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Scott Belinsky April 7, 2019

On the Self, Others, and Experience:

Understanding Our Relations with Others as Perceptual Powers

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Abstract

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This thesis represents a phenomenological study of the self. The thesis provides a developmental account of our sense of self from infancy through adulthood. Primarily drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of intentionality, embodiment, and habit, as well as Russon's analysis of our familial and social structures, the thesis employs the phenomenological method to study our sense of self as we experience it. From this experienced-based account, I fundamentally propose three core arguments: first, that our sense of self is not as independent from other people as we typically conceive it to be, but instead that our sense of self is an intersubjective accomplishment that is contingent upon our experience of others. Second, that many of our relations with others should not be understood as mere objects of perception, but that these relationships are perceptual in themselves; we do not primarily experience our relationships with other people as mere objects, but rather, we experience the world through these relationships. Lastly, in light of this intersubjective understanding of both the self and world, the thesis studies language as a form of expression. Ultimately I propose that language should not be understood as representational of the self, but rather, as a critical element of our relations with others and, by extension, our sense of self.

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Introduction

I have watched a deep red sun descend over the horizon of a distant mountain ridge with the wind lashing a cold breeze against my face. I have let the soft pages of a book flip slowly through my fingers as I am drawn into an immersive work of literature. I have grasped the arm of a friend for support in times when it felt like the world was collapsing before my eyes. And I have a felt my throat tighten, my palms perspire, and my voice shrink as I stand before a group of people to deliver a speech. All of these experiences are vastly different from one another. They take place at different points in time and space, they consist of physical sensations and emotions, and they involve inanimate objects as well other people, to name just a few key differences. And yet there is a unifying element to all of these disparate experiences: they are all my experience – experienced by a person with a cohesive sense of self. *I* watched the sunset over the mountain ridge; *I* felt the soft pages of the book; *I* grasped my friend's arm for support; *I* felt my voice shrink in the presence of others. Our sense of self is pervasive throughout our experience of the world – it is the common and unifying element to all of our experiences. Yet we rarely reflect upon our sense of self, and instead, experience it implicitly in the background of all of our perceptions. While we are always "there", we are almost never the focus of our experience.

When we do explicitly reflect on our sense of self, we typically accept a pre-established understanding – what I will call the "traditional understanding" – of the self, which can be summarized by three characteristics.[1] First and foremost, the traditional view understands the self as independent from others. We honor and glorify narratives of self-actualization, and we take

[1] See Russon's understanding of prejudice in *Human Experience* 9-17 for a detailed account of the traditional view of the self and how it effects our experience of the world

the desire for external validation from other people as an indicator of insecurity. After all, one might argue, what could be more individualized, more personal, than my own sense of self?

The traditional view also tends to understand our sense of self as a static and given element of experience. My sense of "who I am" does not, according to this view, change significantly over time; it is, instead, a fixed element of experience that remains constant. And more importantly, the traditional understanding holds my sense of self as a necessary element of experience – as something which we always have, rather than something developed over time. We can see that these two characteristics – the static and given nature of our sense of self – are connected: because our sense of self is static, it must necessarily be given rather than developed over time.

Lastly, and most fundamentally, the traditional view maintains that the self is primarily isolated from others. In other words, it holds that we are initially separate from others, and that it is only through subsequent action that we encounter others. In its simplest terms, the traditional view understands the self as principally separate and individualized. It understands any shared experience of others as contingent upon this primary state of isolation.

As I briefly noted, however, we almost always experience our sense of self implicitly; it is not usually an explicit element of our experience. Our sense of self is so deeply embedded within our experience that it can be challenging to provide a clear and descriptive account of its nature. This challenge calls into question the accuracy of the traditional view. For instance, how sure can we be that the self should be seen as initially separate from others when we cannot even distinguish our experience of the self from our other experiences of the world? On the other hand, how confident can we be that the self is a given element of experience when we cannot

specifically identify when it was first established? The elusive, implicit, and embedded nature of our sense of self complicates the traditional view by challenging the foundation on which it rests.

In order to evaluate whether the traditional understanding of the self holds any merit, then, we need to reexamine our experience of the self without importing any preconceived notions into our study. We must, at least momentarily, cast aside any previous understandings of the self and instead return to study the self as we experience it. This idea of studying experience as we experience it, without allowing any preconceived theories to influence our analysis, was explicitly articulated by Edmund Husserl in his work *Ideas*. In his work, Husserl describes this mode of philosophical investigation as the phenomenological method and establishes the philosophical tradition known as phenomenology. Since Husserl first described his method, many philosophers have taken up their own phenomenological projects, leading to a diverse range of applications. However, the principal, unifying element of these diverse projects, in its simplest terms, is an emphasis on studying experience *as we experience it*; the phenomenological method asserts that through a rigorous description of our own lived experience we can provide a more accurate account of our experience of the world than we can by relying upon pre-conceived theories divorced from direct experience.

The primary goal of this thesis will be to provide a phenomenological account of our sense of self. I will rigorously describe our lived experience of the self and use this description as the foundation of our analysis. In doing so, I will address the embedded nature of our sense of self by grounding our study in direct experience rather than preconceived theory. Ultimately, by employing the phenomenological method, we will gain a descriptive account of the self that better reflects our lived experience than the traditional view.

My account of the self will be divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, I will primarily draw upon Merleau-Ponty's work in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as Heidegger's notion of action-based intentionality from *Being and Time*, in order to establish a phenomenological framework for our study. I will then use this framework to provide a comprehensive phenomenological description of the development of our sense of self. We will start our study by examining the intersubjective experiences of infants, following Merleau-Ponty's lecture on the topic titled *The Child's Relations with Others*. Then, we will turn to Russon's phenomenological study of the family and the social world in his work *Human Experience*. We will focus on Russon's argument that other people play a critical role in the development of the self. We will briefly review Laing's work in *The Divided Self*, focusing on his notion of ontological insecurity to supplement Russon's argument. In short, this chapter will establish how we develop our sense of self and discuss what implications can be drawn from this understanding for our broader study of the self.

In the second chapter, I will leverage Russon's conception of "bonds" from his book *Bearing Witness to Epiphany* to develop a more detailed account of our relations with others in adult life. We will specifically examine the dynamic nature of our sense of self and the critical role of others in its continuous development. Most notably, we will begin to explore our experience of creatively defining our sense of self and examine how it is integrally connected to our experience of others. This chapter will ultimately provide critical insight into how our relationships continue to influence our sense of self throughout our lives.

Lastly, in the third chapter, I will investigate our experience of language. I will draw upon Merleau-Ponty's work on language in both *Phenomenology of Perception*, and in his essay *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*. I will also draw upon Russon's understanding of

language as a fundamentally shared experience in *Bearing Witness to Epiphany* to further develop Merleau-Ponty's view. Together, both Merleau-Ponty and Russon's work will serve as a foundation for our own study by establishing a phenomenologically based view of language that understands language as a perceptual power. I will use this foundation as a starting place to further explore the unique nature of language in comparison to other forms of expression, where I will also draw upon Simms' work in *The Child in the World*. Ultimately, in the third chapter we will focus on how our experience of language effects our sense of self, and by extension, our experience of the world.

In sum, these three chapters comprise an inquiry into our experience of the self. The most significant outcome of this inquiry, as we will see, is that it will reveal that we cannot fully separate our experience of the self from our experiences of others; experience of self is fundamentally an intersubjective experience. Parallel to this discovery, I also hope to demonstrate that we primarily experience our relations with others as perceptual powers rather than objects of experience; we primarily experience the world *through* our relations with others, rather than experiencing others as a content of our experience. While both these understandings conflict with the traditional view of the self that we have just described, when we turn to study our experiences, we will find that we cannot deny the influence of others on our sense of self, and that we must similarly understand our relations with others as perceptual powers rather than objects of experience.

Our study of the self, then, has far-reaching implications. First and foremost, by grounding our analysis in our lived experience, we will be able to provide an understanding of the self that more accurately reflects how we experience it. Beyond providing a more precise philosophical view, however, in recognizing that others have a defining influence on our sense of

self and experience of the world, we are undermining a core notion of many Western discourses: we are calling into question the privilege of the individual. In philosophy, in the social sciences, in education, in psychiatry, in the law, and in many other disciplines critical to our society, we privilege the individual. We take the study of the individual to be the study of humankind. We make the individual the principal unit of our analysis. We focus on the development of the individual. We treat the mental health of the individual. We judge the actions of the individual. In short, in many of our most significant discourses, we have adopted a myopic focus on the individual.

If we are to understand the self as an intersubjective accomplishment, as interconnected with our experiences of others, however, we cannot afford to hold such a view. If we are to recognize that others are critical to our own experience of the world, we cannot in good faith privilege the individual to such an extreme degree. Our study, then, has the potential to not only help provide a more accurate understanding of the self, but also to broaden the scope of intellectual inquiry by taking into account the significance of others in our experience of the world. In studying our experience of the self as experienced and in expanding our study to include the role of others, we can refocus many of our most critical intellectual inquiries on elements of experience that were previously taken for granted; we can emphasize the interconnected relation between the self and others.

I. The Development of the Self

1. Developing a Phenomenological Framework

In order to fully address our inquiry, I will first aim to establish a phenomenological framework which we can apply to our investigation of the self. I will draw upon Merleau-Ponty's

work in *Phenomenology of Perception* and explicate his understanding of intentionality, embodiment, habit, and power. Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate that these concepts are fundamentally intertwined with one another and to illustrate how, when applied together, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology provides a more accurate framework to explore our inquiry concerning the self and others.

Let us begin with intentionality, which in short can be described as Merleau-Ponty's understanding of consciousness. Typically, when we think of consciousness, we think about it as a "thing"; for a Rationalist thinker it may be seen as the non-material and ultimate source of experience whereas for an Empiricist consciousness could be described by a series of physical brain states that both describes and produces subjective experience. Of course, these two views are more nuanced than this, but the unifying characteristic is that both views reduce consciousness to an object.[2] In contrast, Merleau-Ponty characterizes consciousness as fundamentally *relational*; consciousness can be described as the relation one has with the world (PP xxxi, xxxii). We are always conscious of something. Whether that thing is a physical object, an idea, a memory, or a feeling, we always experience something; even if I think of "nothingness", I would still be experiencing the idea of nothingness. Merleau-Ponty argues that consciousness, then, is the relationship between subject and object, and it cannot be reduced to either element. In other words, there can be no subjectivity without an object of experience, but at the same time, there can be no objects of experience without a subject to experience them. Therefore, consciousness can be described as this irreducible connection between subject and object, which Merleau-Ponty describes as the intentional nature of consciousness.

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[2] See *Phenomenology of Perception*, Part I, Chapters 1-2

We've established that consciousness is relational, but we can be more specific in describing what kind of relation it is. This brings us to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment, which can be seen as the heart of his philosophical project in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Put in its simplest terms, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment is that our experience of the world is fundamentally mediated through our bodies. [3] Our basic bodily capabilities – including our five primary senses and motricity – are the powers that give the world to us (PP 92, 93). Any understanding of consciousness that neglects this fact will be unsatisfactory because our embodied nature defines how we experience the world. To take a simple example, the fact that I feel pain makes the threat of physical violence threatening. My ability to feel pain is defined by my bodily capabilities, and these capabilities charge the threat of violence with meaning. If one imagines a world where I cannot feel pain, then the threat of violence would likely not be threatening – it may be charged with another meaning altogether. This is a simple example, but the embodied nature of consciousness effects every element of experience. For Merleau-Ponty our bodies are the very medium through which we experience the world -- they are the medium in which intentionality takes hold. Thus, any description of experience needs to take into account the embodied nature of consciousness.

