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IN THE SHADOW OF PHILOSOPHY

The Problem of Passivity in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty

Therefore let there always be non-being
so we may see their subtlety;
And let there always be being
so we may see their outcome.
These two are the same.
But after they are produced, they have different names.

—Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*

The renewal of the world is also the renewal of the mind, a rediscovery of that brute mind which, untamed by any culture, demands to create culture anew. From this point on the irrelative is not nature in-itself, nor the system of apprehensions of absolute consciousness, and not humanity either, but that «teleology» Husserl, writing and thinking in brackets, speaks of, that jointing and framing of Being realizing itself through humankind.

—Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (181/179)\(^1\)

Life unfolds according to an inverse logic. Rather than emerging from preexisting causes, purposes, or conditions of possibility, life is a movement that puts itself en route by taking up and shaping the very conditions that make it possible. Conditions of possibility of sense must, paradoxically, *happen* in order to become possible. In both nature and culture, *birth* marks the way that life, vital or conscious, neither purely *constitutes* itself nor is *constituted*
by outside forces—life is a *becoming-true* of conditions and possibilities, a whirlwind of sense that, once it touches down, will have had a formative natural, personal, or historical past. This book is an attempt to uncover these hidden workings of life, what Maurice Merleau-Ponty terms a logic of *institution*, which lets us think of the past in deeper, existential terms as an unfinished reality on the move; and, thereby, to think of life and culture as inheriting and transforming this radical past. By studying becoming in nature and culture, we can thus unearth this lost sense of an original past, and also definitively account for not only how living sense emerges from nonsense, but also how nature emerges from culture and the person emerges from the body and intercorporeal life.

To do this work requires thinking life and culture as originally passive, but this passivity is not inertness, but rather a *generative temporal openness*, where meaningful structures or *institutions* of activity take time to developmentally unfold. Our becoming active as bodies and persons, then, is a process of birth and a growing into being that must happen in order to have become the condition of our being. This, we will see, has implications not only for phenomenological attempts to naturalize consciousness, but also for complicating and rethinking the shared, temporally embedded, and intercorporeal nature of ethical responsibility and political action.

These central questions of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy concern the natural origins of the living body and human subjectivity. As he explains at the outset of his writings, he has a “goal to understand the relations of consciousness and nature” *(SB, 3/1)*. Revealing ambiguity in these relations, these studies also uncover irreducible meaning in both life and consciousness. Yet this early work genealogically discloses the traces within life and experience as a prevital and preconscious past from which these structures emerge. Commonplace interpretations of Merleau-Ponty’s development hold that while his early work is premised on a “philosophy of consciousness,” he later shifts from a phenomenological to an ontological method of a sense-making in nature.² I do not share this view. Merleau-Ponty’s earliest thinking already locates a developmental passivity of consciousness and has a signal ontological concern for the natural underpinnings of consciousness.

The central focus of this investigation is Merleau-Ponty’s pivotal rethinking of the concept of passivity. Merleau-Ponty’s concern with diffusing the concept of constituting activity and rooting it in the living body is directed not simply at the primacy of consciousness, but at meaning-constituting activity as such, including the vital activity of the living body. There is a line
of thinking throughout Merleau-Ponty’s texts that discloses a passive genesis of sense in nature prior to a constituting activity of consciousness or the vital body. Against the idea of constituting activity, and by developing an account of what I term *generative passivity*, I make the case that it is possible to explain the irreducibly meaningful structures of the organism and human person according to a logic of the passive generation of sense, what Merleau-Ponty terms a concept of *institution*.

Rather than rejecting the uniqueness of meaning in the vital body and human consciousness, we can utilize *institution* to account for how these fields do in fact have irreducible senses. We can also show these senses to be derived from a temporality in nature by which distinctive dimensions of meaning develop through what Henri Bergson and Alia Al-Saji describe as a *becoming-true*. This movement of sense generation requires the explication of three progressively richer concepts of passivity in Merleau-Ponty’s work: a structural passivity of life; a dynamic passivity of development and learning; and a more radical, *generative passivity* that ontologically precedes living beings and fully determinate causal events. This draws upon Anthony Steinbock’s critical reading of three levels of phenomenological methodology in Edmund Husserl’s work, though, as we will see, Merleau-Ponty importantly diverges and builds upon Husserl’s concept of passivity, definitively moving it beyond the domain of consciousness. This investigation requires a systematic reading of Merleau-Ponty’s texts from the standpoint of how they progressively work to articulate this concept of passivity that does not name an absence or lack of meaning-making activity, but contextualizes this activity within a radically deep natural past, a past prior to already actual causal or constituting activities. Combining this generative reading of phenomenology with the logic of Bergson, we will see that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy entails a radical reevaluation of the metaphysics of possibility.

