

PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF TECHNOLOGY

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3. The Institution of Technology

Darian Meacham

1. Introduction

In this chapter I have a fairly straightforward aim. I ask whether the phenomenological concept of ‘Institution’ (*Stiftung*), which is sometimes translated (into both French and English) to ‘foundation’ or ‘establishment’, can help to better articulate how phenomenology or phenomenological methods can contribute to the philosophical examination of technology. I think that the answer is yes. Nonetheless, it is not clear from the outset that the concept of institution, as developed in the phenomenological tradition, can be rendered in a straightforward manner as a *method* or *tool* in the philosopher of technology’s quiver. Moreover, the application of phenomenological methods in the philosophy of technology under the umbrella of postphenomenology has also come under recent criticism for being insufficiently attentive to questions of broader historical and political context (Cressman, 2020)—a classic critique of phenomenology—and for being insufficiently phenomenological (Ritter, 2021)—a common critique of applied versions of phenomenological philosophy. The aim here is not to intervene in these debates about the merits and shortcomings of postphenomenological methods in the philosophy of technology or whether postphenomenology is sufficiently phenomenological, but rather to understand how the concept of institution transformed phenomenological analysis and how this might be of some use in approaching the question of technology from a phenomenological perspective.

Though the concept of ‘institution’ (*Stiftung*) appears in the work of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, and more recently Roberto Esposito, the focus in this chapter will be on its role in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, with some reference to its Husserlian development. The reason for this is on the one hand scope and on the other that the manner in which Merleau-Ponty elaborates the concept makes its affinity to the philosophy of technology readily apparent. In the first section of the chapter, I will give a brief account of the development of the concept in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking from earlier writing on perception and embodiment through to a form of synthesis of his readings of Max Weber, György Lukács, and Husserl that was at least in part meant to address and elaborate his own and other criticisms of transcendental phenomenology. In this second part, I will try to provide a more conceptual overview of the concept and how it developed from an element of Husserl’s genetic phenomenology to a ‘fundamental modality of time’ (to use Lefort’s expression) in Merleau-Ponty’s onto-political turn in the mid-1950s. The difficulty with the concept of ‘institution’ is its fecundity: event, social object, form, and structure are all ways in which the concept can and has been utilized. To give the term its place in a method of phenomenological analysis, these different senses of the term will have to be separated analytically, to the extent possible. In the third part, I will examine how this concept may be able to contribute to a phenomenological approach to questions concerning technology.

2. Very Brief History of a Concept

The concept of institution is most closely associated, in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, with the *Collège de France* lectures from 1955 and the subsequent 1961 course on Husserl’s ‘Origin of Geometry’ text (Husserl, 2002). Lefort’s use and further development of the concept in the development and elaboration of his own political phenomenology stemmed from a rigorous engagement with the entirety of Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre.¹

1 Derrida’s own treatment of the ‘Origin of Geometry’ text marks another trajectory for the life of the concept, which is outside the scope of the present chapter.

However, Merleau-Ponty's engagement with the concept predates these 'later' writings and can already be discerned more than a decade earlier in the phenomenology of perceptual experience and embodied being in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1942). This early uptake was probably a consequence of Merleau-Ponty's close reading of Husserl's *Ideas II* manuscripts in the early 1940s. The application of the concept to historical—how one time has access to another time (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 8)—and political analyses dates to a period when he turned again toward questions of politics in the texts gathered in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955) (Merleau-Ponty, 1973), following a break with Sartre and French communist politics.² The first sentences of the preface of *Adventures of the Dialectic* read: 'we need a philosophy of both history and spirit to deal with the problems we touch upon here. Yet we would be unduly rigorous if we were to wait for perfectly elaborated principles before speaking philosophically of politics'. The concept of institution seems then to be the imperfectly elaborated principle that will form the basis of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of history. The period of the institution lectures and the publication of *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955) was also a period of engagement with Weber and Lukács. Before proceeding to the concept of institution directly, it is necessary to touch upon the insights that are driving this often overlooked engagement, because I think that they are formative for the development of the concept of institution.

Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Weber merits broader consideration but here I will point to only two points of contact within the essay 'The crisis of understanding' (Merleau-Ponty, 1973): (1) the reconstruction of the 'horizon' of an action, and (2) the notion of 'elective affinity'. The first pertains to what Merleau-Ponty considers the form of activity proper to both the historian and the 'man of action'. The 'man of action' should be a kind of historian and likewise the activity of engaging in historical investigation is always a form of (political) action. To understand an action, it is necessary to reconstruct its horizon, which

2 Despite the falling out, Sartre seems to have closely followed Merleau-Ponty's turn toward history and politics in the 1950s, famously writing, in an eulogy following Merleau-Ponty's death, that Merleau-Ponty had taught him the meaning of history. The concept of institution takes an important role in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1961).

is to say not just the 'perspective of the agent' or the subjective acts, but also the objective content or context which shapes the subjective acts. Merleau-Ponty calls doing history 'action in the realm of the imaginary' (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 11). What does this mean? The historian engages in an imaginative reconstruction of the horizon of subjective acts and objective forces that shape concrete action.

Two key points here. First, neither the historian nor the 'man of action' (the political actor) can engage in this horizon reconstruction from the position of pure spectator; by acting in and on the realm of the historical imaginary that shapes action, the historian or political actor reshapes the historical horizon of action in the present moment. The imaginary that Merleau-Ponty refers to does not sit on the side of the subjective act, but is the web of meaning from which both the subjective act or volition (he uses both words here, though the scope of subjective act goes beyond that of volitions) and the objective content attain meaning. In other words, the imaginary pertains to the historical and material context of meaning formation.

Second point: Merleau-Ponty cautions his reader, or Weber's reader, that this does not amount to reconstituting in whole or in part the thought processes of 'great men' or historical actors. The ambition is much greater: 'the total meaning of what has been done'. But by 'total meaning', what he seems to mean is that the historian comes to be aware of a certain style or 'logical structure of the facts' in their temporal development. This logic that is revealed in historians' work becomes a 'key' to comprehending a further unfolding of events, intentions, and objective conditions. Merleau-Ponty refers to Weber's classic example of how Calvinism and nascent capitalism come together. What Weber's reading of Benjamin Franklin unveils is not the thoughts of one person, but rather how a style that is detected in Franklin becomes a heuristic key to understanding the objective trajectory that was developing historically in Western Europe at the time. It is important to emphasize here how the term 'objective' is being used here. It refers not just to material conditions, but also the public imaginary or symbolic dimensions that shape or condition the meaning of subjective acts and their material context.

To describe Weber's innovation, Merleau-Ponty uses two terms that also show the lineages of his (Merleau-Ponty's) thinking. He tells the reader that Weber has shown a method for restoring the 'anonymous

intention' (a term coming from Husserl's analysis of passive synthesis) of a 'dialectic of a whole' (a term referring most directly here to Lukács's work). The intention is anonymous in the proper sense—it does not originate or belong to any one person or persons, but appears in the trajectory of the historical development of the objective. Without using the term 'institution', Merleau-Ponty provides a nearly verbatim description of what he was putting into his lecture notes for the lectures on institution and passivity that were contemporaneous to the publication of the *Adventures of the Dialectic*: 'symbolic matrices which have no pre-existence and which can for a longer or shorter time influence history itself and then disappear, not by external forces but through an internal disintegration or because one of their secondary elements becomes predominant and changes their nature' (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, pp. 16–17).

What is detected in a style—what Merleau-Ponty elsewhere helpfully calls a 'watermark'—which appears in the historical development of the objective are 'elective affinities between the elements of a historical totality'.³ The sociologist Michael Löwy provides a clear explanation of this somewhat magical term in Weber's writing, which enthralled Merleau-Ponty: 'elective affinity is a process through which two cultural forms—religious, intellectual, political or economical—that have certain analogies, intimate kinships or meaning affinities, enter in a relationship of reciprocal attraction and influence, mutual selection, active convergence and mutual reinforcement' (Löwy, 2004). The elements that emerge and which can enter into these relations of affinity, Calvinism and nascent ideas of capitalism being the prime example, do not spring from an 'all powerful idea'—they are the sparks of a 'historical imagination' (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 17) that develops in an indeterminate if not entirely haphazard fashion in an ongoing dialectic with the web of human speech, choices, movements, and expression more broadly. It is this not entirely haphazard fashion of development of the dialectic that appears as though it were a watermark on the objective content of history itself.

