The works of Merleau-Ponty represent the account of a thinker who devoted much intellectual effort to survey the relation between human subjects and the sensible domain. His investigations of this relation take shape in the numerous texts that make up his phenomenological project. The guiding thread of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology lies in its endeavor to overcome the traditional dichotomy between subject and object. Merleau-Ponty’s concern with the relation of consciousness and nature is the basis of the engagement of his phenomenology with the idealist and realist position on this issue. The idealist tradition, which posits the world as the representation of consciousness, and realism, for which the world is already posited prior to consciousness, provide the critical ground for the development of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Realism and Idealism play structural roles in the progress of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology because they supply the prevalent views of the relation between consciousness and nature that Merleau-Ponty sets out to reassess. Merleau-Ponty’s objective is to put forward an account of this relation, which overcomes the separation between subject and object that is posited by the traditional schools. His phenomenology, which is structured around perception attempts to put forth an alternative account of the relation between consciousness and nature.

Another distinctive aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is its agreement with the area of aesthetics. References to literary figures such as Malraux, Proust, Claudel, Valéry, and various painters are ubiquitous in Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre. Such references to the works of novelists and painters are usually propaedeutic to his phenomenological arguments. The consistency of the area of aesthetics in Merleau-Ponty’s works avers that it represents an essential feature of his phenomenology; aesthetics represents a means of articulation for the phenomenology of perception. Evidence for this claim lies in the central role of painting in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. This affinity derives from Merleau-Ponty’s view of perception as expression since it allows the sensible to appear without being thematized by the subject. The practice of painting represents the apogee of the phenomenology of perception. It is the objective of the present essay to try to understand how the practice
of painting becomes the consummation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception.

In order to examine the centrality of painting in his phenomenology we will consider the artistic style of an impressionist who influences Merleau-Ponty’s works significantly. The influence of aesthetics upon Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is crystallized around the impressionist painter Paul Cézanne. Cézanne’s impact is revealed through Merleau-Ponty’s frequent allusions and his assessment of Cézanne’s style of painting in the essay *Cézanne’s Doubt*. Merleau-Ponty’s propensity toward Cézanne’s technique raises the following question: what was the ground of Merleau-Ponty’s interest in Cézanne’s style of painting? We will attempt to draw out the motive for Merleau-Ponty’s attraction to Cézanne’s style of painting, and illustrate the aspects of his phenomenology that are reflected in Cézanne’s painting. Let us begin by understanding the structure and stages of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception since its culmination in painting can become transparent unless we grasp the aspects of its constitution that are echoed in the act of painting.

**A. Refutation of Idealism and Realism**

In order to follow the trajectory of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological project it is important to understand the fundamental goal that initiates it. The initial drive of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology derives from his aim to offer an alternative approach to the investigation of the relation between nature and consciousness. In the philosophical tradition, the perennial issue of the relation between subject and object has been addressed by idealism and realism. Instead of complying with either side, Merleau-Ponty initially adopts an approach that partakes in both, idealism and realism. This approach takes the shape of an account of behaviors because of its mediate status between idealism and realism.

The account of behaviors is innovative not only because it draws out the responses of living organisms to environmental stimuli, but also because idealism and realism can only offer partial account of its occurrence. The idealist account is limited because the spontaneity of natural responses, in the occurrence of behaviors, eludes the reflective stance, which dissociates itself from the environment in the idealist attitude. On the other hand, in order to account for behaviors, realism would have to posit the
priority of natural stimuli over the consciousness of the living organism. The partiality of each account derives from the impossibility to separate the reaction from environmental stimuli in the behaviors of living organisms. In behaviors the stimulus and the responding organism are essentially related. As Barbaras observes: “L’organisme ne répond pas au stimulus en tant que celui-ci est doué de propriétés objectives, mais seulement dans la mesure où il a une valeur au regard des a priori vitaux de l’animal.”1

The descriptive account of the behaviors of organisms introduces natural ontology as an alternative to idealist and realist ontology. This project takes shape in the study of the behaviors of lower organisms with the assistance of psychology in Merleau-Ponty’s first work: The Structure of Behaviors. This work is fundamental in Merleau-Ponty’s corpus because it introduces natural ontology in his project. In Merleau-Ponty’s words: “…le comportement n’est pas une chose, mais il n’est pas d’avantage une idée, il n’est pas l’enveloppe d’une pure conscience et, comme témoin d’un comportement, je ne suis pas une pure conscience.”2 In this passage, it is noteworthy that the ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty draws is not intrinsic to the nature of behaviors. The ambivalent status of behaviors stands as the expression of the restriction of idealist and realist ontology. The Structure of Behaviors represents the author’s first attempt to find an alternative to idealism and realism. Also, it is the pioneer of a critique of idealism and realism that remains as a central motif of Merleau-Ponty’s later works.