Generative passivity is a concept that enables a rethinking of the nature-culture distinction, and puts to rest tiresome problems in attempts to “naturalize” consciousness, while providing a deepened view of psychoanalysis and the emergence of personality from the body. It also challenges liberal and social constructivist views of society, instead suggesting a deeper take on the ethics and sociality of intercorporeal dependence, oppression, and creativity. This concept also reveals not only a continuity in Merleau-Ponty’s scientific, phenomenological, and ontological works, but also a deep kinship with the philosophical becoming of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, and the deconstructive *thinking* of Jacques Derrida, as well as intimating several
allegiances with contemporary critics of oppressive institutions of gender and race, especially Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks, Gail Weiss, Shannon Sullivan, Kelly Oliver, and Cynthia Willett. Indeed, the concept of reading Merleau-Ponty’s works generatively suggests a novel approach to the philosophical projects of interpreting texts organically and creatively.

READING MERLEAU-PONTY

I draw on Merleau-Ponty’s texts from across his life, but I do so with the goal of presenting the philosophical problems opened up by them rather than the exact theses asserted in them. The prime task in reading philosophically does not involve “reducing given phenomenological motifs to what they were in their original contingency and their empirical humility,” because originary philosophical insights, in their earliest formations, are necessarily ambiguous, since they must use existing concepts to say what has not yet been said (S, 160/161). Thus, reading is an act of going from what a writer literally says to what she is attaining to think.

There is an interpretative fallacy, explains Merleau-Ponty, when “we want the meaning of a man’s works to be wholly positive,” and we reduce it to a philosophical inventory of argumentative claims. But a philosophical text, like a living body, is not simply a codex, a mere thing, but a certain kind of activity, an attempt at an original expression. Invoking Martin Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty levels a Socratic injunction at his reader to move past the positive letter and follow the original difficulties in texts, to follow the search a thinker undertakes in them and to work to further her insight:

“When we are considering a man’s thought,” Heidegger says in effect, “the greater the work accomplished . . . the richer the unthought-of element in that work.” . . . To think is not to possess the objects of thought; it is to use them to mark out a realm to think about which we therefore are not yet thinking about. Just as the perceived world endures only through the reflections, shadows, levels, and horizons between things (which are not things and are not nothing . . .), so the works and thought of a philosopher are also made of certain articulations between things said. There is no dilemma of objective interpretation or arbitrariness with respect to these articulations, since they are not objects of thought, since (like shadow and
reflection) they would be destroyed by being subjected to analytic observation or taken out of context, and since we can be faithful to and find them only by thinking again. (S, 159–60/159)

The text is not a thing, but a horizon for thought, an opening to a beyond that is not ever immediately given but that presents or reorients what is given. The text is a finite entity that opens onto an infinite work; it is an inexhaustible horizon. Thus, to read a text is neither to “inevitably distort” it nor to “literally reproduce” it, because the mode of givenness of a text—like that of the passivity of all meaning in life, the central thesis in my work here—is in part posthumous, in the thinking it generates and the new domains of inquiry it marks out. Reading, like what Merleau-Ponty terms institution, also involves both a receptive and a creative endeavor, such that being honest to a thinker means holding open the possibility of thinking in her writing, rather than distilling her work into a positive actuality. Thus, to read is to resume while also transforming a thought, to institute this thought anew by following its inner logic of development and the possibilities it reveals for the first time.

