

Bachelor's thesis

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Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Arendt on Meaning and Justification

Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre holds that man is doomed to freedom and, because of this, to contingency and absurdity. In the present essay, the reasons why he thinks this will be explored and then contrasted with the views of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hannah Arendt. For the latter two, although never in an absolute way, a justification, a meaning can be found in human existence by taking heed of the passive, receptive relation man has toward the world's already-present meanings. In view of Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre, and in addition to Arendt's similar views, I will argue that the fundamental difference lies in how Sartre, in looking for a meaning, gives consciousness' free choice too much importance, that he lacks a passive receptivity toward the world, which leads him to a state of loss and lack of justification. The questions whose answers I make my objective to find in the following essay are: What stands at the base of a world view in which meaning and justification are achievable, and what then is missing in Sartre's? And are there different notions of meaning involved?

In part I of the essay follows an exposition of Sartre's so-called philosophy of negativity, where it will be found that for him, meaning is absence. This has direct implications for his view that man is relegated to absurdity, to be an unjustifiable fact. In the second part of the essay (II), the views of Merleau-Ponty on the subject's orientation in the world will bring us to an alternative view of what meaning is and how it is found, namely in an ambiguous and dialectical hold upon the world. In part III, a summary and assessment will follow, where it will be shown that the two different conceptions of what meaningful experience is for men, derives from two different conceptions of man's relation to the world. Considering Merleau-Ponty's criticism, Sartre's so-called philosophy of negativity will be found lacking in attention to the world and having a too trivialized view on passivity. Next, in part IV, Merleau-Ponty's insights around the passive and dialectical, together with the inevitable, concomitant ambiguities seen as inevitable in meaning-formation, will be further corroborated by bringing in the picture the philosophy of Hannah Arendt. Although the latter has a different point of entry into philosophy compared to Merleau-Ponty, there are striking similarities between their thoughts around how an existential meaning and justification can be found. I will argue that Arendt's approach considers ambiguity, passivity and the dialectical

just as much as Merleau-Ponty does, thus showing us, perhaps, what finding an existential justification truly is about. Finally, in part V, I will wrap up the discussion with some concluding remarks. Although it is true, as Sartre said, that it is impossible to reach a full coincidence with oneself, or reach complete knowledge about the world, nonetheless, a meaning of one's stance in it, a justification for this stance, is achievable – albeit not absolutely.

I.

Sartre and his ontological dichotomy

For Sartre, as for all phenomenologists, consciousness is consciousness of something. This formulation is important for many reasons: it discloses the underlying structure of the picture Sartre has of consciousness and its relation to the world. Consciousness is in fact at every moment directed toward some thing or other out there in the world. Sartre says that “All consciousness is positional in that it transcends itself in order to reach an object, and it exhausts itself in the same positing” (2001, LI). So much so that Sartre says consciousness is derived from being (ibid., LVI). Consciousness is thus parasitic on being, as Sartre puts it, while the latter on the other side simply *is*. “The object does not *possess* being, and its existence is not a participation in being, nor any other kind of relation. It *is*” (ibid., XLVII). Consciousness leans on something that is self-sufficient and independent, feeding, that is, on the being of appearances. (Sartre, in line with the fundamental tenets of phenomenology, operates an upheaval of the separation between being and appearances; being is given to us through appearances and in no other way, and the latter appearances have their own being.) So, consciousness is consciousness *of* something.

But this formula must also be read highlighting its verb. Consciousness *is* consciousness of something – and nothing more. Describing consciousness thus “is to say that it must produce itself as a revealed-revelation of a being which is not it and which gives itself as already existing when consciousness reveals it” (ibid., LXII). It is a revelation in that it posits something outside itself, thus revealing it with its own light. But this process of revelation is itself revealed, made apparent. For Sartre, each revelation of being is itself an object for consciousness. That is, I am primordially conscious of being conscious of something. More specifically, I am always conscious of revealing something that I am not, of transcending toward something external and alien to myself. Fundamentally, since I *am* this negating consciousness, it means that I *am* something that I am not, as Sartre paradoxically put it. This primordial consciousness which accompanies each of

its transcendent exoduses toward objects outside itself, Sartre calls pre-reflective consciousness or cogito.

It is clear that, in the structure of the thought of Sartre, there operates a dichotomy, a duality that will be made clearer as his thoughts will be more extensively unfolded. “Absolute subjectivity can be established only in the face of something revealed; immanence can be defined only with the apprehension of a transcendence,” he says (*ibid.*). In this sense, Sartre believes consciousness to be a nothingness, a non-being. Taken alone, it is ungraspable. Consciousness is only consciousness on the background of that which it is not and on which it nonetheless depends in order to be. So far, we can summarize Sartre's duality of thought with his own words: there are “two absolutely separated regions of being: the being of the pre-reflective cogito and the being of the phenomenon” (*ibid.*, LXIII).

Although Sartre believes that consciousness and being are structurally separated from each other, he does not want to reinstate a Cartesian dualism. In fact, as a phenomenologist, what he instead wants to show through this, is how consciousness is fundamentally dependent on a world. Being and nothingness, the world and consciousness, are “complementary components of the real – like dark and light” (*ibid.*, 12). But, as said above, while being has no need of nothingness to be and we can conceive of it completely positively, “nothingness, which is not, can have only a borrowed existence” (*ibid.*, 16). “Non-being exists only on the surface of being” (*ibid.*).¹

Consciousness is a reflecting-reflection that produces non-being, since it knows that every thing it directs itself toward *is not* itself. In fact, all human determination has this nature. A schism, an unassailable distance separates consciousness from being every time it directs itself toward the world which it is dependent on to be.