Putting together Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment and intentionality, then, we can see that intentionality is not a conceptual relation between subject and object but one rooted in our embodied nature; the relation is not abstract, but deeply orientated toward action. Thus, Merleau-Ponty understands motricity – our power of bodily movement – as the original intentionality, writing,

> "Consciousness is originarily not an 'I think that', but rather an 'I can.' … Vision and movement are specific ways of relating to objects … it is the movement of existence, which does not suppress the radical diversity of contents, for it does not unite them by

[3] See *Phenomenology of Perception* Part 1, Chapters 3-4 for Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment

> placing them all under the domination of an 'I think', but rather by orienting them toward the new inter-sensory unity of the world." (PP 139)

Our relation to the world – our intentionality – is one of action. Our experience of objects relates to how we can, as embodied subjects, act upon them. This action-oriented understanding of intentionality is also central to Heidegger's work in *Being and Time*, where he illustrates this concept with his classic example of the hammer (BT 64, 65). In summary, Heidegger argues that an ontological understanding of a hammer is not fully captured through abstract contemplation. We will never come to a full understanding of what it is to be a hammer by analyzing its qualities (its color, its density, its texture) in isolation. Instead, he argues, our primary understanding of the hammer should be defined by how we use it. The fact that I can grasp the hammer's handle and swing its head imbues my experience of the object with meaning. I fundamentally experience the hammer in the context of what I can do with it. We can extend this notion of action-based intentionality to all experience. I experience my world in terms of what I, as an embodied subject, can do. Consequently, what I can do changes how I perceive the world; my powers define my experience of the world.

This understanding of embodiment establishes that my ability to perceive enables my experience of the world, but it can also be said that the *degree* of this power also affects my experience. For example, when a child develops his power to walk, it changes how he experiences distant objects. No longer are distant objects burdensome to get to, but instead, they become accessible. Note that we would like to claim that the content of perception remains the same – the distant object's physical form might seem to be the same – but the meaning of the perception drastically changes when the child further develops his ability to move himself. The same can be said for any of our powers. My worsening eyesight changes my experience of distant objects, rendering them ambiguous and demanding that I move closer to them. My recent weight-lifting

routine makes the heavy luggage I have to carry less burdensome. My fatigued body from a long day at work makes taking my dog for a walk a nuisance rather than a pleasure. All of these examples highlight how any development or change in our embodied abilities also changes the way we experience the “same” content of experience. Consciousness is both intentional and embodied, and therefore we experience the world in the context of what we can and cannot do; consequently, changing what we can and cannot do fundamentally changes our experience of the world

The development of our embodied powers, then, takes on a new level of importance. These powers are not just areas of personal development, but they change how we experience the world. Merleau-Ponty provides a very compelling and detailed account of the underlying dynamics of this development, which he describes as the process of “habituation”. Essentially, he states that acquiring a habit is the process of integrating an object into one’s embodied consciousness through repeated and systematic contact with said object (PP 143). When a child learns to grasp a toy, for example, he repeatedly comes into contact with the toy and struggles to take hold of it. Over time, however, the child habitually develops his ability to grasp – his ability to control his hand and fingers in a specific manner – and, by doing so, he integrates this grasping power into his lived body. With this process of habituation, the child’s power of motricity is further developed and his experience of the world is dramatically changed. The toy no longer appears to the child as an alien, uncontrollable object but as an object that he can move as he desires.

This notion of habituation, Merleau-Ponty argues, applies to non-bodily objects that we integrate into our lived bodies as well (PP 144). Take, for example, a keyboard. When we first attempt to type on a keyboard, we are inaccurate and slow. Every keystroke takes conscious effort as we explicitly locate each key on the keyboard to press. As we practice and develop a habit,

however, our ability improves, and we are able to type more quickly, accurately, and without explicit awareness of each key's location. What is happening here, Merleau-Ponty argues, is that through habituation the keyboard is integrated into our lived body. That is not to say that the keyboard cannot be experienced as an object (it is when I focus on its aesthetic qualities for example), but that when I type on my keyboard, I primarily experience it as a power of having the world appear in a certain way – of having certain possibilities – rather than an object. In turn, my habituated power to type transforms my experience of the world. I no longer experience the keyboard as an alien plastic object but as a way to access my computer. It allows me to interact with friends over the internet, express my thoughts through writing, organize my life through my calendar, etc. In short, I integrate an object into my lived body through this process of habituation, which in turn develops a power that changes my experience of the world. Of course, this is just one example of a pervasive element of our lives. The primary takeaway, however, is that it is through habituation that we can integrate objects – even non-bodily objects – into our lived bodies, which enhances our powers and abilities, ultimately changing the way we experience the world through our embodied states.

It is important to note that these concepts of intentionality, embodiment, perceptual power, and habit should not be considered in isolation, for they serve as an integrated phenomenological framework. They form a system for understanding our perception of the world. One cannot fully understand Merleau-Ponty's notion of intentionality without understanding the bodily relation that is established between subject and object through his notion of embodiment. Likewise, one cannot understand Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perceptual powers without his understanding of habit, which are of course both linked to his original notion of embodiment. This is just to say that these concepts need to be applied in conjunction with each other, and that they operate

synergistically to provide a more detailed phenomenological account than they would on their own.

Let us now turn to apply this phenomenological framework to our original question surrounding the self and others. We have established that our experience of the world is determined by an action-based intentionality. Our experience of the world, then, is defined by our possibilities for action. My experience of a car, for instance, is in part defined by my potential power to use it as a means of transportation. At a more fundamental level, my ability to feel pain, we said, charges one's threat of violence with meaning. Any change in our powers, then, in turn effects our perception of the world. If I were to lose my power to walk and were confined to a wheelchair, for example, my perception of the stairs would change: instead of perceiving the stairs as a tool, I would perceive them as an obstacle. On the other hand, if after years of having poor vision I get fitted for glasses that allow me to see better, my experience of far-away objects would change from previously ambiguous, blurred shapes to determinable and accessible objects.

Keeping this understanding of the connection between our experience of the world and our powers in mind, we can move to establish a central claim of this thesis: many of our relations with others – our intersubjective experiences – should not be seen as objects of perception, but as *powers of perception.* They should be considered what I will call our "intersubjective powers", as capabilities through which new possibilities for action that were previously unrecognized are given to us. In many cases, other people are not a content of experience; instead they are part of the very form of our own experience – we perceive the world through them.

As we just established, because we experience the world through action-based intentionality, any change in our powers effects how we experience the world. Therefore, the development and refinement of our relations with others influences our experience of the world.

Just as my power to type on a keyboard changes my experience of the world by giving me access to my computer, my relations with others affect my experience of the world by creating new possibilities for me that could not exist without these intersubjective relations. To take a simple example, I may read a moving work of literature and feel a demand to share it with a friend who would appreciate it. This demand, this urge to share, is an experience that would not be possible without the other and my intersubjective powers. As we will see, our experience of the world is frequently charged with meaning that is ultimately attributable to our intersubjective powers.

If we simultaneously recognize our experience of the world as occurring through action-based intentionality, and that many of our relations with others are experienced as an intersubjective power, then we have to understand that our experience of the world has a critical intersubjective component. Any account of experience, then, must take into account the significant influence of other people. That being said, I recognize that this is a significant claim to make, and that the connection between the phenomenological framework and intersubjectivity may still remain unclear. Therefore, I will now apply this framework to our original inquiry into the self. We will examine the development of one's sense of self from birth through adulthood through a phenomenological lens. In doing so, my aim is not only to refute many traditional notions of the self, but to further illustrate how our experience of the world is interconnected with our intersubjective experiences, and why we must understand many of our relations with others as perceptual powers.

2. Distinction Between Self and Other

Let us begin our sketch of the development of the self at the very beginning of a child's life – at infancy. To provide a phenomenological account of the child's experience of both self

and other, I will draw upon Merleau-Ponty's work on the subject. Merleau-Ponty was not only a leading phenomenologist but also a professor of child psychology at Sorbonne. Specifically, I will examine one lecture he gave titled *The Child's Relation with Others*, in which Merleau-Ponty provides an account of social development in children from birth through their first three years of life. Merleau-Ponty draws upon contemporary psychological research and discusses the phenomenological implications of these studies, and these discussions will provide the core of our discussion of the infant's development of his sense of self.

Merleau-Ponty starts his analysis by asserting that – counter to typical understandings of the self – the child does not begin life distinguishing between the self and others. Instead, he argues that the child begins unaware of self and others as different beings, describing this state as "The attitude of a *me* which is unaware of itself and lives as easily in others as it does in itself." (CR 119) Of course, starting at this point of indistinction demands Merleau-Ponty provide an account of how exactly the child develops the sharp distinction between self and other that in many ways is definitive of traditional notions of the self. For Merleau-Ponty, the distinction between self and other is created through the development of the child's understanding of both the self and other; the child *simultaneously* develops an awareness of his own body and the existence of other people (CR 125). The critical element of this proposed dynamic, however, is that both understandings (of the child's body and of the other) are complementary. The child's developing sense of his own body informs his understanding of the other, and the child's better understanding of others in turn further establishes his understanding of his own body. For a concrete example of how this complementary dynamic operates in practice, let us turn to a series of mirror studies that Merleau-Ponty analyzes throughout his lecture; in these studies,

psychologists examine an infant's reaction to mirror images of himself and other people at various stages of development.

Merleau-Ponty notes that it is not until about four months of age that the child reacts to any mirror images at all, and that at this stage of development the child fixes his gaze on mirror images of other people, but not his own (CR 127). It is not until about eight months of age – therefore four months after reacting to images of other people – that the child begins reacting to his own mirror image (CR 128). Around this age, Merleau-Ponty states the child can be seen to look at his reflection in the mirror when he is called, and he can be found to extend his hand to touch the mirror image of himself, only to react in surprise when he touches the material of the mirror (CR 128). This seems to imply that the child develops an awareness of other people before his own sense of self. Naturally, the question arises: why does the child react to the mirror image of other people months before he reacts to the image of himself?

Merleau-Ponty begins to answer this question by proposing the classical psychological explanation, which is that recognizing the image of another person represents a less difficult intellectual problem for the child than recognizing his own image. With respect to the image of the other, the child has two visual "objects" (his father and his father's mirror image) which he must reconcile. When it comes the child's recognition of his own image, on the other hand, he has only one visual "object" (his own image in the mirror) because he cannot see his own body in its entirety *except* in a mirror. Thus, in recognizing his image as his own, the child must connect his interoceptive sense of his body with an exteroceptive visual experience of his body, and this represents a greater challenge. In other words, for the child to recognize his own mirror image, he must perceive a difference between self and other; to recognize the mirror image of others, on the other hand, the child does not need to perceive this distinction.

However, Merleau-Ponty points out that it is problematic to describe this problem as an intellectual one because psychologists have found that the child continues to experiment and play with mirror images long after he demonstrates an understanding of his own mirror image. For example, Merleau-Ponty notes that at 57 months, the child still investigates his mirror image and is surprised when he passes his hand behind it, and even at 61 months the child continues to play with his mirror image (CR 131). Intellectual problems typically do not need to be "practiced", and they are not solved gradually (e.g. when one *conceptually* understands that one plus one equals two, one does not need to practice this understanding). Therefore, the child's repeated practice and gradual progression of his own understanding of the mirror image – which can be seen as a proxy for his understanding of the self – demonstrates that the traditional psychological explanation of this phenomenon (the discrepancy between recognition of self and other) cannot be accurately described as an intellectual problem.

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty proposes his own phenomenological understanding of the problem which is grounded in his understanding that the child develops his sense of both self and other in a simultaneous and complimentary manner. If we accept Merleau-Ponty's perspective that the child begins in a state of non-distinction between self and other, and that over time he develops an understanding of both self and other in a complementary fashion, then the "issue" of the child recognizing the other's mirror image before his own – of the child developing an awareness of others before himself – is largely mitigated. Because we do not expect the child to understand himself before the other, his recognition of the other's image prior to his own image needs no explanation per se; under this view the child's understanding of self is not privileged over his understanding of the other.