This reading of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical works is distinctive from most scholarly interpretations of his corpus. A widely held view is that Merleau-Ponty’s early period, during which he wrote the Structure of Behavior and the Phenomenology of Perception, is essentially characterized by analyses of the structure of human consciousness as a world-constituting activity. This early period is often juxtaposed with Merleau-Ponty’s later works, such as the lecture courses on nature and institution and passivity, and the unfinished The Visible and the Invisible, works that are said to mark an ontological turn away from the primacy of consciousness and toward a philosophy of nature and metaphysical questions about Being. I do not share this view. I argue that though Merleau-Ponty’s works are rarely univocal, there is a line of thinking through Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy that is an attempt to abrogate the notion of a world-constituting synthetic activity and to disclose the emergence of novel forms of meaning from nature. This thinking against activity does not mean that we are passively constituted natural beings, that nature is a positive, deterministic reality in-itself, but that nature is understood as generativity, as an origin of activity that is not itself yet activity. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development is limited not to a rejection of constituting consciousness, but to a critique of the notion of constituting activity as such. I read Merleau-Ponty’s works as resources
to think not only against the tenets of idealism, but also against vitalism, or the attempt to defer the constituting activity of consciousness to the living activities of the organic body. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is most coherently understood as an attempt to validate the experiential primacy and irreducibility of conscious and bodily lived-experience, while also genealogically disclosing the original non-self-sufficiency of these structures and their passive emergence from nature.

**THREE CONCEPTS OF PASSIVITY**

The strategy of reading Merleau-Ponty’s texts is a token of the very thesis I am asserting in this work: that meaning is never literally given or passively fixed, but is in a process of becoming that involves receptivity and transformation, a mixture of activity and passivity. The notion of meaning as fixed, and produced by the constituting activity of consciousness or life, is rejected by Merleau-Ponty, as is the notion of a static or constituted meaning inherent to nature. Both notions are premised on the concept of meaning as merely passive given, whether a product of life or a static given of nature. Such a reductive sense of passivity is prevalent in certain theories of meaning, such as empiricism, which posits a simple sensory given; positivist biological accounts, which posit the organism as determined by causal reflexes and environmental factors; and social constructivism, which is premised on the idea that meaning in human life is fixed by socially constituted norms that precede individual human lives or acts. This “bad ambiguity,” as Merleau-Ponty terms it, is a mere external relationship between activity and passivity, constituting and constituted, such as in naturalism, where human sense is passively determined by nature; or, conversely, idealism, where nature is a passive being constituted by consciousness.

Beyond this concept of a passivity *tout court*, which Merleau-Ponty rejects outright, we can identify three crucial concepts of passivity in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking. In keeping with the phenomenological reduction, Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of a positive given before which consciousness or life is passive *simpliciter*. In his criticism of a reductively physiological account of the reflex in *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty argues that even the most putatively direct stimuli are only ever explicable in terms of responsiveness in the organism. Against the idea that the organism is a mechanical system of reflexes impacted by the impressions of an external world,
Merleau-Ponty discloses that the stimulus and the response are mediated coefficients of a coordinated sensorimotor loop. This avoids the metaphysical dualism of an organic perspective and an external reality in-itself, as well as the question of how a mere mechanism could be sensitively alive to its environment. This critique of passivity tout court can be extended to social constructivism, or structuralism, which takes the person to be a passively inscribed social subject, because, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the very issue of our subjectivity is how we take up our inherited cultural traditions.

The first operative concept of passivity in this philosophy is therefore the notion of environmental or static passivity, whereby the living activity of the organism or the person and the givenness of its environment are moments in a holistic interrelationship. The relationship between environment and organism is transcendental, preceding and mediating its two terms. Here we can think of the way that an organism’s environment is always an expressive production of its living acts, but also how its acting body is always sensitive and responsive to this environment. This organism-environment relation, what Merleau-Ponty calls a “structure” or “form” of behavior, exhibits the logical structure of intentionality, insofar as consciousness is not a pure activity but a relationality. This concept names the ontological co-givenness of activity and passivity as a living relation between organism and environment, self and world, but it cannot explain the genesis of this structure.

In order to explain how the organism-environment relation is not self-constituting, a further concept of genetic passivity is required. This concept explains how vital and conscious activities emerge out of processes that are not yet fully formed modes of activity. Where the static concept of passivity situates the organism and environment as continuously temporally related, the idea of genetic passivity is premised upon a conception of this relationship as developmental and therefore punctuated by discontinuous temporal events (SB, 125/136). This notion hinges on decisive events that inaugurate new meaning structures, such as pivotal developments in the organism-environment relationship, or formative moments in the emergence of personhood. The key insight of The Structure of Behavior, and the conceptual linchpin of the Phenomenology of Perception, is the concept of a “decisive now,” a moment that becomes the formative “true present” for all events that follow (PP, 87/114). The “decisive now” does not simply elapse, but remains active as the structural dimension according to which present modes of activity and awareness have a sense. The sediment of the past in the present does not simply repeat the past but serves to open new
fields as possibility, such as the infant learning to move his body, then gesture, and later speak. Each new sedimentation folds a new possibility of movement into the body, while potentially serving as a scaffold for more differentiated movements, such as grasping, waving, writing, sculpting, caressing, and so many more. We catch the work of this genetic passivity only retrospectively, just as we can change habits only through the slow and uncertain work of forming new habits, rather than through transparent self-awareness or purely active self-control.