Merleau-Ponty's reading of Weber and its own affinity with the idea of institution that was coming from the phenomenological side can be

3 The term 'style' has its own Husserlian legacy which Merleau-Ponty is building on, see Meacham (2013).

read as a response to the critique that Lukács made of phenomenology already nearly a decade earlier; a critique that I think also animates some of the recent ‘dialectical’ criticism of (post) phenomenology as an approach in the philosophy of technology (Cressman, 2020). In the long essay on Lukács, ‘“Western” Marxism’, that directly follows the essay by Weber in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty provides a view of Lukács’ historical materialism that bears a close resemblance to his (Merleau-Ponty’s) reading of Weber: ‘the relations among men are not the sum of personal acts or personal decisions, but pass through things, the anonymous roles, the common situations and the institutions where men have projected so much of themselves that their fate is now played out outside them[selves] [*desormais hors d’eux*]’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 32).

The point that I want to make here is that these readings of Weber and Lukács function as preparation for what can be read as a phenomenological response to Lukács’s critique of phenomenology through the concept of institution. It is worthwhile then to look a bit more closely at that critique as it is phrased in the 1949 essay ‘Existentialism’ (Lukács, 1971). Lukács takes as his example an ‘honest’ phenomenologist, Wilhelm Szilasi—someone whose name is now forgotten, but who evidently Lukács held in higher esteem than, say Max Scheler, whom he refers to in the same essay as a charlatan. Szilasi attempts the well-worn move of the phenomenology lecturer, to provide a phenomenological analysis of the situation perceptually before him in terms of how the co-presence of others conditions or co-constitutes its appearance: ‘this space with its variously worked boards is a lecture hall only because we understand this mass of wooden objects as such, and we do understand it so because from the outset we mean it as something presupposed in our common task—namely, lecturing and listening. [...] It is the way of being together that determines what the thing is’. Lukács makes several critical points. The first has to do with the level of abstraction. Szilasi refers to ‘variously worked boards’ and not to desks, benches, etc., so as not to deprive the intentional act of its constituting power or what Lukács calls the ‘magical potency of the intentional experience’. This is not an oversight, but an essential dimension of the phenomenological analysis. Lukács goes on. What is also missing from the analysis, but precisely not from the experience itself, are the social

and political conditions which shape the environment of the lecture. In this case, that it is taking place in Zurich and not Freiburg where Szilasi can no longer teach due to the Nazi regime. Moreover, the building, the heating system, and the furniture all bear what we above—using Merleau-Ponty's terminology—referred to as the style or watermark of 'a certain stage of development of industry and of society'. Lukács criticism is not that phenomenological method cannot account for socio-historical meaning, but that it places it on the side of individual subjectivity. It 'confronts consciousness with a chaos of things (and men) which only individual subjectivity can articulate and objectify'. To understand the critique, it is helpful to go back to Merleau-Ponty's own reading of Weber and Lukács. As Merleau-Ponty points out, Lukács's retort to Weber in *History and Class Consciousness* was that he remained confined to the traditional categories of subject and object (Lukács, 1923). When we are also able to relativize these categories, we can arrive at a 'sort of totality'. It is a *sort* of totality because it does not encompass all actual and possible being, but a 'coherent arrangement of known facts' (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 31). In other words, it is a partial and historical totality that allows for what Merleau-Ponty will later refer to as 'coherent deformation' with the advent of lines of development and matrices in the historical imagination.

In short, the critique is that phenomenological analysis fails, by design, to appropriately account for the fundamental insight of Lukács's dialectical philosophy: that perceived empirical objects 'are to be understood as aspects of a totality, i.e., as aspects of a total social situation caught up in the process of historical change' (Lukács, 1971, p. 162). The theory of institution functions then as a phenomenological response to Lukács critique, but also as a development of Merleau-Ponty's own critique of transcendental phenomenology, which in *The Visible and the Invisible* he characterizes as the attempt on the part of reflective consciousness to methodologically walk back the path of constitution from the constituted object of experience to the 'zero point of subjectivity'; as though 'one could walk in either direction from Notre Dame to the Eiffel Tower or from the Eiffel Tower to Notre Dame' (Flynn, 2013; Merleau-Ponty, 1968). The analogy is interesting for our purposes here as Merleau-Ponty uses not only a historical example but a technological one. The point that he wishes to make with this example

