

15 Merleau-Ponty on the Temporality of Practical Dispositions

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From the point of view twentieth-century phenomenology, our understanding of time must begin with an account of our lived experience of it. It is in the practical domain that our confrontation with time is most pronounced, and so it is not surprising that for many of the thinkers working within the phenomenological tradition there is an intimate link between our experience of time and our experience of ourselves as agents. In the work of Bergson, for instance, only free agents—beings whose futures are fundamentally indeterminate—demand to be thought of in distinctively temporal terms. A purely deterministic world would make time ontologically superfluous, on Bergson's account, for all future events would be already implied in what is present, and all past events would be simply irrelevant insofar as they no longer had any determinative, causal force in their own right. In contrast, our existence as free agents must be conceived in terms of a continuous temporal duration whereby the past is not simply over and done with, but is prolonged and made effective in the present course of action precisely through the agent's retention of it in memory; moreover, even the future shapes the character of the agent's present, for on Bergson's account, we only ever perceive that portion of the present world that aligns with the range of possible actions that we anticipate performing in it.¹ In the thought of Sartre the link between freedom and the experience of time is likewise brought to the forefront, for on his account it is precisely our basic experience of freedom that introduces a genuine negation into the fabric of being, and as such we as agents become the basic ground of such negative phenomena as "not yet" and "no longer," phenomena that are essential to the experience of time.² Even the basic Husserlian notion that our perceptual experience of the present is essentially encompassed by a horizon of potential further experiences seems to recognize a special connection between time and agency. For the horizon of potential experiences consists essentially in an anticipation of a not yet determined future, and our very openness to this future seems to be grounded in an experience of an "I can."³ The experience of freedom and our experience of time, it seems, are intertwined in a fundamental way in such accounts.

My goal in this chapter is to articulate what I take to be one of Merleau-Ponty's distinctive contributions to this phenomenological account of the

link between time and agency. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), Merleau-Ponty's focus on the fundamentally practical orientation of the lived body, and on its capacity to develop new habits, draws our attention to a basic form of bodily agency that is quite distinct from our more familiar conception of a self-conscious, thinking agent that acts on the basis of reasons and consciously formed intentions. We find this bodily agency at work in such basic natural processes as breathing and balancing and eating, but for Merleau-Ponty it is also the basis of our more developed practical dispositions and the psychological "complexes" that underlie our general characters. Part of what is distinctive of Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the link between time and agency is that he works towards clarifying the distinctive form that our lived experience of this level of agency takes, and then attempts to articulate the experience of time that is peculiar to it. Merleau-Ponty argues that the way we experience time at this bodily or dispositional level is quite distinct from the more familiar experience of time we have as free, self-conscious agents occupied by the various personal decisions we find ourselves having to make on a situation-by-situation basis.

Among other things, in the latter experience agency is essentially episodic in nature, in the sense of having to exert itself anew in each fresh instance of action. As such, this experience is correlated to an experience of a time that can be broken up into distinct episodes, distinct "nows," whose individuation is correlated with that of the individual moment of decision. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty would have us see that the operations of our bodily agency are fundamentally cyclical, and so non-episodic in fundamental ways, with the result that our bodily agency is correlated to an experience of a time that is not so readily divisible into distinct moments. Thus, rather than being alive first and foremost to the unique "now" of some particular practical situation I may be in, at the level of my bodily agency we might speak, instead, of the general now of my life as a whole—a now that is not present to itself all at once, in this or that particular instance, but that is relatively indifferent to particular situations. My goal is to bring this latter experience of time to the fore, and to suggest how our practical dispositions are structured in terms of it.

1. Natural Time and Historical Time

At several points in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty sees fit to make a distinction between two basic kinds of temporality: the temporality specific to historical events, including the biographical events that make up the core of our personal histories as individuals; and the temporality specific to generic, cyclical processes of nature, including those processes of our living bodies that we share with other humans and animals (1962, 82–85; 346–347; 422–424; 449–453). We, as embodied agents, are historical and natural at once, and every phenomenon of human life will to some degree be informed by both these dimensions, and so by both sorts of

temporality. However, certain aspects of our lives are clearly more defined by historical time, and others more by natural time.

