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A LOGIC WITHIN CONTINGENCY: MERLEAU-PONTY ON THE HISTORICAL A PRIORI

ABSTRACT

This paper develops a systematic reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's implicit conception of the historical *a priori* within the scope of his philosophy of existence. We argue that Merleau-Ponty reconfigures the historical *a priori* as grounded in facticity, temporalized within lived time, and inseparable from socio-historical, linguistic, and embodied conditions of experience. Drawing on his notions of radical situatedness, generative phenomenology, and history, the paper continues to show that the notion of historical *a priori* functions in his philosophy as a node that mediates between embodied subjectivity and historically contingent horizons of sense. Understood as a 'logic within contingency,' it structures experience without assuming the form of timeless or apodictic necessity.

KEYWORDS

Historical *a priori*,
Historicity, Generative
Phenomenology,
Radical Situatedness

In recent debates on the notion of the historical *a priori*, Edmund Husserl and Michel Foucault are often taken to mark two distinct philosophical poles. As Dermot Moran observes, both thinkers investigate conditions of possibility, forms of sense-institution, and patterns of historical transformation, yet they do so within different frameworks (cf. Moran 2016: 13). While Husserl eventually identifies the historical *a priori* with invariant essential structures of the historical world, Foucault employs the concept to designate the historically specific conditions and limits under which knowledge is constituted and legitimized, thereby opening the way for an analysis of the relation between knowledge and power (cf. *ibid.*). Between these two positions, Maurice Merleau-Ponty is rarely discussed as a systematic interlocutor — even though his philosophy repeatedly engages questions of history and the sedimentation of meaning. His account is especially compelling because it avoids the two opposed theoretical impasses operative in Husserl and Foucault. On the one hand, it resists Husserl's de-historicization of the historical *a priori*; on the other, it resists Foucault's insistence that the historical *a priori* names specific epistemic conditions that

cannot be surpassed. If the former ultimately abstracts phenomenology from its historical conditions, the latter risks reducing epistemic horizons altogether to historically determinate conditions. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the historical *a priori* is particularly significant in this context insofar as it takes its point of departure from Husserl's phenomenological-generative analysis, yet turns toward a historically specific *a priori* without reducing it to epistemic horizons that function as strictly determining conditions.

This paper, however, does not offer a direct comparative reading of Husserl's, Foucault's, and Merleau-Ponty's respective approaches to the historical *a priori*. Instead, it argues that Merleau-Ponty shares a decisive interest in the problem of the historical *a priori*, even if he does not *explicitly* formulate it as a concept in its own right. His concern lies foremost in the question how subjectivity is entangled with a socio-historical horizon that is at the same time permeated by power structures — for example, in the form of specific economic or political conditions — while this social and historical horizon remains bound to subjectivity as its experiential field. Within the scope of his philosophy of existence, which we frame as a generative phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is neither primarily interested in the justification of knowledge (even though he does address this issue), nor does he focus explicitly on the relation between knowledge and power. Rather, he asks to what extent the subject–world relation is always already socially and historically *saturated*, and how this ‘saturation’ can be phenomenologically elucidated. In this sense, we argue that his work can be productively read through the lens of the concept of historical *a priori*, more specifically understood as a conceptual tool for examining how experience and subjectivity are always already shaped by and entangled with historical and social formations.

The paper unfolds in four steps. The first section reconstructs Merleau-Ponty's reconfiguration of the *a priori* as a decisive methodological reorientation of his phenomenology. By situating the *a priori* within the facticity, historicity, and embodied situatedness of experience, we show how Merleau-Ponty dissolves the traditional hierarchy between *a priori* and *a posteriori* and replaces it with a co-original relation grounded in existence. We here establish three guiding premises of our argument: the grounding of the *a priori* in facticity (i), its temporalization within lived time (ii), and the historical condition of all sense-genesis (iii).

The second section situates this reconfiguration within Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ‘radical situatedness.’ Here, we argue that phenomenological reflection is always already embedded in concrete socio-historical and linguistic conditions, and that this embeddedness is not a limitation but a constitutive feature of its praxis. By framing Merleau-Ponty's approach as a form of generative phenomenology, we show how his thought extends phenomenology beyond static and genetic analyses toward an account of the historical, inter-subjective, and instituting genesis of sense.

The third section turns to Husserl's notion of the historical *a priori* in the context of his generative phenomenology, focusing in particular on the tension

between universal claims and the linguistically mediated processes of sense-genesis. We argue that this tension provides the crucial background against which Merleau-Ponty's appropriation and transformation of the concept must be understood.

The fourth section develops Merleau-Ponty's own implicit notion of the historical *a priori* by bringing together his reconfiguration of the *a priori*, his philosophy of existence, and his engagement with Husserl. Through close readings of his reflections on history, we argue that Merleau-Ponty conceives the historical *a priori* as a symbolic, expressive, and linguistic matrix that mediates between embodied subjectivity, contingent elements of a cultural milieu, and intersubjectively shared sense horizons. The historical *a priori* here functions as a generative yet contingent horizon of sense-formation, allowing us to read Merleau-Ponty as articulating a distinctive account of the concept.

Reconfiguring the A Priori: Facticity, Historicity, and the Methodological Reorientation of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty's reworking of the concept of the *a priori* lies at the heart of his attempt to rethink the very method and scope of phenomenology. What is at stake in this reformulation is not merely a technical revision of transcendental philosophy, but a broader effort to liberate phenomenological reflection from the abstract formalism as well as ahistorical foundationalism of its Kantian and Cartesian legacies. In questioning the idea that the conditions of experience must be sought in a realm of pure, ahistorical necessity, Merleau-Ponty opens the *a priori* toward the contingency, historicity, and embodied facticity of lived experience.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty postulates that the phenomenological method entails a "new definition of the *a priori*" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 229). This reconfiguration places the *a priori* in a renewed relation to the *a posteriori*, without, however, allowing either term to "dissolve or [be] cancelled," as Sidra Shahid demonstrates (Shahid 2022: 400). Merleau-Ponty's argument begins by emphasizing the role of experience in relation to our knowledge of the *a priori*. As he explains:

From the moment in which experience – that is, the opening onto our factual world – is recognized as the beginning of knowledge, there is no longer any means of distinguishing a level of *a priori* truths and a level of factual ones, or between what the world ought to be and what the world actually is. The unity of the senses, which was taken as an *a priori* truth, is no longer anything but the formal expression of a fundamental contingency: the fact that we are in the world. The diversity of the senses, which was taken as an *a posteriori* given, including the concrete form that it takes in the human subject, appears as necessary to that world, that is, to the only world that we could think of with any importance; the diversity of the senses thus becomes an *a priori* truth. [...] these *a priori* truths amount to nothing other than the making explicit of a fact: the fact of sensory experience as the taking up of a form of existence [...]. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 229–30)

Of particular importance here is that Merleau-Ponty conceives of experience in terms of a *factual* relation to the world. His argument, then, starts with the premise that Kant did not fully follow through on his own insight that the *a priori* is not knowable prior to experience, “for he [Kant] sets out to define our powers of knowledge through our factual condition, and that should have obliged him to place every conceivable being against the background of this factual world” (ibid.: 229). Emmanuel Alloa reinforces this point when he observes that what Merleau-Ponty “criticizes in Kant is less his transcendental approach than, more precisely, the fact that he did not follow his program — namely, to define cognition in terms of the factual condition of the knowing subject — to its conclusion” (Alloa 2017: 29). The specific factual — that is, existential — relation to the world that Merleau-Ponty introduces must be understood in light of his reading of Martin Heidegger. As is well known, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the lived body draws upon and expands Heidegger’s concept of *being-in-the-world*, insofar as embodiment designates the medial and sensible anchoring of subjectivity beyond any strict dichotomy of subject and object — also read in the horizon of the phenomenological *noesis-noema* structure.¹ In line with this, Merleau-Ponty develops a conception of subjectivity attuned to existential dimensions that seeks to move beyond the Cartesian dictum of an egological philosophy of consciousness. He describes the lived body accordingly as “the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 84).