One of the strategic implications of natural ontology is that, via the analysis of animal behaviors, it suggests the inadequacy of idealism by asserting the existence of the world as transcendence. It challenges idealism in its assertion that the sensible domain, as the bearer of stimuli, cannot be the mere creation of a constitutive consciousness. The idealist position conflicts with the intimate relation of the stimulus, as transcendent, with the organism. The analysis of behaviors establishes the world as an independent entity from the representation of consciousness. It defeats idealism by reinforcing that “Le rapport signifiant de l’organisme à son milieu demeure un rapport à une réalité, à

1 Renaud Barbaras, De L’être Du Phénomène: Sur l’ontologie de Merleau-Ponty, (Editions Jerome Millon., 2001) p.22. Hereofore will be cited as EP. [The organism does not respond to the stimulus because it has objective properties, but only in the measure in which it has values in relation to the vital a priori of the animal.]
2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, La Structure Du Comportement, (Presses Universitaires de France, 1972) p. 138. Hereofore will be cited as SC. [Behavior is not a thing, nor is it an idea, it is not the envelope of a pure consciousness, and as a witness of a behavior, I am not a pure consciousness.]
une transcendance, et ne repose donc pas sur une conscience transparente à elle même, sur un acte de connaissance…”

Through natural ontology, Merleau-Ponty elicits the naivete of idealism.

However, this realization becomes problematic because it points out an implicit commitment between natural and objective ontology. It undermines approach of natural ontology to offer an alternative account of the relation between nature and consciousness. The inclination toward objective ontology is displayed in the fact that Merleau-Ponty is employing the discoveries of the psychology of form to support his investigation in *The Structure Of Behavior*. In this work, natural ontology is developed as an extension of psychology, which is an objective scientific method. The justification of the apparent association of natural and objective ontology in *The Structure of Behaviors* is that Merleau-Ponty is using psychological discoveries to challenge idealism. In addition, psychology, as a science, is closer to phenomenological procedure than idealism. Objective ontology is preferable to idealism because it asserts the autonomous status of the world from consciousness. “Si Merleau-Ponty se tourne ici vers la science, c’est dans la mesure ou celle-ci fait de la phénoménologie: comprise de manière conséquente, la notion de forme libère une perspective transcendentale.”

Merleau-Ponty pursues the endeavor to overcome idealism and realism more rigorously in his second work. He undertakes the process to overcome objective ontology in his doctoral dissertation: *Phenomenology Of Perception*. The scope of this work is twofold: it is both a critique and phenomenological task. Merleau-Ponty engages in a formal criticism of the idealist and realist account of the relation of consciousness and nature. And he posits the scope of the work as purely descriptive rather than analytical or explanatory. In Merleau-Ponty’s words:

Il s’agit de décrire, et non pas d’expliquer ni d’analyser...Revenir aux choses mêmes, c’est revenir à ce monde avant la connaissance dont la connaissance parle toujours, et à l’égard duquel toute détermination scientifique est abstraite, signitive et dépendante,... Ce mouvement est absolument distinct du retour

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3 *EP*, p.23 [The significant relation of an organism to its environment remains a relation to reality, to transcendence, and does not rest on a consciousness, which is transparent to itself, on an act of knowledge.]

4 *EP*, p.22 [If Merleau-Ponty turns toward science, it is in the measure, where it does phenomenology: understood accordingly, the notion of form frees a transcendental perspective.]

5 Although we do not want to get ahead of ourselves, it is important to mention that the problem becomes more acute in this work as Merleau-Ponty attempts to find a concrete mediator between nature and consciousness. According to some commentators, the problem remains insoluble until *Le visible Et L’Invisible*. 
idéaliste à la conscience et l’exigence d’une description pure exclut aussi bien le 
procédé de l’analyse réflexive que celui de l’explication scientifique.6