For instance, our breathing and blinking patterns are almost purely natural, and so help to reveal the sense in which we are thoroughly implicated in the cyclicity of natural time.⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, natural time is most essentially grounded in a structure of *indefinite repetition*, and thus in a *lack of meaningful differentiation and individuation among temporal moments*.⁵ In the case of breathing, for instance, I breathe now only to breathe again, and then again; my current breath does not mark itself off as significantly distinct from my past breaths, nor does it take itself to build on what my previous breaths have accomplished: with each breath, we are, so to speak, right back where we started the last time; each breath is a wholly fresh start on the exact same process, facing what is from breathing's point of view the exact same situation as the last breath. Each "episode" thus immediately dissolves, leaving no trace and no memory of itself as distinct.

Moreover, the ongoing, cyclical character of breathing is such that there are no decisive, internal beginnings or endings within the overall flow of the respiratory process. While we might be tempted to treat the exhale as the completion of a process begun by the movement of inhaling—as though there were some sort of narrative structure involved in each breath cycle—the exhale is just as much that which calls for the next inhale as it is the end of the previous one. It seems that what really exists here is not primarily the distinct episodes of breathing, each temporally individuated in its own right, but rather the general, *continuous* process of breathing as such. And though, of course, this continuous process only maintains itself in and through distinct episodes of breathing, these episodes *don't matter as such in their distinctness*, but are each in the service of enabling the *continuous flow of breathing* to continue on indefinitely. If we consider that each breath exists in the present, as happening always "now," it seems we must say that each of these "nows" is at bottom *identical* from the point of view of the process of breathing itself; breathing itself carries no historical register within which each breath would take its unique, dated place, but is wholly concerned with making sure that the same thing is happening continuously. In a way, it is more appropriate to speak of the general "*now*" of breathing in its overall continuity—a now that, in our case, lasts the duration of our respiratory lives—rather than an identical now that is *repeated*; for even the notion of repetition seems to be premised upon retaining the temporal individuation of the moments repeated, and this individuation is precisely what seems to be dissolved in such a natural cycle.⁶ This privileging of the general now, this stretched-out present, over the more circumscribed, episodic now of the passing moment is, on Merleau-Ponty's account, a constitutive feature of natural time and, indeed, of nature in general.⁷

Historical time, in contrast, is the **time** specific to eventful unfoldings and narrative developments that begin and lead somewhere, rather than being stuck in an indefinite, repetitive cycle.⁸ Within historical time, the now is

not wholly indifferent to its past. The historical present is never a wholly fresh start, nor a pure, identical repetition; it carries its past within it *as something past*, and thus *distinguishes itself from it while taking it up into itself* (whether to develop, surpass, depart from, or imitate it). Moreover, the historical present is never wholly cut off from its future, either, for it is in part structured in terms of an anticipation of what is to come, much as, while listening to a melody, our sense of the significance of the note we are currently hearing is informed, in part, by our anticipation of where the melody is leading us.

For Merleau-Ponty, that aspect of our existence that is most clearly structured in terms of historical time is *action*. Indeed, I would suggest that historical temporality is itself a function of the distinctive way in which agents take up time *qua* agents, for action inevitably involves an express differentiation and interrelation of past, present, and future.⁹ For instance, if, on a given morning, I commit myself to performing certain tasks that day, I thereby reach out from the present moment toward the future, committing my afternoon in such a way that its temporal unfolding will constantly refer back to, or carry forward, the morning's resolution; it is on this condition, for instance, that the day can come to appear to me as "slipping away," as the fading daylight makes palpable to me that I am "running out of time" in the drama I have instituted. My capacity to make such ordinary commitments is thus founded upon the more basic capacity of my agency to imbricate the temporal dimensions with one another—in this case, by making the future answerable to my resolution in the present, which *will be* this future's specific past.¹⁰

However, it is clear that for Merleau-Ponty some of our actions—in particular, those that most individuate us as agents—more clearly exemplify the basic structure of historical temporality than others. For instance, many of our most repetitive, routine actions—like brushing our teeth or showering or eating—are basically extensions of our natural cycles, and they are comparably generic and impersonal in character. There was nothing remarkable about my act of brushing my teeth this morning, and I would be hard-pressed to single out anything in this act that made it distinct from the thousands of acts of brushing that I have engaged in over the years; and even if a glimpse of my unique personality can be had by observing the particular way I brush my teeth, no one would deem such an action worth mentioning in a biography of my individual life. On the other hand, one's most individual, and personality-revealing, actions—a momentous confession of love, a decision to give up a successful career upon realizing one's heart has never really been in it, a decision to stand up against an injustice despite the fact that doing so exposes one to a threat to one's own livelihood—can claim to warrant chapter-length treatments in one's biography, for such actions seem to make manifest, in an incomparably heightened way, one's most constitutive commitments and characteristics. Such acts are typically "once in a lifetime" decisions, and are typically undertaken with a heightened sense of their singularity and momentousness. They are also typically