is that there is what we can call an institutional pathway or history that gives the historical path from Notre Dame to the Eiffel Tower its sense. The sense of both artefacts is emergent from this institutional history and cannot be thought without it. The idea of movement and the play of the French word *sens* as meaning both sense and direction is important here: sense is emergent in the movement of institutions. One can travel in both directions from the Eiffel Tower to Notre Dame, but it is not the same path. On the walk back, we see things differently, having been marked by the walk there. We can think this in a very literal sense of the perceptual experience of the walk to and from Notre Dame, but also in the historical sense, which runs through the perceptual. Notre Dame appears in an institutional and perceptual context that includes a history of architectural development through to the Eiffel Tower. To link back to Lukács's critique of phenomenology, we see in and through 'a certain stage of development of industry and of society'; there is no direct path from the constituted object of experience to 'the zero point of subjectivity', perceptual consciousness occurs in and through a historical totality. This is why Merleau-Ponty, in the 1955 lectures on institution, says that we should shift from thinking consciousness in terms of constituting/constituted to instituting/instituted.

Though presenting this as a critique of transcendental phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is nonetheless insistent that the sprigs of institutional thinking can be found in the 'unthought' of Husserl's own work—itself an institution. And this idea of the 'unthought' (akin to the notion of horizon that Merleau-Ponty pulls from Weber's work) that reanimates an institution becomes key to the theory of institution itself. In the next section, we will focus somewhat more on the Husserlian legacy of the concept.

3. The Phenomenology of Institution

In this section, I will try to further unpack the phenomenological theory of institution that Merleau-Ponty attempts to develop on the basis of this reading of Weber and Lukács on the one hand and also his project of developing Husserlian phenomenology beyond the limitations pointed out by Lukács. Taking a step back, it is helpful to reiterate what it is that I mean, in the most basic sense, when I use the term 'institution'.

Perhaps one of the clearer explanations of what an institution is comes not from the phenomenological tradition (not entirely surprisingly) but from the conservative political theorist Yuval Levin: ‘when I speak of institutions, I mean the durable forms of our common life. They are the frameworks and structures of what we do together’ (Levin, 2020). In this section I will try to unpack this rather straightforward description in the phenomenological language of Merleau-Ponty, while trying to retain the central insight articulated by Levin.

3.1 Institutions in Personal Life

For both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, an institution within subjective life refers to an event that becomes a durable form of sense (to use Levin’s construction). Husserl in the language of constitution uses the term ‘act’, specifying that an institution is an act that opens a horizon of other potential sense-developments, whether conceived as events or acts. The horizon of potentiality exists in a form of latency in the initial event of the sense-bestowing act. This latency or horizon of potentiality can be more or less constrained depending on the history or institutional web that any one event or act occurs within. When potentiality within the web of institutions that constitutes a subjective life (Merleau-Ponty takes issue with the language of constitution here for reasons well-articulated by Lukács above) is actualized into sense-formation or an event it ‘refers back’ to the initial institution that facilitated it. Husserl and subsequently Merleau-Ponty use the term *Nachstiftung* or reinstitution to describe this. This back-referral awakens and also transforms the initial institution, affecting both its sense within the web of a subjective life, but also its intensity. If we can refer to these processes of sense formation as institutional pathways, no pathway operates in isolation. The entire nexus of a subjective life is in a constant process of being activated, reactivated, and transformed, however subtly.

The discussion of institution in personal life occurs for Husserl—and also when it is picked up by Merleau-Ponty—in the broader context of passive synthesis; meaning a form of synthesis that is not present to consciousness. Passivity, in this sense, is not opposed to activity. To put it in somewhat plainer terms, our subjective lives are instituted in ways that we are not aware of. Becoming at best partially aware of these processes

in relation to an objective context is the activity of the historian or political actors as discussed in the first section. This process of reinstitution, the continuous activation and transformation of the temporal web of our subjective lives, takes place in what Husserl calls the 'background that is prior to all comportment and is instead presupposed by all comportment' (Husserl, 1989, p. 279). The institution can be described in terms of an active meaning structure that displays a sort of meta-stability or plasticity; it is subject to change and transformation without losing its identity. This explanation clarifies somewhat how Merleau-Ponty wishes to use the concept when he sketches the problem and defines the term in the *resumé* of his 1955 course at the *Collège de France* and how Lefort summarizes the idea in his introduction to those lectures:

Institution in the strong sense is this symbolic matrix that creates an opening of a field, of a future according to its dimensions, from which comes the possibility of a common adventure and a history like consciousness. (Lefort in Merleau-Ponty 2003, p. 45)