Despite the developmental character of genetic passivity, it remains conceived of as a vestigial constituting activity in much of Merleau-Ponty’s work. Specifically, there is some ambiguity about whether the sedimenting power is a capacity (pouvoir) of the living body or of human consciousness. According to this view, the organism would be both self-enacting and yet emergent. This is circular reasoning, because to hold this position we must simultaneously posit the organism as both possessing and being preceded by this power of temporal synthesis. Even if we cede this synthetic power to an ancestor, the embryo, the parent, the seed, et cetera, we arrive at a regress of genetic acts. The notion of development as a constituting activity, therefore, falls into a regress that presupposes a constituting act of a more basic order, ad infinitum. To overcome these issues of a problematic logic of constitution, a final notion of radical or generative passivity is required.

This generative concept of passivity, drawn from the later lectures Child Psychology, Institution and Passivity, and Nature, points at the emergence of sense from nonsense and activity from nonactivity, and thus names a potency or possibility (puissance) of being. To understand the logic of this emergence, Merleau-Ponty rejects the classical alternative of constituting activity and constituted reality in favor of understanding the emergence of form in life and experience as a movement from nonsense to sense. Initially, the passive generativity is not a meaning-constituting activity of the body or of consciousness, but a sedimenting movement that these activities will come to have inherited as their own activity. This notion rejects the principle that meaning emerges from a determinate moment in the past, whether a locus of preexisting meaning or a meaning-making power, thus undermining the fundamental premises of mechanist, vitalist, and idealist accounts. Admittedly, there is a fine distinction between genetic and generative passivity, but while both concepts explain forms of living existence according to a logic of developmental becoming, the notion of generative passivity can uniquely
account for how these developments are not originally activities of the body or consciousness.

Generative passivity is an *aporetic* structure, not merely an epistemological blind spot that limits our finite consciousness, but—connecting to central insights of Bergson, Deleuze, and Derrida—a metaphysically incomplete, open, and ungraspable origin to movement and activity, what Merleau-Ponty calls an absolute past or a time before time, a radical source of all possibility. The true “past” of life and consciousness, says Merleau-Ponty, is not a chronological past, but an ontological past of “nature,” a “past that has never been present” (*PP*, 252/289), a “retrograde becoming of the true.” This ontological past is not a “retrospective illusion” or mere projection of consciousness. This paradoxical “time before time” is, as I will demonstrate, understood as “dimensions,” which are not fully formed structures or given moments but a more radical becoming beyond and between structures that enables and shapes possibilities of meaningful events and activities within structured or “instituted” space and time.

Overcoming the dualism of fact and essence, Merleau-Ponty deems this movement of instituting-instituted an “experimental Platonism,” akin to what Deleuze sometimes calls transcendental empiricism. Like developmental passivity, it is possible to catch a glimpse of this “nature” at work retrospectively, particularly in the emergence of life from nonlife, or in the emergence of personal significance out of vital significance, or in the birth of new cultural and political movements. Learning is a moment of generative passivity par excellence, because the event of insight is a happening that first of all structures a new field of possibilities, such as when the child learns to move upright and thus begins to enter into the space of the adult world, when a new skill of articulation becomes an organ of communication, or when a new concept destabilizes and restructures a field of inquiry. Learning is an experience where confusion, a furtive beckoning, or nonsense portentously explodes into a new domain of sense, transforming the very field from which it emerges, taking up recasting previous indeterminacy into new determinate meaningful dimensions, like the body finding a new balance in a new vehicle or regaining and reshaping a previous balance through the incorporation of a prosthesis. We experience this striving and its accomplishment of new activities as a power (*puissance*) that exceeds and grounds us, announcing itself to us, inviting us to assume and inhabit it, to take it on as one of our active capacities (*pouvoir*). According to this concept of *generative passivity*, we cannot say that the past now harbors the future in utero. We can say, however,
that the past will have become the structural basis of the present, albeit in an unfinishable way, so that the future remains radically open to the evolution of new forms of life because of this very latency or potency of the past. Our true nature is difficult to name conceptually, because this passive origination of sense obscures itself in its own temporal becoming.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