This implies, first, a reconceptualization of subjectivity through a certain notion of *existence*, and second, a characterization of *being-towards-the-world* as a practical and habitual mode of engagement within a concrete situation. We will return to this existential dimension in more detail in the next section. For now, it suffices to adopt a provisional definition of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of existence: “Existence [...] does not admit any pure facts in themselves, because *it is the movement by which facts are taken up*.” (Ibid.: 173; our emphasis)

The first premise of our argument is therefore that Merleau-Ponty’s reformulation of the *a priori* must be understood within the Heideggerian scope of his philosophy, and more specifically as determined by the facticity of experience.²

1 The relation between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger is, of course, more nuanced in this respect. For a more detailed account of their distinct arguments in the context of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, see Taylor Carman (2020: 106 ff.). A more extensive treatment of the relation between Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the lived body and Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world exceeds the scope of the present paper; for further discussion, see: (Aho 2005; Vallega-Neu 2019; Wehinger 2025).

2 As Taylor Carman puts it: “What Merleau-Ponty inherited from Heidegger, and what he could plausibly claim to be preserving through further elaboration of his own, is an idea that was anathema to Husserl, namely, that our immersion in our environment, our being in the world, renders impossible any reference to consciousness or subjectivity as an isolated or self-sufficient sphere or region of being.” (Carman 2020: 44)

The reconfiguration of the *a priori* that emerges from Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Heidegger signals at least three rearticulated dimensions in the relation between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*. This shift entails, *first*, a reconsideration of the relation between necessity and contingency, *second*, a rethinking of the temporal dimension of the *a priori*, and *third*, a concretization of the situatedness of experience, which increasingly shapes Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of the phenomenological method.

With regard to the relation between necessity and contingency,³ we would like to revisit the extended passage from *Phenomenology of Perception* cited above.⁴ Here, Merleau-Ponty argues that, once experience — understood as our concrete opening onto the factual world — is recognized as the true point of departure for knowledge, the traditional distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* collapses. The two are no longer opposed as necessity and contingency but rather emerge as interwoven dimensions of a shared field of sense. What had previously been conceived as an *a priori* truth — such as the unity of the senses — now appears as the expression of a fundamental contingency, namely the fact that we are in the world. Conversely, what was formerly regarded as an *a posteriori* given — the diversity and concreteness of sensory experience — proves to be necessary for the very structure of this world-relation. In this reversal, Merleau-Ponty dissolves the hierarchical opposition between *a priori* and *a posteriori*, showing that both *co-arise* from embodied and changing conditions of existence.

Secondly, this suggests that any reflection on conditions of possibility for experience and world-relatedness remains inseparably tied to the embodied situatedness of the reflecting subject and its conditions of reality. Accordingly, the *a priori* no longer refers to timeless structures imposed upon experience,

3 It is crucial to distinguish here between contingency understood as mere factual circumstance — the commonsense notion that empirical situations “could have been otherwise” — and contingency as the irreducible facticity through which sense-formation comes about. Merleau-Ponty's reconfiguration operates precisely at this latter level: facticity functions not as external constraint but as the very medium of sense formation.

4 Due to space constraints, we are unfortunately unable to provide a detailed analysis of this novel relationality between necessity and contingency — an analysis which would require a further elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's concepts of transcendence, the transcendental field, and the temporal dimension of his notion of institution. The notion of contingency plays a formative role in Merleau-Ponty's field-logic, extending from his conception of the field of experience, through the phenomenal and transcendental field, and culminating in his concept of institution as an operative category for the temporal-processual structure of the existential field. We refer here to Shahid's article, which offers a preliminary discussion of these issues, particularly where she argues against Andrew Inkpin that: “The suggestion that Merleau-Ponty's claim to contingency neutralized or replaces necessity, however, is unwarranted (as in Inkpin 2017: 49). For Merleau-Ponty, the transcendental a priori is both necessary and contingent. It is necessary insofar as it structures experiences, but this necessity is itself indexed to contingency, to the openness of the phenomenal field and to the facticity of lived experience. Though indexed in various ways, transcendental claims for Merleau-Ponty are a priori and necessary [...]” (Shahid 2022: 401)

but is itself embedded within a lived temporality.⁵ For generally speaking, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is marked by a sustained interest in the *actual* appearance of the world in its phenomenal givenness — which implies an analysis of the conditions of reality that precede any determination of allegedly universal conditions of possibility. The discovery of the world through experience, and its subsequent reflective articulation, is therefore neither a “passing to the infinity of the possibles” nor a “leaping into absolute objectivity,” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 105) but rather an *existential movement* oriented along an open, situated, and historically mediated field of phenomena.

Thirdly, these considerations must be situated within the broader context of Merleau-Ponty's methodological reorientation of phenomenology. Central to this reorientation is the radical embedding of knowledge within the facticity of experience and, more precisely, within the lived dynamics of perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty decisively breaks with the idea that thought can lay claim to a timeless or apodictic foundation. Instead, he insists that the validity of our ideas is historically and existentially conditioned, tied to concrete moments in individual and collective life. As he writes in *The Primacy of Perception*:

But in reality the ideas to which we recur are valid only for a period of our lives or for a period in the history of our culture. Evidence is never apodictic, nor is thought timeless, though there is some progress in objectification and thought is always valid for more than an instant. (Merleau-Ponty 1964c: 13)

This insight reveals the extent to which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is bound to the irreducible temporality and situatedness of existence. The method of phenomenological reflection can no longer proceed from a position of transcendental detachment; rather, it is rooted in the historical, embodied condition of the subject. As such, the reconceptualized *a priori* in Merleau-Ponty's work is no longer a timeless or purely formal condition of experience, but one that is itself temporalized — shaped by, and responsive to, the concrete, lived realities through which meaning emerges. Facticity, far from being a limit to reflection, becomes its very ground, and any *a priori* structure must now be understood as co-constituted within the flux of lived time and cultural history. In a similar vein, Gerhard Thonhauser articulates the point as follows:

[It] is no longer assumed that transcendental reflection can expose ahistorical conditions. Rather, the phenomenological way of raising the transcendental questions (which, after this transformation, might more adequately be called quasi-transcendental) is about making manifest the historically contingent conditions that underlie not only our everyday comportment, but also our possibility of transcendental reflection. According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is concerned with making visible the conditions that are determinative of our existence, while at the same time making us aware of their fundamental