Furthermore, however, this phenomenon also illustrates the complementary nature of the child's understanding of self and other – it demonstrates how the child's understanding of the other improves his understanding of self. Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this dynamic when he says, "I understand all the more easily that what is in the mirror is my image for being able to represent to myself the other's viewpoint on me; and inversely, I understand all the more the experience the other can have of me for seeing myself in the mirror the aspect I offer him." (CR 139) In order to understand that others have a viewpoint upon him (a core element of the self), the child must understand that others have viewpoints at all. Therefore, the child's experience of the other as an external being with his own independent perspective is necessary for the child to understand that he – with his own perspective – is also an external being just like the other. The child's understanding of himself as a subjective "perceiver" who exists externally for others to perceive is therefore acquired through his experience of the other. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the child's simultaneous and complimentary development of both his sense of self and other provides a more accurate account of why the child recognizes mirror images of others prior to images of himself. More broadly, Merleau-Ponty's view explains how the child gradually moves from a state of non-distinction to establishing a sharper distinction between self and other. Fundamentally, any notion of the self that distinguishes the self from others is contingent upon some understanding of others. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's analysis establishes two key points. First, that the child begins in a state of non-distinction between self and other. Second, and perhaps more importantly, that the child develops his sense of self in part through his experience of the other, while his developing sense of self simultaneously informs his developing sense of others.

Still, I have criticized the traditional psychological explanation of the mirror discrepancy for characterizing the issue at hand as an intellectual one. The question remains, however, if it is not an intellectual problem, what kind of problem could it be? The answer can be found by applying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework: the child's developing understanding of the mirror image of both himself and the other is not an intellectual one (as the traditional view holds) but a *habitual* one. It is a problem of integrating his experience of the self and others, and more precisely, his sense of self as seen by others, into his lived body. Through experimenting and playing in front of the mirror, the child is simply developing his intersubjective powers – he is further integrating them into his lived body. Specifically, the child is habitually developing his sense of perceived *by other people*. Thus, the very basic distinction between the self and other should be seen as the primary starting point of his intersubjective powers. This distinction, developed over time through a growing understanding of the other, is the opening into a new realm of experience. It is a change in the structure of the child's experience that will permanently alter his perception of the world, charging it new meaning. Most importantly for our study, it is the starting point of the child's sense of self, the first steps in his developing understanding of himself as distinct from others that will serve as the foundation for his future intersubjective experiences. However, as we will soon discover, this intersubjective foundation – this originary sense of both self and other – will be continuously and habitually developed as the child further refines his intersubjective powers through contact with others.

3. Family as the Originary Other

One implication that can be drawn from Merleau-Ponty's understanding of habit is that the determinate objects through which we develop our perceptual powers largely define the how

we understand the power going forward. For instance, the significance of my ambulatory ability is defined by the determinate context in which I learned to walk: perhaps as I child I learned to walk in the expansive and open countryside, and so walking through congested urban streets where I must weave through crowds may feel alien to me. In other words, the way we interpret the significance of our powers is determined by the context in which we develop them. Therefore, if we are to understand our relations with others as *powers*, as abilities developed habitually through contact with others, then those first people through which we develop this power gain a new level of importance; the determinate features of these others fundamentally define how we will come to live and understand our intersubjective powers. Of course, we have a name for these other people that represent our first intersubjective contacts – we call these people family. This understanding of family as the originary others of our experience is central to John Russon's book *Human Experience*, in which he provides a contemporary phenomenological analysis of the family and its implications for our experience of our sense of self.[4] Therefore, we will now turn to Russon's analysis of the family in order to further explore the child's development of his understanding of both self and other beyond the foundational distinction between self and other just discussed.

First, it may be helpful to specify what Russon means by "the other". Throughout experience, we implicitly distinguish between different types of objects. For example, we recognize some objects as animals, some as plants, and others as rocks. The question is, what are the properties of other people that causes one to identify them as "others"? The answer, Russon argues, is that we experience the other as being a "center of value" that exists independently

[4] Russon's understanding of "family" is quite expansive, and it is not equivalent to a typical definition of family (a nuclear family as parents and several children). He cites the extended family structures of Ancient Greece as an illustration of his more expansive understanding of family (HE 61-63)

from ourselves (HE 54). We experience the other has having his or her own ability to interpret the world – to determine its meaning – just as we do. It is important to emphasize that we experience the interpretative ability of the other as independent from our own; while I am still my own source of meaning, I experience others as having their own perspective and as being equally capable of interpreting the world. Note that this defining characteristic of the other – that he or she exists as an exterior being with his or her own independent perspective – is exactly what the infant establishes as he or she develops his distinction between self and other. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's analysis provides a critical starting point for Russon's exploration of the family's influence on the self.

Russon argues that this experience of there being exterior and independent sources of meaning in the world poses a fundamental ontological problem for the child. By encountering an independent source of meaning, the child's own interpretative power is called into question. As Russon puts it, "It is my very sense of myself as someone who matters that is at issue in recognizing another as 'another person'." (HE 55) The other then, when recognized as an independent source of meaning, threatens to undermine the child's developing interpretative power; just as the child begins to understand himself as being as "someone who matters", this sense of self is threatened by the interpretative power of the other. Furthermore, it is important to clarify that Russon understands "meaning" to include a wide range of interpretations of experience – from contested questions of value like what justice is, to the most fundamental ontological views like the independent existence of the self, what I will call our sense of "ontological independence". These views are, of course, are merely illustrations of our interpretative power to determine meaning in the world; they are examples of what it means to be one who matters. One must recognize that the broad scope of this interpretative power extends to

all facets of experience. Consequently, this ontological problem – the threat of undermining of the child's claim to interpretative power – truly represents a conflict for the child. The stakes of this ontological conflict are extremely high, reflecting a situation of immense vulnerability.

It is critical to clear up two complexities about this ontological conflict. First, it is not that the child enters the family understanding himself to be an independent ontological being with the power to interpret the world, but rather, it is through his initiation into family that the child establishes this interpretative power – this sense of self. Thus, this ontological conflict unfolds gradually as the child habitually develops his sense of self through the family; through the family, the child comes understand himself as a being with interpretative power, but he simultaneously comes to recognize that others maintain independent interpretative powers which threaten to undermine his own. In our analysis, therefore, we must be careful to understand that this ontological conflict is embedded within the family structure and is itself contingent upon the child's progressive development of his intersubjective powers through further integration into the family. The ontological conflict that Russon describes is predicated upon the child's developing sense of self, which the child only develops through the family.

The second complexity we must address is that while our ontological independence – our sense that we are centers of value who exists independently from other people – is critical to our experience of the world, it is also so deeply embedded into our experience that its significance can be difficult to recognize. In other words, our ontological independence is so fundamental to our sense of self that it is easy to take it for granted. If we do not appreciate just how critical our sense of ontological independence is to our experience, however, it will be difficult to fully grasp the stakes of the ontological conflict Russon describes. Thus, in order to provide a more accurate account of the ontological conflict, let us turn to further explicate this notion of ontological

independence and examine how it effects our experience of the world. Because our sense of ontological independence is, as we said, so deeply embedded within our experience, the best way to examine its impact on our experience is to study those who lack a strong sense of ontological independence. In doing so, we will be able to not only gain a better understanding of ontological independence – what it means to experience oneself a center of value – but also provide a fuller account of the ontological conflict Russon describes in his analysis of family.

To explicate this notion of ontological independence, let us briefly turn to the analysis of psychiatrist R.D. Laing, who presents a phenomenological account of mental illness in his book *The Divided Self*. In the work, Laing proposes the existence of "ontological insecurity," a disorder characterized by the lack of a sense of ontological independence, or as he puts it a lack of "ontological security" (DS 40). In short, Laing argues that many patients who suffer from mental illness are misdiagnosed: while these patients have been diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia or an anxiety disorder, Laing argues that their symptoms should really be attributed to a deeper ontological insecurity, which the anxiety or schizophrenic behaviors are merely manifestations of. Let us further explore Laing's conception of ontological insecurity to better understand our experience of ontological independence.

We said that Laing understands ontological insecurity as a lack of ontological independence, but we can be more specific here. Laing proposes that there are five primary elements of ontological security, and states that patients who lack one or more of these elements suffer from a ontological insecurity. He states that an ontologically secure person: (1) experiences himself as differentiated from others; (2) has an unquestionably autonomous identity; (3) has a sense of inner-consistency; (4) is spatio-temporally grounded; (5) experiences himself as having begun in birth and being liable to extinction with death (DS 43). Looking at

these five criteria, we can now see both how fundamental our ontological independence is to our sense of self, but more importantly, we can see how much we take these elements for granted. Both Laing and Russon argue that we should not take these elements of the self as given, and instead, that we should see them as developed elements of our sense of self.

Still, it can be difficult to fully comprehend what our experience would be like without our sense of ontological independence. For instance, it is very challenging to imagine my experience of the world where I understand my very existence to be dependent upon others. To illustrate his conception of ontological insecurity, Laing presents the case study of "Mrs. R." a patient whom Laing discovered was suffering from an underlying ontological insecurity. We can work through Laing's case study to develop a better understanding of his notion of ontological insecurity and, by extension, our ontological independence.

Mrs. R initially saw Laing for help with her previously diagnosed case of agoraphobia (DS 57). Laing states, however, that he quickly discovered that Mrs. R. was fearful of being alone in public, but that if she was with someone she knew, she was not afraid (DS 57). This ruled out a standard diagnosis of agoraphobia. Digging deeper, Laing found that Mrs. R grew up in a family that treated her with indifference. Mrs. R., a single child, felt she was not loved nor hated by her parents, but merely insignificant to them (DS 57). Mrs. R. went on to suffer from a severe anxiety disorder throughout her life: when her husband, an army officer, was stationed abroad, she felt severe panic, but not any sadness (DS 58); when her mother passed after Mrs. R. spent considerable effort caring for her throughout her illness, Mrs. R. was again struck with panic, rather than depression (DS 58); and, as we said, Mrs. R. experienced a paralyzing fear of being alone in public (DS 58).

Laing argues that all of Mrs. R.'s fears are centered around being alone in an existential sense of the word. When Mrs. R.'s husband was stationed abroad, she was struck by a fear of not being needed as his wife. When her mother died of illness, Mrs. R. again entered a panic because she was no longer needed by the family to care for her mother. In her description of her fear of being on public streets, Mrs. R. said, "Nobody knows who you are. Everyone's engrossed with themselves. No one cares about you." (DS 58, 59). From Mrs. R.'s perspective, it is clear that it is not so much being physically alone that scares her as it is her being treated with indifference by strangers. Therefore, Laing argues that all these fears can be attributed to a lack of ontological independence – to a fundamental ontological insecurity. He writes, "In order to exist she needs someone else to believe in her existence … If she [Mrs. R.] was seen *as* an anonymity, *as* no one who especially mattered or as a *thing*, then she *was* no one in particular." (DS 60) Because Mrs. R. did not have a sense of ontological independence, because her most fundamental sense of existence was contingent upon others, she fell into a panic every time she was not given ontological affirmation from others. For those with ontological independence, who do not depend upon others for their basic belief that they exist, the removed attitude of strangers on the street does not influence our ontological status. For Mrs. R. however, the behavior of the strangers on the street petrified her because it called her very sense of existence into question.

Mrs. R.'s case is particularly helpful to our study because it helps us understand what our experience would be like without a sense of ontological independence. Clearly, our ontological independence is critical to our experience of the world, and without it we would perceive the world in a very different – and petrifying – manner. Laing's analysis also demonstrates that even the most fundamental elements of our sense of self, such as our ontological independence, are developed over time and not a given. Mrs. R.'s unfortunate experience indicates this most

clearly: she never developed a critical element of her own sense of self that would allow her to experience her existence as being not entirely dependent on the perspective of others. Most importantly, however, Laing's analysis of Mrs. R.'s ontological insecurity further supports Russon's argument that the family, as our originary experience of the other, holds significant influence over our sense of self. As we briefly saw in Mrs. R.'s case, it was her family's indifferent treatment of her that Laing determined to be the principal cause of her ontological insecurity. Therefore, as we continue to follow Russon's analysis of the family, we should keep in mind how critical family is in the development of our sense of self.

