The burden of his phenomenology is to move from the thinking Cogito to the silent cogito, i.e. from the now present meaningful subject and world to their primordial origin. This quest takes him far into ontology and to the articulation of the notion of the flesh as the unity (the element) of body and world. He turns inward to account for the first person experience of the world, and the first thing he discovers is that the subject does not subsist in itself but is subtended by the deeper reality of the silent self, the body-subject, which in turn, by a process of interpretation, is seen to originate from the still deeper reality of the flesh. The absence of a masterable ground thus unites the thinking of Augustine and Merleau-Ponty, but in the midst of thinking through the consequences of this Merleau-Ponty's life was cut short. In the same way that Augustine was constrained by metaphysical assumptions, however, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the flesh was constrained by his immanent holism. Not having recourse to the Christian distinction between creator and creation, he could not interpret the flesh as having come into being, rather he saw it as Being itself. In thinking about origins, Augustine and Merleau-Ponty both remember, but Augustine

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[102] *Conf.* 10.24-25
[103] *ibid.* 13.1

remembers further back and existentially deeper: whereas Merleau-Ponty remembers that we are flesh, not a small achievement in itself, Augustine remembers that we are created and that love holds us in being. This is of course a memory of grace; indeed, a graced memory.

4.2 CREATION AND BECOMING OUT OF NOTHING

Another point of convergence between Augustine and Merleau-Ponty is their emphasis on becoming. For Augustine this comes out of his interpretation of the creation-narrative in Genesis and receives its most precise formulations in the theory of the seminal reasons and in the scheme of (*re*)*vocatio*, *conversio*, *formatio*. This dynamic of becoming is meant to be responsive to the text of scripture as well as to human experience of change, and not least to the existentially precarious place of human beings as tending to nothingness save by the grace of God. That there is this dynamism in becoming is made clear in Augustine's understanding of becoming as involving both a providential teleology, a continuous development of the created world, and an element of creaturely freedom and response in the *conversio*. In a very surprising and unusual way his interpretation thus manages to address itself both to the reason why there should be a teleological becoming of the world at all, and the reasons why this is a continuously unfolding process in which creation itself has a part to play. Becoming for Augustine is therefore neither arbitrary nor deterministic; it is a process recognizable in real human experience.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of becoming initially follows from his phenomenological analyses and from their ontological interpretation. In comparison with Augustine he has much more to say about the processes of becoming and his theorizing is backed up by very careful analyses of lived human experiences, which lends him credibility and a certain explanatory power, making his thinking well suited to enter into dialogue with the wider sphere of contemporary cognitive science. However, as we have seen, it is questionable whether his account of the teleology of human being is coherent on its own terms, as there is no reason for the fission in the flesh which inaugurates the meaningful becoming of the world. While I agree that the notion of one flesh grounding the intertwining of body and world is helpful to understand its possibility, this still does not address the why-question of the world's continuous becoming and the evolution of its meaning. Even as he rightly shies away from all traces of determinism in the process of becoming, Merleau-Ponty ends up rejecting the very condition of its increasing intelligibility.

It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's inability to coherently think becoming has to do with his refusal of divine transcendence, which alone opens up the world beyond itself. For contrary to his own intentions Merleau-Ponty is always open to the charge that his thinking terminates in a more or less accessible ground, made harder to recognize by calling it flesh. Since the flesh which generates becoming is not itself seen as having come into being, it can easily be understood as self-subsisting Being,

the final and fixed ground of the becoming of the world. Augustine's conception of all created being as opening up beyond itself toward the creator is a more radically anti-foundationalist move, even as it safeguards the coherence of the teleology of becoming. On this way of thinking, even the flesh must be seen as immanently groundless; it *is* only by the free grace of its creator, an origin that is transcendent, ungraspable and therefore not in any way masterable. Strangely, Augustine's origin is thus more inaccessible as well as more relational, which is what I have tried to indicate by calling it an ontology of grace.

However, nothing constrains us from reworking the Augustinian anthropology, where the soul is exempt from the process of becoming. Augustine himself is hesitant here and nothing in his wider thinking necessitates his move, which is ostensively motivated by Augustine's exegetical concerns, but which might better be explained by a lingering late antique suspicion of embodiment. From a theological perspective, the fundamental distinction is between created and uncreated, not between putatively material or immaterial things, and this is something Augustine recognizes. Here we can learn from Merleau-Ponty about the absolute centrality of the body-subject and its intimate communion with the perceived world as the *phenomenological* basis for the upshot of a meaningful world: we would understand human embodiment as a necessary condition of the world as we know it, and we would understand the fundamental unity of the world as immanently being made possible by something like a primordial flesh of being. In this endeavour we would benefit from the analyses of Merleau-Ponty and others on human embodiment and thus be able to extend our conversation beyond phenomenology and theology to include the wider sphere of the arts and sciences. If in this way we affirm a more holistic understanding of human being and view human being itself as part of the process of becoming we shall be in a position to understand both our existential groundlessness as created beings and the integrity of creation in virtue of its primordial unity.