The structure of the exposition consists of delineating the inability of idealist 
philosophy and the objective sciences to arrive at the proper rapport between 
consciousness and nature. Moreover, the descriptive account of the relation of 
perception and the world is meant to formulate a substitute that does away with the 
opposition between nature and consciousness. Merleau-Ponty carries out these two 
procedures in a descriptive manner. In the introduction, he engages in a description and 
critique of sensory perception as a propadeutic. As the title of the introduction, _Les 
Préjugés Classiques et le Retour aux phénomènes_, indicates, Merleau-Ponty revises and 
critiques the traditional interpretation of sensory perceptions in order to put forth a 
construal that conforms with his phenomenological project. This deed has a strategic 
purpose since an authentic return to the phenomena is feasible unless the prejudices of 
idealism and realism, which pervade the traditional interpretation of sensory 
perceptions is revised. Olkowski comments upon the structure of the introduction in the 
following:

The introductory section of Merleau-Ponty’s _Phenomenology of Perception_ consists 
of four chapters. The first three contain a critique of key perceptual notions as 
developed and utilized by empiricism and intellectualism. These notions include 
sensation, association, the projection of memories, attention, and judgment. In 
each case, Merleau-Ponty finds these notions to be nothing but markers, logical 
abstractions which misinterpret perceptual phenomena because they reduce 
them to the simplest possible elements.7

The criticism of idealism and realism is present in the introduction as the description of 
their failure to offer proper accounts for sensory perceptions. The critique persists 
throughout the _Phenomenology_ under various motifs. “D’une manière pratiquement

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6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, _Phénoménologie de la Perception_, (Editions Gallimard, 1945) p.2-3 dans
l’avant-propos. Heretofore will be cited as _PhP_. [what matters is to describe, and not to explain, nor to 
analyze. To return to the things themselves, is to return to this world prior to knowledge of which 
knowledge always talks about, and towards which all scientific determination is abstract, signified, and 
dependent,…This movement is absolutely distinct from the idealist return to consciousness and the demand 
for a pure description excludes as well the procedure of reflective analysis and scientific explanation.]

7 Dorothea Olkowski, _Merleau-Ponty and Bergson: The Character of the Phenomenal field_, in _Merleau-
Heretofore will be cited as _dmp_.

constante, la pensée de Merleau-Ponty, dans la Phénoménologie de la Perception, s’organise à partir d’un double refus: d’une part le refus de l’idéalisme (ou philosophie réflexive) et, d’autre part, le refus de l’ontologie objectiviste.”

Merleau-Ponty engages with idealist philosophy through constant references to the flaws of Kantian and Cartesian philosophy. The critique of the objective sciences happens through the assessment of the contributions of psychology, physiology, and physics to the issue of the relation of nature and consciousness. The continuous engagement with idealism and realism permeates the exposition under the form of the opposition of the psychic and physiological. Merleau-Ponty holds Cartesian duality responsible for psychology’s categorization of its observations under the psychic and the physiological. “…enfin l’union de l’âme et du corps, supposée par ces deux explications, était comprise selon la pensée de Descartes, comme une union de fait dont la possibilité de principe n’avait pas a être établie,…”

The conflict between the psychic and physiological represents the animating tension of the exposition and the occasion for the central theme of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to emerge. The critique of intellectualism and realism sets the ground for the introduction of the notion of corps propre. Merleau-Ponty claims that the way to overcome the dichotomy between consciousness and nature is to return to the fundamental notion of existence. For Merleau-Ponty, existence constitutes the integration of the for-itself and in-itself and is the root of consciousness in the world. “Ce qui nous permet de relier l’un à l’autre le ‘physiologique’ et le ‘psychique’, c’est que réintégrés à l’existence, ils ne se distinguent plus comme l’ordre de l’en soi et l’ordre du pour soi, et qu’ils sont tous deux orientés vers un pole intentionel ou vers un monde.”

It is precisely in the orientation toward the world that existence is concretized as an intentional entity through the body. “Le corps est notre moyen général d’avoir un monde...En lui nous apprenons à connaître ce noeud de l’essence et de l’existence que

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8 Jean-Yves Mercury, Approches De Merleau-Ponty, (L’Harmattan, 2001) p. 12-3. Heretofore will be cited as AM-P. [In a practically consistent fashion, the thought of Merleau-Ponty, in the Phenomenology of Perception, is organized around a twofold refutation: on the one hand the refutation of idealism (reflective philosophy) and, on the other hand, the refutation of objective ontology.]

9 PhP. p.111-2 [ the unity of soul and body, supposed by these two explications, was understood, according to the thought of Descartes, as a union of fact for which the possibility of principle had not been established]

10 PhP. p.103 [What allows us to link the one with the other the ‘physiological’ and the ‘psychical’, is that reintegrated to existence, they are no longer distinguished as the order of the in-itself and the for-itself, and they are both oriented towards an intentional pole or a world.]
This transition introduces the notion of the *corps propre*, which stands as the intersection of nature and consciousness.