The concept of institution may help us to find a solution to certain difficulties in the philosophy of consciousness [...] there is nothing in the object that is capable of throwing consciousness back toward other perspectives [...] Thus what we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience that endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, will for an intelligible series or a history—or again those events which sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future. (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, pp. 123–124)

Both of these descriptions help to demonstrate how the concept both retains its character as an element of phenomenological methodology while also addressing the critique of that methodology as one finds, for example, in Lukács work, as discussed above. This is, in other words, consciousness historicized. A 'history like consciousness' emerges from what is described above as the historical imagination of a material totality at a certain point in its development. But consciousness (an example of an institution) is also an institution that endows a particular sense to a series of future experiences, but also to the past. The force of the institution extends into an indeterminate future and a past that is also reshaped as its 'facts' are reinstituted by their contact with the trajectory of the new institution. Institution is what gives consciousness

its history in both senses, a consciousness of history and the history of consciousness. I am using consciousness itself as an example here, but we could just as easily take another, the technology of writing or the invention of perspective in painting. Considered as institutions, these open particular pathways of historical development, not just for individual subjects (Lukács's critique of phenomenology) but for the material totality as meaningful in itself.

This should also help us to better understand the Eiffel Tower to Notre Dame comment from *The Visible and the Invisible*. The critique that Lukács makes is that the phenomenological method counts on the constituting act of the subject for the sense content of the experience. But in walking the path backwards, neither the subject nor the totality from which sense is instituted is the same. It is true that from the perspective of a philosophy of consciousness like the one Lukács and Merleau-Ponty are critiquing, there would be nothing in the object to throw consciousness off in new directions, because the object is constituted in its sense by the act of consciousness. But appearing in a constantly evolving historical and material socio-technical context (the 'totality') as it does, the object that one encounters on the walk back is now run through with different institutional significances than it was on the walk there. And what of the 'necessity of a future'? What the phenomenologist qua institutional analyst investigates are the appearances of what I earlier called 'watermarks' in experience—these appear as indicative of a style that expresses the elective affinities within a particular moment of the totality or of the historical socio-technical context and gives sense to a forward historical trajectory of the totality. Its institutionally conditioned but indeterminate horizon of potentiality appears in experience through the style or as a watermark in experience.

3.2 Institutions in Intersubjective Life

The account above addresses institution in personal life, but personal life is never solipsistic. The institutional life of consciousness that Merleau-Ponty sets out to describe is part of a 'common adventure' during which durable common forms of life are instituted. In fact, the history of this concept on the phenomenological side begins with Husserl's analysis of intersubjectivity in the famous sections of *Cartesian*

Meditations (Husserl, 1973) devoted to that topic. First, the institution of the sense of my own body as a *lived body* facilitates what Husserl calls the analogous apperception by which the bodies of others also appear as lived-bodies and not only object-bodies (*Körper*). (I will leave aside further discussion of the difficulties and productive problems in this account of inter-subjectivity.)

It is in this shift from personal to intersubjective or collective life that the concept of institution begins to take the full significance that Lefort attributes to it above. Events in the sense described in the paragraph above are not lived in solipsistic isolation, in the relation between subjective consciousness and object, but are experienced and sedimented as institutions in expressive relations with others. Perceptual and expressive life flows and congeals (institutes) at points in constant expression relations with others. Experience is shared, and an experience around which we communicate with others and moreover about which we communicate becomes an institution in intersubjective or public life. Its activity qua institution in sense formation is run through the experiences of others and expressions of that experience in communicative acts. The possibility of technologically preserving or meditating these experiences (for example in writing or oral tradition, recorded speech or images) alters the nature of the institutional structure of human experience, providing new possibilities for sedimentation of experiences outside of the scope of any individual life. This is why the advent of writing is so closely bound up with the concept of institution in Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's work (as well as in Derrida's [1978]). The possibility of writing and recording facilitates the process of sedimentation wherein the initial expressive acts and intuition are sedimented but also forgotten or anonymized into formalizations or what Levin calls in another context the durable forms of collective life. It is this sedimentation that makes the forms of meaning durable and also easily transferable in formalizations across time and space. Here, writing functions as a technology that was itself instituted and whose meaning—the meaning of the possibility of communication across space and time using written language—shaped the institutional totality; and also as an institution that mediates experience and sense formation, i.e., the historical development of the totality in the manner described above.