4.3 PRIMORDIAL POTENTIAL: FLESH AND FORMLESSNESS

The incentive to develop Augustine along these lines is given already in the continuity between his notion of unformed matter and Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh. For Augustine, unformed matter is a creation of God and so is not absolute non-being, but nor is it a determinate being. Such unformed matter is invisible, for we cannot perceive that which is without any specific form whatsoever; Augustine realizes that it must lie somewhere "midway between form and nothingness." Striving to articulate this idea he characterizes unformed matter as "a nothing-something" or "an is-that-is-not".[104] Clearly then, subtending the world as we know it in lived meaningful experience is this ambiguously existing quasi-being that can be characterized as

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[104] *Conf.* 12.6

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invisible. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, describes the flesh in strikingly similar terms: "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it we would need the old term "element"…in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea…"[105] The key here is in the *between*: the flesh/unformed matter exists neither as an ideality, nor as an intelligible individual, nor as pure nothingness; rather, it is that which exists between our known categories, that which makes them possible and unifies them as the primordial ground from which they arise. In both Augustine and Merleau-Ponty, in other words, there is a holism, a unity, a belonging-together of all things that attaches to the notion of unformed matter/flesh, something that in the nature of the case can only be obliquely indicated and never explicitly thematized. (To demonstrate what it *really* is would require making it determinate and it would thus cease to be what it is, namely indeterminate.) That Augustine can ascribe to such an understanding of primordial potential strengthens my claim that we can indeed affirm the unity of all things, the integrity of creation and the emphasis on becoming without thereby rejecting the need for all this to somehow come into being, to be created. We must distinguish between *becoming* and *coming to be*, and, as I have argued, the sort of becoming we experience is made coherent on the assumption that it once came into being through the act of a transcendent creator. It is worth pointing out again that this sort of understanding and reading of the texts cuts against the grain both of Merleau-Ponty's misguided immanentism and Augustine's lingering dualism.

4.4 THEOLOGY, TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

Can the notion of a radically transcendent creator, as implied by the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, be held together with a Merleau-Pontian theory of embodiment, or is such transcendence too foreign to his thinking? It is a fact that all his life Merleau-Ponty was interested in the notion of transcendence and the question of the relation between God and the world; Madison goes so far as to say that this interest reveals the "essence" of his philosophy.[106] (This is remarkable for a philosopher often hailed as one of the great atheist existentialists.) However, Merleau-Ponty seems to have thought that an affirmation of the transcendence of God as creator of the world would lead to a conception of the world as static and to a devaluation of human freedom and existence, presumably because modernity had tended to portray God as guarantor of the world order, of essences and substances and so forth.[107] (Descartes' theological foundationalism would be an illustration of this tendency.) Therefore the only God Merleau-Ponty could accept would be an immanent God, a God who unfolds with the unfolding of the world: "There is a sort of impotence of God

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[105] Merleau-Ponty (1968), p 139
[106] Madison (1981), p. 236
[107] Hence my remarks on p. 10.

without us."[108] This looks very much like the God of process philosophy, or the God of classical panentheism, whose relation to the world is like that of a soul to its body.[109] We could say that what Merleau-Ponty thinks he rejects in divine transcendence is a divinity that could only be affirmed at the expense of the world, and what he wants to affirm is a divinity or mysterious power that sustains and validates the world by being immanent in it.

However, as I have already indicated, these unwanted consequences were never entailed by the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and certainly not by Augustine's creational hermeneutic, and the reason for this is to be found in the inner logic of the Christian distinction. Let us look first of all at the worry that the transcendence of the creator somehow threatens the integrity of the world and makes it into a kind of prop. Even though this might have followed from some Deistic appropriations of creation, it should be clear by now that Augustine's account escapes these charges. This follows from his emphasis on becoming, that there is a teleological development of the world; the world is not seen as a static whole and there is a consequent suspicion about self-subsistent entities. Added to this is the scheme of *(re)vocatio, conversio, formatio*, which invites human beings to partake, in a sense, of creation by the use of their freedom, making possible response, reciprocity and relation. Indeed, the graceful calling that goes out to human beings, and to which they may freely respond, is to develop into the likeness of the image of God – this hardly qualifies as a devaluation of human existence.

Let us look next at the desire to have God immanently present in the world, rather than coldly observing it. This is of course something to affirm, especially from the point of view of incarnational theology. But again we see that even though some Deistic conceptions might have given cause to worry, the Christian doctrine of creation implies, rather than denies, the reality of the immanent presence of God. For as we have seen, the groundlessness of the world, its precarious existence between determinate being and formless nothing, means that it must at every instance be sustained by the presence and power of God. *Participation* is the word for this: the world does not subsist in itself, it exists by participating in the divine being. No one is clearer than Augustine about the existential import of this: it means that "God is nearer to me than I am to myself"[110], more immanent than anything else. But this is also where we must go further and venture a critique of immanent holism and its divinity. For if real transcendence is denied at the expense of immanence, what concept of God would follow? Everything that happens in the course of the world would have to be seen as somehow an unfolding of Godself, even the most horrendous evil, and the immanent comfort that was sought in rejecting

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[108] Quoted in Madison (1981), p. 235.
[109] Cf. Cooper, J. (2007), *Panentheism, the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present*, Baker Academic, p. 32f.
[110] *Conf.* 3.11

transcendence will be deprived of its power to heal and restore, its resources being only those of the world itself. Further, while a coherent notion of becoming could still be held, the question of the coming to be of the whole will be unanswerable, and the whole will consequently be seen as somehow eternal. Creation *ex nihilo*, along with the Christian distinction will be rejected. The teleological becoming will, in turn, have to be thought as a dialectical process from some primordial negation or tension within the whole. But, to repeat, is it not the case that *becoming* is more readily understood within a creational hermeneutic, as having itself *come to be*?