**B. The Transition from *Corps propre* to *Chair***

The idealist view conceives of the body in accordance with Cartesian duality. It posits the body as a distinct entity from the mind, which regulates bodily functions. It reduces the body to the medium that carries out mental operations. Merleau-Ponty opposes this view because it overlooks that: “…notre corps n’est pas objet pour un ‘je pense’: c’est un ensemble de significations vécues qui va vers son équilibre.”

On the other hand, the realist view of the body as pure object prompts the scientific attitude toward the body as a reactive mechanism, which has a causal relation with its environment. This interpretation of the body reduces it to a set of physiological operations. The flaw of this approach to the body is that it neglects the fact that: “Les différentes parties de mon corps, ses aspects visuels, tactiles et moteurs ne sont pas simple coordonnés.”

Given that such misconceptions of the body are concomitant to the idealist and realist account of the relation of nature and consciousness that Merleau-Ponty is attempting to defeat, thus, he needs to put forth an alternative to their conception of the body as well.

Merleau-Ponty seems to have been aware of this necessity. As a means to address this requirement, he provides an analysis of bodily functions at their most primitive stage. The emphasis upon the operations of the body at their primitive level is meant to accentuate its immediate connection with its natural habitat. This emphasis is the drive behind the narrative of Schneider’s pathology and the frequent examples of children’s behaviors in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. For Merleau-Ponty, pathological and infantile behaviors represent the expression of the unity of the subject with the

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11 *PhP*. p.171-2 [The body is our general way to have a world…Through it we learn to know the unifying thread of essence and existence that we usually find in perception and that we will have to describe more fully.]

12 *PhP*. p.179 [our body is not an object for an ‘I think’: it is a set of lived meanings, which is going towards its equilibrium.]

13 *PhP*. p.174 [The different parts of my body, its visual, tactile, regulating aspects are not simple coordinates.]
environment. “Comme toujours chez Merleau-Ponty, la pathologie ou la primitivité révèlent l’expérience originaire du ‘normal’…” In this context the ‘normal’ is the unity of consciousness with nature. This return to the primitive association of subject and environment eventually leads to the _corps propre_, which symbolizes the transcendence of the idealist and realist conception of the body and asserts the _envelopment_ of nature and consciousness.

The _corps propre_ is one of the pivotal achievements of the work because it is in agreement with the objective that Merleau-Ponty claims at the beginning. As the descriptive account, which allows a return to the things themselves, the living entities that constitute our environment, the _Phenomenology of Perception_ introduces a new perspective of the body as the _living_ recipient of all worldly experience. According to Merleau-Ponty’s description: “…je perçois avec mon corps ou avec mes sens, mon corps, mes sens étant justement ce savoir habituel du monde, cette science implicite ou sédimentée.” One may observe from this claim that Merleau-Ponty does away with the usual dissection of the body into the senses. The _corps propre_ is a unified entity, which cannot be reduced to mere senses, nor alienated from its _envelopment_ with nature. “Ce que nous enseigne la _Phénoménologie de la Perception_ c’est que le ‘corps propre’ (qui peut en dernier recours échapper aux antinomies, aux oppositions dualistes de type sujet-object) est le lieu où le rapport au monde à l’être s’effectue.”

Despite the originality of the introduction of the _corps propre_ as an alternative to the idealist and realist position, cautious pondering of its presupposition and implication expose its limit. The discovery of the _corps propre_ is the outcome of the early project that Merleau-Ponty undertakes in _The Structure of Behaviors_. Since the drive of the exposition was to demonstrate the partial elusiveness of behaviors to idealism and realism, it nevertheless remains within their parameter. It borrowed from objective ontology, the findings of the psychology of form. On the other hand, its implicit commitment to idealism lies in the assertion of consciousness “Parce qu’il détermine la téléologie à partir de la conscience…le phénomène est toujours déjà subordonné à la

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14 _EP_. P.28 [As always in Merleau-Ponty, pathology or primitivity reveal the original experience of the normal.]

15 _PhP_. 275 [I perceive with my body or with my senses, my body, my senses being this usual knowledge of the world, this implicit science or sedimented.]