This work comprises four chapters, two on life followed by two on personhood. Chapter 1 is a discussion of how life points to deeper dimensions of genetic and generative passivity, and chapter 3 similarly sounds out these institutions of personhood in habit. Chapter 2 develops the logical core of our study: the concept of generative passivity, investigating the radical becoming of meaning in life and challenging the methods of mechanism as well as vitalism and autopoiesis. Chapter 4 similarly develops a radical notion of intercorporeal possibility with respect to our ethical and political lives, raising specific challenges to social constructivist and liberal models of social personhood. In a brief conclusion, resources for rethinking naturalizing consciousness and also for grounding ethics in intercorporeal life are put forward.

In chapter 1, “Consciousness and Animality: The Problem of Constituting Activity in The Structure of Behavior,” I present Merleau-Ponty’s early philosophy not only as a critique of consciousness as constituting activity, but also as a critique of any attempt to defer constituting synthesis to the vital activity of living organisms. Contrasting my reading of Merleau-Ponty with the autopoietic notion of Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson, I argue that a “vital structure of behavior” in the organism cannot be a self-sufficient source of meaning. Such an account, I argue, serves only to defer a constituting activity of consciousness to life. I argue that this move to understand consciousness as a living structure must incorporate a concept of genetic passivity, insofar as organic structures must grow and develop in relation to other organisms, particularly other animals. Like these organisms, consciousness develops by moving in, responding to, and expressing a vital environment.

Chapter 2 articulates this difficult temporal logic in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, arguing that they uncover a new philosophical terrain beyond the alternatives of mechanism and vitalism, or evolutionary contingency and finalism, because meaning emerges from a natural “past” in which vital structures were
not determinate, but nevertheless had a nascent, developing sense irreducible to determinate form. I borrow Bergson’s “retrograde movement of the true” to expose how possibility is not generated in determinately given moments of activity, which I think is the underlying premise of all naturalistic, finalistic, and deterministic accounts. Instead, meaning is an emergent movement, not from the past toward the future, but between dynamic events. This becoming-true of sense as a process points back at an origination difference, a past more radical than a former present and thus other to the horizon of temporal moments. This is a deep, fecund past of generative possibility that is manifest in the ongoing differentiation and transformation of sense. This originary past is thus not elapsed, but neither is it determinatively present. It rather marks out a radical difference and openness to becoming, a generative passivity, in and between existing dimensions of sense. The chapter concludes with a consideration of some criticisms from Michel Foucault, who charges Merleau-Ponty with at once nostalgically positing a nature in-itself, a pristine past, while also reducing this nature to an idealized construct of human consciousness. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy offers resources to overcome this dualism by understanding the past as radically different from the present and even from itself. The solution to this problem provocatively points toward the deconstructive philosophy of Jacques Derrida, and to the symbolic character of sense we inherit in our second nature and rebirth as linguistic persons.

In chapter 3 our discussion shifts from the institution of nature to the development of second nature through habituation. Addressing the problem of how there can be an irreducible sense of personal life if this sense is not originally constituted by human beings, we will take up different tendencies in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. The first trajectory in this text suggests that human meaning emerges from habit formation and a sedimenting power of the living body. Yet there is another line of reasoning here that shows how the passivity of human development cannot merely depend on human growth and learning as constituting acts, but as the *Phenomenology* already indicates and the later lecture courses demonstrate, becoming human draws on a more primordial becoming of meaning that can be articulated by a generative sense of passivity. The body is not a hypostatized ground of possibilities of the person, but like the person is an emergent structure. The body depends, passively, on nature’s original generativity. Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology*, then, already intimates an ontology of nature.