⁵ For detailed discussions of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of temporality and its consequences for his accounts of subjectivity, phenomenological method, and the subject-world relation, see, for example: (Al-Saji 2009; Kelly 2010; Ossino 2025b).

contingency and specific becoming. In this way, the phenomenological approach to the transcendental question radically historicizes transcendental conditions of possibility. (Thonhauser 2023: 10)

We propose this temporal dimension as the second premise of our argument: insofar as the reformulation of the concept of the *a priori* is bound to the facticity of lived existence, it necessarily entails a temporality that unfolds within an expanded horizon of history. Before developing this premise further in relation to Merleau-Ponty's project of a generative phenomenology, we aim to situate it more specifically within his philosophy of existence, which emerges from his methodological reorientation of Husserlian phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Existence and the Radical Situatedness of the Subject

Merleau-Ponty's orientation toward Heidegger's concept of facticity carries far-reaching implications for his methodological understanding of phenomenology. As Thonhauser convincingly argues, Merleau-Ponty "explicitly opposes the idealistic understanding of the phenomenological method," (ibid.: 1) because "when conducting the phenomenological reduction and proceeding with the analysis of our being-in-the-world that it enables, we are confronted with a radical situatedness that underlies all our efforts at reflection and can never be fully recovered by them" (ibid.: 13).

The notion of "radical situatedness" that Thonhauser introduces refers to the ultimately inescapable embeddedness of subjectivity within its concrete, lived conditions of existence and marks Merleau-Ponty's decisive shift away from the idealist presupposition that phenomenological reflection can fully transcend its own experiential context. Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the phenomenological reduction marks a decisive methodological shift within the phenomenological tradition. While he adopts the *epoché* as a necessary gesture of philosophical reflection — namely, the suspension of habitual assumptions about the world — he simultaneously challenges Husserl's belief in the possibility of carrying this reduction through to completion. As he writes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction." (Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxxvii)

The phenomenological act of bracketing presupposes a position of a detached observer of the world that consciousness can never fully attain, since reflection is always already situated within the temporal, embodied, and affective life it seeks to analyze. Thus, the *epoché* remains a methodological *telos* rather than an achieved standpoint and moreover reveals a certain opacity and resistance of the world rather than overcoming them. Thus, the phenomenologist can never *truly* become an undetached observer that would "create a universe of absolute freedom from prejudice," (Husserl 1960: 35) because the reflecting subject remains a radically situated subject that cannot detach itself fully from its situatedness, nor should this be its methodological goal. In accordance with

Eugen Fink's characterization of the reduction as beginning from *thaumazein* — the philosophical wonder before the world — Merleau-Ponty conceives of the reduction not as a methodological detachment from, but rather as an effort to renew our wonder before the world (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxvii). In this sense, the phenomenological reduction is reinterpreted as a movement of immersion rather than withdrawal. It does not grant the philosopher a sovereign vantage point outside the happenings of the world but instead illuminates the irreducible fact of our entanglement in it. The task of reflection is not to transcend this embeddedness but to clarify it and thus to thematize the ways in which our lived involvement in the world, our bodily orientation, and our historical and linguistic situatedness shape the institution of sense.

In this view, the phenomenological reduction does not grant access to a pure, presuppositionless standpoint, but rather exposes the limits of reflection by revealing the ineliminable fact of our being-in-the-world. Thonhauser's notion of radical situatedness stresses that for Merleau-Ponty being situated does not merely imply a background condition to be bracketed but is understood as a constitutive structure of experience itself. Every gesture of reflection is already situated in an embodied, affective, linguistic and intersubjective horizon. Crucially, this means that phenomenological insight arises not through a methodological purification of experience, but through a deepened responsiveness to the concrete ways in which meaning is sedimented in practices, histories, and embodiment. Radical situatedness thus redefines the scope of phenomenology: it demands an attunement to the conditions that precede and exceed intentional consciousness. It affirms that reflection always begins in the midst of a world that it cannot fully master, and in so doing, grounds phenomenology not in ideal structures, but in the dynamic, lived texture of reality itself.

Building on the notion of radical situatedness, Merleau-Ponty's departure from Husserl's epistemological project of phenomenology as a "pure science" becomes increasingly apparent. By positing the theoretical passage through the *actual* as an uncircumventable condition of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty elevates the concrete situatedness of both the reflecting subject and the phenomena under investigation to a constitutive element of phenomenological analysis. It is the everyday experiences of "this world, of others, of human history [...] and of culture" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 94) that phenomenology must take as the beginning and horizon of its reflection. Accordingly, his phenomenological method does not abstract from language and history but begins from within them. This marks a decisive shift in phenomenological research: its focus turns toward the existential conditions of subjects embedded in a world that is always already shaped by language, history, and culture. These situating factors — spoken language, lived history, and social practice — are moreover understood as a form of "living generative sociality" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 107, referencing a letter Husserl has written in 1935 to Lévy-Bruhl; translation modified).

It is precisely this shift that leads Merleau-Ponty to develop what he calls a "philosophy of existence," (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1992) one that no longer seeks

to analyze formal invariants of experience in abstraction, but rather undertakes an analysis of the genesis of sense within a *generative* historical horizon. By generative phenomenology, we refer to a form of phenomenology that extends both static and genetic analyses by examining how sense is constituted, transmitted, and transformed within historical, intersubjective, and cultural horizons. Whereas static phenomenology focuses on the synchronous structures of sense and genetic phenomenology investigates the temporal development of sense within the life of an individual subject, generative phenomenology moves beyond both by attending to the *transgenerational* and originary *intersubjective* dimensions of sense-constitution. In this register, generative phenomenology asks how sense is sedimented, handed down, and reactivated across generations, how traditions and shared practices emerge, and how the lifeworld acquires historical continuity. It explores the ways in which cultural, social, and historical formations shape the possibilities of experience, while also showing how these formations are continually transformed through the ongoing practices of individuals and communities.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of existence — which cannot be reduced to existentialism in the sense developed by Jean-Paul Sartre — marks a discursive expansion of his thought beyond the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, insofar as it also engages with thinkers such as Georg W.F. Hegel, and, particularly, Karl Marx. Overall, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of existence is centrally concerned with three thematic domains: the situation of embodied being, intersubjectivity, and history. What is distinctive about his approach is that he conceives these three dimensions as *primordially intertwined* and elaborates this in terms of a field-logic. Thus, he speaks of a *field of existence*.