Returning back to the ontological conflict we have been exploring, Russon states that we typically employ a wide variety of strategies to circumvent this ontological conflict, which often (and regrettably) take the form of interpersonal conflicts (HE 56, 57). For example, a parent may attempt to enforce their will – their ontological superiority – on the child through threat of force or violence. In turn, the child may resist the parent's will by incessantly yelling or crying, establishing his own ontological validity (HE 57). Of course, interpersonal conflicts are not limited to the parent-child relationship and we can see similar themes throughout our experience of others. For example, a domineering husband may demand that his wife submit to his judgement, or a child may bully others to establish himself as "superior". In all these cases, one person attempts to assert themselves as meaningful – as being someone who matters.

It is critical to understand, Russon notes, that we are almost never explicitly conscious of these strategies for asserting ontological significance (HE 58). Nevertheless, this dynamic of domineering assertion is a common feature of our experience of others, and it illustrates the way this ontological conflict affects our experience of the world. These strategies are clearly problematic from an interpersonal perspective, and deeply unhealthy. But additionally, Russon

argues that they are inherently contradictory, writing, “In the very fact of needing and relying on the other’s confirmation of my claim, my behavior has tacitly acknowledged that my sense of self-worth is contingent on that other’s act of valuing; in other words, I reveal that the real thing that matters in the world is what is important to the other, not what is important to me.” (HE 59) By demanding that the other recognizes you as significant, you implicitly recognize that the other is also a center of value which is why you desire his or her recognition in the first place. By trying to force the other to recognize us as beings who matter, we implicitly acknowledge that the other matters as well.

These problematic strategies (on both an interpersonal and a conceptual level) that we employ to grapple with this conflict reveal the importance of ontological affirmation. But Russon points out that we also employ healthy strategies to navigate the immense vulnerabilities at play here, strategies that rely upon what he calls “cooperative self-definition”, where both parties find their ontological value affirmed by one another (HE 61). As we will see, these strategies will prove to be critical in developing the child’s secure sense of self. Russon argues that is principally through the established structure of family that cooperative self-definition takes place. It is because the roles within the family – primarily the roles of parent and child – are often so clearly defined that the vulnerabilities of this ontological conflict can be navigated well.

Let us examine this claim in more detail. Russon writes, “Recognizing the family as family means recognizing it as the bestower of meaning, that is, recognizing it as the real agency that determines the ultimate ‘can’ and ‘cannot,’ the ultimate interpreter of the significance of one’s own interpretations.” (HE 63) Through the established family structure both the parent and child embrace the overarching familial interpretation of the world. Russon calls this overarching ontological interpretation a “narrative”, and it can be understood as an all-encompassing way of

understanding the significance embedded within our experience. The familial narrative, then, is the set of interpretations that is defined by the family and it is that to which all family members subordinate their own individual claims to meaning. The child is then initiated not only into a family structure, but into a determinate familial narrative that will prove to be critical to his developing sense of self. As Russon puts it, "The narratives that our family members bring to bear on the situation define the intersubjective parameters in which and through which the child must operate, letting the child know how she will be recognized as properly interpreting her situation." (HE 66) These familial narratives describe a way of being for the child; a way of being that will lead to recognition of his ontological significance. By further embracing the familial narrative as his own, the ontological conflict is gradually resolved in that the child's interpretative power is recognized and affirmed when it coheres with the larger familial narrative.

However, Russon described this strategy as *cooperative* self-definition, and one could argue that this strategy seems just as domineering as the unhealthy strategies we just discussed. The critical component of the family structure is that *all* family members subordinate their independent claims to meaning to the familial narrative. The parent, who in this case appears to be the dominant figure, does not usually maintain his own independent narrative which he forces upon the child, but rather, he typically acquired his understanding of the world through his own family structure. In other words, we, as parents, do not typically experience ourselves as "defining" the familial narrative, but instead, we most often experience our interpretation of the world as "the way things are"; in reality, however, we must recognize that this interpretation was, in part, defined by our own familial narratives that we embraced as children. Therefore, in a sense Russon understands the familial narrative as a "third party" to this ontological conflict

between parent and child. Both parties – parent and child – embrace the familial narrative in order to create a self-reinforcing intersubjective dynamic of mutual affirmation. All family members' behavior comes to align with the familial narrative, and both child and parent end up reinforcing one another's claims to meaning.

To be clear, it is not as if the child actively chooses to embrace the familial narrative. On the contrary, it is through his embrace of the familial narrative that the child develops his very sense of agency – his sense of having the power to choose. The child, then, is thrown into the familial narrative, and he comes to embrace it as his own through a habitual development of his intersubjective powers. Let us examine this habitual development in more detail, as it is integral to our understanding of intersubjectivity as a perceptual power. The child comes to embrace the familial narrative because it is fundamentally empowering: the intersubjective powers granted by the familial narrative open up a new realm of possibilities for action that would not be possible otherwise. At its most fundamental level, the familial narrative establishes the child's ontological independence, his interpretative power, and his agency (albeit to a somewhat limited extent for the child). These fundamental attributes of the self which we typically take for granted change the way the child experiences the world by revealing novel possibilities for action. These attributes are so embedded within our experience of the world that it can be difficult to imagine experience without them. To take a simple example, however, understanding ourselves as agents – as having the power to choose – fundamentally changes how we understand the world; we understand ourselves as being able to change the world rather than passively accepting the world as it is. Therefore, the child's embrace of the familial narrative gives him these fundamental powers that only the family can provide.

A comparison can be drawn between this dynamic and the child's developing ambulatory ability. The child develops his power to walk in order to reach previously inaccessible objects. Through this development, the child enrichens his experience of the world because his ambulatory ability creates new opportunities for action. But one does not say that children "choose" to learn to walk, it is simply naturally developed because experience – in this case the inaccessible objects – demand it of children. Similarly, the child does not choose to embrace the familial narrative and develop his intersubjective powers, the intersubjective world in which he is thrown into demands it of him. And just like in the child's developing ambulatory ability, the child's developing intersubjective powers – his integration of certain relations with others into his perception of the world – reveals new ways of being in the world that were previously unrecognized.

It is through initiation into a family – through the embrace of the familial narrative – that we acquire our originary interpretation of the world. We take the familial narrative and we accept it as our own. The way that the child's family interprets the world – the determinate familial narrative the child is thrown into – will forever be ingrained into how he perceives the world himself. This world, of course, includes our understanding of what it means to be a person – it includes our sense of self. Thus, we can see again that the very parameters through which the child understands himself is developed through his experience of others. Russon clarifies this position when he writes, "We are initiated into a way of recognizing what there is in the world and how our own identity fits within it." (HE 66) Embedded within the familial narrative, then, is the identity – the role, status, power, and responsibility – of each of its members. The crucial fact here is that these expectations of behavior that are embedded within the familial narrative are almost always expressed implicitly through the behavior of *others*. How I am to behave – how I

am to relate to the world – is not developed on my own through my experience of objects, but rather it defined through intersubjective contact – through a habitual integration of others into my perception of the world and a simultaneous development of my intersubjective powers.

To take a simple example, my perception of chairs as being objects to sit on is not grounded in an independent and isolated contemplation on the nature of chairs, but rather it is developed through my experience of others using chairs in this manner. That is not to say that if I were to be isolated from others that I could not sit in a chair, but just that my experience of objects is always mediated by my experience of others because we do not live in an isolated world but an intersubjective one. Even the experience of isolation – of being completely separated from others – is in itself an intersubjective experience because it is defined by the absence of others; without prior experience of others, we could never feel isolated.[5] In short, the intersubjective world that we are thrown into is not limited to our experience of other people; it extends across all elements of experience because we are fundamentally intersubjective beings.

The familial narrative that we embrace, therefore, defines much more than just our experience of other people; it extends to define our understanding of the world and how we are to relate to it. As we have previously discussed, we are fundamentally connected to the world through an action-based intentionality; who we are can be seen as how we relate to the world. Thus, we can again say that our understanding of self and other are integrally connected. We develop our identities in response to the behavior of others – through interaction with and exposure to the intersubjective world. We come to understand ourselves – how we are to approach the world – implicitly through this intersubjective contact. At the same time, however,

[5] See *Being and Time*, section 26 (113-114) for Heidegger's explication of this argument

the way others behave is defined by the narrative they have previously adopted through their own intersubjective experiences.

Family is integral to the child's understanding of his own sense of self and the way he experiences the world. It is the family that usually (although not always, as we saw in Laing's notion of ontological insecurity) affirms a child's ontological independence – a child's sense of being "one who matters". It is through the family that the child develops an originary perspective of the world. The child's initiation into the family's world – into their intersubjective world – is the principal event in all of this. Therefore, its impact on the child's experience of the world cannot be overstated. Many of our most deeply held notions of what it is to be a self – to be autonomous, independent, and individualized – are not arrived at independently of others but developed through our initiation into family and given to us by our embrace of the familial narrative. Thus, we can see again that our sense of self is not an intrinsic element of experience, but a product of our relations with others, and in this instance, a product of the determinate family structure that we are born into.

4. Transcendence into the Social World

Of course, the child does not stop developing his sense of self with his initiation into the family's world and acceptance of the familial narrative. Instead, we tend to distinguish between children and adults, often calling adults mature or "fully developed". Let us examine the dynamics of this progression in more detail, focusing on how the child's sense of self changes throughout the process. As Russon points out, the child's family – the ultimate source of interpretation for the child – is always itself situated in a larger social context, a more expansive world Russon calls the "transfamilial social world." (HE 68) Furthermore, the natural trajectory

of the child's development seems to be to integrate into this larger social world. In fact, we typically consider family structures that support this integration as healthy. Thus, Russon argues, the family structure can be said to be naturally self-transcendent, writing,

> "The very nature of the family, then, is (1) to begin by insisting that the single individual [the child] give over the rights claimed by her singularity for defining her identity in favor of the right of the particular group to give it an identity as a particular member, and (2) subsequently to lead by its own development to an overturning of this notion in favor of a notion of the universal or commonly shared identity of humankind." (HE 68)

This process of maturity, then, can be more precisely described as a fundamental shift in identity. The family structure ultimately pushes the child to see himself in a new light. He no longer sees himself as just the child of his family, but as a member of a larger social world with its own narrative in place. In doing so, the child must in part renounce or, at the very least, distance himself from the familial narrative that he was initiated into.

This is primarily reflected in the change in the relationship between child and parent. Prior to maturity, the familial narrative typically holds that the parent has a superior interpretive power. The parent has the ultimate authority on how the world should be interpreted. The parent, in this sense, is elevated to a superior ontological status. The maturing child, however, comes to realize that there is really no ontological difference between parent and child, or, as Russon puts it, that "Parents and children are not, in the end, different kinds of reality, different kinds of being." (HE 68) This of course describes the "rebellious phase" we typically see in maturing adolescents. In no longer recognizing his parent as a superior ontological being, the maturing child pushes back against the will of his parent which in turn undermines the familial narrative and asserts the maturing child as an ontological equal. This phase of maturity, while often difficult for both parent and child, could be seen as necessary if the family structure is to ultimately produce a mature, self-reliant adult.

I have proposed the familial and social worlds as two separate intersubjective domains – as each maintaining its own ontological narrative. But it is important to clarify that the two worlds – and their corresponding narratives – are not entirely distinct from each other. The familial world is of course embedded within the larger social world, and the social world is at the same time comprised of a multitude of familial worlds. Thus, most familial narratives are then somewhat aligned to the social narrative in which they are embedded. For instance, basic interpretations such as one's ontological independence is typically held by both the familial and the social narratives. With other more nuanced interpretations of the world such as ethical positions, however, we can sometimes see more significant misalignment between the familial and social narratives. For example, a familial narrative may understand violence as a permissible way to resolve conflicts where one is wronged, whereas the social narrative of the society in which this familial narrative is embedded may understand violence to be unethical unless necessary for self-defense.