16 _AM-P_. p. 17 [What the _phenomenology of Perception_ teaches us is that the ‘corps propre’ (which in the last resort can escape the antinomies, the dualist opposition subject-object) is the place where the intersection between the world and being occurs.]
The indebtedness of Merleau-Ponty’s examination of behaviors persists throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which according to Barbaras is “…conduite sous le présupposé de la conscience, la *Phénoménologie de la perception* demeure profondement tributaire de l’intellectualisme qu’elle dénonce.” Thus, the expression of this dependence re-surfaces in the characterization of the *corps propre*, which is conceived as a mediator of the radical split between nature and consciousness. Merleau-Ponty reaches his objective to offer an alternative to idealism and realism; however, it remains a middle path instead of a complete renunciation. Barbaras comments upon the issue in the passage below:

Merleau-Ponty oscille donc entre une conception unitaire du corps et une vision dualiste, qui fait du corps le ‘moyen’ de la conscience; il ne parvient pas à penser *ensemble* l’identité et la différence de la conscience et de son corps, c’est à dire à décrire *positivement* la non-appartenance du corps au domaine de l’objet comme à celui du sujet.

Merleau-Ponty remains dependent upon the traditions that he wishes to refute. The dependence of the *corps propre* upon idealism and realism arises as a structural necessity. The origin of this dependence derives from Merleau-Ponty’s initial refusal to adopt a definite position, but instead proceeds to critique idealism and realism by describing their inadequacy. “Ne voulant rien préjuger, nous prendrons à la lettre la pensée objective et nous ne lui poserons pas de questions qu’elle ne se pose elle-même. Si nous sommes amenés à retrouver l’expérience derrière elle, ce passage ne sera motivé que par ses propres embarras.” The role of mediator of the *corps propre* derives from the self-determining power that Merleau-Ponty grants to the exposition.

This structural subordination to idealism and realism remains a central issue in Merleau-Ponty’s other works. The attempt to sever this bond becomes an important

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17 *EP*. p.33 [Because teleology is determined from consciousness… the phenomenon is always already subordinated to consciousness.]
18 *EP*. p.33 [is conducted under the presupposition of consciousness, the *Phenomenology of Perception* remains profoundly dependent upon intellectualism, which it denounces.]
19 *EP*. p. 26 [Merleau-Ponty oscillates thus between a unitary conception of the body and a dualist vision, which turns the body into the means of consciousness; he does not come to think the identity *and* difference of consciousness with its body *together*, meaning to describe *positively* the non-belonging of the body to the domain of the object as that to the subject.]
20 *PhP*. p.86 [To avoid prejudices, we will take objective thought in its true form and we will not raise any question that it does not raise itself. If we are brought to find experience behind it, this passage will be motivated by its own limitations.]
structural theme of the successive works to the *Phenomenology*. The failure to adopt a
definite position at the early stage of the development of the phenomenology of
perception compels him to take on a radical view in order to extricate his project from
the net of idealism and realism. The obligation to develop an independent outlook upon
the relation of consciousness and nature occasions the major turning point of Merleau-
Ponty’s thought, mainly, a passage from phenomenology to ontology. The effort to
produce a new conception of being inaugurates the second stage of Merleau-Ponty’s
philosophical project, which encompasses a broader scope than the previous descriptive
stage. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the shortcoming of his phenomenology and the call
for an ontology in a working note: “Résultats de Ph. P. – Nécessité de les amener à
explicitation ontologiques: la chose, le monde, l’être, le négatif, le cogito, Autrui, le
langage. Les problèmes qui demeurent après cette 1ère description: ils tiennent à ce que
j’ai gardé en partie de la philosophie de la ‘conscience’.”

This decision determines Merleau-Ponty’s crucial move, which is to jettison the
primary role of consciousness. This fact bears significant alterations. Consciousness is no
longer that to which all phenomena are subordinated, it becomes a moment of the
world. At this juncture, the relation nature-consciousness is superseded by the expression
of being; the _corps propre_ and consciousness become expressions of a common source.
Moreover, the world loses its status as an objective finality because it is posited as the
continual source of expression of consciousness and _corps propre_. “Abordé à partir de
l’expression, le monde ne peut plus être défini par la présence mais comme ce dont l’être
est d’excéder toute présentation: devenue philosophie de l’expression, la
phénoménologie de la perception s’accomplit comme ontologie.” Merleau-Ponty’s new
task is to elucidate this fundamental ground, which represents the turning point of his
philosophical project. *The Visible and the Invisible* is the work that introduces Merleau-
Ponty’s ontology of expression, which revolves around the notion of _flesh_ (chair).
Merleau-Ponty makes the following statement regarding this new notion:

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cited as Vi. [Results of Ph.P — Necessity to bring them to ontological explicitness: the thing, the world,
being, the negative, the cogito, otherness, language. The problems which remain after this 1*°* description:
they derive from what I kept, in part, from the philosophy of ‘consciousness’.]
22 EP. p.81 [Dealt with from expression, the world can no longer be defined by presence, but as that whose
being is to exceed all representation, having become philosophy of expression, phenomenology of
expression accomplishes itself as an ontology.]
Quand nous parlons de la chair du visible...Nous voulons dire, au contraire, que l’être charnel, comme être des profondeurs, a plusieurs feuillets ou a plusieurs faces, être de latence, et présentation d’une certaine absence, est un prototype de l’Être, dont notre corps, le sentant sensible, est une variante très remarquable, mais dont le paradoxe constitutive est déjà dans tout visible...23

This passage brings out the transformation of the body, which was a mediator of the idea and object in the *Phenomenology of Perception* to a vehicle of being. The body is simultaneously an expression of the *flesh*, which simultaneously occasions further expressions of the various layers of being. The *telos* of the previous phenomenological procedure is replaced by an *arche*. “Alors, à l’infinité du *telos*, mise en évidence dans l’acte expressif, correspond l’infinité d’une arche.”24

However, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of expression is confronted with a new issue. The expressive status of the *arche* as the source, which is in continuous flux seems to suggest a regression to an essentialist perspective. A misinterpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the *flesh* is very likely to be the perspective that the *arche* is the essence of all things. The essentialist misunderstanding is a threat to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of expression because it constitutes an implicit embrace of the idealist view that he wishes to renounce. The misreading of the *flesh* as the expressive essence would ascribe it to the constitutive consciousness of the subject. Merleau-Ponty may have anticipated this possible misinterpretation because his elaboration upon the definition of the *flesh*, as the dimension that permeates all objects and ideas without being either, seems to aim at preventing it. The *flesh* is presupposed by objects and ideas but is never fully concretized in either.25

La chair n’est pas matière, n’est pas esprit, n’est pas substance. Il faudrait, pour la désigner, le vieux terme d’ ‘élément’, au sens où on l’employait pour parler de

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23 VI. P.177 [When we talk about the flesh of the visible...We mean, to the contrary, that the carnal being, as being of depth, with several layers or with many facades, latent being, and presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, for which our being, as sensible sensing, is a very remarkable variant, but the constitutive paradox is already in all visible]

24 *EP.* p.81 [Thus to the infinity of *telos*, put in evidence in the expressive act, corresponds the infinity of an *arche*.]

25 It is noteworthy that the characterization of the *flesh* is reminding of Aristotle’s definition of prime matter, in the *Physics*, as that which is presupposed by form and matter in nature and art, but is never observable.
l’eau, de l’air, de la terre et du feu, c’est-à-dire au sens d’une chose générale, à mi-chemin de l’individu spatio-temporel et de l’idée...\textsuperscript{26}

The twofold definition of the flesh is the main cause of such misinterpretation. Merleau-Ponty is right to claim that: “…qu’il n’y a pas de nom en philosophie traditionelle pour désigner cela.”\textsuperscript{27} The flesh is comparable to an invisible thread that runs through objects and ideas, but is never observable. It is not accurate to interpret it as an element since for the pre-Socratics the element becomes sedimented as it partakes in the constitution of all things, whereas, the flesh is always vibrant in things, ideas, and their relations. Merleau-Ponty uses the term chiasme to express the fusion of the structure of idea and object that occurs via the flesh. Mercury observes that: “Habituellement le chiasme définit un entrecoisement de structures ou encore de functions, comme c’est le cas notamment du chiasma optique...Elle permet ainsi à Merleau-Ponty de décrire les rapports complexes du corps et du monde.”\textsuperscript{28} The flesh allows not only the expression of world and body, but also their mutual interaction.

The novelty of this idea renders it elusive to the philosophical tradition because it challenges idealism and realism, and thus requires a different lingo for expression. The most significant impact of the ontology of expression through the flesh is that its twofold characterization hampers pure conceptualization of its operation; the intellect needs assistance of concrete illustration to grasp this invisible thread that underlies all that is visible to it. The ontology of expression is revolutionary and thus requires a different form of account than the philosophical. Bonan is correct in observing that: “Dans un renversement spéctaculaire de la philosophie et de l’esthétique qui lui correspond, Merleau-Ponty, donne ainsi un nouveau sens à l’idée d’un sensible commun.”\textsuperscript{29}

Thus, it is upon this structural demand that painting becomes a central motif in Merleau-Ponty’s project. The practice of painting is the most appropriate medium of illustration of the ontology of expression that occurs through the flesh. “L’ontologie

\textsuperscript{26} VI. p. 182-3 [The flesh is not matter, not mind, not substance. There should, to define it, the old term of ‘element’, in the sense it was used to talk about water, air, earth and fire, meaning in the sense of a general thing, at midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea.]