Chapter 4 takes up the way in which we receive ourselves from other beings before we ever enjoy a sense of agency or personal independence. This
originary belonging to others, what Merleau-Ponty calls syncretic sociability in his “The Child’s Relations with Others,” is crucial to understanding the passive generation of personality and, moreover, it can offer a unique explanation of human sociality. This shared, intercorporeal sense of bodily life, a sense that precedes subjective awareness, structures social relations that enable or oppress individual and group senses of agency. Against traditional liberal, voluntaristic, and structuralist, social constructivist approaches, which take the self to be either self-constituting or constituted by others, the logic of generative passivity points to the way in which shared bodily gesture functions as a pivotal, often overlooked, means of interrogating and reshaping social institutions from within. Like life, consciousness and the social world are spheres not of constituting activity, but are institutions: dynamic nexuses where sense is shaped through shared dynamics of interbodily movement, expression, and communication. Life, consciousness, and society are structures of generative passivity.

**BETWEEN HUS塞尔 AND MERLEAU-PONTY: THE INVERSION OF PHENOMENOLOGY**

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is an institution from within and beyond Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology: a method equally historically indebted to and yet liberated from the terms of Husserl’s thinking. Merleau-Ponty develops his notion of institution from Husserl’s concept of *Stiftung* in such texts as *The Origin of Geometry* and Husserl’s development of a radical, generative sense of passivity in his *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*. Anthony Steinbock unearths three layers of phenomenological constitution in Husserl, each of which refines and complicates the idea of meaning-constituting (*Sinngebung*) that is so often simplistically attributed to phenomenological philosophy.

Husserl’s phenomenology deepens the practice of phenomenology from a simple description of structures of consciousness to an understanding of the preconscious motivations that tacitly orient consciousness, and then to a deeper affective level yet, pointing behind these motivational structures to traces of an imperceptible yet perception-orienting affective life. While pointing beyond the sphere of consciousness, and thus sourcing the very origins of our descriptive powers to an affective life, Husserl pushes past the traditional limits of phenomenology as a study of consciousness.
However, these deeper affective layers are ultimately defined *ex negativo*, as a kind of unconsciousness or “antechamber of the ego” (Husserl 2001, 166). Steinbock makes this point by working through a triple—static, genetic, and generative—logic of sense genesis in Husserl, a tripartite logic I have borrowed and transformed here in order to study Merleau-Ponty.

The first mode of phenomenology is *static*. Phenomenology describes the modes of givenness of essential structures of consciousness. Essential features of consciousness such as embodiment and worldhood are not at this level described in their becoming, but are taken to be “finished” (Steinbock 2001, xxx, xxxvi). These structures of consciousness are not substances or essences, but rather modes of relating or meaning-constituting activities. The first object of phenomenological method is thus the *activity* of consciousness. Static phenomenology, despite its power as transcendental psychology, thus remains abstract.

The second mode of phenomenology is genetic. A genetic description of consciousness might articulate how one activity gives rise to another, just as one judicative act entails another in a process of deduction. The novel value of this second method comes when we observe the first genesis of one mode of activity from its prior foundations, where “one traces the origins of activity in passivity” (Steinbock 2001, xxxi). Here we might think of motivating moments of association where a perception calls up the activity of a thought, or a nagging resemblance or echo summons our perceptive attention. These *motivating* moments are not themselves yet modes of conscious activity, but are the alluring stirrings that occasion and invite active modes of consciousness and the givenness they accomplish. Genetic description makes it possible to explain how there is a layer of sense-constitution more basic than an act of consciousness, an operative layer of motivations and background associations that orients our conscious life behind our backs, in our sleep, and in our memory and forgetfulness.

The final mode of Husserlian phenomenology is generative, and it digs deeper than a genetic attending to motivational and habitual structures that call up activities of consciousness. In point of fact, these motivational structures are themselves modes of activity within conscious life; it is just that they are not given (except in retrospect) as intended objects of our consciousness. Generative description is subtle, because it traces the origins of these motivations to preparatory dimensions that are not so readily circumscribed within the realm of subjectivity or first person consciousness. Steinbock
deftly reveals how there are traces of constitutive features in our conscious life that we do not experience ourselves as originally constituting, structures that reveal the passivity of our active consciousness. Using examples of birth and death, and the experience of home as defined by a spatial and intersubjective beyond, Steinbock discloses how Husserl’s analysis of consciousness, by asking after the ultimate roots of motivational consciousness, point to superindividual, vertically constitutive sources of meaning. Where the previous methods hypostatize an immortalized consciousness, generative phenomenology reveals consciousness as intergenerational and culturally embedded (Steinbock 2001, xxxiii–xxxiv).