Generally speaking, existence designates neither an anthropological nor a purely subjective category; rather, it concerns the entire structure of our relation to the world and to others. This structure is characterized by its intrinsic situatedness, mediated through affectively-embodied as well as socio-historical horizons. Subjectivity is thus conceived as *always already* embedded within a field of coexistence, history, and institutions. We accordingly read in the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

If existence is the permanent movement by which man takes up and assumes a certain factual situation for himself, then none of his thoughts will be completely detached from the historical context in which he lives and, in particular, from his economic situation. The external becomes internal and the internal becomes external precisely because economics is not a closed world and because all motivations intersect at the center of history, and no part of our existence can ever be wholly transcended. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 177)

The quote indicates that the concept of existence is linked to a certain dynamic that — following Thomas Bedorf — can be understood as a form of subjectivation (cf. Bedorf 2025: 38–40). To approach subjectivity through the concept of existence means to trace how the lived reality of a factual situation

(radical situatedness) binds every act of reflection to a historical context, while Merleau-Ponty links the historical context of a lived reality repeatedly to *concrete* dimensions of a given historical situation, such as its economic conditions. The analysis of the field of existence marks, for Merleau-Ponty, the decisive step by which he carries his phenomenological analysis beyond a transcendental philosophy of consciousness and transforms it into a philosophy whose focus is extended to ‘*concrete*’ social and historical situations. What is at issue here is not the query into a transcendental ego, but the endeavor of describing a subjectivity that always already finds itself within a field of pre-given meanings, relations, institutions, and historical developments. The existential field understood in this way, so we argue, is not static but dynamic and generative: it opens spaces of possibility, shapes the horizons of action and perception, and bears the traces of past practices.

Central to understanding the field of existence in Merleau-Ponty’s work is, furthermore, the influence of Marx’ thought, particularly in its critical impulses. Merleau-Ponty is inspired by Marx’ research into the concrete reality of human relations, because what stands at the center in Marx’ analysis of society is not a set of ideas a society articulates about itself, but the actually lived social and material conditions within which human life takes place (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2023: xviii). Although Merleau-Ponty does not, in the manner of Michel Foucault, undertake concrete historical analyses of specific historical or philosophical contexts, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that he demands of his phenomenological method that it takes a certain concrete framework — the framework of radical situatedness — as the point of departure for analyzing the subject–world relation, intersubjectivity, and the embeddedness of experience in historical contexts. In other words, a philosophy of existence must, he argues, operate on the basis of acknowledging its own situatedness within concrete socio-historical and socio-material milieus. In this sense, Annabelle Dufourcq highlights that “the willingness to develop a philosophy of existence or of the concrete, [is] an undertaking that is riskier than classical rationalist philosophy precisely because it refuses to anchor itself on the basis of reason that is assumed to be absolute” (Dufourcq 2024: 13).

With reference to Merleau-Ponty’s implicit concept of the historical *a priori*, we propose — building on the first premise, that the *a priori* must be conceived in relation to the facticity of existence, and the second premise, that it possesses a temporal dimension dependent on historical horizons — a *third premise*, according to which the *a priori*, now already understood as a temporalized *a priori*, is bound to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of existence and thereby implies both a *concrete* and a *generative* dimension. In what follows, we aim to expand this third premise through a closer analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of central arguments of Husserl’s generative phenomenology.

Our argument, then, is that although Merleau-Ponty is profoundly influenced by Husserl’s ‘historization’ of phenomenology, he does not endorse the rationalistic and universalizing tendencies that continue to shape Husserl’s transcendental framework. In this light, and taking Husserl’s notion of the

historical *a priori* as a point of departure, it becomes possible to show how Merleau-Ponty simultaneously marks a distance from Husserl's position while further developing and reconfiguring crucial aspects of the generative analysis.

Recourse to Husserl's Notion of the Historical A Priori in the Context of his Generative Phenomenology

For Husserl, the question of historicity becomes increasingly central in his later phenomenological writings, particularly in *The Crisis of European Sciences*, where he seeks to clarify how meaning and ideality can retain validity despite being historically situated. While earlier works were primarily concerned with establishing a foundation for knowledge through static phenomenological analysis, Husserl later acknowledges that all philosophical reflection necessarily arises within a genetic and, more specific, generative constituted historical life-world [*Lebenswelt*], as the total horizon of sedimented meanings and traditions (cf. Husserl 1970: 124–25). Yet rather than embracing historicity as an interpretive context — as for example Wilhelm Dilthey does in his hermeneutic conception thereof — Husserl aims to phenomenologically grasp the *essence of historicity itself*, finally treating it as a transcendental structure to be regained (cf. Myers 2021: 114). For Husserl, then, historicization must be analyzed by means of the transcendental reduction that makes the very structure of historicity available to reflection. This methodological position puts him at odds with Dilthey's "critique of historical reason," which treats reflection as an understanding that is a socially and historically embedded activity itself (cf. Dilthey 1989: 500–501, 2010: 110).

Even though we will not reawaken the Dilthey–Husserl debate here — particularly the question of the danger of skepticism — it is nevertheless helpful to recall that Dilthey's hermeneutic account of historicity maintains that "the interpretation of our historical situatedness is potentially endless insofar as our sense for history is recognized as historically situated itself" (Myers 2021: 114). In contrast, as Christopher R. Myers points out, Husserl's seemingly paradoxical approach remains within a foundationalist transcendental setting in the sense that "the answer [to historicity] lies in the task of understanding our historical situatedness *in such a way that is not* historically situated" (ibid.: 115; our emphasis). In other words, Husserl seeks a level of reflection that goes beyond the process of historicizing in the sense that it aims instead at an understanding of the *universal* structure of historicity *as such*.

An ambiguity emerges here in Husserl's treatment of historicity. On the one hand, he acknowledges the necessity of methodological distancing, referring retrospectively to himself as an "ahistorical Husserl," who had to have at times distanced himself from history [...] in order to come so far in method as to pose scientific questions in regard to it" (Husserl, quoted in: Scharff 2018: 38). On the other hand, as Myers notes, the 'historical Husserl' was always aware "that consciousness is *factually* situated in historical circumstances" (Myers 2021: 116). This tension, between bracketing history for the sake of transcendental

analysis, on the one hand, and recognizing historicity as an irreducible feature of the facticity of subjectivity, on the other, remains a productive site of inquiry for contemporary phenomenology. We argue that Merleau-Ponty was aware of this tension and that, although he acknowledges that Husserl's later thought recognizes the importance of history for philosophical inquiry, his own understanding of history and historicity nonetheless diverges from Husserl's, insofar as it remains methodologically tied to his own conception of subjectivity as a radically situated existence. In this sense, we agree with Burt C. Hopkins when he states that

Husserl's epistemological commitment to pure cognition, together with his metaphysical commitment to pure subjectivity as the source of all objectivities and the meaning of all being, precludes the kind of radical confrontation with the finitude of human understanding that is necessary to do philosophical justice to this understanding's intrinsic historicity. Not only does Husserl's *a priori* mode of phenomenological cognition *in principle* exclude the attunement to the historical context of all understanding [...], but, because of this, his appeals to history in the *Crisis*-texts [...] at worst are contradictory. (Hopkins 2005: 179)

Our agreement with Hopkins, from a Merleau-Pontian perspective, therefore, concerns the decidedly epistemological orientation of Husserl's phenomenology, which, at the methodological level, repeatedly points to the possibility of a transcendental ego that can be established through a stance of disinterested observation and that, in principle, can detach itself from the lived facticity of the natural attitude. By contrast, already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the necessity of developing the phenomenological analyses — especially of time — considering the finitude and facticity of subjectivity. In this turn and throughout his later writings, he continues to eschew the reduction to a transcendental subject and productively reevaluates the intersection of historicity and situativity, an intersection that Husserl limits to personal subjectivity.⁶