undertaken with a sense of making a decisive break with the momentum of one's past life, and involve opening oneself to a new and indeterminate future—the embarking into a new chapter, one that may in fact become the decisive, dramatic core of the whole narrative that is one's individual life. Indeed, one can feel as if the *whole* of one's personal narrative is on the line in making such a choice—as if even one's past is not ultimately impervious to being reoriented and redefined by it, given that this past will *from then on* be experienced as the prelude to the particular new future this act alone opened up.¹¹ It is this momentousness, one's anxious sense as an agent in the midst of deciding, that everything is on the line *right now*—this sense that one's present will not simply “dissolve” into oblivion and be replaced by another present that is indifferent to it, but will from here on in be decisive for understanding all that came before and after it—that ultimately gives the historical present its singular, “once and for all” character for Merleau-Ponty.¹² It is in this respect that the historical present most distinguishes itself from the dissolving, indistinct present of the natural cycle (the present that immediately fades into the general present of an overall continuity).

2. Freedom and the Historical

Within the existentialist tradition that Merleau-Ponty is clearly drawing from, these sorts of heightened decisions are the clearest cases of *free* action. For Sartre, this capacity of an agent to break from the past and inaugurate a new future in the decisive singularity of the present is tantamount to the definition of freedom itself (1993, 21–45); and so in this tradition, and especially for Sartre, the philosophy of human agency comes hand in hand with an account of the distinctively *historical* character of our being, where this is understood specifically as an ability to negate and transcend our merely natural character.

Even leaving aside such heightened decisions, however, it seems that there is an important link between what we generally think of as free actions and the original, individualized character of the temporal present. It seems that, in principle, every practical situation, every distinct episode in which an action is called for, is an original, temporally individuated whole unto itself, and that an agent is free to approach each such situation on its own individual terms. The agent is free to settle upon a way of responding that is unique to the present demands of this situation as they combine with the particular desires, needs, and beliefs she has at the moment.¹³ Each episode of free action, each moment of decision is, in effect, a singular and autonomous “now,” differentiating itself from all other nows in part by the fact that the agent experiences it as a “live” now—that is, one that actually calls for a response on her part, rather than being a now that is remembered and that is, as such, over and already done with. This now of action, it seems, gets its individuality ultimately by way of the individuality of the agent and her sense that she personally is being called upon to respond, and in particular

by the agent's singular *presence to herself* in being thus solicited. As Sartre argued, even if the agent is bringing to bear past commitments or motivations in the response she decides upon, or is anticipating future outcomes, this past and future are *internal* to the decision and have a force in informing it only insofar as the agent is, within the singular moment of decision itself, *actively granting* them their force, thus enabling them to be “live” and “present” concerns.¹⁴ Decisions to act, it seems, necessarily take place in the singularity of the present, and insofar as they claim to be autonomous and free—that is, insofar as they are not *determined by* the past, but claim to be presently *conscious of* the past and *thereby give it* its motivational force in the now—they in effect constitute the present itself as a distinctive and original individuality, *discontinuous* with the past (and with the future).¹⁵

Against this background it is striking that, in his main discussion of freedom and agency in the *Phenomenology of Perception*,¹⁶ one of Merleau-Ponty's overriding concerns is to explore not primarily those inaugural choices by which our lives take on a decisively new historical direction, but the general practical orientations or dispositions that persist across, and in that sense are repeated through, an agent's episodic, moment-by-moment choices. Among other things, such general practical orientations account for how it is that there is a general, meaningful *continuity* across our various choices—an overall style of agency, if you will—and as such they involve not the ability to interrupt the past and inaugurate new directions, but rather the ability to maintain a single, coherent practical identity over time.

It is clear that, over time, agents betray a certain continuous style of approaching their practical situations, and are not making radically new and utterly autonomous decisions in each singular episode of action.¹⁷ We gradually begin to notice recurring themes and tropes in a person's behavior—for instance, we see that a person is prone to shy away from situations involving adversity, or that she is the sort of person who typically seizes on opportunities to aggrandize herself before others—and this gives us reason to think that, beyond the sphere of self-conscious, *individuated* choice, there is another sort of enduring, more generalized form of agency at work in human life.