Augustine believes our desire for fellowship with God is original and itself God-given: "…you have made us…and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."[111] For Augustine, then, there is indeed divine immanence, but contrary to immanent holism he sees it as conditioned upon the transcendence of the creator. Immanence and transcendence are not in competition, but the possibility of the former flows from the latter. How is this so? Again, it has to do with the groundlessness of created being. If the essence, the being, the most intimate thing about human beings is that they *are* by being related to God as creatures to their creator, if the very existence of humankind is to be continuously and at every instant created and sustained by God, then nothing is more intimate and immanent to them than God. And this is so because God created them. In other words, there can be genuine transcendence in immanence only because there is real transcendence. This is the internal logic of the Christian distinction, and this is how Augustine understands God to be not only *interior intimo meo*, but also *superior summo meo*.[112]

4.5 TOWARD AN EMBODIED CREATIONAL HERMENEUTIC

It is hoped that the critique of Augustine's anthropological dualism and Merleau-Ponty's immanent holism, and the emphasis on the intertwining of becoming, embodiment and grace may help usher in a new creational hermeneutic. Following alongside Augustine and Merleau-Ponty, learning to think after them but also taking their intellectual projects further in response to our own situation and understanding, will be a constructive task of thinking. What I would like to develop, but can here only indicate, is an ontology of grace that takes the becoming of phenomena seriously. This would include different kinds of phenomena, even the phenomenon of human being itself, which makes it existentially relevant rather than of merely theoretical concern. I now conclude this thesis with a brief sketch of the developing lines of such a project at the intersection of theology and philosophy.

The starting point would be to see the whole world as gift, given in the gracious creative act of God, the transcendent creator. As such the world comes to be *ex nihilo*. From this two major consequences follow: First, the world can no longer be

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[111] *Conf.* 1.1
[112] *Conf.* 3.11

seen as subsisting in itself, which means we must rework our notions of stability, essence, substance and so on. All these things will be seen more like the relatively stable notes in a flowing piece of music.[113] Instead of a substantialist or essentialist ontology our ontology would be properly creational, and this would in turn drastically change the framing of some philosophically complex issues, such as the relation between body and soul. Second, since all things come from the same creator and the most fundamental thing we can say about anything, that it is created, is something generally shared, the primordial unity of all things would naturally follow. All created things are in a sense of the same fabric, a belonging-together that could be thematized under notions such as flesh or unformed matter. So, beginning from creation *ex nihilo* gives us an understanding of the immanent groundlessness of all things, which paradoxically turn out to be indicative of their unity.

From this primordial unity an intelligible world develops. This development or becoming is closely tied up with embodiment, since it is as embodied subjects that human beings are intertwined with the perceived world. The ontological unity of the world can here be corroborated by phenomenological analyses of embodiment and a consonance between ontology and phenomenology attempted. The upshot of this intertwining development is phenomenal reality, no longer seen as a shadow-reality hiding a deeper noumenal reality, but as the real created world itself.

The emphasis on embodiment in the process of becoming is twofold. On the one hand it is as embodied subjects that human beings develop and find themselves always already in a meaningful world; it is also as embodied subjects that they are created in the image of God, which places the accent on the relational and dynamic rather than the static. Thus when through a process of conversion and formation the phenomenon of human being appears in time, it appears precisely as an image mirroring the creator. On the other hand, however, human embodiment must be seen as mediating the world itself, along the lines suggested by Merleau-Ponty. This means that the world's becoming is directly related to the becoming of embodied subjects; they are, as it were, the warp and woof of the same piece of cloth, such that the world becomes for human beings, and human beings for the world. Embodiment thus lets us understand something of the immanent processes of becoming, processes that have themselves been called into being.

Thus an incredibly dynamic scheme unfolds, in which the becoming of phenomena is unequivocally affirmed and explicitly connected to human embodiment. Both becoming and embodiment are given an ontological status and value within this scheme, for without them the world would not be what it is. This looks like an immanent holism, and for good reason, but it also opens up to the realization that the world has come into being by the creative act of a transcendent God, which means that an exegetically responsible and theologically orthodox doctrine of God can be

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[113] Cf. Hart (2003), p. 203

maintained. Moreover, the coherence of becoming and the teleological development of the world are related to the doctrine of God, for the creator is the one who both gives *to be* and gives to *become* – two movements in the ontology of grace.

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