Man is always separated from what he is by all the breadth of the being which he is not. He makes himself known to himself from the other side of the world and he looks from the horizon toward himself to recover his inner being. Man is a being of distances. (*ibid.*, 17)
Such distance is always there *for* consciousness; being discloses itself *for* consciousness. Consciousness is the being *for* which the world presents itself in a negating way. Consciousness is thus for-itself, since it reflects on its insertion in being. An object, an instance of being which

¹ “Non-being”: Since for Sartre, as we have seen, consciousness is always consciousness of something that it *is not* (I am consciousness of this table, a table that I am not), every conscious act is therefore a negating activity that thus makes “non-being” appear, something that would not have happened without the upsurge of a consciousness in the world, a for-itself. Alone, the in-itself is pure positivity, which cannot possibly bring into existence a non-being. The in-itself is not conscious.

simply *is*, which is unable to produce nothingness as consciousness on the other hand is, but which self-assuredly stands there, full of itself, independent of other beings to *be* (as the for-itself on the contrary is not), Sartre calls the in-itself. The for-itself is at every moment directed toward an in-itself that it is not. As will now be seen, this has important implications for Sartre's conception of meaning.

Consciousness as lack, meaning as absence

The for-itself is a lack in the sense that it defines itself out of that which it *is* not, that which it lacks and misses by a breadth of nothingness; the for-itself is a failed being since it can only in principle understand itself in view of a totality that it is not and cannot be. The for-itself, as Sartre sees it, lacks a particular totality: the totality of the self. The self is a unity that enjoys a coinciding presence to itself. Normally, as we have seen, the for-itself does not coincide with itself in that, by positing the slice of world on which it rests, it realizes it cannot possibly *also* be it.

The supreme value toward which consciousness at every instant surpasses itself by its very being is the absolute being of the self with its characteristics of identity, of purity, of permanence, etc., and as its own foundation... Value can simultaneously be and not be. It *is* the meaning and beyond of all surpassing; it *is* the absent being-in-itself which haunts being-for-itself. (ibid., 69)

The self is an ultimate "value" for man. "Value taken in its origin, or the supreme value, is the beyond and the *for* of transcendence" (ibid.). It is the ultimate touchstone against which man defines himself, an absolute which is unreachable but nonetheless necessarily held in mind when man transcends and surpasses himself toward the complete being he wishes to be. "Human reality² is not something which exists first in order afterwards to lack this or that; it exists first as lack and in immediate, synthetic connection with what it lacks" (ibid., 65).

The "self-as-being-in-itself is what human reality lacks and what makes its meaning" (ibid., 64). That is to say that man, according to Sartre, chronically lacks the fullness and roundness of being, of the in-itself. Now, the self, or man's ultimate value, has for Sartre the mode of being of an in-itself-for-itself. It is both present to itself, *for* itself, but also enjoys a coincidence with itself, which means that it is its own foundation because it needs nothing else outside itself in order to be, like an in-itself. But this is impossible for consciousness since, abiding by the formula above, it is always and inevitably consciousness *of* something.

² An expression Sartre sometimes uses to refer to man and the nature of his stance in the world.

In view of all this, one can say that Sartre takes meaning to be characterized by absence, in that it is composed of something that always slips our grasp. Meaning is always found in function of something, never on its own, just as consciousness is *of* something, never self-sufficient. Man understands himself only by positing something beyond himself. Sartre states that we can only make sense of parts in terms of the whole. We understand the crescent moon in terms of the full moon (ibid., 71). It seems to follow that Sartre believes meaning to be formed only in terms of an absent completeness or absoluteness which one cannot hope ever to reach. In the conclusion of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre states that “Everything happens as if the world, man and man-in-the-world succeeded in realizing only a missing God” (ibid., 541). In understanding his surroundings and in projecting himself toward an end or desire, man perceives a lack, something missing. Man is an incomplete vagabond, jumping from desire to desire, from one lack to the abortive attempt to quench another, without ever being able to find completeness, or a justifiable foundation for what he is but cannot possibly be. Man lives with the fantasy of the in-itself-for-itself, a state which man strives after and obtains meaning through – but never reaches.

Freedom and embodiment

Meaning is absence, absence in contrast to a whole that consciousness posits, setting itself in relation to it. For Sartre, the positing of a whole in whose relation meaning is found, happens in utter freedom. Fundamentally, man is freedom; “it is very exactly the stuff of my being” (Sartre 2001, 415). Sartre thinks that it is up to the for-itself to bestow meaning to the full, positive and determined in-itself, which alone only has brute, contingent being and is, as it were, meaningless and undifferentiated. Meaning, for Sartre, is utterly and only made-to-be, a becoming *ex nihilo*. The meaning of things is *bestowed*, or rather forcefully *imposed* on them by the choice of the for-itself. Signification for Sartre is a one-way process; from consciousness to world. Let us see how.

In Sartre's view, “for human reality, to be is to *choose oneself*; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can *receive or accept*” (Sartre 2001, 416). He thinks that even the motives and causes, that originally were understood as the internal and external movers of human action, respectively, are without meaning if they are not *experienced* as such, which means that “the for-itself must confer on [them their] value as cause or motive” (ibid., 413). So, even here, we see that it is consciousness' active positing that ultimately imposes meaning on reality. Such freedom in determining itself leads it to be able to proceed in a saltatory fashion.

“Consciousness in so far as it is considered exclusively in its being, is perpetually referred from being to being and cannot find in being any motive for revealing non-being” (Sartre 2001, 410). Consciousness can at all times redirect itself elsewhere. Neither the world nor its past have a determinant force on consciousness' choice of what to posit as that totality that it misses, that totality in relation to which it meaningfully stands as lack.

Consciousness is a lack that is continuously haunted by the in-itself-for-itself it wishes to be in the form of freely chosen projects and ends. In its freedom, consciousness is doomed never to fully be what it wishes to be. Consciousness freely chooses the goals and ends in relation to which it discovers itself as lack. It freely posits its way to meaning. It is up to man to find meaning in the world in the sense that it *always* freely chooses the fullness in relation to which it is a lack, almost by caprice. In this utter freedom, it has no bedrock on which to lay his foundations, on which to find a justification or objective reason for having preferences for what to direct itself toward, for what to be. The sole justification man can give himself is his own, which, objectively speaking, is no justification at all. “In our own apprehension of ourselves we appear to ourselves as having the character of an unjustifiable fact” (Sartre 2001, 56).