In this section, we further elaborate the tension in Husserl's historicization of phenomenology by tracing it through his concept of the historical *a priori*. Since much of the research on the concept already highlights this tension (cf. Aldea and Allen 2016; Hopkins 2005; Myers 2021), we will here only indicate

6 The topic of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the transcendental is too broad to be discussed adequately here; for an overview, see the special issue edited by Andrew Inkpin and Jack Reynolds (2017). As Inkpin shows, if measured against the standard of Husserl's transcendentalism Merleau-Ponty does not meet the necessary requirements of a transcendental philosophy, even though he still maintains transcendental arguments (Inkpin 2017). Our own argument is most closely aligned with positions that emphasize Merleau-Ponty's premise of a chiasmic relationship between the factual/empirical and the transcendental (cf. Inkpin 2017; Morris 2017; Reynolds 2017). Based on the equivocality between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, the transcendental itself becomes dependent on that of which it seeks to provide the necessary conditions of possibility. The decidedly situated character of the historical *a priori* thereby leads to a phenomenological position that understands transcendental itself as mediated through *a posteriori* conditions.

those aspects that are crucial for Merleau-Ponty's reappropriation of the notion. One central issue appears to lie at the intersection of Husserl's postulation of, and sustained interest in, the linguistically mediated communal dimension of communities, on the one hand, — Husserl speaks of a “community of communication” (Husserl 1970: 360) — and the universal dimension of the historical *a priori*, on the other. Husserl refers to the concept of the communicative community on multiple occasions in his manuscripts on intersubjectivity (cf. Husserl 1973: 194) and in the appendices of *Crisis* (cf. Husserl 1970: 328ff., 358ff.), and it can be considered an important prerequisite for the methodological reflections in the *Crisis* (ibid.: 70ff.). Patricia Meindl and Dan Zahavi identify three key interests in Husserl's notion of the community of communication: its role as a requirement for transcendental claims, its relevance for personhood, and its general importance for the constitution of the social world (cf. Meindl and Zahavi 2023). In *The Origin of Geometry*, these concerns are approached by Husserl with a particular emphasis on the generative dimension of community. Here, the notion of communicative, linguistic community serves to describe the manner in which *cultural traditions* are being passed down across generations through language, most notably in documented — that is, written — form (cf. Husserl 1970: 358ff.). The main tenor here is that cultural traditions become accessible to subsequent generations only through a successive process of communication among subjects. Community is thus understood as historical in the sense of a generative intertwinement of the sense horizon of personal subjects. Husserl argues that while cultural traditions are embodied in concrete linguistic forms, they are never fully determined by them, since their sense must be taken up and actualized by subjects and thus stay open to transformation.

In this sense, language functions as the medium in which original acts of sense constitution are reiteratively sedimented and rendered capable of reactivations across intersubjective and historical dimensions. Husserl additionally writes: “In the unity of the community of communication among several persons the repeatedly produced structure becomes an object of consciousness, not as likeness, but as the one structure common to all” (ibid.: 360). He maintains that “human beings are necessarily members of generative communities and thus necessarily live in every communal surrounding world as their own surrounding world, in which, in this respect, a universal historicity holds sway” (ibid.: 331). In this regard, the historical *a priori* assumes the function of guaranteeing the *a priori* ‘unity’ that makes a universal historicity possible. We further read:

[The] whole of *the cultural present*, understood as a totality, ‘implies’ the whole of the cultural past in *an undetermined but structurally determined generality*. To put it more precisely, it implies a continuity of pasts which imply one another, each in itself being a past cultural present. And this whole continuity is a *unity* of traditionalization up to the present, which is our present as [a process of] traditionalizing itself in flowing-static vitality. (Ibid.: 371; our emphasis)

Husserl famously characterizes this processual unity as “the concrete, historical *a priori* which encompasses everything that exists as historical becoming and having-become” (ibid.: 372). Importantly, the term ‘concreteness’ should not be mistaken for a reference to empirical or merely factual historical events; rather, it denotes the underlying structural unity that conditions the very possibility for such events to appear and be understood as historical. In this sense, the concrete historical *a priori*, for Husserl, functions as the ground for historicity itself. This indicates that historical conditions are only accessible on the basis of a structural unity that remains implicit as “the general ground of meaning” [*allgemeiner Sinnesboden*] (ibid.: 371), understood as the dimension through which historical meaning can become intelligible. At the same time, this unity is encountered evidently only from within a specific historical situation in which a horizon of sense is passed down. The concrete historical *a priori* thus does not merely encompass the givenness of the historical unity – which would only imply its static framework – but rather the ongoing becoming of history’s concatenated unity through the mediation of a particular present. It is in this sense that Husserl can speak of a “historical present in general” (ibid.: 372) and understand the situatedness of subjectivity as an invariant that is given through a historically sedimented lifeworld.

From this point of departure, the historical *a priori* emerges as the concept that embroils a subject’s – and specifically its *spiritual* – activity within its historical horizon. However, as part of his critique of historicism, Husserl clearly argues against allowing this historical entanglement to entail a facticity of the historical *a priori* itself, for any attempt to ascribe facticity to the historical *a priori* would already presuppose the very structural conditions of historical intelligibility that the historical *a priori* is meant to account for (cf. ibid.: 349). He likewise advances, in *The Origin of Geometry*, a critique of historicism insofar as it attempts to historicize the historical *a priori* itself. He argues that any historicization of the historical *a priori* already presupposes history as a universal horizon of historical intelligibility (cf. ibid.: 373). Accordingly, he maintains that historicity *itself* can only ever be universal, since “it lays claim to a strictly unconditioned and truly apodictic self-evidence extending beyond all historical facticities” (ibid.). This ultimately allows him in the *Crisis* to develop an apodictic historical method that has “perfect insight” (ibid.: 71) into the “total unity” (ibid.: 72) of the primal institution [*Urstiftung*] of sense.⁷

At this point, however, the internal tension of Husserl’s concept of the historical *a priori* comes fully into view. While the notion is introduced precisely to secure the universal unity of historicity, it simultaneously relies on and refers to contingent, linguistically and materially mediated processes of sense-institutions [*Sinnstiftungen*]. In this double commitment to universal, apodictic validity on the one hand, and to historically contingent conditions of linguistic and socio-material dimensions of sense-production, the conceptual

⁷ On Husserl’s motivation for the concepts of *Stiftung* and *Urstiftung*, and their connection to his idealist framework, see, for example: (Marsico 2023).

problem of the status of the contingent and universal dimensions of the historical *a priori* arises.

This tension has been taken up and further articulated by several commentators. Andreea Smaranda Aldea and Amy Allen, for instance, point out that the notion of the historical *a priori* has given rise to an analysis in which pre-theoretical and theoretical levels must remain inseparably entangled (cf. Aldea and Allen 2016: 3). Dermot Moran similarly elaborates the tension by arguing that Husserl's account of the concrete historical *a priori* entails the recognition that human life is inescapably bound to its own temporal horizon, while at the same time conceiving this historicity as an "invariant essential structure" (Moran 2016: 23).