It seems clear that such general orientations are not like fixed essences or natural laws that determine an agent's behavior in a situation in the same way that, say, being a tomato plant determines the various ways in which an individual tomato plant will actualize itself in response to the determinacies of its physical environment. In the case of a plant, we are inclined to think that, if it meets with generally appropriate environmental conditions, and is not plagued by any disease or other abnormality, it *necessarily* and *automatically*—as by an inner law or essence—grows towards its proper form, that it has no possibility of its pursuing another, alternate route of its own accord. To ascribe a general orientation to an agent, in contrast, is to acknowledge that this agent can at times drift away from, or even expressly pose a challenge to, her characteristic patterns of action, even if this generally does not happen. A person whose overall way of being is

shaped by an inferiority complex can, on occasion, summon the courage to speak confidently in a public setting, even if, for the most part, such an act is unimaginable to him.¹⁸ Talk of general orientations thereby makes room for the sphere of indeterminacy that seems to lie at the heart of the human condition, and that we typically associate with freedom and with the possibility of substantial self-transformation: we are not *stuck* in an endless repetition of our already established ways of being, but always have some room to modify the direction of our lives, even if only in gradual increments.

Despite this indeterminacy, however, to have a general orientation towards a certain way of comporting *is* for this orientation to have an actual bearing on what directions and choices are experienced as compelling or as “live options” in a given situation, and thereby determine the basic contours of the present situation itself. And so, though orientations do not *determine* what an agent does, they do indeed make it *more likely* that an agent will engage in certain actions over others.¹⁹ If my friend is generally self-disparaging in his overall orientation, and has a tendency to experience himself as unworthy of others’ recognition, the chances are high that he will not perform very well at a job interview in which he will be called upon to give a compelling case for the significance and value of his accomplishments. For, despite his conscious resolve to impress the interviewers, singing his own praises does not come easily to him, and is a much more remote possibility in his practical orientation than that of selling himself short. An awkward performance seems both *more probable*, and *more fitting*, more immediately harmonious with the general way of being that he radiates in his overall demeanor, and that displays itself in so many other avenues of his life.

Given these considerations, it seems we can speak of there being a kind of general commitment at work at the heart of human agency, a commitment that occurs at the level of a person’s overall and enduring character. This commitment is inherently general, I want to suggest, in the sense that it is not reducible to a particular choice made in a particular episode of action. Nor is its persistence a matter of being consciously re-chosen again and again in successive, distinct episodes of action. Nor is the content of this commitment peculiar to a particular situation and the concrete actions specifically relevant to it. Rather, it is a commitment to acting a certain way in general, or to a general way of approaching practical situations; it is a commitment that, in its generality, exists as such *only insofar as it cuts across otherwise distinct episodes and situations of action*, and sustains a kind of enduring presence. But how are we to understand such general commitments as playing a role in our lives as agents?

3. Two Levels of Agency and the Generality of the Body

To the extent that we find ourselves called upon to make particular choices in particular, relatively discrete temporal episodes, those more general commitments that constitute our overall style of being an agent in the world

must be conceived as grounded in a relatively distinct level of agency, one that operates according to a different logic than our moment-by-moment choices. It is helpful to understand this general agency, not as directly involved in making such particular, moment-to-moment choices, but in terms of its role in opening up and shaping the general character of our practical situations themselves, such that the particular choices we as agents make *within* these situations are, so to speak, always already drawing upon the power and efficacy of this more general level of agency.

To illustrate how these two levels of agency operate together, we can turn to Merleau-Ponty’s basic discussion of the ways in which the general features of our bodily life underlie and inform all of our particular practical situations, thus lending these situations a certain generic character that makes them open to a range of particular actions in the first place. For example, because I have hands that can take hold of things and wield them, the things I encounter in each situation I am in immediately present themselves to me, from the start, in terms of their possibilities of being wielded, or, conversely, in terms of their unwieldiness.²⁰ Thus, whenever I am, in some particular situation, consciously occupied by a particular decision to take hold of something or not, my particular decision is always nested within what Merleau-Ponty calls a general, non-representational bodily intentionality, by which the world is first opened up for me, in general, as a practical field populated with things that can be wielded in the first place. This intentionality is non-representational in the sense that it does not consciously picture its end to itself before resolving to enact it. Rather, the body’s actuality consists precisely in the continual holding open of a world of interactional possibilities, and the perceptual appearing of these possibilities, *qua its possibilities*, is the concrete work of this bodily agency. In this sense, **my** active body is conscious of itself *only by way of the world and its possibilities*, not directly, via some sort of “internal” self-consciousness.