One must not, however, misconceive Sartre as a philosopher that is solely concerned with consciousness. He is not, as we have said, a Cartesian dualist. In fact, as a phenomenologist, his focus lies in the participation of consciousness in the world. Consciousness is always directed outside itself, it is always consciousness *of* something. There is no consciousness without a world. But, importantly, consciousness is part of the world in a deeper sense. It is situated, it is embodied; it is given something which it does not choose or determine.³ Can it thus really be up to consciousness to determine itself wholly, as it appears it does in the exposition of Sartre's thought done so far? If consciousness truly is given something at birth, surely it cannot choose *that* away! The discussion has arrived at a crucial point, to which now we must turn with renewed and enhanced attention.

For Sartre there *is* an interdependence between consciousness and world, and this interdependence, as Joseph S. Catalano has stated, “reveals that the world exists independently of our concepts about it, *but not independently of the advent of human consciousness within matter*”

³ Examples of such “givenness” can be the family we are born in and the concomitant conditions of either poverty or ease and prosperity, skin color and other anatomic characteristics, etc., which are all aspects that we are “given” at our birth, that we do not choose to have. In existential philosophy, this givenness takes the name of the “facticity” of existence.

(1998, 160, emphasis added). The fact that consciousness is embodied, that it is in a body, establishes the condition for the possibility for a world to appear (ibid., 162-3). The body is the medium through which consciousness can be *of* something in the first place, the medium through which being is given. In fact, Sartre goes so far as to establish a relation of identity between body and consciousness: “the body is what this consciousness *is*” (Sartre in ibid., 165). But, as Catalano says, although Sartre is no dualist, his thought is characterized by a certain anthropocentrism. This means that, for Sartre, the doors to being are opened only on the side of our consciousnesses, through our embodied relation to being (ibid., 160, 169). Embodiment is that incontestable fact that allows the positing of being, of the in-itself. What *meaning* the in-itself is to have, however, is a question always and solely relegated to consciousness.

As John J. Compton has said, for Sartre, to be embodied is “*to exist as situated, to occupy a place and time, to be in certain circumstances and conditions*” that our consciousnesses can make its theme by positing them – but it then has “to choose the meaning of these situating conditions” (1998, 180). The view that man is relegated to absurdity, to inescapable contingency, that man is unable to find some justified meaning, is thus connected to the arbitrary ability that consciousness, although embodied and situated, has to posit itself as in a meaningful relation of lack to some totality that it misses.

II.

Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre

However, not all philosophers believe that this is man's predicament. Merleau-Ponty is one of them. In fact, if Sartre thought that man was doomed to freedom and, therefore, to absurdity and unjustifiability, Merleau-Ponty believed that man was doomed to always find *some* meaning, and therefore some justification for his actions. But he has another conception of meaning than the one Sartre has. At every moment, Merleau-Ponty thinks, man has a meaningful hold upon the world. Meaning is not posited, as in Sartre, but *lived-through*. Merleau-Ponty thinks that Sartre's “philosophy of absolute negativity,” as he calls it in his work *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968, 55), is unable to account for the true relationship between man and the world. It lacks a theory of *passivity*, by which he means that Sartre relegates too big of a responsibility on consciousness and its freedom to find meaning in the world, trivializing the weight that the givenness of existence

actually has on us (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 77). As we shall see, Merleau-Ponty holds passivity and receptivity toward it to be key attitudes for the formation of meaning.

Of course, Merleau-Ponty realized that, according to Sartre, consciousness does not impose a *structure* on being, it does not construct it; being is *in itself* independent of consciousness; consciousness neither adds to, nor takes anything from being (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 55). But what consciousness does do is choosing a way about it that is meaningful, which is at the same time the only manner consciousness can attain meaning. Consciousness, as we have seen, is according to Sartre utterly free in its relation to the world and can thus disclose whichever part of being in a way that is meaningful. And this is giving consciousness a freedom in determining meaning that it in fact does not possess, says Merleau-Ponty. For Sartre, nothingness' openness upon being is thus absolute. Being floods in the field of consciousness with no resistance, naked, bare and flat, waiting to be signified by the for-itself's chosen projects.

But, as Alphonso Lingis writes in his preface to *The Visible and the Invisible*, pursuing the thought of Merleau-Ponty, "our openness upon being is not this absolute proximity" (1968, XLIII). Sure, it is only with the advent of man that being takes up meaning. But what Merleau-Ponty thinks Sartre misses in his philosophy of negativity, is the awareness that the things in the world *reveal* themselves meaningfully, and that we abide by such meanings. For Sartre, since consciousness is wholly responsible for choosing the ends in relation to which it finds a meaningful stance in the world, it cannot make sense of it but by its arbitrary, unjustified choice, which thus reveals the world *in itself* as meaningless. "[I]n seeking to make the openness upon being absolute, the philosophy of negativity makes it unintelligible" (ibid.). On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty insists that the world itself is expressive in many ways. However, as this expressivity becomes apparent, one at the same time realizes that the things do not appear in completeness. "[O]penness in being occurs in the form of a world, that is, a field, a topography, where nothing visible shows itself without therewith hiding most of itself, and hiding more of the visible behind itself" (ibid.). With this in mind, we can go on to see how Merleau-Ponty thinks that, despite its opacity, the world is discovered as already meaningful.