Therefore, for a person that is embedded within both of these misaligned and conflicting narratives, a real tension arises that can be difficult to resolve. That being said, the degree of alignment between familial and social narratives is always historically contingent. Some societies (often more "traditional" ones) have more alignment between familial and social narratives, while more diverse societies may have less alignment. I do not mean to imply that misalignment is bad – in fact in many ways it may make a society more dynamic as Russon points out – only that the degree of alignment between familial and social worlds is contingent upon the determinate composition of families and the society in which they exist (HE 70). Regardless, the degree of alignment between the familial and social world is important to our

study because it will affect the experience of the maturing child as he is integrated into the transfamilial social world.

This, of course, raises the important question of how the maturing child transitions from the familial into the social world. Russon argues that it is primarily through our ritualistic experience of social customs that we come to adopt the social narrative and integrate into the social world. These customs are described as “ritualistic” because they demand acceptance and conformity without offering justification. As Russon points out, “It is only by embracing these customs and their implicit narratives that we develop the ability to look for justification … for it is these customs that provide us entry into the intersubjective world in which these issues of justification and respect first become possible.” (HE 70) The very notion of justification – that I have a right to question the social narrative – is predicated upon an interpretation of the individual as a free and independent. Thus, the child is thrown into the social world, filled with customs and institutions that the child embraces ritualistically without justification in order to integrate himself into this social world. In the very same way that the very young child embraces the familial narrative, the maturing child embraces the social narrative. In both cases, the child’s “embrace” of the familial or social narrative because it is, at least in some sense, empowering: it opens up new possibilities for action that would not have otherwise been available to the child.

This dynamic unfolds as the maturing child finds that he is recognized when his actions align with social customs and the social narrative. It is this self-reinforcing cycle that essentially habituates the maturing child into accepting the social narrative as his own. Russon succinctly describes this dynamic when he writes, “The new member becomes an independent person precisely through the process of becoming habituated to a series of intelligent actions, the intelligence of which is not explicitly self-conscious to her: her independence comes from

relying upon – depending upon – the rightness of the traditions, of society.” (HE 71) Through the ritualistic enactment of social customs, the maturing child habitually integrates the social narrative into his own perspective of the world, further developing his intersubjective powers. For example, perhaps in my family we raise our voices to make a point and it is not considered rude, but in my society raising one’s voice is customarily considered rude. As I integrate into the social world, I may choose to not raise my voice so as to not come off as rude (because I desire affirmation from non-familial others). In time, however, I may become habituated to understand raising one’s voice as rude in itself. In doing so, I have accepted the social narrative and integrated it into my own way of understanding the world. I have habitually developed my intersubjective powers, and, consequently, these powers have changed my interpretation of my own behavior. This example is, of course, simplified, but it illustrates the dynamic that Russon describes. Social customs demand that the maturing child change his behavior if he is to be recognized by the social world, and this in turn habitually develops the child’s intersubjective powers into a form that is reconcilable with the larger social narrative.

One critical implication of this finding is that the determinate social customs that we are thrown into are integral to our sense of self. Like the family, the customs, norms, and institutions of the society I am raised in define the parameters of my intersubjective powers. They define how I understand what it means for a person to be with another person, and therefore, they define what it is to be a person. As we have noted, the child accepts the social narrative ritualistically. His sense of self that is defined by this narrative, therefore, is not of his own making, but rather pre-established by the society in which he is raised. It is also important to emphasize that this social narrative is not typically experienced as an object that we contemplate – as we are doing in our study – but rather as something that we only experience through the actions of others.

Therefore, when Russon describes social customs as that which integrate the maturing child into the social world – as that which ultimately endow the child with a sense of being ontologically equal to others – it is critical to understand that it is only through others that this dynamic unfolds. It is only through others that we experience the social world, and it is through others that we establish our understanding of ourselves as an independent from and ontologically equal to others. We therefore fundamentally rely upon others for this very basic sense of independence which we attribute to the self. Traditional notions of individuality that do not recognize this complexity, that deny the intersubjective nature of the self, are not only imprecise but they fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the self. Our sense of self as a being who is independent from others is a shared, communal achievement – an intersubjective accomplishment – that is only made possible through our experience of others and integration into the social world.

Our study of the development of the self – from infancy through childhood and into adulthood – has, in a sense, taken us full circle. Through his integration into the social world, the maturing child – now an adult – comes to understand the self in the traditional manner that we started our study with: he understands himself as being individualized, self-defined and autonomous, and isolated from others. However, we now understand that this sense of self is only true when taken at face value. While we do often experience the self in this way, our study has revealed that there is more to the self than these attributes. We have seen that the self is habitually developed simultaneously with our intersubjective powers. We have come to understand that the development of these powers is fundamentally driven by our experience of others. Perhaps most importantly, we have established that the traditional understanding of self is not a given essence of what it means to be a person, but an intersubjective accomplishment

defined by the determinate contexts through which one comes into contact with others; it is defined by the family and social narratives we are thrown into.

Thus, the phenomenological approach has revealed important complexities for our understanding of the self that have we have previously taken for granted. Not only does our study provide a more accurate account of the development of the self, but as we shall see, this phenomenological understanding of the self will have significant implications for the way we think about our continued relations with others in adulthood. We will now turn to examine our most important relationships – our romantic relationships and friendships – and their influence on how we understand ourselves.

II. Bonds with Others

1. Dynamic Nature of the Self

Our sense of self does not stop developing upon our integration into the social world. While at the most basic level our sense of self remains stable throughout our lives, it is hard to say that I am the same person that I was ten years ago. Our continuously unfolding experience of the world fundamentally changes how we understand ourselves. We can feel this dynamic nature of the self quite acutely when we encounter recorded elements of our past. For example, reading my old personal journal can evoke the strange feeling of simultaneously encountering an intimate part of my life while also reading something foreign to my current perception of the world. Similarly, reviewing an old academic paper I wrote can feel like I am reading the words of a stranger. Reflecting upon the perspective of the world I used to hold can be at times be humorous, at others embarrassing, but ultimately it is rarely the exact same as the perspective that I hold today. This is all just to say that our sense of self changes throughout our lives, and

our understanding of the self must account for the dynamic nature of the self. Therefore, we will now turn to examine this dynamic nature in more detail. We have just developed a phenomenological understanding of our relations with others as perceptual, intersubjective powers – and analyzed how we develop this power through our experience of others. We will now further explore the self's dynamic nature in order to provide a more complete account of the interconnected relationship between our sense of self and other people.

We have previously established that we, as intersubjective beings, cannot remove ourselves from the intersubjective world in which we live. Consequently, the context of our world is always in part comprised of the people that surround us. This context, which I will call our "intersubjective context," is formed by all of our relationships – from those of strangers on the street to our family members and close friends – and it is instrumental to how we understand ourselves. We have seen this to be true in the context of the familial world. Our families constitute our originary intersubjective context, and it is through this context that we first develop our sense of self. Within the social world we find a multitude of intersubjective contexts, each with many complexities and nuances, that are all layered on top of each other. For instance, while my co-workers and I comprise one intersubjective context, my group of friends at a pub comprises another, and the polite but arms-length interactions I have with strangers at the supermarket yet another.

All of these contexts are sites of intersubjective contact and interpretation. It is through intersubjective contexts that I originally developed my sense of self and was integrated into the familial and social worlds. But the interpretative power of these contexts does not limit itself to my integration into these worlds; the power extends to the new contexts I enter into, constantly developing and redefining my sense of self throughout my life. As much as the traditional

understanding of the self likes to hold that we, as fully formed adults, are independent from others, in truth our sense of self always rests within an intersubjective context that we cannot remove ourselves from. There is, then, an integral connection between our sense of self and the intersubjective contexts through which we experience the world. It is not through independent self-discovery (as the traditional view tends to hold) but intersubjective contact that we continuously develop our sense of self. Therefore, we must be able to attribute any development in our sense of self to our intersubjective context. In other words, there must be a direct connection between the dynamic nature of the self and the intersubjective contexts through which we define ourselves. We then must shift our focus to explore this proposed connection in order to provide a comprehensive account of the dynamic nature of the self.

Investigating the dynamic nature of the self poses a challenge because our sense of self typically changes very gradually. When I woke up today, I did not experience myself as being a different person from when I went to sleep the night before. The same can be said over longer periods of times. We do not experience the dynamic nature of the self as a clear, distinct, and explicit perception like the perception of a sound, but rather it is typically only *after* the change has occurred that we can recognize the self's dynamic nature at all. That being said, one of the clearest examples of the connection between the dynamic nature of the self and our intersubjective context can be found in the excited anticipation we feel when we are about to enter a new intersubjective context altogether. For example, the nervous anticipation that often characterizes the emotions of students leaving their home town to attend college clearly illustrates the connection between one's sense of self and his or her intersubjective context. This excitement is driven by a dramatic change in intersubjective context that we rarely experience in our lives – in most cases the change is more gradual. The excitement is centered around the

potential for a change in self-perception that is a direct consequence of a change in intersubjective context. For instance, one student may have been considered shy and reserved throughout her time at her local high school. For whatever reason (perhaps rooted in her familial narrative) this young woman was quiet, and she tended to keep to herself rather than engaging with others as much as her peers. Perhaps she came to dislike this perception of herself – which she has in some ways accepted – but her current intersubjective context offers few routes for changing it. As this young woman enters the novel intersubjective context of her new college life, she has a chance to redefine herself. The new intersubjective context offers this student an opportunity to forge a new identity through her relations with others. Of course, this notion of a dramatic redefinition is a common theme in popular culture, and this is not to say that a complete redefinition of self is so simple. But focusing on the emotional quality of this excitement and what it is directed at underscores how novel intersubjective contexts hold the potential to re-define our sense of self. It reveals a direct connection between our sense of self and intersubjective contexts.

Another common element of experience that illustrates the connection between our sense of self and our intersubjective context can be found in the frustration we often feel when a perceived change in our sense of self is not recognized by others; when we, by forging new relationships with others, come to understand ourselves in a new way but others, who have known us before this transformation, fail to recognize anything has changed at all. This often can be most intimately felt in our familial relations – when family members do not recognize the dynamic nature of the self. For instance, a child may have been unruly as an adolescent. He frequently got into trouble at school, and his father came to understand him as a problematic, stubborn, and rebellious person. As this child matured through experiencing new intersubjective

contexts, however, his perception of the world changed, and his behavior reflected this. He came to understand the value of self-discipline, developed respect for structure, and no longer caused trouble. Whenever this young man comes home to visit family, however, his father treats him with an attitude of distrust and disdain. The young man, of course, feels angered by this treatment because he sees himself as a fundamentally changed person. He may even feel resentful towards his father for what he perceives as mistreatment due to his father's lack of recognition. These feelings of frustration, anger, or resentment can all be attributed to a fundamental tension between the young man's dynamic sense of self and his father's static understanding of him. The dramatic shift from the young man's life outside the family where he is seen as a rule-follower to his return home where he is still seen as rebellious highlights how the intersubjective context we live in cannot be separated from our sense of self; the dynamic nature of our sense of self, therefore, must be connected to our changing intersubjective contexts.

For the young woman entering college, the rapid change in intersubjective context offers the opportunity for a radical redefinition of self. For the young man returning home, on the other hand, the change in intersubjective context denies and refutes his own transformation. Both of these examples illustrate the integral connection between our sense of self and the intersubjective context through which we experience the world. Furthermore, these examples demonstrate the interpretative power that the other maintains in our intersubjective experience. While we have stated that this integral connection between the self and others can be difficult to recognize due to the typically gradual development of the self, the rapid change between intersubjective context in these two examples highlights this connection. That being said, this only establishes a connection between the self and other. The question still remains, how exactly does one's sense of self develop through our intersubjective contexts – through our experience of others – once we

have been integrated into the social world? We can, of course, be more precise here. Thus, we will now turn to explore how we gradually develop our sense of self through our experience of others as adults, and how this development ultimately underlies the dynamic nature of the self that we have just established.