\textsuperscript{27} VI. p. 181 [there is no term in traditional philosophy to design this.]

\textsuperscript{28} AP. p.78 [Usually the chiasm defines an intersection of structures or again of functions, as it is the case in the optical chiasma. It thus allows Merleau-Ponty to describe the complex relations between the world and the body.]

\textsuperscript{29} Ronald Bonan, Premières Leçons sur L’Esthétique de Merleau-Ponty, (Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), p.36. Heretofore will be cited as PLE. [In a spectacular reversal of philosophy and aesthetics, which corresponds to it, Merleau-Ponty, thus gives a new sense to the idea of common sensible.]
témoigne de la volonté d’un accès à l’expérience qui soit immédiatement philosophique, mais seule la peinture peut ménager la voie de cette immédiateté.”  

30 Merleau-Ponty turns toward an aesthetic medium instead of formulating a philosophical lexicon to elaborate on the ontology of expression.

**C. Painting, Expression, and Cezanne**

As it has been demonstrated above, the innovation of the ontology of expression compels Merleau-Ponty to seek a different avenue of expression. Merleau-Ponty espouses the practice of painting because it is best suited to illustrate the dynamic relation of the flesh with the body and nature. Merleau-Ponty undertakes the project of developing the painting criteria that satisfy the requirements of the ontology of expression in the essay: “Le Doute de Cézanne” written in 1942, which is pivotal in Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre. The essay bears the rules of painting that correspond to the ontology of expression, and delineates the application of these rules in Cezanne’s technique. It asserts the reasons for the centrality of Cezanne’s style in Merleau-Ponty’s project as the best affirmation of the ontology of expression.

Merleau-Ponty begins the essay with a biographical account of the painter, which emphasizes the morbidity of his psychological constitution. His psychological description is summarized in the following:

This loss of flexible human contact; this inability to master new situations; this flight into established habits, in an atmosphere which presented no problems; this rigid opposition between theory and practice, between the ‘hook’ and the freedom of a recluse—all these symptoms permit one to speak of a morbid constitution and more precisely, as, for example, in the case of El Greco, of schizothymia. The notion of painting ‘from ‘nature’ could be said to arise form the same weakness.

Merleau-Ponty’s accentuation upon Cezanne’s pathological behaviors is not accidental. It is intended to draw out the painter’s innate bond with the natural. As we have seen

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30 *EP*, p.88 [Ontology reveals the will of an access to experience, which is immediately philosophical, but only painting cam manage the way of this immediacy.]

previously: “…chez Merleau-Ponty, la pathologie ou la primitivité révèlent l’expérience originaire du ‘normal’.”32 Merleau-Ponty wishes to show that Cezanne is naturally inclined to be a painter of nature. Cezanne’s social ineptitude allows him to develop the receptive observer’s attitude toward the natural domain. “Left to himself, he was able to look at nature as only a human being can.”33

32 EP. p.28 [In Merleau-Ponty, pathology and primitivity reveal the original experience of the normal.]
33 CD. p. 61
34 CD. p. 63
35 PLE. p.48 [It is that the interest of the latter [Merleau-Ponty] for Cezanne comes directly from his painting, far from being an attempt to impose a style or a set of techniques, as impressionism did, would be entirely subject to the restitution of the pre-objective state of the world, has the figuration of an indissociable unity of the secondary qualities in the thing as it is perceived.]
36 CD. p. 63
37 CD. p. 67
39 AMP. p. 48 [Seeing is here a reading of things which obeys to a singular sensibility, to a temperament! That is without a doubt the dynamic of seeing which remains fundamentally an operation of expression, or in other words a deliverance.]
Cezanne’s psychological make-up had partial contribution to his skill to transcend the conventional perspective in order to capture the object in its pre-objective state. He was able to remove the social mask that is imposed upon the phenomenon to let it appear under its primitive state. “It is clear from his conversations with Emile Bernard that Cezanne was always seeking to avoid the ready-made alternatives suggested to him: sensation versus judgment; the painter who sees against the painter who thinks; nature versus composition; primitivism as opposed to tradition.”