We here do not aim to resolve this potential difficulty within the scope of Husserl's own phenomenological project. For the purpose of the following discussion of Merleau-Ponty's reconfiguration of the historical *a priori*, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that the concept is intrinsically marked by a tension between, on the one hand, a contingent dimension of generative traditions that concerns its linguistic and material conditions — which Merleau-Ponty calls, differing from Husserl's description, its *concrete* historical dimension — and, on the other hand, the claim that these traditions rest upon a unitary and universal ground that is not itself subject to historical contingency. In the background of the Merleau-Pontian perspective on the tension within Husserl's concept of the historical *a priori* lies, moreover, a critical stance toward Husserl's tendency to reintegrate the concept into the domain of transcendental consciousness oriented toward *transparent* insight. Against this tendency, Merleau-Ponty departs from Husserl by refusing both to refer history back to consciousness and to fully exclude its contingent aspects.

Reconfiguring the *Historical A Priori* through Merleau-Ponty

In the first step, we will examine Merleau-Ponty's explicit reference to the concept of the historical *a priori* to establish the orientation of his reconfiguration of, and interest in, this notion. In the second step, we will then return to the three premises of his original conception of the *a priori* as identified in the first part of our argument and articulate their relevance to the specifically '*historical*' *a priori*. The three premises can be summarized as follows: first, the reformulation of the *a priori* is understood within a Heideggerian horizon of the facticity of existence; second, the understanding of the *a priori* does not refer to timeless structures, but is embedded in a lived temporality; and third, Merleau-Ponty's claim that the validity of our ideas is historically and existentially conditioned, and thus tied to concrete epochs of collective life.

Already in the *Phenomenology of Perception* we find a reference to the historical *a priori*, not in a systematic or conceptually isolated manner, but embedded within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of embodiment, existence, and history. The context in which he uses the term is therefore decisive: it concerns the question of the existential world-relation of our subjectivity

that always already involves a history. Against this background, he introduces a distinction between two ‘histories’ to analyze the temporality of human existence. On the one hand, there is a “banal” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 90) cyclical and repetitive history, which corresponds to the level of habitual embodiment and reflexes. This banal history unfolds according to relatively stable rhythms and regularities; it is characterized by repetition rather than innovation and by a temporal structure that is closer to recurrence than to eventfulness. At this level, subjectivity carries a past that is sedimented in embodied dispositions and habitual patterns of responsiveness, forming a kind of pre-personal ‘memory’ that continues to operate pre-reflectively. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes an open and singular history, which he understands as a more ‘genuine’ notion of history. This second notion pertains to “a second order of phenomena if history were a series of events that not only have sense, but provide themselves with that sense” (ibid.). This second notion of history is not governed by mere repetition, but by the emergence of events that transform the field of possibilities itself. It is this second order of history in which subjects and collectives act, decide, and reinterpret their situation, thereby producing new configurations of sense. Unlike the ‘banal’ notion of history, this second form is oriented toward the future and is marked by creativity. Crucially, Merleau-Ponty insists that these two ‘histories’ do not simply coexist side by side, nor can they be cleanly separated. They are internally related and partially overlapping, even if they never fully coincide. Human existence is the site of their constant intertwining: embodied repetition provides the sedimented background against which historical novelty can emerge, while historical action, in turn, reshapes embodied habits and modes of comportment.

For Merleau-Ponty, the notion of historical *a priori* designates precisely this *zone of mediation*, in which historically formed structures of sense guide action without rigidly determining it, and in which ‘freedom’ operates only against the backdrop of sedimented sense-horizons and habitual embodiment. Accordingly, he emphasizes that:

The subject of history does not create his role from scratch. Faced with typical situations, he makes typical decisions [...]. These stereotypes are not for that matter a destiny, and just as clothing, jewelry, and love transform the biological needs from which they are born, so too, within the cultural world, *the historical a priori is only consistent for a given phase and provided that the equilibrium of forces allows the same forms to remain*. History, then, is neither a perpetual novelty nor a perpetual repetition, but rather the *unique* movement that both creates stable forms and shatters them. (Ibid.; our emphasis)

Merleau-Ponty’s interest in the “role” of the subject in history can be understood, in a Husserlian sense, as an inquiry into the entanglement of subjectivity with its historicity. We learn here, first, that this ‘entanglement’ is permeated by typifications and “stereotypes” that do not operate in a strictly deterministic manner. Rather, Merleau-Ponty compares them to cultural phenomena such as clothing or even love which possess the *transformative capacity* to act

upon our most fundamental needs. What is particularly striking in the quote above is that the historical *a priori* is explicitly situated in relation to the cultural world. In this sense, it is not the description of a universal, ahistorical structure, but instead is understood as possessing *a specific consistency relative to particular historical phases*.

While Husserl's generative phenomenology is somewhat present in the concept, insofar as it serves to elucidate the historicity of a 'communicative community,' Merleau-Ponty's concern stays specifically directed toward the cultural and intersubjective dimension of the notion. Moreover, from this important passage in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, we learn that the concept is intended to describe a "unique movement" that mediates between dimensions of ideality and empiricism, and that articulates a processual structure beyond both mere repetition and absolute novelty. An example of a concrete historical *a priori*, understood in this specifically Merleau-Pontian sense, is the phase of puberty. We read in his lectures on *Child Psychology*:

The problem [of puberty] consists in carrying out a welding between the psychic element of affection [...] and the increased reality of sexuality and instinct. The child creates this development under the conditions of the ambient culture. [...] Development is not inscribed a priori in a static nature, nor does it arise *ex nihilo*. Rather, it progresses from *Gestaltung* to *Gestaltung*, as a writer slowly creates his language. (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 224)

In the example of puberty we can discern, on the one hand, the convergence of an 'empirical' dimension of sexuality and an 'ideal' dimension of affection. These two dimensions stand in a relation of mediation and are, moreover, situated within a broader relation to the "conditions of the ambient culture," which exert an influence on this medial structure and thereby introduces an element of contingency into it. The development of puberty does not inscribe itself into a structure of static *a priori*; rather, it works in analogy to the genesis of Gestalt-like perception. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that Merleau-Ponty compares this form of development — its "unique movement" — to the creation of a language. This circles us back to Husserl's horizon of language as part of the historicity of generative communities.

What is particularly striking is that, in his lecture on institution — where Merleau-Ponty engages with Husserl's concept of *Stiftung* as developed within his generative phenomenology — he returns to the phenomenon of puberty and explicitly describes it as an institution. Puberty as an institution of sense is here understood as a "symbolic matrix," (Merleau-Ponty 2010b: 18) in the manner of a "formative event or institution [that is not] merely corporeal, not merely psychical, but a nexus of the one with the other" (Merleau-Ponty 2010b: 22). Without entering here into a detailed discussion of Merleau-Ponty's notion of institution itself we will instead focus, in light of the preceding argument, on the extent to which the historical *a priori* has a symbolic and linguistic dimension that Merleau-Ponty describes as a "matrix" and which establishes a "nexus" that proceeds according to the logic of perception and

thus creates an originary in-between of empiric and ideal dimensions of our being-in-the-world.