The working of this bodily intentionality is, of course, not something that depends upon my self-conscious, episodic agency; and whether things in the world appear to me as wieldy or not is not simply a function of whether I happen to have chosen to take on some particular project that involves the use of my hands. Rather, by the mere fact that I have hands, and that my hands exist for me as living portals of certain general kinds of motility involving gripping, holding, carrying, and so forth, all that is presented to me is *already* implicitly measured up in terms of their general potentialities for being wielded. In this respect, the practical outlines of my situation are not only generally the same from situation to situation, but they are also generally the same as those encountered by other agents with similar bodies. So it is not simply I, as a fully individuated, choosing agent, who perceives this chair as something that can be picked up and moved across the floor; it is the impersonal, generic agency of my body itself.²¹ If we can speak of this bodily agency or intentionality as working, as being involved in generating something, what it generates is precisely a general and enduring practical

terrain within which particular episodes of wielding things can unfold. Thus, though my act of picking up this pen in order to write a letter in which I finally confess my love may be a singular moment in my individual history, it draws on the power of a much more general and generic bodily agency, from the point of view of which this situation is only one among many other potential bodily performances I might undertake with arms and hands. And, insofar as this “natural” agency, which (like breathing) maintains its continuity across my various episodic engagements of it in practice, is nevertheless *my* agency, there is a sense in which I too (in my generality, in the generality of my experience) am at some level indifferent to the singularity of my particular act, a sense in which this act and this situation “dissolves” or is forgotten in its individuality. That is, insofar as I live my body in its general and continued openness to wielding handy things, in this “layer” of my experience I do not differentiate between the significance of this instance of picking up a pen and other comparable instances; from the point of view of my lived body, the particularly of this instance is a matter of indifference, for what I am most alive to is the continuity of a world that affords possibilities of wielding things.²²

4. The Body as Basis of General Practical Orientations

Though the practical orientations that make up an individual agent's personal character are not as general and impersonal as the body's role in giving rise to the general practical terrain in which all of our actions take place, Merleau-Ponty argues that the generality that is at the core of such character traits is ultimately of a piece with the generality of the body's agency; and so, an agent's general manner of being is likewise conceived as a sort of impersonal agency that determines the general contours of her practical situation in advance of her conscious consideration of this or that particular line of action in a particular situation.

To highlight the way in which an enduring practical orientation takes shape by way of the body's power to generalize, Merleau-Ponty frequently appeals to examples of repression drawn from psychoanalytic thought.²³ For example, drawing from Binswanger's work, he discusses the case of a young woman who, as a response to her mother's forbidding her to see the young man with whom she is in love, cuts herself off from interpersonal interaction altogether (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 160ff.). She does this, not by consciously engaging in *particular* and *isolated* acts of refusal, but rather by “losing” her very ability to speak; that is, her refusal becomes a general manner of being in the world, and it comes about by way of a kind of impersonal and general agency that works, not at the level of episodic, self-conscious choice, but at the level of that general bodily function of speech that forms the underlying horizon of possibility for all of her more developed acts of interpersonal communication. Because her bodily organs of speech open up for her the general world of interpersonal communication in general, she is

able, precisely by way of this general agency of her body, to shut down her very access to this world. This is something she simply could not pull off in her capacity as a self-conscious choosing agent. As Merleau-Ponty argues, she cannot be said to choose not to speak, for “will presupposes a field of possibilities among which [an agent] choose[s]” (1962, 162), whereas what collapses for her, in her aphonia, is precisely that general field of possibilities of speaking or remaining silent. Just as a man who loses his arms will eventually cease to experience things in the world in terms of their possibilities of being wielded, so too does she cease to experience a world populated by interlocutors, and has ceased to feel any sense of solicitation or motivation when someone poses a question to her.

Of course, her loss of speech is not paralysis, and she can regain the use of her voice through therapy or other events in her interpersonal situation, thus showing that this loss is, in some sense, a sort of activity that she herself is in the process of performing and maintaining. But it is not an activity that consciously puts before itself some specific, finite objective to be attained, at which point the action would end. It has the structure of an indefinite reiteration that is not leading anywhere in particular; that is, it has lost any trace of temporal individuality and historicity. Part of what this example shows, then, is that the body's generality—in this case, its general and enduring openness, through its organs of speech, to a world of interpersonal communication—becomes the vehicle through which some distinctively *personal, historical event* in an individual's life—here, the woman's being cut off from her lover—can itself become generalized into something more impersonal, something that comes to determine the contours of an agent's overall engagement with the world as a whole. This singular event, which concerned her contact with one particular person, lost its historical specificity and became merged with the general horizon of intersubjective contact that mediates all of her particular encounters with others. It comes to shape her experience of what is actually there, what is actually available and possible, in her world.