Merleau-Ponty: embodiment, dialectic and the common world

Let us restate. For Merleau-Ponty, it is not a one-way signifying act from consciousness' hold that imposes meaning on being, but a dialectic, a commerce with the world comporting both an active

imposing *and* a passive receptiveness of signification. Moreover, he notices a fundamental ambiguity in this meaningful relation to the world, an ambiguity that nonetheless allows for things to *reveal* themselves in their coherence and meaningfulness. We already begin to perceive that Merleau-Ponty's idea of meaning distances itself from Sartre's concept of meaning as absence. Meaning is connected to the *disclosure* of a meaningful structure in being, to a *relation*. But let us proceed in order. To understand this, we first have to look at some of the basics in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

As for Sartre, man is according to Merleau-Ponty an embodied subject, or as he alternatively calls it, a body-subject (Matthews 2002, 59). According to Merleau-Ponty, through our embodiment we are naturally directed toward the world, and we are fundamentally embedded in it, we are part and parcel of it, in perpetual playful contact with it. Being embodied, however, induces man's experience of the world to be inevitably perspectival. When we perceive a house or a tree, we perceive only certain sides of it. The front or the back, for example. But even though "we see a house, there is always more to the object than we can ever perceive" (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1964, XIII). As incarnate subjects, as Merleau-Ponty refers to man, our body places us in the predicament that we are "set to see more" as we can displace our perspective and explore more of the object in front of us (*ibid.*, XII). Our bodies are constantly exploring the world, revealing the hidden and helping to construct a unifying picture of that which is under our gaze. In this exploration, for instance, we often change our minds about what we see: the front facade of what I thought was a house shows itself to be a mere billboard depicting a house when I walk around it. "What is given is a path, an experience which gradually clarifies itself, which gradually rectifies itself and proceeds by dialogue with itself and with others" (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 97).

Merleau-Ponty's point seems to be that we construct the rationality and the regularity of the world, its meaning, by being in a symbiotic "commerce" with it (1964, 52), in a dialectic exchange with it, in dialogue with it, not by arbitrarily positing an in-itself-for-itself in relation to which we are a lack, as Sartre does. This reciprocal commerce is the fundamental fact of our existence. It is wrong to think that we ourselves are the only ones capable of giving meaning to our stance in the world, of making being arise in its meaningfulness by caprice, *ex nihilo*, although Merleau-Ponty does not contest that there is such an element of active imposing, as we shall see. But we participate in the world's signification as much as *it* pulls and influences us toward certain readings of it, certain understandings of the world and our orientation in it. By merely seeing

consciousness as a nothingness that “seeks [in things], so to speak, a stability which it lacks” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 73), Sartre’s philosophy of negativity ignores the fact that “there is being, there is a world, there is something; in the strongest sense in which the Greek speaks of [to legein], there is cohesion, there is meaning” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 88). And this cohesion, this primordial meaning in things, man perceives, grasps and makes sense of in a pre-reflective manner. Merleau-Ponty notices how “things attract my look, my gaze caresses the things, it espouses their contours and their reliefs, between it and them we catch sight of a complicity” (ibid., 540). Let us try to understand this better.

As already foreshadowed, on one important point, Merleau-Ponty agrees with Sartre. “It is true that nothing has *significance* and value for anyone but *me* and through anyone but me” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 510). In a way, says Merleau-Ponty, Kant (and Sartre) was right when he said that one finds in things only what one has put into them. But a *Sinngebung*, the act of setting oneself in meaningful relation with being, cannot be taken to be solely like this, merely centrifugal, as it is also for Sartre. This is because, continues Merleau-Ponty, “[i]n so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose” (ibid., 511). Our selfsame corporality (the fact of our having a body) teaches us that we are part of our world, not separate from it. By being inseparable from the world, we are involved in the construction of it as much as *it* (the world) is active in defining us. “There is an autochthonous significance of the world which is constituted in the dealings which our incarnate existence has with it, and which provides the ground of every deliberate *Sinngebung*” (ibid., 512). As I understand it, meaning is for Merleau-Ponty *lived-through*, in the sense that it gradually takes shape in a dialectical relationship with the world. I come to have a meaningful picture of the environment I stand in by appreciating how there is a congruence between me and it and the relation between us. By the simple fact of being shaped as I am, I understand which possibilities, for example, the world offers me. For instance, I immediately understand that this wall is too high and smooth for me to climb over. I find meaning in the process of adjusting myself to my environment through the pre-reflective grasp I have of the intentions and cues embedded in the world; I find it by *making sense* of the environment. Now, for Merleau-Ponty, we make sense of the environment in concert with others, a key aspect of his philosophy to which we now turn.

The shared world and ambiguity; meaning as lived-through

As has just been said, there are embedded intentions in the world that take up their meaning for an embodied subject in virtue of its specific embodiment, that is, by the mere fact that, to use Merleau-Ponty's synecdochally eloquent phrasing, it has hands, feet, and a body. Further, meanings come into being and become stabilized through "spontaneous evaluations" of these (ibid.). There are for me, as there are for other men, "certain shapes which are particularly favored" "that I am not surprised to find in all psycho-physical subjects organized as I am" (ibid., 511) and give me "a unified, unique and *developing* perceptual experience of [things]" (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 93, my emphasis). Merleau-Ponty uses an example that, in its simplicity and straightforwardness, I think enlightens the matter at hand perfectly. Given the following series of dots

a b c d e f g h i j

"we will always pair the dots according to the formula a-b, c-d, e-f, etc., although the grouping b-c, d-e, f-g, etc. is equally probable in principle" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 48). So, there are certain readings of reality that are common to all, and this is true even though we arrive at reality individually and privately from our own, personal point of view, that is, although perceptions are first of all mine and mine alone.

For although it is true that perceptions are private, that we arrive at the world separately from each other, it is important for Merleau-Ponty to underscore that the world that we perceive is a shared one and that awareness about this fact confers objectivity and reality to the objects perceived (ibid., 93-4). For Merleau-Ponty a prerequisite of perception is the belief of an "undivided being" between men, to which all have access and into which all can put their faith, a faith that allows communication about the world. In fact, the world is something we take for granted: when involved and engaged in their activities, men do not question, rather they implicitly abide by, the hold that they share about a situation, about their world. It is first in the moment I stumble and notice something out of order that it becomes apparent that I and my neighbor actually have two separate entrances in reality. "I would never know how you see red, and you will never know how I see it; but this separation of consciousnesses is recognized only after a failure of communication" (ibid., 94).