3.3 Institutions as Social Objects

The public sedimentation in expression (of which written language is an example, but not the only one) of events and experiences transforms them from private to public institutions. To the extent that the institutional nexus that is created with the sedimentation of an experience in the temporal flow of consciousness can be considered an object, we can consider these public or communal experiences and events to also be objects. The theory of institution this way opens onto a phenomenological theory of social objects. Social objects are those that are formed and maintained in expressive and communicative acts. In this way, a public institution or social object resembles what Merleau-Ponty called, in the discussion of Weber, ‘symbolic matrices’. These social objects/public institutions/symbolic matrices do things in social life; in other words, they exhibit powers to mediate meaning formation of other institutions at public or private levels. An institution’s instituting power—how it mediates and conditions the sense-forming capacities of other institutions—is constrained by the web of other institutions that it is within. As Merleau-Ponty wrote about symbolic matrices, they disappear ‘not by external forces but through an internal disintegration’. These institutions (let us stick with that term) require maintenance in communicative action. Without such maintenance, the instituting power that they exert on the web or totality of sense around them diminishes and can eventually fade away or be fundamentally transformed, as, for example, the Acropolis of Athens goes from being a centre of religious and political life to a tourist attraction, though its appearance is still conditioned by its former existence as a sacred place. In other words, the Acropolis, as an objective, material architectural accomplishment remains an institution, but the power that it exerts on the dynamics of sense formation around it has transformed.

Some institutions are intentionally constructed in communicative acts to exercise constraints on or transform others, within a certain sphere—laws and regulations would be a good example of this, and we can analyze institutional web or ecologies at many different levels. A relevant difference between three terms that I have run together here, perhaps somewhat hastily—social objects/public institutions/symbolic matrices—is that while a social object entails something that we can

point to (e.g., an organization, nation, group, or idea) it is less clear that symbolic matrices necessarily entail the same solidity. When we talk about the instituting power of symbolic matrices, an object is not necessary. It can also refer to something we might call an imaginary line of force that organises elective affinities, creating a historical trajectory.

One can see that the way that I am talking about public institutions here comes quite close to the way the mediating powers of technologies are discussed in some forms of analysis. The above example of writing or recording technologies are apt ones. These are not just material processes but also exercise a power over sense formation within a web of meanings. The institution of writing technology seems to have a very general significance; this means something like, there is little if any communication—including non-written communication—that occurs within literate societies that is not somehow mediated by the sense-forming power of the institution of writing itself. Simultaneously, the institution of writing is continuously transformed at local levels in relation to the more local institutional ecologies where it is continuously reinstituted. At the local level, Lukács's example, which he uses to criticize phenomenological methodology, provides a good example of how the social object, in this case the lecture hall, can be analyzed qua institution. It does not appear in abstraction from a historical and material context, but only in that context, and its manner of appearance in that context then exercises an instituting power over the sense making activities that occurs within its vicinity. We can take the term vicinity here in a literal sense. In the lecture hall, one speaks, moves, and probably also writes and remembers in ways that are conditioned by the sense of the hall, which also bears the watermark of 'a certain stage of development of industry and of society'. The power or force is 'objective' but also imaginary or anonymous in the manner discussed in the first section above, but it is manifest in individuated expression which is always watermarked, to use that term again, by an idiosyncratic institutional life history. In this way the object as it appears is not constituted by subjective acts, but instituted in a process of sense-development that includes subjective act and intersubjective verification and modification without being reduced to this. The instituting force of the lecture hall qua social object weighs heavier perhaps on the person who had spent their formative years in that hall, or even ones like it, than on a person

who is just visiting, for example—this is another way in which there is a subject that is ‘instituted and instituting, but inseparably, not a constituting subject’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 35).

3.4 The Anonymous Horizon and Coherent Deformation

The idea of an ‘anonymous horizon’ plays an important role in the account of institutions and their instituting powers. Merleau-Ponty also uses the term *unthought* to denote the same idea, but this risks an over-subjective interpretation. We can try to unpack this idea of the anonymous horizon by returning to the quote at the beginning of this section where Merleau-Ponty tells us that institution provides the ‘durable dimensions’ to experience. This dimensionality should be understood in terms of a virtual horizon of objective potentials that unfurls from the event of the institution. I use the term *objective* again here to denote that this virtual horizon is the ideal dimension of the material totality that Merleau-Ponty referred to in his reading of Lukács. The institution qua event should be understood as the actualization or concretization of a horizon of objective virtualities or potentialities that have emerged from the dynamics of the institutional totality. But the actualization or concretization of a potential does not exhaust it.⁴ An institution always has an anonymous horizon: affinities that are opened up without being actualized and which can lay dormant, so to speak, until they are actualized or not, but which still shape the development of sense in their vicinity and the further development of the anonymous horizon itself.