2. The Expressive Power of the Bond

We can be more specific as to what constitutes an intersubjective context. At its most basic level, the intersubjective context is comprised of a series of individual relationships between ourselves and other people. Of course, our various relationships are never completely distinct from one another, and we will later analyze their interconnection in more detail. Beyond this shared nature, however, there is there is an important attribute of our relations with others that is frequently taken for granted: we tacitly express our sense of self through our relations with others, and it is through this expression that we are able to further develop our sense of self. Russon highlights this element of our intersubjective experience in his book *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*, in which he proposes his conception of bonds to describe our relations with others (BW 79). Russon fundamentally argues that we must understand our bonds with others as a mode of behavioral expression. He writes that our bonds are, “Our way of behaviorally claiming ourselves, our way of saying who we are.” (BW 79) Typically, we understand expression in the explicit sense of the word. For instance, when I tell my girlfriend, “I love you,” we say that I am expressing myself. However, Russon argues that we also express ourselves *behaviorally*, which is to say through a series of actions, attitudes, and decisions. This behavioral expression becomes the undercurrent of one’s bond with another, or as Russon describes it, the “theme” of the relationship (BW 81).

In order to better explicate his understanding of bonds as a mode of behavioral expression Russon offers an example of a hypothetical relationship for the reader to examine. The relationship consists of a man and a woman who, due to different patterns of neglect in their respective upbringings, are dismissive of critical judgements from others (BW 79-81). Through their bond together, however, they both find support from one another that their dismissive attitude towards judgement is appropriate and reasonable. They come to understand themselves as “rebels” and characterize their dismissive attitude as simply “non-conforming” rather than defensive. We can see that is not through one action in isolation that their bonds act as a mode of expression, but through a combined series of attitudes and actions. The dismissive couple implicitly expresses their shared sense of being “rebels” that are above the judgements of the conforming masses throughout the many elements that form their bond: perhaps this behavioral expression takes the form of a look the couple shares during a conversation with friends; perhaps it takes the form of the couple increasingly retreating from attending social functions without each other; or perhaps it is even expressed explicitly through vocal support for one another’s dismissive attitude. All of this is to say that the behavioral expression of our bonds is not reducible to any one action, but rather that it must be understood as a holistic, all-encompassing attitude that we project onto all of our experiences with others.

Another important element of Russon’s conception of the bond that this example highlights is that our bonds act as sites of interpretation, ultimately leading to the affirmation or rejection of our sense of self. While we behaviorally express our sense of self through our bonds, this expression is always directed at another person. Our bonds are always shared endeavors of expression, or, as Russon states, “[the bond] is an experience accomplished with another/others, and not in metaphysical isolation.” (BW 76) Due to this shared nature, our bonds become a

flashpoint of both vulnerability and power. Through our bonds we express an interpretation of who we are. Those whom we share our bonds with, whom I will call our "companions," can affirm this interpretation or reject it. Russon writes that, "We seek recognition from others in order to confirm our own sense of the propriety of our own behavior – of ourselves." (BW 80) Our behavior reflects our sense of self, and it is through our bonds with others that we implicitly seek to affirm this behavioral expression of ourselves. This, of course, explains the intensity of emotion that typically surrounds our most intimate relationships, whether they be romantic, familial, or close friendships. It is our very sense of self that is at stake in the behavioral expression of our bonds, and we give the companions with whom we form our bonds with the immense power to affirm or reject our sense of self.

Returning to our previous example of the dismissive couple, we can see the expressive power of our bonds illustrated in detail. In this example we saw that both partners affirm each other's sense of self as being "rebels" or "above conformity"; the mutual support of their bond shields both from the judgements of others. But this did not need to be the case. One partner could have recognized the problematic nature of his or her partner's self-perception and rejected it. This could have forced the rejected partner to change his or her sense of self in response to the others interpretation. Regardless of whether a bond affirms or questions of our sense of self, however, Russon argues that they fundamentally hold an authoritative interpretative power over how we understand ourselves.

We have seen that our bonds are sites of both expression and interpretation, and we've explored how these elements of our bonds grant others a significant power to shape our sense of self. In our example, we saw how the dismissive couple reinforced each other's sense of self in a problematic way: they allowed each other to retreat defensively against the criticism of others by

affirming to one another that they were “above” the judgements of “conformity.” But, as we noted, this bond could have taken shape in a different form. One of the partners could have addressed the problematic nature of his or her partner’s sense of self. In other words, one of the partners could question rather than affirm his or her partner’s expression of self. While in the moment this rejection can be emotionally painful, one would hope that their partner would do the same for them if they found his or her actions to be problematic. The expressive power of our bonds, then, can be leveraged in both healthy and unhealthy ways.

However, we cannot characterize all bonds that shield a person from the judgement of others as unhealthy. For instance, one could imagine a man who is criticized by his old friends for not behaving as recklessly as he used to do when he was younger. This man’s partner could offer him support, affirming his sense of self as someone who is less reckless and in turn shielding the man from the judgement of others. But we would not say that this bond is unhealthy. The question remains, then, if it is not the shielding of judgement that makes a bond unhealthy, what might it be? Russon argues that the determining factor of whether a bond is healthy or not is, “Whether the trajectory of this self-contained unit – the self-defined bond of the couple – is open to or closed against self-transformative growth in interaction with the epiphany of reality offered up by the world.” (BW 82) What makes a bond healthy, then, is its ability to open both partners up to the world; the healthy bond encourages the transformation of the self in ways that one could not accomplish on his or her own. Thus, the ability to support the continual development of one’s sense of self can be seen as the positive application of the bond’s immense expressive power. When understood as both expressive and interpretative, our bonds take on a new level of significance. Our bonds can no longer seen as a mere connection between the self

and other, but rather, we must understand our bonds as sites of interpretation, judgement, and, ultimately, self-transformation.

3. The Integrative Power of the Bond

As we have noted, our bonds are always shared with others. It is always with others person that we form the relationships that serve as sites of interpretation and ultimately definition of our sense of self. However, Russon argues that the shared nature of our bonds means that as much as our bonds offer opportunities for self-definition through interpretation, they also transform our experience of the world by gradually integrating our perception of the world with our companion's (BW 84). In other words, our bonds shape our sense of self in two ways: first, as we have just seen, they act as sites of behavioral expression and interpretation for our sense of self; additionally, however, they also draw us into the world of our companions and gradually integrate our perception of the world with theirs. Russon elaborates on this integrating power of our bonds through an analysis of our erotic relationships. He notes that initially in erotic attraction, we place the other's immediate desires as our highest ideal (BW 83). Over time, however, we come to recognize that others, just like ourselves, have desires that extend beyond the immediacy of the moment. We understand that, as Russon says, "Like me, the other is much more beyond what he immediately takes himself to be." (BW 83) Our desires are not only what we immediately desire, but they also include our long-term desires for ourselves, what I will call our "expansive" desires. For instance, I desire not only to alleviate my immediate sense of hunger, but also to become a better philosophy student. Note that I say we "understand" ourselves to have expansive desires, but we must recognize that this understanding of both self and other as beings that have expansive desires – as having the capacity for growth and

development – is an intersubjective interpretation grounded in our social world. In other words, our expansive desires are a communal achievement predicated upon the society in which we have been raised. Our discussion of the child's integration into the social world, then, provides a foundation for this analysis. Regardless, we do experience ourselves and others as expansive beings, and therefore in order to fully satisfy our partners' desires in our erotic relationships we must look beyond our companions' immediate desires and consider their expansive desires as well.

In order to consider our companion's expansive desires, however, we must first come understand their world. Thus, in our bonds we see an integration of the perspective of ourselves and our companions. This integration can take many forms. As Russon points out, we often gain a new level of appreciation for our companion's passions and interests (BW 84). For instance, my girlfriend's study of British literature exposes me to a new genre of writing. Initially, British literature may seem foreign to me and I may not see the value in it. However, even at this point I do recognize that she has an expansive desire to become a leading scholar in the field. Therefore, in order to care for her – in order to support her as an expansive being – I must develop my understanding of British literature. Of course, this happens naturally without me explicitly recognizing the underlying dynamic; when my girlfriend tells me about her most recent lecture, I listen because I am interested in hearing about her lecture, not because I am explicitly aware of my intention to support her expansive desires.

Nevertheless, my interest in her lecture is, at some level, underpinned by my interest in her world, which can be attributed to my desire to support for her expansive desires. Therefore, through my bond with my girlfriend, I gradually develop my interest in British literature. By doing so I am able to better support her expansive desires. Ultimately, I might come to

understand British literature in a new light and even start reading it for my own sake. It is critical to recognize that this process changes my perception of the world: British literature originally was foreign and uninteresting to me, but through my bond with my girlfriend I developed a genuine interest in the genre, which therefore changes how I perceive the world. Through this example we can see how our bonds draw us into the world of our companions. When I recognize my girlfriend as a developing being with expansive desires beyond her immediate ones, I also recognize that I need to understand her world in a richer sense than her immediate situation. Consequently, I come to understand her world better in order to support her expansive desires, and through this process my own perception of the world is changed; my perception of the world is partially integrated with my companions' perspective.

This integrating process should be seen as the further development of one's intersubjective powers. As we saw in the child's integration into the social world, the child habitually develops his perspective of the world to align with the larger social narrative. For example, the child repeatedly encounters the handshake as a greeting gesture through his experience of others, and, ultimately, he comes to understand shaking hands as a greeting gesture, imbued with all of the meaning that comes along with this understanding. Through this habitual development, the child integrates his perspective of the world – in this case, of handshakes – with the larger social narrative. This fundamental shift from experiencing the handshake as alien to a familiar element of his experience illustrates how we develop intersubjective powers through others, and we can see the very same dynamic reflected in the integrating power of our bonds. As we noted, my initial experience of British literature was alien: I had never read it, it was foreign to me, and I did not see the value in it. Through exposure to British literature, which can be attributed to the intersubjective experience of my bond with

my girlfriend, I came to appreciate the value of British literature. In this sense we can see that I integrated my perception of the world with my girlfriend's. My intersubjective powers were further developed through intersubjective contact, and my perspective of the world was changed. I fundamentally came to see the world differently through my bond with my girlfriend. Therefore, the integrating power of our bonds must be seen as critical to the development of our intersubjective powers.

The embrace of our companion's interest as our own is a common example of the bond's integrative power. But the bond's power to integrate our perception of the world with our companion's extends far beyond mere interests. Our bonds also expose us to novel interpretations of the most substantive questions we face: questions of value, ethics, and most importantly to our study, our own sense of self. My girlfriend maintains an independent understanding of who I am. This understanding is different from my own sense of self, as our views are always mediated by our own perspectives. As we have demonstrated, my bond with my girlfriend integrates my perspective of the world with hers. Her interpretation of who I am is a part of her perspective. Through my bond with my girlfriend, therefore, I am drawn into her world and exposed to this novel interpretation of who I am. Over time, her interpretation of who I am will be integrated into my perspective of the world; my sense of self will change according to how my girlfriend perceives me. Russon touches upon this when he writes, "It is the specific others with whom I become fused that define who I am … they define the horizon of possibilities that I am, that is, they are my doorway into a dynamic future rather than merely a static "settling" of who I am." (BW 86) We are exposed to our companion's perspective of who we are through our bonds, and we integrate this perspective into how we interpret ourselves. Thus, the integrative power of our bonds does contribute to the dynamic nature of the self. By deepening

our bonds with our companions, we can enrich our intersubjective powers and further develop how we understand ourselves. Of course, this not to say that we always embrace our companion's sense of who we are. The experience of our companion's viewing us differently than we understand ourselves can be particularly hurtful if their interpretation is a negative one. On the other hand, our companion's interpretation of who we are can immensely supportive when they see positive elements of our character that we could never recognize on our own. Regardless if our companion's perspective is supportive or hurtful, we have to recognize that the integrative power of our bonds has the potential to change our sense of self, and that the integrative power of our bonds is critical to our dynamic sense of self in adult life.