So, we naturally put our faith in reality. However, since our entrance into the world is perspectival and incomplete, as we saw, existence carries with itself a constant possibility of failure

– of misunderstanding the world. We might always have to reorganize our perceptual grasp of an object, so that “meanings can become stabilized but are *never absolutely secure*” (Matthews 2002, 100, my emphasis). Nevertheless, as Merleau-Ponty says, “[t]he fact that my experiences agree with each other and that I experience the agreement of my own experiences *with those of others*” (2007, 99, emphasis added), is enough for me to reliably deal with the world, to arrive at conclusions and understandings that allow me to orient myself in it – at least temporarily. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty's conception of a dialectical *Sinngebung*, or meaning-formation, leads one to understand existential justification, justification of one's hold upon the world, as relying on what I see as a pragmatic approach to the ambiguities of the world. Let us try to understand this.

Justification for one's entry in the world, for choosing this rather than that, or understanding something in a way rather than in another, appears in finding a congruence between my and the others' view on and hold upon reality, in seeing that we are able to successfully coexist in a world where our intentions, actions, perceptions, etc., can be commonly assessed and exposed to the yardstick of a shared understanding of the environment. In turn, this presupposes a faith, a trust in the world, a conception of reality as being unequivocally *there*, before both me and my neighbor.

If Sartre found no justification in existence in allowing consciousness a saltatory freedom, Merleau-Ponty finds it thanks to the faith he puts in the shared, commonly understood and meaningful world. Perhaps, the reason that Sartre fails to find even the slightest justification for man, was precisely the lack of such faith. But I will return to this later. For now it is important for us to say that for Merleau-Ponty, all experience is construed on the model of perceptual experience (Matthews 2002, 100). Indeed, this “primacy of perception” applies also to man's historicity, not only his bodily-perceptive life. At each moment, we experience an understanding of ourselves, of our socio-historical situation, of our standing in relation to the world's meaning-structures, in one word of our specific entry in and hold upon the world. For example, says Merleau-Ponty, we experience a pre-reflective understanding of the sublinguistic schema or spirit of a civilization (1964, 93). At each moment we make sense of our environment. But this comes with a price: we must give up the thought of trying to ground our lives absolutely. Our position in the world is contingent and our understanding of it ambiguous, in that we can never grasp its wholeness, although we effortlessly navigate through it. In a subject's understanding of and participation in a

given system of language, he first “espouses it before he becomes aware of it” (ibid., 88). And even when he does become aware of it, he cannot hope to fully contain it in thought, to totally *understand* how it works.

If we want to live meaningfully, I believe Merleau-Ponty to be saying, we must learn to cope with the ambiguity of the given. Order and rationality are achieved in an interaction with others and the history, language, and the conventions that these are bearers of, that is, *with the already given and meaningful world and its embedded intentions* that, however, never lead us to apodictic certainties, but rather meaningful ways to cope with our surroundings. Meaning is for Merleau-Ponty *lived-through* because its formation accompanies us and develops with our every step through existence.

III.

Summary and discussion by way of interlude

At this point I find it advantageous to stop and regroup our thoughts around what has been said so far and assess the matter. Sartre takes the world to be void of meaning except for the one that the for-itself *chooses* to impose on it. Meaning takes form, for Sartre, in that consciousness posits a fullness in relation to which it stands as lack. Unable to arrive at a coincidence with the in-itself that it has made its theme, consciousness is always separated by a film of nothingness from the whole it wishes to be, forever alien to it. “Imperfect being surpasses itself toward perfect being” (Sartre 2001, 65). For Sartre, meaning comes with a realization of failure. Meaning is absence and there is no justification for the continuous choice consciousness has to make of itself. Consciousness cannot ground itself.

World and consciousness *are* in exchange and communication, one needing the other *to be*, but even when welded together and interdependent, consciousness and being are separated by a veil of unassailable difference. The dichotomy always validly stands: being *and* consciousness. The fundamental dehiscence between being and nothingness uncompromisingly leads to a conception of consciousness as being utterly free, whose inevitable state is that of contingency and absurdity. Sartre allows nothing, it seems, to definitely impede the freedom of consciousness in its choice of direction or vocation, as it were. There is nothing consciousness *receives* or *accepts*, as was said above. Consciousness and the projects which it freely chooses (and just as freely changes) have an ontological primacy in the constitution of the meaning of reality. Merleau-Ponty is critical

to these views. In its projecting outburst in being, by finding meaning only in freely positing those projects and ends in relation to which it is a lack, consciousness overlooks the already-present meanings in the world, or at least it significantly downplays their ascendancy on its orientation in it. Unrestricted choice blindfolds consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty also believes that it is man's presence to give the world the possibility to reveal itself as meaningful, something implicit in Sartre's philosophy of negativity. But, importantly, the former insists on the dialectical process this implies. A philosophy of negativity, that emphasizes what *consciousness* allows to appear as meaningful, ignores the dialectics, the two-way signification between man and world which, if heeded, brings us to a path to be pursued and followed, as Merleau-Ponty has put it, a path which, if followed, gives us a stabilized, though neither apodictic nor infallible, hold upon the world by which to orient ourselves. By imposing the meaning that it chooses on being, consciousness for Sartre fails to account for the in-itself in its own right, it overlooks the *passivity* of experience and the meaningful anchor in being that this provides. Sartre fails to find a satisfying, justifiable and stable meaning in existence because he lays too much emphasis on the unfettered *freedom* of such existence. Sartre's philosophy is one that sees consciousness as situated, yes, but always with the last word, in its freedom, to determine the meaning of its entrance in the world.