In the lectures on passive synthesis, Husserl shows how motivational structures of affectivity are rooted in a deeper layer of affective “associations,” a layer prior to the division between subject and object, stimulus and response, whereby an “objectlike formation” is neither the call of an outside world nor the already sensitive noticing of sensation. Rather, there is a “prior” moment that will have shown itself in and through the subsequent acts of attending that it motivates. This layer of passive synthesis undercuts the previously clear division of subject and object, of activity and passivity. Affect is shown retroactively, as generative trace, but it is not strictly speaking something we perceive or sense in the “now” of consciousness. Here Husserl’s generative method is at its furthest, revealing a level of relatedness that precedes the terms “punctual presence” and “active consciousness.” While this points to an imperceptible past of nature and perhaps an immemorial past of culture, Husserl nevertheless holds to the terms of “association” and an “antechamber of consciousness.”

As Immanuel Kant also suggested, prior to his reactionary Cartesian revision of the 1781 Critique of Pure Reason, there is a productive layer of imagination that undercuts the distinction between passivity and activity, sensation and understanding, body and world, a priori and a posteriori, self and other (Steinbock 2001, xl). As with Kant, however, Husserl’s profound insight is caught up in the miring dualisms of his philosophy, as Steinbock (2001) describes: “This leads Husserl to a paradoxical formulation of the process as an ‘active passivity’ in order to characterize a constitution and acquisition of sense that is, on the one hand, not nothing and is also somehow ‘subjective,’ but which, on the other hand, does not stem from ‘an activity proceeding from the ego’” (xxxix–xl). This sphere of passivity is originary but so only in relation to the “active” and “judicative” sphere (xlii). Passivity, while pointing in a radical direction, remains defined negatively for Husserl:
“Husserl tends to regard passivity as basically equivalent to perceptual, pre-predicative, pre-reflective, and prelinguistic experience” (xli). Despite Husserl’s audacity, he remains a thinker of consciousness. But unlike the 1787 Kant, Husserl does not thereby subordinate sensibility to the understanding, because he unearths a passive dimension of synthesis, an aesthesis that is the condition of possibility of logos. The distinction between the two terms emerges within the life of consciousness in this paradoxical unfolding of a passive-activity. Husserl dared, in pointing to what Laura McMahon (2014, 279–82) evocatively terms these “organic phantoms” haunting consciousness, to uncover the trace of something yet more radical than a rationalistic phenomenology of consciousness.

A key difference in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is that where Husserl’s later texts focus on the preconditions of consciousness in a new “transcendental aesthetic,” Merleau-Ponty’s genetic and generative concepts are aimed at rooting the seeming activities of both life and consciousness in a spontaneous history of natural evolution and its transformative self-developments. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology extends this study of natural expression beyond the terms of a lifeworld, taking up the question of the origin of sense from nonsense and the temporality of an ontologically radical past, a past that has never been present. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s work goes beyond a genetic and generative genealogy of conscious, meaning-giving acts and seeks out an inverse logic of sense in a radical prehistory, a concept of passivity deeper than the levels of passive synthesis in sensibility and, indeed, more mysterious. A further study would be required to adequately trace the relation of these distinctive concepts of passivity in each thinker, but Merleau-Ponty explains his own original development of Husserl’s notions of embodiment, and generative temporality, from his early visit to the Leuven archive before the Second World War, in the pages and footnotes of the Phenomenology of Perception, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” and in exhaustive detail in his later lecture course Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology.

Though these concepts are not isomorphic in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, particularly in Merleau-Ponty’s nuanced sense of “generative passivity,” I use the concepts of static, genetic, and generative phenomenology developed by Steinbock (1995) in his pioneering Home and Beyond to serve as three interpretative keys to work out three concepts of passivity in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking. The French philosopher does not privilege the position of human consciousness and of constituting activity, and indeed undermines the whole idea of constitution by proposing the concept of institution whereby life
continually accumulates sense through a movement between sense and non-sense, a movement that difficultly calls into question our ideas of “past,” “nature,” and “origin.” Merleau-Ponty develops a generative conception of the past as a soil of possibility beyond the terms of conscious acts, and even beyond those of the living body’s activities, and thus inaugurates the radically new philosophy of generative passivity or *institution*. 