In his lecture on *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty engages directly with Husserl's generative phenomenology, particularly with his fragment *The Origin of Geometry*. Here, Merleau-Ponty takes up Husserl's interest in the transmission of sense across generations and engages closely with Husserl's thematic focus on the specific ideality of generative sense. In doing so, he offers the following reception of Husserl's line of thought:

The structures of the ideal and of the construct are still structures of lived experience: horizon and sedimentation — *Sinnbildung* and *Sinnentleerung* and their *Beweglichkeit*. Eidetic variation as horizon in principle. Science as praxis. [...] Hence universal historicity. The a priori of history as universal history. This a priori is *Sinnesboden* ['ground of sense']. The historicity of philosophy. The problem of reason: is there a universal a priori and a total reactivation [or a speech within Being]? [...] Thus pure ideality is an *Idealisierung*. This does not mean that it is uncertain, but that the evidence of our idealized capacities and of the idealized *constructum* is particular. [...] Logical activity is specifically tied to language (HUA 374). [...] For Husserl, it is impossible to distinguish in this way the theory of knowledge from history, the epistemological from the genetic origin (HUA 379). [...] What is at issue is an a priori of history, a structural a priori (HUA 380). Is this a priori the return of the Kantian notion found in the period of *Ideas*? (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 62)

What emerges here, above all, is Merleau-Ponty's distinct appropriation of Husserl's thought, which foremost reveals how he understands the historical *a priori* — namely, within the horizon of his own reconfiguration of the *a priori*. First, it becomes evident that he conceives of ideality as a structure of lived experience, more specifically in terms of horizon and sedimentation. The universality on which Husserl insists is, moreover, explicitly tied by Merleau-Ponty to the conception of science as praxis. Husserl's universal historical *a priori*, understood as *Sinnesboden*, thus becomes the lived horizon and the specific sedimentations of sense that emerge from lived practice.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty somewhat relativizes the very notion of universality by understanding "pure ideality" as a *practice* of idealization that is *bound to language*. In doing so, he aligns himself above all with the 'historicizing' Husserl, for whom language constitutes a necessary condition of ideality — *qua* communicative communities. Of particular importance for Merleau-Ponty's own account of the historical *a priori* is the final question he poses, which indicates a reservation to the universalizing component of the historical *a priori* and his uncertainty as to whether this should be conceived in a Kantian manner — an option that would run counter to his own reconfiguration of the *a priori*.

Merleau-Ponty ultimately interprets Husserl against the Kantian notion of the *a priori* and emphasizes that Husserl's historical *a priori* must be understood as the "ground or horizon of sense," as a "bearer of a horizon of history," and as the "unity of traditionalization up to the present" (ibid.: 63). What emerges from this reading is that Merleau-Ponty does indeed endorse a form

of *structural pervasiveness* of the historical *a priori*, insofar as it constitutes the horizon and ground of sense of historical sedimentation within a ‘unified’ framework. At the same time, however, he repeatedly stresses that this structural unity is bound to our knowledge of it, and that this knowledge itself remains embedded in a specific praxis articulated through a specific language and thus tied to contingent forms of culture. This recurring insistence on contingent aspects of the historical *a priori* — grounded in its embeddedness in cultural praxis and spoken language — should not, however, be misunderstood as a return to factual history [*Tatsachenwissenschaft*] or to “ontic history as a series of facts” (ibid.). On the contrary, by conceiving history itself as the historical *a priori*, Merleau-Ponty binds it to the very movement of history.⁸ This movement, however, cannot be reduced to a series of factual events, and neither unfolds according to teleological schemas nor is reducible to genetic structures of consciousness; instead, it remains anchored in socio-material and cultural formations of practice and language, thereby inscribing a degree of inertia to the movement of history.

We can link this line of thought back to Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the historical *a priori* in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. There, he aims to describe a “unique movement” of history that accounts, on the one hand, for the sedimentation and repetition of sense, while, on the other, leaving open the possibility of creative transformation of its horizon. In understanding the historical *a priori* as the very movement of history itself, this movement does indeed possess a certain generality, insofar as it functions as the processuality of horizons of sense that comes with a degree of stability and inertia. At the same time, however, this generality is understood as itself temporalized — and, in a certain sense, historicized — by virtue of its dependence on contingent dimensions. This brings us to the second part of this section, which is concerned with reconsidering the ‘historical’ *a priori* in light of the three premises of the reconfiguration of the *a priori* in Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

1) *A priori structures are anchored in the facticity of our existence.* The first point we developed regarding Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the *a priori* concerns its Heideggerian scope, insofar as Merleau-Ponty binds subjectivity to a notion of existence understood as an ‘opening onto the world,’ which he further elaborates on in terms of a facticity. In this way, a fundamental contingency is inscribed into our relation to the world — one that first signifies that we are in the world at all but also concerns the radical situatedness in a *specific* world with concrete cultural, economic and political conditions. The fact that we are perceptually and existentially thrown into the world, and that a sense of reality is constituted through this specific world-relation, designates the inescapable facticity of existence. Merleau-Ponty further binds the concept of

8 Consequently, his concept of the historical *a priori* is closely connected to his broader notion of history. Since the latter is rather complex, we refer here to relevant literature on the topic and wish to emphasize that Merleau-Ponty developed his own philosophy of history to a significant extent through a critical engagement with the thought of Karl Marx and his notion of praxis.

history — as outlined above — to contingent factors such as language and cultural praxis. Merleau-Ponty furthers this in that he argues for the *a posteriori* (contingent dimensions of experience) and the *a priori* (necessary structures) as not standing in a hierarchical relation, but rather as co-original and mutually implicating structures.

When this framework is applied to the concept of the historical *a priori*, it becomes evident that the *a priori* truth of the unity of history remains an expression of a fundamental contingency: namely, the fact that we are in the world, and that the contingency of our world-relation itself constitutes a necessary structure of that relation. From this it follows that even though Merleau-Ponty indeed implies a structural logic to the historical *a priori*, this unitary logic is a logic within contingency. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

History is therefore a logic within contingency, a reason within unreason, where there is a historical perception which, like perception in general, leaves in the background what cannot enter into the foreground but seizes the lines of force as they are generated [...]. (Merleau-Ponty 1970: 9)

The historical *a priori* thus constitutes a necessary structure insofar as it functions as the generative horizon of sense-genesis; yet this horizon remains bound to the contingency of the facticity of our existence. The commonsense understandings of contingency and necessity are thereby significantly modified. Contingency is radically reconfigured in that it is no longer the simple opposite of necessity but rather its intrinsic condition.

2) *A priori structures are not timeless but embedded within lived temporality.* By repeatedly tying both the *a priori* and the historical *a priori* back to the actual perception of the world and to our habitual, embodied relation to it, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that *a priori* structures themselves can no longer be conceived as timeless forms but must instead be understood as embedded within lived temporalities. We have elaborated on this point in particular through the notion of the “radical situatedness” of subjectivity, which also binds Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy methodologically to specific experiences of time, including temporal formations in the sense of historical epochs. One may recall, for instance, his description of the historical *a priori* as being “consistent with a given phase.” What becomes evident here is that Merleau-Ponty’s very concept of the historical *a priori* is itself, in a certain respect, historicized. We therefore suggest that his account can be read in proximity to hermeneutical conceptions of history, insofar as “the interpretation of our historical situatedness is potentially endless insofar as our sense for history is recognized as historically situated itself,” (Myers 2021: 114) as Myers observes.