I think that Colin Smith wonderfully explains Merleau-Ponty's view on how men actually experience the world when he says that for the latter, "experience could be described as contextual and exploratory" (1998, 31). As we have seen, experience is contextual in the sense that the embodied subject, which also is a historicized one, understands its position in the world and in a history by adjusting itself to certain already-present significations in its environment, its context. Explorative, because, as Merleau-Ponty explains in the case of perception, "perceiving a given thing does not guarantee that our experience will not be contradicted" (2007, 96). We are hence *set to see* more of our world, be it perceptually or with the historical eye. As Merleau-Ponty says in his *Phenomenology*, experience "always comes into being within a framework of a certain setting in relation to the world" (1962, 353). Meaning does not come by an arbitrary positing of an (unreachable) end, but rather in plunging in the world, in taking part in it. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, meaning is *lived-through* and constantly formed. It comes in place, it sediments as we move through the world, in a movement that allows for the world's different facets and hidden surfaces

to meet us, making sense out of it, adjusting our previous hold upon it to the picture of reality we make ourselves by gradually disclosing more of its nooks and crannies.

Moreover, and I think crucially in establishing the difference between him and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty notices that such signification must take place in a shared and commonly understood world, a real world that is already *there*. The world takes on reality in that we notice that certain *readings* of it are common to all. I become impatient when a friend fails to see a certain aspect of the landscape we have in front of us (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 94). As Leo Rauch has noted, “Merleau-Ponty is concerned to show the primacy of the given”, which is to say, that “The perceived object is already in a *world* of sense; matter is already pregnant with its form [and that this] perceived world [...] is the implicit foundation of all rationality, all value, all existence” (1998, 11-2). By taking the dialectic influencing between man and world as being fundamental, observing that there are certain psycho-physical structures shared by all men that occasion a unitary, common reading of the world, Merleau-Ponty positions common experience right at the base of meaning-formation. Obtaining a meaningful hold upon the world presupposes that there is an unequivocal reality, taken for granted and passively accepted as valid.

Although for Sartre, as we have seen, consciousness and world are in fact complementary and in constant communication, the in-itself is in the end at the mercy of consciousness to be given meaning, as it were, and therefore incapable of engaging in that dialectic of mutual influencing that is at the basis of Merleau-Ponty's thought. There *is* passivity for Sartre; it takes the form of our situatedness. But its meaning is constituted by consciousness' choice made in freedom. Sartre sees the body merely as the medium through which being is given. Its meaning is posited separately from the entry of embodied consciousness in being. “For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, to be embodied is *to find the meanings of situations and our responses to them already generally shaped as well*” (Compton 1998, 180).

I think it can be clearly stated as follows: Sartre gives too much importance, in the eyes of Merleau-Ponty, to the idea of the project, the signifying outburst that embodied consciousness meets the world with. For Sartre, man's situation is to be individually interpreted and signified. Merleau-Ponty is on the other hand more accepting and porous in meeting the world: he waits for it and, as it were, lets it speak.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty says that we must understand our stance in the world as being a process of constant interrogation. What I think he means by this is that

although at our entry in the world, its entirety always transcends our view on it, although our encounter with it is inevitably partial, limited and perspectival, nevertheless, by our continuous contextual exploration of it, by letting ourselves be borne by the dialectic between us and it, we can hope to arrive at an understanding of it, which tomorrow is possibly going to be different from the one of today, but that nonetheless today has aided us in handling our lives and in making sense of history's unfolding. Man wades through a river of meaning, a river whose waters change, but that nonetheless uphold man's vessel in its traverse.

The concept of meaning as absence and the concomitant failure to find a justification presupposes an utterly free consciousness that can posit ends and projects in relation to which it stands meaningfully as lack. By making the world the arena in which the nothingness of consciousness can freely direct itself without restraints, Sartre overlooks the already embedded meanings that the world has to offer. Because of this, consciousness always finds itself attached to being in a way that it cannot find justification for, it finds itself *lacking* because always directed beyond itself. To the contrary of this, Merleau-Ponty observes the presence of an intimate reciprocity between man and world, a reciprocity that reveals the world's already-present, embedded intentions that influence and are primordially understood by all men. Man has at each moment a meaningful hold upon his world. By a contextual and explorative dialogue with his environment, he is ready to always change and shift this hold, living in a perpetual, meaningful elaboration of reality, interrogating the world and its embedded meanings. Meaning for Sartre arises through a posited lack; for Merleau-Ponty it is constructed in life's strolling, it is corroborated and given justification by its ability to give us a unitary picture of the world so that coexistence with others in it is rendered possible and harmonious even though it is in constant change; meaning is lived-through in a perpetual, collective interrogation of the world. It is in this spirit of interrogation, of the dialogical elaboration of reality, that it makes it, I think, propitious to turn to Hannah Arendt.

IV.

Arendt: the ambiguous "who" and its passivity

But first: where are we in our discussion? And why bring Arendt in the picture? It must be remembered that the aim of the essay is to find out what lies at the basis of a world-view that allows for an existential justification to be found. Arendt holds such a world-view; so that the

objective is to understand whether her ideas are compatible with Merleau-Ponty's, as I will argue they are. Through this parallelism, we will be able to corroborate the view to which we have arrived: to allow for justification is a faith in the world whose understanding is commonly shared by men. But with this I do not want to say that Sartre is unequivocally wrong, rather that he is too much of a perfectionist. Is he abandoning himself to wishful thinking? Not necessarily. I see in his notion of the in-itself-for-itself and the existential frustration of not being enough, if not an inevitable truth, at least a way of thinking that is wholeheartedly human. Even Merleau-Ponty and Arendt think that a perfect coincidence with oneself and an ultimate knowledge about the world are out of reach. Ambiguity is for both inevitable. But I think that what the latter two consider as justification is more in consonance with human experience. To find a meaningful way to cope with the ambiguities of the world is more in the reach than the search for a God-like foundation, the one Sartre sought. But let us now turn to Arendt.