We can now see more clearly that our bonds with others, which are always intersubjective experiences, continuously redefine our sense of self in two ways: through the interpretation of our behavioral expression, and, as we have just illustrated, through an integrative power. So far, we have illustrated this integrative power through an analysis of our erotic relations, as that is where the influence of our bonds is often most powerfully felt. However, there is no reason that our platonic bonds should not hold the same power. Any bonds in which we feel close to our companions – any bond that calls us to care for them – draws us into the world of our companions. As we have noted, it is this pull into the world of the other that changes our perspectives. Therefore, this integrative power of the bond and its relation to the dynamic nature of the self should apply to all of our bonds. The only limitation in the application should be the degree to which we feel drawn into the world of our companions: the more we care for another, the stronger we feel the pull into their world. Our most intimate and vulnerable relationships, therefore, have the strongest integrative powers and are the most critical to developing a richer sense of who we are.

4. Freedom and Creativity

We have already noted that there is a clear similarity between Russon’s conception of the bond and his understanding of how we develop our sense of self through intersubjective contact in the social and familial worlds. Let us examine this comparison in more detail, focusing on juxtaposing Russon’s conception of the bond with his understanding of the family for the sake of simplicity. The most obvious similarity between bonds and the family is that in both we rely upon others to affirm our sense of self. Just as the child depends upon his family to affirm his most basic sense of self, such as his ontological independence from others, we rely upon our companions in the bonds we form to affirm other, less fundamental elements of self-perception. As we saw, we behaviorally express a sense of who we are through our bonds, and through this expression we assert a sense of self that we leave open to interpretation from our companions. Ultimately, our dynamic sense of self is reliant upon our companion’s interpretation of who we are.

Beyond this similarity in expressive power, both the bond and the family maintain an integrative power as we have just discussed. Through our initiation into family, our perspective of the world is gradually integrated with the familial narrative. For example, if my family understands raising one’s voice as an appropriate means to express emotion, then I will come to see raising my voice in the same way. With our bonds, we saw a very similar integrating dynamic between companions, where our perspective of the world is gradually integrated with our companion’s. For instance, if my companion sees me as intelligent and hardworking, I may integrate this understanding of who I am into my own self-perception.

Additionally, both the family structure and our bonds are self-transcending. With the family, the child is drawn into the familial world, but exposure to this familial world in fact directs the child beyond the family into the social world. This of course is illustrated by the fact that the natural trajectory for children is to mature and integrate into the social world. We saw a similar dynamic in our analysis of our bonds: our bonds with others are initially formed around the basis of our immediate desires, but their natural trajectory is to orient us to a more expansive and richer sense of care to support the long-term projects of our companions.

These three similarities between the family and the bond can be attributed to the fact that both are structures that develop our intersubjective powers. They develop our relations with others and, by extension, enrich our perception of the world. As we have already demonstrated, the family initiates us into the intersubjective world – it is the originary ground of our intersubjective powers. But our bonds are the driving force behind the dynamic nature of our sense of self that we recognize throughout our experience of the world. It is through our bonds that we continuously redefine and transform our sense of self by further developing our intersubjective powers. Most significantly, it is through our most intimate bonds that we expand our intersubjective perception of the world in novel ways. Our intersubjective powers serve as a "platform" that these various elements of experience are built off of. Therefore, these dynamics of interpretation, integration, and self-transcendence are shared between the family and the bond because both are intersubjective structures through which we develop our intersubjective powers and expand our perception of the world by providing new possibilities for action.

Despite these similarities, however, our experience of our bonds is very different than our experience of both the familial and social worlds in one critical way: we are thrown into our pre-defined familial and social worlds, whereas our bonds are characterized by possibility – of an

inherent freedom. We do not have a say in the family structure or society in which we are born. In fact, the pre-establishment of these structures is often a source of angst and interpersonal conflict in maturing children. We have no initial influence over the norms of our family and society – recall that we are "initiated" into the family and into society, meaning we accept the narratives of these institutions without understanding their underlying logic. In our bonds, on the other hand, we can sometimes (although certainly not always) experience a distinct sense of freedom.

We can experience this freedom on two levels. First, we are free to choose whom to form a bond with. If we do not like someone's perspective of the world, including the way that they interpret and behave toward us, we can distance ourselves from the relationship and reduce the influence of the bond on our sense of self. So, while the companions of our bonds do hold significant interpretive power over how we understand ourselves, we can choose whom to trust this power with. Of course, like most of our intersubjective experiences, this is almost never an explicit "choice". We often navigate these intersubjective issues without fully recognizing what is at stake. But we do sometimes express an understanding of this sense of freedom in our bonds through how we treat our romantic relationships. In an unhealthy romantic relationship where our sense of self is restricted from development, for instance, our friends may urge us to leave the relationship, which of course explicitly recognizes the freedom that we maintain with our bonds.

The second level of freedom we experience within our bonds is even more significant to our study of the self: it is fundamentally up to me and my companion to decide how we are to interpret, understand, and judge what our shared bond means to us. As Russon notes, we typically do not think about our bonds in this way – we often think of them as rigid structures

that fit neatly into categories (BW 90). We typically understand our relationships as belonging to an overarching “type”: we have romantic relationships, friendships, family, relations with strangers, etc. In fact, the experience of not being able to clearly categorize one relationship can be troubling for us, as we see in the tension that arises between friends when one person develops romantic feelings for another. Once we categorize our relationships, Russon argues, we often look to the overarching category of relationship, which has been pre-established by society, to dictate how we are supposed to interpret our bonds. For example, once I categorize my bond with a woman as my “girlfriend,” then I tend to accept society’s understanding of how I am supposed to behave in this relationship – I interpret the bond according to the criteria established by society. My acceptance of a pre-established understanding of my bond can manifest itself in many ways: in my insistence that I pay for our dates, in my reluctance to express myself emotionally, in the role I take in our sexual relations, etc.

We all accept a pre-established interpretation of our bonds in some way or another. But Russon argues that this acceptance is fundamentally a denial of a freedom that is inherent in our bonds. He writes that “This familiar taxonomy (1) is extremely restrictive for analyzing the possible forms of human reality, and (2) suggests that these essences are fixed and predelineated, where in *each* of the four types just mentioned (family member, friend, lover, and associate) … is really a possibility and an invitation for creative invention of what it will be.” (BW 90) So while we do frequently experience our bonds as pre-established, Russon points out that this need not be the case. Furthermore, he argues that if we do embrace the freedom of our bonds, if we do understand that we can redefine the significance of our bonds and how we should act within them, then we are opened up to a previously unrecognized opportunity for creativity. Therefore, this second level of freedom within our bonds leads us to experience our intersubjective world as

one of creativity, which is very different than the pre-established familial and social worlds we are thrown into.

We should clarify that we do not always experience both these instances of freedom. First, many of our bonds with others are forced upon us by our intersubjective contexts. We cannot fully disengage from our relations with coworkers, colleagues, friends of friends, and so on. Second, we are only able to embrace the intrinsic freedom of our bonds – only able to creatively redefine our interpretation of them – in our most intimate relations with others. For most of our relations with others, such a radical redefinition remains outside the scope of possibilities because embracing the freedom of our bonds makes us vulnerable to others. That being said, we do experience both senses of freedom in our most intimate bonds that exist outside of specific intersubjective contexts (where we experience a greater sense of freedom to engage with others as much as we would like).

With this clarification in mind, let us turn to explore this notion of creativity, and specifically, what it might look like with regard to our bonds. Fundamentally, Russon argues, embedded within our bonds is a criterion of evaluation, and that "Each form of relationship is a form of commitment, a form of co-witnessing, and brings with it its own distinctive possibilities, and ways for measuring success or failure in living up to these responsibilities." (BW 90) We must therefore apply our creativity to how we understand our commitment to one another. Instead of blindly accepting a set of criteria for evaluating our bonds with others according to their "category," we should creatively determine what elements of our bonds are important to us. To take a simple example, perhaps it is a social norm that a husband is the "breadwinner" of the family while the mother is to take care of the children. In this case, a "good" husband is one who makes enough money to support his family, and a "good" wife is one who raises the children

well. But perhaps in one family, the husband would prefer to stay home with the kids, and the wife is career-driven and would prefer to work than to stay home. This couple should creatively interpret their bond and recognize that the traditional gender norms embedded within society's understanding of marriage need not apply to their bond; they should recognize that what makes a "good husband" in their relationship is not the man's ability to support the family but something actually important to their dealings with one another. In short, the freedom of our bonds demands that we decide for ourselves what constitutes support or betrayal of our bonds (BW 90). What specific form this creatively formed criteria of evaluation of our bonds takes is inherently ambiguous; an embrace of the creative potential of our bonds requires that we allow our bonds to take whatever forms we decide. But the fact of the matter is that both levels of freedom we have recognized in our bonds demands an element of creativity from us.

To refuse this freedom and creative power within our intersubjective experience is to deny ourselves the possibility of *creative* co-definition. It is through our bonds that we continuously develop our sense of self in our adult lives; our bonds drive the dynamic nature of the self that represents a critical element of our experience. Therefore, the fact that the structure of these bonds can be determined creatively – rather than being pre-established as we saw in the familial or social world – means that our sense of self is not solely defined by forces outside our control. When we creatively interpret our bonds, we grant agency to ourselves and others. Our sense of self is liberated from the restrictive confines of the familial or social world, and we become free to collaboratively define who we are and what is important to us. This sense of agency – of autonomy and freedom – is fundamental to the human experience. Therefore, recognizing the creative potential our bonds is critical to our account of the self.

5. Conflicting Bonds

While significant, the creative nature of our bonds is often difficult to recognize. While we understand ourselves to be free – an understanding we must note was established through our integration into the social world – we rarely embrace this freedom in our relations with others. It is all too easy to accept the pre-established interpretations of our bonds given to us by our social narratives. We accept these pre-established interpretations for a variety of reasons: we are pressured by others to conform to social norms, we may develop a naturalistic understanding of social relations and simply accept that how things are is how they ought to be, or we may not even recognize that we could interpret our bonds differently. In any case, while we can recognize, as we just have, that our bonds are free and open to novel, creative interpretation, we frequently neglect this opportunity for creative co-definition. One element of experience where we are forced to recognize the freedom and creativity of our bonds, however, is when we experience a conflict between two or more of our bonds. Let us focus on this conflict in order to further illustrate how our bonds can interpreted creatively.

We are always engaged in a multitude of bonds. Russon writes that, "Our adult lives are constituted by a complex interweaving of bonds: the bonds of love, friendship, collegiality, family, and so on." (BW 91) While our bonds can be experienced as distinct relationships (e.g. I can say my relationship with my mother is very strong), we can simultaneously recognize that every individual bond influences our experience of our other bonds. One clear example of this interwoven nature of our bonds can be found in groups of friends. We often form groups of friends centered around a common situation. For instance, perhaps I became friends with a group of people that all lived in my college dormitory. While I experience the distinctiveness of the

bond I share with each individual friend, I can also clearly see the interwoven nature of these bonds, particularly when there is conflict. For example, perhaps one member of this friend group has a falling out with another member. Depending on the specifics of my respective relationships, my experience of my bonds with both friends could change: I could "take a side" and only maintain a friendship with one friend; I could decide to be neutral and feel uncomfortable spending time with just one friend; I could seek to explicitly mediate the conflict; I could ignore the conflict altogether. Whatever option I choose, it is clear that my bond with one friend affects my bond with the other. We can see a similar interweaving of our bonds throughout our experience. Almost all of our bonds effect each other to varying degrees, and these conflicts can lead to tumultuous interpersonal dilemmas for us as we seek to resolve them.