This argument is furthermore connected to Merleau-Ponty’s specific understanding of the horizon. Within his philosophy, the historical *a priori* is conceived as the generative horizon of sense-institution. He characterizes this structural horizon primarily in terms of “typic” and “style” and as a “horizon *a priori*” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 35). Crucially, this ‘horizon *a priori*’ is not an “endogenous condition of possibility,” but rather a “possibility as *Möglichkeit*

an Wirklichkeit" (ibid.). By binding the horizon *a priori* — here synonymous with the unity of the horizon structure of the historical *a priori* — to the notion of *actuality*, Merleau-Ponty once again temporalizes the *a priori*, insofar as actuality ties every horizon back to embodied subjectivity. For this reason, he concludes unambiguously that

In reality, the ideas to which we recur are only valid for a period of our life or for a period in the history of our culture. Evidence is never apodictic, nor is thought timeless, though there is some progress in objectification and thought is always called for more than an instant. (Merleau-Ponty 1964c: 13)

3) *A priori structures are tied to praxis and language.* As we have argued above, Merleau-Ponty understands the radical situatedness of our subjectivity as a constitutive structure of our relation to the world. As a result, concrete modes in which sense sedimentation occurs are always already inscribed in this relation — namely, through praxis, habitual embodiment, language and culture. If the historical *a priori*, understood as the generative horizon of sense-genesis, is likewise a constitutive element of our field of experience, then ‘constitution’ must here be thought along perceptual, linguistic, imaginative, and symbolic horizons. For Merleau-Ponty not only describes the “unique movement” of the historical *a priori* in analogy to the movement of language and as a “symbolic matrix,” but also emphasizes that our knowledge of any notion of *a priori* remains bound to these symbolic and linguistic elements. In this sense, we argue that the symbolic, expressive, and linguistic ‘matrix’ itself describes Merleau-Ponty’s own notion of the historical *a priori*, specifically in its mediating dimension.

While one might argue that the historical *a priori* constitutes the most basic structure of our entanglement with history, this is not to be misunderstood as an apodictic and universal (in the strict sense) notion, since our entanglement with it is tied to contingent aspects of our lived reality. Moreover, what we can say about the historical *a priori*, and the manner in which we articulate it, remain correlated with a specific historical epoch and our situation as speaking philosophers.

Conclusion

In this paper we argued that Merleau-Ponty can be read as articulating a distinctive conception of the historical *a priori* that neither coincides with Husserl’s transcendental universalism nor collapses into a purely empirical account of history. By reconstructing Merleau-Ponty’s reconfiguration of the *a priori* within his philosophy of existence, we have shown that what is at stake in his concept of the historical *a priori* is a logic within contingency. We understand this logic as a historically effective structure that institutes experiences without assuming the form of timeless or apodictic dimensions of this structure.

Our analysis proceeded by establishing three core premises. First, that Merleau-Ponty anchors the *a priori* in the facticity of existence. For him, the

conditions of possibility of experience emerge from our embodied, situated being-in-the-world. The historical *a priori* thus expresses a structured contingency: the fact that we are always already engaged in a world shaped by social, cultural, economic, and political conditions; while simultaneously functioning as a *necessary* horizon of sense. Second, Merleau-Ponty temporalizes the *a priori*, for rather than constituting an ahistorical structure, it unfolds within lived time and is consistent only “for a given phase.” From this temporalization we deduced that the historical *a priori* is subject to transformation, sedimentation, and reactivation, without thereby losing its structuring function. Third, our knowledge of any *a priori* structure is mediated through praxis, language, and symbolic forms. We showed that the historical *a priori* specifically functions as a symbolic and expressive matrix, in that it binds sense-formation to historically specific practices and communicative communities, making any philosophical articulation of it necessarily situated.

Against this background, Merleau-Ponty’s position can be productively situated between Husserl and Foucault. Like Husserl, he maintains that history is not a mere succession of empirical facts but presupposes a structural horizon of sense-genesis. Yet unlike Husserl, he refuses to locate this horizon in a transcendental subject capable of apodictic insight. Instead, the historical *a priori* is understood as inseparable from contingent conditions of the social field as well as from embodied existences that carry it forward. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty moves decisively toward Foucault’s understanding of the historical *a priori* as a set of concrete, historically specific conditions that make certain forms of knowledge, practice, and subjectivity possible at a given time.⁹ More precisely, Merleau-Ponty already articulated this understanding prior to Foucault. While Merleau-Ponty does not undertake an archaeological or genealogical analysis of discursive formations in Foucault’s sense, his concept of institution provides a phenomenological account of how concrete socio-historical and socio-material conditions are symbolically, corporeally, and temporally inscribed into lived experience.

Seen in this light, his account preserves the insight that history has a structural logic, while radicalizing it by binding this logic to contingency, embodiment, and praxis. The historical *a priori* thus names neither an eternal form nor a merely empirical configuration, but a dynamic, generative horizon — one that both constrains and enables historical transformation. This conception not only clarifies Merleau-Ponty’s place in debates on historicity but also underscores the relevance of his phenomenology for contemporary critical and historical philosophies concerned with the situated conditions of meaning, normativity, and power.

9 Although the present paper does not engage with the intersections between Foucault’s analyses of power structures within the horizon of the historical *a priori* and Merleau-Ponty’s critical social philosophy, we wish to signal this as an important direction for future research. A more extensive engagement with this topic would require careful examination of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of history as it unfolds within his critical engagement with Marxism, communism, and liberalism. Relevant scholarship on this issue includes, among others: (Crossley 1994; Dru 2021; Feron 2022; Ossino 2025a).

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Logika unutar kontingencije: Merlo-Ponti o istorijskom *a priori*

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad razvija sistematsko tumačenje implicitne koncepcije istorijskog *a priori* kod Morisa Merlo-Pontija u okviru njegove filozofije egzistencije. Tvrdimo da Merlo-Ponti rekonfiguriše istorijski *a priori* tako što ga utemeljuje u faktičnosti, temporalizuje unutar proživljenog vremena i pokazuje njegovu nerazdvoljivost od društveno-istorijskih, jezičkih i oteľovljenih uslova iskustva. Oslanjajući se na njegove pojmove radikalne situiranosti, generativne fenomenologije i istorije, rad dalje pokazuje da pojam istorijskog *a priori* u njegovoj filozofiji funkcioniše kao čvorište koje posređuje između oteľovljene subjektivnosti i istorijski kontingentnih horizonata smisla. Shvaćen kao „logika unutar kontingencije“, on strukturira iskustvo, ali ne dobija oblik bezvremene ili apodikticke nužnosti.

Ključne reči: istorijski *a priori*, istoričnost, generativna fenomenologija, radikalna situiranost