Like Nietzsche and, after him, also Sartre, the problem that Arendt mused over and that she attempted to find an answer to in her philosophical works, is whether human life as a whole can be said to have any meaning, or whether, as Nietzsche expressed it, life is truly “like a leaf in the wind, a plaything of nonsense” (in Beiner 1992, 145). According to Ronald Beiner, there are two phases in Arendt's thought that come to two different solutions to the problem, that nonetheless stand in relation to each other, both of which will here be explored. I will argue that Arendt's answers are very much in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's. For Arendt, meaning is lived-through as well, and the reaching of meaning and understanding shares the same formal structures of ambiguity and dialectic as in Merleau-Ponty's thought. Moreover, for her there is an element of passivity in the formation of meaning; man is not the sole responsible, but rather is both active and receptive in finding out “who” he is, as we shall see. Finally, according to Arendt, as for Merleau-Ponty, there are no firm, final answers that man can hope to reach, but a meaning, an understanding that can help him establish (a temporary) meaningful relation to his environment, can nonetheless be found in dialogue with it. Let us start by looking at her views around action.

For Arendt, man's peculiarity lies in the ability to act.⁴ Action is the highest of man's activities, the only one through which man can come to be called man and that gives him dignity.

⁴ For Arendt, action and speech are indissoluble from each other. Action, to be meaningful, has to be explained and recounted, which presupposes language. However, in my exposition, I sometimes let the notion of speech collapse in the one of action for expository practicality.

This is because in action man can express that which is individually particular in him, his person, a process that takes place in a world of other men. As soon as an individual is introduced in a community, he enters in significant relationships with his neighbors and surroundings that, with every interaction, contribute to the disclosure of the individual's idiosyncrasy and particularity, as if he were confronted by an impelling question the world directs at him: Who are you? (Arendt 1998, 180) "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (ibid., 179). For Sartre, the self is the "ultimate value" that consciousness desires to reach and ultimately coincide with. With Arendt, it actively takes form; it is enacted.

The enactment of a "who" leads, however, to Sartre's same disappointment: man can never reach a full coincidence with himself. Even according to Arendt, he has an ambiguous, incomplete understanding of himself, that he can never hope to have full control over. "On the contrary, it is more than likely that the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself" (ibid.). It is such that no one knows who one in truth is revealing when one steps out in the common world. But this need not scare us as it did Sartre.

For whereas Sartre makes consciousness posit a self beyond itself, a unitary totality which it misses, Arendt allows for a self, a meaningful though ambiguous whole, a "who," to appear in the dialectic of action among men. A meaningful picture of, or the life story about him is organized and meaningfully positioned in the *context* of his community, of his world, what Arendt calls the space of appearances (ibid. 199).

The disclosure of the "who" through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact. It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, [...] because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that it "produces" stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. (ibid., 184)

Man, the newcomer, eagerly sets out to reveal himself under invitation from the world, a world that is previously constituted and rich in *already* present meanings, other life stories. By being set in a living relation to these, in contact and in dialogue with them, a meaningful life story is revealed. Meaning, for Arendt, is thus even more literally "lived-through" than it is for Merleau-Ponty: my every action contributes to the jotting down of the story that my life is a constant development of, a story I and other men can in retrospect turn our gaze on and appraise in its whole, a whole that I will nonetheless never totally apprehend.

Man lives thus in an ambiguous relation to himself in a world that is already replete with meaning, in whose threads man knits his story meaningfully. Indeed, this knitting is not enacted solely by him, the actor. There is a factor of givenness, of passivity, in action: a man's actions must be set against and understood related to the already-existing patterns drawn in the world. The actor's story is meaningfully set in place in an already-present and meaningful world, in a continuous process of interpellation. The "who" is not only actively, but also passively shaped, simply by being set in relation to other already meaningful life stories. There *is* meaning in the world in the form of structures already in place, and these constitute the meaning of the "who" as much as it is itself active in determining it through its actions.

The fact that passivity, ambiguity and dialectic are essential for meaning-formation, that meaning is *lived-through*, Arendt obviously has in common with Merleau-Ponty. But as mentioned above, they share an ulterior similarity, an aspect that makes such meaningful dialectic possible in the first place: the faith in the reality of the world. So far in our discussion about Arendt, the world has been presupposed as the already-present, meaningful background against which life stories can be knit in relation to. But the already-existing world, together with the *common understanding* men have of it, which were two important aspects in Merleau-Ponty's thought, must now be made to the bearing themes, which will lead us to see how Arendt also finds existential justification in a pragmatic approach to understanding reality. By turning to this topic, moreover, Arendt's notions of understanding and judgment will come to the fore.

Sensus communis: meaning through understanding and judgment

It can be observed that, at the bottom of the latter process of meaningfully-coming-into-appearance, in the enactment of life stories, there lies an objective, worldly element. There is no doubt in this process about the fact that men in action share the same world. According to Arendt, men in action are directed toward the world that lies between them; it is what the action is *about*; action is about common interests, which is saying that it is impinged on that which *inter-est*, which lies between men (ibid., 182). Action presupposes the reality of the world, a solid grounding to which its stories can be firmly attached. Only by seeing action and trying to understand it in the light of this commonly shared reality, can it become meaningful. To grasp this, Arendt's notions of understanding and judgment must be introduced in the discussion. This is because Arendt realized that, to become wholly meaningful, action needs spectators, arbiters (Beiner 1992, 145).

A leading idea in Arendt, which reminds us of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "hold upon" the environment, is that every man has a need of reconciling himself to his world (ibid., 308). Judgment, together with the concomitant understanding it produces (and thereof a meaning), makes this reconciliation possible even though "it does not compel universal validity" (Beiner 1992, 104). A stable, meaningful account of man's environment presupposes, as we have already seen with Merleau-Ponty, a shared, common understanding of it and a faith in its objective reality, a *sensus communis*, that is, the sharing of "a nonsubjective and "objective" (object-laden) world with others" (ibid.). At a crucial juncture on the road to understanding this, we must contextualize.