To illustrate the point, Merleau-Ponty provides another technical example: painting. A (good) painter does not learn by simply imitating the work or techniques of her predecessors. What marks out the great work of painting is that it seems to respond to a question about painting

4 Though there is a clear link between Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of institution and Simondon’s theory of concretization (Simondon, 2016), I am using the terms in a slightly different way but closely related way here. If, by concretization, Simondon means a process where the technological object becomes increasingly self-sufficient and incorporates more functions into itself (Bontems, 2018), I am using it here to mean a process whereby the individuation of an institution leads to it becoming more robust or resilient in relation to pressures from its institutional environment.

itself without that question having been actually posed. This happens because the artist, or great artist, explores the unrealized potentials of a tradition (what we could think of as a sub-ecology). Great painters respond in their work to questions that are latent within a moment in history, questions that we or they did not know were there, that we had an inkling of, but could not quite articulate until they are instituted in the event of a work that responds to them without intending to. Merleau-Ponty tries to explain this in the analysis of painting in the essay 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence':

The difficult and essential point here is to understand that in positing a field distinct from the empirical order of events, we are not positing a Spirit of Painting which is already in possession of itself on the other side to the world that it is gradually manifested in. There is not, above and beyond the causality of events, a second causality which makes the world of painting a 'supersensible world' [...] but if circumstances lend themselves in the least to creation, a preserved and transmitted canvas develops a suggestive power in its inheritors which is without proportion to what it is—not only as a bit of painted canvas, but even as a work endowed by its creator with a definite signification. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 68)

These works then institute what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a 'coherent deformation' that reveals a 'subterranean logic'—there is no causal pathway in an institutional history by the concretization of virtualities, which lived a potential or underground life until being concretized by a new institution (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 124). In the last paragraph of 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', Merleau-Ponty brings the project of institutional analysis that he had been to that point exploring through the study of expression and painting back to the project announced in the first lines of *Adventures of the Dialectic*. (Recall, 'we need a philosophy of both history and spirit to deal with the problems we touch upon here. Yet we would be unduly rigorous if we were to wait for perfectly elaborated principles before speaking philosophically of politics'.). Political thought consists in the same kind of institutional analysis or pathway tracing entailed in the study of painting. He calls it the elucidation of an 'historical perception in which all our understandings, all our experiences, and all our values come into play' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 83). Political thought then becomes not a search for principles and values, but the activity of unearthing the

subterranean logic of events in the development of the totality. It is not so much the art of the possible as Carl von Clausewitz wrote, but an art of deciphering the signs of the potential or imaginary dimension that shapes the objective historical totality in both its actual and potential or virtual dimensions.

3.5 Matrix Institutions

In Merleau-Ponty's 1955 course notes on institution in public life, a specific set of institutions are identified that he refers to as events-matrices or matrix-institutions (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 44). Perhaps the best way to describe these are as institutions that exert enormous instituting power, opening what he calls a 'unified historical field' meaning that it is an institution that makes the potential (not actual) a series of further events. The two examples that he offers in the 1955 course are again technological in the broad sense of the word: the Neolithic revolution and the industrial revolution. These institutions, which cannot be described as singular events but rather something more akin to constellations of institutions with an elective affinity leading to a dynamic 'cultural nexus [noyaux]' that exerts enormous instituting power on the dynamics of their local institutional (and material) ecology, play a significant role in determining the capacities of other subsequent institutions.