By renouncing traditional alternatives, Cezanne strives to paint the object as it is revealed by sensations prior to the corrective intervention of judgment. Bonan comments upon Merleau-Ponty’s attraction to Cezanne’s style in the following:

C’est que l’interet de ce dernier [Merleau-Ponty] pour Cézanne vient justement de ce que sa peinture, loin d’être une tentative d’imposer un style ou un ensemble de techniques, comme a pu le faire l’impressionisme, serait vouée tout entière à la restitution de l’état pré-objectif du monde, à la figuration de l’unité indissociable des qualités seconde dans la chose telle qu’elle est percue.

In accordance with Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, Cezanne’s painting attempts to transcend the prevalent dichotomies of idealism and realism, which shape our judgments. It is by permitting the object to appear from its specific location in the domain of ‘l’être sauvage’ that Cezanne’s painting is an indirect attack upon idealism and realism. It jettisons the polar relation of nature versus consciousness to grant nature precedence over both. “Cezanne did not think he had to choose between feeling and thought, as if he were deciding between chaos and order. He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear…”

Another aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s attraction to Cezanne’s technique is that they both rely on visual perception as the primary means of ouverture to the world and as means of expression. Cezanne depends upon his sight to get a hold of the sensations of the material, which are then transposed in painting. Perception is the bridge through which the objects find their way to his grasp in order to exit via brushstrokes toward the canvas as their final destination. The doublure of the object that occurs in painting is prompted by perception. “He would start by discovering the geological foundations of the landscape; then, according to Mme Cezanne, he would halt and look at everything with
widened eyes, ‘germinating’ with the countryside.” Cezanne’s method reveals the subjectivity of a painter that ceaselessly stretches toward nature to participate in the connectedness of the body with all phenomena via the invisible thread of the flesh. This paradoxical operation, which is complex precisely in its immediacy relies mainly upon visual perception. Grene is right to observe that Merleau-Ponty finds in Cezanne’s painting the appropriate use of perception: “It was visual perception, in particular, that especially concerned him (hence my slogan ‘man of vision’) and for him (Merleau-Ponty) the paradigm case, the activity that uniquely shows us what perception is, was the activity of the painter.” Merleau-Ponty was able to discern that the role of perception in the practice of painting is at its apex in Cezanne’s painting.

The ontology of expression, which revolves around perception, finds its best exemplar in Cezanne’s technique. Perception is not the mere medium of sensory data between the polar relation of consciousness and nature. In the ontology of expression and the practice of painting, visual perception is the occasion for the circular exchange between the body and fundamental flesh. As Mercury observes perception becomes a tool for deliverance: “Le voir est ici une lecture des choses qui obéit à une sensibilité singulière, à un temperament! Telle est sans doute la dynamique du voir qui demeure fondamentalement une opération d’expression ou, en d’autres termes une délivrance.” Also, it is noteworthy that the role of the body is modified as well as visual perception in the practice of painting. As Merleau-Ponty states in Eye and Mind: “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.” This artistic interpretation removes the view of the body as an isolated element within the natural domain, and restores it among its natural counterparts. Merleau-Ponty establishes a symmetrical relation between the body and other natural phenomena. And it is in virtue of this use of the body that “Cezanne, in sum, sought to present on canvas what in phenomenological parlance has been termed the constitutive eidos of the given.”

In conclusion, Merleau-Ponty’s survey of Cezanne’s style of painting is the destination of a long phenomenological voyage. The period of the propensity toward
painting represents the highest juncture of Merleau-Ponty’s intellectual adventure, which starts in *The Structure of Behaviors*. Merleau-Ponty posits his anti-dualism in the early critique of idealism and realism through the investigation of behaviors, which led to their formal critique in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Behaviors, and corps-propre have been the steps of a critical philosophical approach. The inadequacy of these early discoveries reveals Merleau-Ponty’s ability to adopt a critical stance toward his own investigation. The arrival at the ontology of expression is the result of an assiduous deepening within perception as the very basis that Merleau-Ponty started with. Consciousness is finally overcome and yields to *l’enveloppement* of nature and body. This cataclysm, which eludes traditional philosophical jargon imposes upon its author the onus to find a new ethos. Merleau-Ponty’s embrace of the practice of painting and Cezanne’s style not only because it is the illustration of the ethos of the ontology of expression, but also, in compliance with Merlau-Ponty’s commitment to the things themselves, it is the concrete and immediate illustration of all the theoretical postulations of the phenomenologist.