Common sense, or *sensus communis*, "discloses to us the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world" and thus "enables man to orient himself in the public realm" (Arendt in ibid.). How? It seems to me that the same pragmatic approach to meaning and justification that was discovered in Merleau-Ponty, also becomes apparent here. Indeed, it is only on the basis of such common sense, of consciously sharing an objective world with others, that judgments about an environment leading to understanding, to a hold upon reality, to a general *agreement* between men on how reality is, are at all possible. Only by understanding the world as "an objective datum, something common to all its inhabitants" (Arendt ibid., 105), can men hope to come to a view upon reality they agree upon – albeit not an infallible one.

"Human beings can act as political beings because [...] they can share the world with others through judging what is held in common, and the objects of their judgments [...] are the words and deeds that illuminate the space of appearances" (ibid., 93). The judgment of the spectators produces understanding, which "is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world" (Arendt 1994, 307-8). Judgment and understanding about reality, summing up, presuppose a view of the world as real and utterly, unequivocally *there* and already meaningful in its essence. Moreover, understanding has the character of an endless elaboration of reality, a constant exploration that never reaches final answers, which is in accordance with what Merleau-Ponty had to say about this.

In fact, as seen above, our hold upon reality is never complete, something that is made explicit by the upsurge of historically contingent events, for instance. Just like the contradictions discovered in perceptual experience force us to readjust our hold upon our environment (by discovering, for example, that an object whose shape I thought was elliptical is, when I move

around it, actually round), in the same way, the change that historical events impose on the order of things, induce to a reassessment of it by the understanding. Arendt's interest in judgment and understanding, that is, her own quest after the discovery of new understanding, new meaning, was similarly initiated in connection with the upsurge of Naziism, in trying to understand those actions whose terrible, devastating effects appeared unintelligible, in that "[t]otalitarian phenomena [...] defy all rules of 'normal' [...] judgment" (Arendt *ibid.*, 314). For Arendt as for Merleau-Ponty, then, it seems that continuous dialogue, as opposed to *positing* a meaning or a final destination as it were, is the only way for men to get about, and for meaning to be formed. "If we want to be at home on this earth [...], we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with its essence" (Arendt in Beiner, 97).

Arendt's work on action and judgment can be seen, in a way, as a "meditation on whether man's worldly existence occasions gratitude for the givenness of being or whether, on the contrary, it is more likely to invite unrelieved melancholy," as Beiner puts it (1992, 93). In view of what has been said, Arendt holds that it is in the "faith in and hope for the world" (Arendt 1998, 247), the shared space of appearance that it offers men, a room in which men thus find a common ground, an intersubjective familiarity which they can speak of and linger on judgmentally, understandingly, it is only in believing in the *sensus communis* by which men know they share the same reality, that they can hope to find meaning and, more specifically, also find out "who" they are. But the meaning they find in things, in their life stories as well as in historical events today, they must be ready to discard tomorrow, as new contradictions will encounter them and force them to develop new yardsticks for evaluation, an evaluation that takes place in a constant dialectic with the environment.

Amor mundi. Only love and sheer devotion to and trust in the world, in the given, only by giving it the space it asks for in return, as Merleau-Ponty expresses it, can bring it to reveal itself to our eyes, through our actions and judgments, and only thus can we engage in a never-ending exploration of it, and possibly learn to make it our abode instead of seeing it as an isle of loss.

V.

Conclusion

What stands at the base of a world view in which meaning and justification are achievable, and what then is missing in one in which these are nowhere to be found? Are there different notions of

meaning and justification involved? These were the questions asked at the start of the essay, and whose answers I said I would endeavor to find.

For Sartre, meaning is absence. Consciousness, though embodied and situated, stands at every moment free to posit whatever end or totality in relation to which it meaningfully stands as lack. Precisely because of this saltatory license it has in constantly being able to redirect itself toward new ends and totalities, to always *choose* itself, consciousness finds no ballast in the world, as it carries the responsibility of the in-itself's signification solely on its shoulders. It is thus relegated to contingency. True, consciousness does depend on being and stands in a relation of interdependence with it. However, a philosophy of negativity, that sees an ontological dichotomy between the for-itself and the in-itself, does not take into account the passive, intrinsic, a priori meaningful relation it has to the world. The meaning and value of passivity is for Sartre to be chosen and interpreted. “[P]assivity can never be neutral; it always encounters us as meaningful, for example, as something to fight against or as something to yield to” (Catalano 1998, 169). Embodied consciousness has the primacy in ultimately determining itself and its relation to the external. “For Sartre, the doors to reality open only from our end” (ibid.). A world-view that does not find a justification in existence, is precisely only a *view* upon being; it does not consider the other term of this relation, the world, as on a par with the viewer in establishing a justifiable meaning.

For Merleau-Ponty and Arendt, on the other hand, meaning is lived-through. It is not posited as a whole in relation to which to stand, but rather it is taken up by the parts and fragments that are found out there in the world and followed, followed in the path that it offers, pursued contextually and in spirit of exploration, its validity gradually revealed and honed with the touchstone of experience. Hence, a world-view that finds meaning and justification in existence, is one that takes both terms in the relation man-world to have the same weight. It is, however, and because of this, also a world-view that does away with apodictic certainty. There is a justification for our entry in being, yes, but this can never be absolute; it is pragmatic. Our hold upon reality, our current understanding of the situation, is malleable and fluid, and its validity is given in terms of whether it allows us to orient ourselves understandingly in our environment, in a never-ending elaboration of reality. The Sartrean in-itself-for-itself is surpassed: a “who” takes form passively, in the context of its community, and it can blossom into existence even in ambiguity. Man does

not need to posit imaginary, unitary totalities to achieve meaning.⁵ The world can be made man's abode, man's reliable fundament, without being wholly understood. It just needs to be believed in and listened to.

⁵ That men do it anyway, as Sartre thinks they do, is another question.

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