In the specific case of repression discussed, the woman continues to repeat the singular event of being cut off from her lover, by in effect transforming it into the general atmosphere of all of her present circumstances; as Merleau-Ponty writes (in describing the structure of repression generally), “one present among all presents thus acquires an exceptional value; it displaces the others and deprives them of their value as authentic presents” (1962, 424). In such cases “nothing further happens,” and “there occurs only a recurrent and always identical ‘now’, life flows back on itself and history is dissolved in natural time” (1962, 164). As in the case of breathing, each new now, each new situation of having to take a breath, is immediately “dissolved” into the same humdrum drama, and it no longer presents itself in its historical distinctness and *singularity*, but rather in terms of its being yet another opportunity to affirm one's continuous, general way of being. It is as if, like the yoga practitioner who strives to “become his breathing,” the woman recedes completely

into her impersonal, generic orientation to the world, with the result that nothing eventful—that is, nothing historical, no new narratives—can occur.

5. Concluding Remarks: General Orientations and the Generalized Present

While we would call this sort of fixation a pathological complex in the psychoanalytic sense of that term, Merleau-Ponty would have us see that understanding the basic temporal structure of such complexes provides us with a better understanding of both the generalized agency that forms the core of our characters as agents, as well as of the relationship between this generalized agency and the episodic, more personal form of agency typically associated with the moment of self-conscious choice. One of Merleau-Ponty's main preoccupations, in his account of freedom at the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, concerns the manner in which our past as agents is never so thoroughly individuated and circumscribed that we can, in the present, distance ourselves from it completely, so as to be able to choose a radically new path at any individual instant. Rather, our present situation of action is quite literally *merged* into the past, to the point that we are literally not in a position to *distinguish* between present and past; or, in other words, our choices of the moment are inevitably embedded within a more extensive "moment," a *more general now*—one that bleeds off into (what, from the point of view of a narrower present, is) the past, and that our "current," but more general, commitments continue to keep alive into the future.

Thus, for instance, a man who is characterized by proneness to be adverse to risk, and who thus tends to engage in behaviors of avoidance and escape when confronted with what is unfamiliar or threatening, does not experience his current threatening situation as an original, self-contained whole unto itself, within which various possibilities of fleeing and standing one's ground are all equally present on the immediate horizon, waiting only for his current decision to determine which will win the day so as to become definitive of his next present. Rather, akin to the way in which our having bodies with hands opens up a general world already oriented in terms of the exigencies of wielding things, to have a risk-adverse character is to have an impersonal agency that opens up a world that is *oriented*, from the start, in terms of familiar paths of avoidance and fleeing. Indeed, it is as though an evasive manoeuvre were already underway when the risky situation presents itself: there is already a general atmosphere of evasion at work, such that the possibilities of standing his ground seem all the more distant. His decision, otherwise a singular, self-grounding moment, is, as it were, already in the process of being made *before* he even arrives in this particular now; and this "fore-decision" takes the form of the determinacy of the situation he finds himself in, the way the situation itself already presents itself as soliciting in his body evasive maneuvers. But this is only to say that his past, having ceased to take the form of discrete episodes of

action, and having become a general now, has to some degree dissolved the distinctness of his present, in the sense that he is at some level of his experience incapable of distinguishing between the two—much as in the breathing case.²⁴