3.6 Institution as Dimensionality of Time

This analysis of the concept of institutions helps us to understand the idea of an institution conveyed in the quotes that began this section as giving experience durable (read: stable and robust) dimensions and inaugurating a history. It also helps to clarify the relation between institutions as events and institutions as objects. The foundation of an institution is an event that alters the dynamics of an existing objective totality. But the event also has a product, the enduring meaning-structure which continues to exert power over sense-making in the now altered totality. It is as an enduring meaning structure, a social object, that the institution continues to structure and stabilize experience. It is this general structure of institutions interacting and co-shaping one

another in an objective totality that gives coherence to experience as a temporal flow (Meacham, 2013). Institution in this sense becomes the fundamental idea for understanding the phenomenality of time, its appearance. This is the ontological significance of the concept. Experienced time is the individuation of what Merleau-Ponty calls in his later writing *raw-being*. I think that this can be understood in terms of a pre-individuated state of potentiality, that is concretized in the processes of institution that have been described above. Processes of individuation can thus be understood in terms of objectification—the becoming of objects in a meaningful web of relations.

4. Technology and Institutions

In the preceding sections, I provided an overview of Merleau-Ponty's concept of institution as developed through his engagement with Weber and Lukács and the prior development of the concept in Husserl's phenomenology. In Merleau-Ponty's rendering of the concept, it comes to replace constitution in the account of subjective meaning forming activity. It also provides an account for the possibility of intersubjective relations that are shared over time as well as an account of social objects that are formed and maintained in communicative and expressive actions. Finally, the concept takes on historical and ontological significance as the principle that drives the experience of temporality at the subjective, intersubjective, and historical scales. In the final section of this chapter, I want to turn to what had been promised in the introduction but has to this point been only touched upon in passing, the relation to technology.

As noted, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions and analyses of the concept of institution contain many technological examples: writing, architecture, painting, and also what we might call technological events (or event matrices) such as the Neolithic revolution or the industrial revolution. The definition of technology that I am using here is purposefully broader than the classic definition of the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes. It amounts to something like the products of *techné*, the form of 'knowledge and ability which is directed to producing and constructing', or the broader sense of the German *Technik*, meaning 'the entire domain of all those procedures and actions related to skilled production of any kind' (Schadewaldt, 1979). There is a reason why the

clearest examples of institutions in the senses that have been elaborated above come from this domain. Technics is the activity of producing enduring objects whose individuation or development arises out of a need or a trajectory of concretization that may not be anywhere explicit, but that appears in the temporal concretization of the object.

The study of technical objects can then proceed in the manner that Merleau-Ponty indicates institutional analysis in other domains can occur, by a tracing back of institutional pathways and trajectories within an objective totality. In this way, the relativization of subject and object occurs and priority is placed neither on the subjective side of action and expression nor on the objective side of abstracted material conditions—abstracted in the sense that they do not consider the dimension of historical imagination that is studied is the institutional development of the objective totality. This cannot be studied as a whole, but only through the examinations of intertwined and overlapping historico-material regions of the totality. What the institutional analyst seeks out are the elective affinities that give sense and direction (*sens*) to a series of events within such regions, which are identified retrospectively, though whole fields are devoted to trying to identify them prospectively. These affinities can be sought in a study of the style of development, use, transformation, and disuse of technical objects qua institutions. This examination is necessarily both descriptive and empirical; it is the product of embedded observation, as it is not possible to remove the gaze from the internal institutional dynamics of the objective totality, though techniques are possible to provide the required distance. These are the techniques that Merleau-Ponty seeks to elucidate through his studies of painting, science, politics, and also philosophy, where he attempts as early as in the *Phenomenology of Perception* to recast the phenomenological reduction in this way, as a tool for distancing from the lived-immediacy of event. Though, it remains the case that he makes no mention, to my knowledge, of *technics* as a distinct domain. These techniques of institutional analysis themselves, in philosophy, the arts, science, and politics, have their own institutional trajectories. What appears in the institutional analysis of these zones of practice is the ‘logical structure’ or ‘subterranean logic’ of what Merleau-Ponty refers to as ‘the facts’ or elsewhere the ‘objective’ in the manner that I have been describing.

Although the domain of technics does not receive specific attention in the cases of institutional analysis that occupied Merleau-Ponty's later writing—art, science, language, and politics—it nonetheless has a privileged role. Technics is a cross-cutting field across all the other institutional domains, such that one cannot study the history of art, science, politics, or philosophy for that matter as distinct from the history of technics. In this sense, the institutional analysis of technical development has a particular ontological significance. It is also in this sense, as a way of studying history that tries to take fuller account of the dimension of potentiality or virtuality that inhabits the material world and is a driver of temporality in its experiential sense, that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of institution, which though incomplete, offers rich resources for a philosophy of technology.

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