The agent in this case is not *conscious* of himself as *willingly repeating* a past way of being. For, as I have already suggested, to be conscious of a repetition is at least to be alive to the actual distinctness of the present from a discrete past, even while affirming that they are substantially similar in content. But if we can say, drawing from Merleau-Ponty's discussions of natural temporality, that the past "displaces" or dissolves the present, or that the past is literally "re-opened" in the present, or that the past is a sort of enduring wound to which our agency in the present continues to dedicate its power (1962, 85), it must be that at some level we exist in such a way as to *blur* the past and the present, giving rise in effect to a continuous, "generalized" present that does not have determinate borders, and that thus does not easily fit into a register of circumscribed moments that clearly come before and after other moments as in a historical narrative. This lapsing of the distinction between present and past, this generalizing of the past into the general atmosphere of the present, is tantamount to a lack of consciousness of any significant difference between the present and the past. It is as though one's practical orientations give rise to a sort of eternal now, precisely because they in effect present the current situation as in no way dependent on, or as responding to, past reiterations. Rather, as in the case of breathing—where one is "back where one started," in the exact same situation one was in during one's last breath, and where one's last breath in no way contributes to one's ability to respond to the current respiratory exigency—one is, as it were, absorbed in the present, but not in the sense of having a heightened awareness of this present's historical momentousness, its singularity; on the contrary, one is, in one's general orientation, lost in what is in effect a generic present, the same one now that was present earlier and that will continue to be there as one goes on to face further, otherwise historically new situations with the same active orientation in place.

To have a practical orientation, I have been suggesting, involves operating with a substantially different way of experiencing time than is typical of our more familiar conception of time according to which time takes the form of individuated, historically datable episodes. Insofar as we have some experiential footing in this generalized, non-episodic temporality, there is a way in which we ourselves are not wholly "in" the distinct episodes of our practical lives, a way in which we are at some level indifferent to the unique demands of the individual situations we face. While this indifference might, from the point of view of historical time, seem like a kind of deficiency—akin to the indifference of nature to our personal projects and achievements—such indifference is nevertheless necessary for rendering the contours of our experiential situations similar to each other over time, necessary for making the experience of the continuity of our practical world,

across the diverse situations we face, possible. On Merleau-Ponty's account, both ways of reckoning with time are necessary for understanding the fuller phenomenon of human agency, and so any privileging of historical time and its link with freedom—as in Sartre's thought—must be tempered by a phenomenology of what I have been calling the “general now” of practical life.

Notes

1. The links between temporal duration and agency are dealt with in Bergson (2001) and (1991). The latter book is focused especially on the way memory and anticipation shape the agent's perception of the present.
2. See Sartre (1993, pt. 1, ch. 1, pt. 2, ch. 2). For an especially helpful discussion of Sartre's conception of the link between freedom and time, see Bouton (2014, ch. 8). Bouton's chapter on Bergson (ch. 7) is also worth consulting.
3. For Husserl's link between the notion of an indeterminate experiential horizon and the experience of one's own freedom, see, for instance, Husserl (1964, § 19). It should be noted, however, that Husserl's own explicit discussions of the constitution of time and of the nature of protention do not expressly point to freedom as a condition of time.
4. I refrain from identifying them as unqualifiedly natural because even these processes can come to be (and perhaps always are) expressive of a person's individuality. Thus, for instance, the yoga master's breathing patterns, and Bette Davis's blinking patterns, carry traces of their respective personal identities and history of action. It seems that the conditions for natural processes like this taking on such expressive meaning are: (1) that we are not *totally* oblivious to them (even if they only appear to us as background to our determinate experiences, on the remote fringes of consciousness); and (2) that our personal actions and ways of being have some causal influence on how they unfold, even if only in a very indirect way. It is also worth noting here that any habitual, highly routine actions—for instance, showering, brushing teeth, making our morning coffee—are also characterized by a generic, repetitive character, and can be virtually automatic in their unfolding. Merleau-Ponty discusses the case of a worker (the patient, Schneider) for whom even the fairly complex activity of making a wallet has become automatic, to the point that he is “scarcely aware of any voluntary initiative” while in the midst of making the wallet; it is as though the sequence of events unfolds of its own accord (1962, 105).
5. The time characteristic of natural cycles, writes Merleau-Ponty, “continually erodes itself and undoes that which it has just done,” and the “present which it brings to us is never a present for good, since it is already over when it appears” (1962, 453).
6. From the point of view of our lived experience of breathing (in contrast to our express, voluntary acts of attending to it, as when we set ourselves to make it an object of observation), we tend not to be alive to distinct breaths except in cases in which the continuous rhythm of breathing breaks down, as when we “lose our breath” or have the wind knocked of us and find ourselves gasping for air. Indeed, in such extreme cases it is as though our *whole consciousness* becomes absorbed in our breathing, and we are not able to concern ourselves with anything other than getting the next breath. But it does not seem right to say that we are at other times simply *unconscious* of our breathing. Rather, our continuous, “normal” breathing recedes to become part of the general background of our experiential field and, rather than something that we are (unconsciously) monitoring in a moment-by-moment manner, it is something the experience of which takes the form of a general aliveness to the world around us.

7. I have argued for this claim at more length in a forthcoming work (Ciavatta, forthcoming). See also Barbaras's insightful discussion of Merleau-Ponty's later challenge to the idea that nature, understood essentially as generality and totality, can be individuated into distinct temporal moments (2001, especially 32–36).
8. Compare Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the “time of the event” in contrast to natural time (1962, 423).
9. This proposed link between historical time and agency is perhaps more pronounced in Bergson's philosophy than in Merleau-Ponty's. See, for instance, Bergson (1991) for an account of how our indeterminacy as free agents comes hand in hand with what he calls “intensive durations,” which give temporal individuation to an otherwise undifferentiated material world characterized by repetition. However, note the implicit link between agency and temporality discussed in Merleau-Ponty (1962, 83–85), where Merleau-Ponty links personal agency with the way in which the present is individuated, and note Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the idea that “time is the foundation and measure of our spontaneity” (1962, 428).
10. See Merleau-Ponty (1962, 453) for his identification of historical time with the notion of commitment. For a helpful elaboration of some of the complicated ways in which the temporal dimensions implicate each other—and, specifically, the way in which the past “becomes past” in virtue of the present that references it as past—see Mazis (1992).
11. On the specific issue of how an action can inaugurate a new present in terms of which the past must now be understood, compare the discussion of expressive actions in Merleau-Ponty (1964). That the meaning of the past can be reconfigured by present action is a theme central to Sartre's analysis of freedom; see Sartre (1993, 637–647).
12. On Merleau-Ponty's account, [e]very present grasps, by stages, through its horizon of immediate past and near future, the totality of possible time; thus does it overcome the dispersal of instants [characteristic of natural time], and manage to endow our past itself with its definitive meaning. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 85)
See also his claim that [e]ach present may claim to solidify our life, and indeed that is what distinguishes it as the present. In so far as it presents itself as the totality of being and fills an instant of consciousness, we never extricate ourselves completely from it, time never completely closes over it. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 85)
Compare also Merleau-Ponty's description of the historical present as an “indestructible individuality” that has a “once and for all” quality (1962, 424). I am suggesting that these features of the distinctive historical present are intimately bound up with our decisiveness as agents.
13. Compare Merleau-Ponty's notion of an “authentic present” and its link with “personal time” (in contrast to the impersonal time of nature) (1962, 83).
14. See Sartre (1993, 29–34, 439–453), among other places. Merleau-Ponty privileges the present—as the locus of the subject's self-presence—in a very similar way (1962, 424). Compare also Merleau-Ponty's claim that all our available past thoughts, which exist for us as a horizon surrounding our present thinking, “draw their sustenance from my present thought, they offer me a meaning, but I give it back to them” (1962, 130).
15. See Sartre (1993, 32–35), for a discussion of how freedom is, essentially, the same thing as that process by which the present introduces a discontinuity between itself and the past, precisely by “negating” the past, and thereby making it *past* (i.e., no longer present).

16. See Part 3, Chapter 3, titled "Freedom."
17. See Merleau-Ponty (1962, 451): "If the subject made a constant and at all times peculiar choice of himself, one might wonder why his experience always ties up with itself and presents him with objects and definite historical phases."
18. Though we should note that he is not, in this instance, free to be a *confident person*. He is rather, a characteristically self-doubting person who managed to put aside his self-doubts on a particular occasion. Compare Sartre's discussion of the way the past inevitably contextualizes our present decisions (1993, 496–504).
19. Compare Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the appropriateness of speaking of probability and likelihood in the prediction of human actions (1962, 442).
20. I am drawing here from Merleau-Ponty's influential discussion of the phantom limb (1962, 80–82).
21. See Merleau-Ponty (1962, 82–84), and in particular Merleau-Ponty's characterization of the body as an "inborn complex" (1962, 84).
22. Compare Merleau-Ponty's example of being locked up in one's personal grief, while one's eyes continue to be drawn in by the world's spectacle insofar as they, in their generic character, are relatively autonomous and indifferent to the singular event that absorbs one at the personal level (1962, 84).
23. For a description of repression as grounded in the character of the body, see Merleau-Ponty (1962, 82–86).
24. In having "committed myself to inferiority" in the past, having made it the abode of my life, this past "is not a set of [individuated] events over there, at a distance from me, but the [general] atmosphere of my present" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 142).

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