We cannot fully separate our bonds from each other for one fundamental reason: our bonds place demands upon us; they call us to interpret the world in a specific manner, which in turn changes how we approach the world. Russon writes that,

> "I may, for example, be a mother, a high school teacher, a Catholic, a wife, and an Italian American. Each of these ways of describing me in fact describes an interpersonal or social relationship, a community. Each of these dimensions of my reality, too, is characterized by "oughts": each makes demands upon me, and inasmuch as these domains are me, these are demands placed upon me by my own identity." (BW 91)

The effects of our actions are never isolated to one bond. Our actions are always interpreted by all the companions of our other bonds. In the example of the friend group, my bond with one friend calls me to act in one way, but these actions are interpreted through my other bonds and by my other companions. Of course, most of the time we do not feel a conflict between our bonds. I can have many relationships of different kinds, and I am typically able to reconcile the demands of each bond with the demands of all others. In fact, Russon notes that our bonds are often mutually supportive (BW 91). To take Russon's example, the demands of a woman's

identity as a mother (her bond with her children) can support her in grappling with her demands of being a high school teacher (her bonds with her students) as she develops a better understanding of children through both bonds.

On the other hand, the demands of our bonds can also conflict with one another. Continuing with Russon's example, when this woman's child is sick, she may experience a conflict between caring for her child and preparing lessons for her students (BW 91). In this case, we can see a clear conflict between the demands of the woman's bonds. Her bond with her child demands that she, as a good mother, will care for her child while her bonds with her students demand that she, as a good teacher, will prepare for her lessons. There is not an easy way to reconcile this conflict through her actions. There is a limited amount of time in a night, and the woman cannot both care for her sick child and prepare for her lessons. These situations – where our *actions* are unable to reconcile the conflict between our bonds – force us to embrace the freedom and creativity inherent in our relations with others. They force us to make a choice. In Russon's example, the woman must choose between preparing for her lessons and taking care of her sick child. But by making this choice, the woman also implicitly interprets her bonds. Specifically, the conflict requires the woman to reinterpret what her bonds mean to her. If she chooses to take care of her child, for example, she is implicitly deciding that her bond with her child means more to her than her bond with her students. These conflicts between our bonds are difficult to grapple with precisely because they force us to determine *who we are*. Because it is through our bonds that we develop and define our sense of self, resolving conflicts between our bonds can be seen as an implicit expression of our sense of self. This mode of self-expression, while difficult and forced by the situation at hand, is fundamentally creative. There is often no pre-defined structure to make this decision for us, which is precisely the source of the difficulty.

But regardless, in making a choice we are embracing the freedom of our bonds and creatively defining how we understand ourselves.

The conflicts between our bonds are not always so clearly at odds with one another, and it is in these cases where the creative power of our bonds becomes most significant. For instance, one Jewish man may experience a conflict between his bond with his Orthodox temple and his bond with his work colleagues. His faith demands that he does not work after sundown on Friday to celebrate Shabbat, the Jewish sabbath, but at the same time he feels he should not leave work early on one Friday because his colleagues need his help. In this case, there is again a seemingly irreconcilable conflict: either this man must follow the demands of his faith or his work, and there is no way to resolve the conflict by meeting both demands. However, the man could creatively reinterpret his bonds. He could reevaluate what elements of his bond with his faith are important to him; perhaps he values the community of his temple, the wisdom of his spiritual leaders, or the opportunities for charitable work more than the traditions of the faith that Shabbat represents. On the other hand, perhaps he recognizes that he does value tradition, and instead reinterprets his bond with his colleagues, understanding his early departure for Shabbat as a healthy break from the office. Whatever this man decides, this conflict forces him to approach his bonds in conflict *creatively*. He is forced to step outside the rigid, pre-established structure of his bonds to evaluate what elements of his bonds are important to him.

We should note two important complexities here. First, that while I am calling the resolution of these conflicts “decisions,” they are almost never made consciously. We typically experience and navigate these conflicts tacitly and within the realm of emotion. And we often decide based off of “what feels right”. Of course, some take a “rational” approach. In any case, however, both an “emotional” or “rational” decision is, at its deepest level, determined by how

one wants to define oneself. Second, and perhaps most important to our discussion, I have attributed these decisions to the individual in conflict (the woman deciding between her child and students, and the man between his faith and work), but we must recognize that both these conflicts and decisions are shared, intersubjective experiences. Even if the decision is made by the person in a room alone, isolated from others, these conflicts are just as much about our sense of self as it is about our duty to others. We can therefore see a powerful example of how our sense of self is an intersubjective accomplishment. In other words, we can again see how our experience of the self and others are integrally connected.

We can now return to our original question concerning the dynamic nature of the self. It is clear from our analysis that the continual development of our sense of self that is pervasive throughout our experience of the world can often be attributed to our bonds with others. Our companions represent routes to redefinition, whether that be through the expressive or integrative powers of our bonds. Most significantly, we've established that it is through our bonds with others that we able to embrace the freedom of the human experience and creatively define our sense of self. All of these findings can be traced back to our original framework of understanding our sense of self as an intersubjective accomplishment. The power of our bonds to develop our relations with others must be understood as the fundamental power to continuously refine our intersubjective powers and, by extension, our sense of self and perspective of the world. Most importantly, we can now see that the traditional understanding of our sense of self, while not necessarily inaccurate in describing how we typically experience the self, takes for granted the complexity, nuances, and power that others hold in shaping the structure of our experience.

III. Language as an Intersubjective Power

1. Language and Intersubjectivity

Thus far in our study, we have explored the development of our sense of self from birth through adolescence and then further investigated how our sense of self continues to develop throughout our adult lives. In this study we have seen a very rich sense of self unfold. On the one hand, we have seen how our initiation into the familial world establishes the most fundamental elements of our sense of self. For instance, we have found that our most basic ontological independence was established through our initiation into a family. Similarly, we saw that our understanding of the self as autonomous and free was itself developed through our integration into the social world. On the other hand, we've just investigated our bonds with others and how it is through these bonds that we continuously develop our sense of self. We specifically focused on the interwoven nature of our bonds, and how they both establish and redefine the multiplicity of the identities that comprise our sense of self. In both of these areas of study – in our study of the familial and social worlds, and our study of our bonds – we have arrived at a unified conclusion: it is only through intersubjective experience that we develop the very rich sense of self that is central to our study.

However, up and to this point we have largely neglected to discuss the role of language in the development of our sense of self. While it may have been helpful to focus on other elements of our intersubjective experiences, it is now time that we turn to examine language in more detail. Specifically, in this chapter I will propose that we should understand language as a unique form of the intersubjective powers we have been studying all along. We will work through the key similarities between language and our intersubjective powers: that both are habitually

developed, perceptual powers rather than objects of experience; that in both we are thrown into a pre-existing, socially determined structure; that both maintain expressive and integrative powers; and lastly, that both have an immense creative power embedded within their structures. After working through these similarities, we can then turn to explore what makes language unique from other intersubjective powers. Lastly, we will explore the implications of understanding language as a unique form of our intersubjective powers on our understanding of the self.

2. Language as a Perceptual Power

First, let us establish that we primarily experience language as a perceptual power, not an object of our experience. Recall that earlier we established that our intersubjective powers are developed habitually and integrated into our experience. Just as we do not need to explicitly locate every key on our keyboard in order to type, we do not explicitly call upon our sense of self in our dealings with others. When we employ language – whether through speech, writing, or thought – we do so without explicit awareness that we are employing language, and we are able to do this because we have habitually integrated the power into our perception of the world. This understanding of language as a power is at the center of Merleau-Ponty's work on language in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Asserting what I will call the "empowered" view of language, Merleau-Ponty writes, "I relate to the word just as my hand reaches for the place on my body being stung. The word has a certain place in my linguistic world, it is part of my equipment." (PP 186) Language, in Merleau-Ponty's view, should be seen as an element of our embodied experience. This empowered nature of language is most evident in moments of immediacy. For example, when, in a heated argument, I may regrettably insult my friend's intelligence. In this instance, I do not first experience the meaning of what I want to say, and then transpose it into a

word – into language – in order to externalize this meaning. Instead, I experience language as an integrated element of my perception; I experience language as a habitually developed, expressive power, not as an object of experience. This empowered understanding of language extends beyond moments of immediacy. Even as I write this sentence, I do not experience myself contemplating the words I am about to write, but rather, the words flow through my fingers and onto the keyboard as I complete my thought. This habitual understanding is critical to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologically based, empowered view of language.

We need to be clear about what this distinction between understanding language as an object and a power really means. To clarify the distinction, we should examine some common views of language that treat language as an object of experience, which I will call the "representational views" of language. Merleau-Ponty directly addresses the representational views in *Phenomenology of Perception*. He notes that both Empiricism and Intellectualism (the term he uses to characterize Rationalism) treat language as an external representation of an internal state (PP 182). In doing so, the representational views treat language as an object of experience, as an element of perception that is distinct from our perceptual capabilities. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty argues we must consider language as a power, as something through which we are given our perception of the world. For example, we could say that in my experience of the mug that sits before me, the mug is an object of my experience in that I perceive it through my power of sight. The critical distinction here is that objects are explicit elements of our experience, whereas powers are capabilities through which these objects of experience are given to us. Merleau-Ponty fundamentally argues that we primarily experience language as a power that we experience the world through rather than an object of experience in itself.

To be clear, I do not mean to advocate for a sharp subject-object distinction (i.e. that subjects and objects are fully distinct and separate from one another, as many traditional philosophical views hold). In fact, Merleau-Ponty begins his chapter on language by stating that he hopes his empowered view of language will give us the opportunity to leave the classical subject-object dichotomy behind (PP 179). In viewing language as a power rather than an object, we are actually undermining the subject-object dichotomy. Recognizing language as a power means recognizing the intentionality of experience; when we recognize that subject and object are always interconnected – that one's experience of objects are defined by his or her subjective perspective and that one's subjective perspective is in turn defined by the objects of his or her experience – the subject-object distinction becomes ambiguous. So, in short, we must understand that language is a power, not an object, but that in recognizing language as such, we are not supporting the subject-object dichotomy but redefining by understanding experience as intentional.

We can now understand Merleau-Ponty's empowered view of language more clearly: our experience of language is much more like a power than an object. For example, there is a line of text on my mug. When I perceive it, the meaning of the text immediately gives itself to me the same way the sound of a car driving by immediately gives itself to my ears. The object of my perception may be the text on the mug, but my experience of language is not the mere perception of the text, but rather it is my understanding of the meaning embedded within it. This understanding of language is further illustrated when reading a foreign language. I can perceive Japanese characters, but I do not say I can *read* them.[6] I cannot say that I experience language in my perception of Japanese characters because the meaning of the characters is not given to me

[6] For an insightful description of this phenomena, see *Human Experience* 14, 15

by my linguistic power. Alternatively, this empowered understanding of language is also illustrated by the fact that you cannot easily choose *not* to read something in your native language – though this is something that graphic designers may train themselves to do. I cannot look at the title of a book and perceive a random assortment of letters; my linguistic power immediately employs itself without my control.

Merleau-Ponty elaborates on his understanding of language as a power when he writes, "The operation of expression, when successful … makes the signification exist as a thing at the very heart of the text; it brings it to life in an organism of words, it installs this signification in the writer or reader like a new sense organ, and it opens a new field or dimension to our experience." (PP 188) Merleau-Ponty compares expression – of which he considers language a specific type – to a sense organ. And from our brief study of language, we can see that his analogy reflects our experience of language. Our acquisition of language – which is habitually developed through our experience of others – opens us up to the linguistic world, a world of new-found signification that we would not have access to if not for our linguistic power. Just as sight gives us the visual world and hearing gives us the auditory world, language gives us the linguistic world, and we must understand language as the power through which we are given access to it.

That is not to say, however, that we cannot experience language as an object. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges this, stating that we are able to conjure "verbal images," when we explicitly contemplate a word in isolation – a word that is not as part of an act of expression (PP 186). We can take these verbal images to be linguistic representations or objects of experience. But Merleau-Ponty argues that while we can experience language in this way, it is not how we experience language in our everyday lives. Instead, he argues, we typically experience language

as a means of expression. One could note that we can also experience our bodies as objects rather than powers. For example, I can state that there is a distance of five feet and eight inches from the ground to the top of my head. But we really do not typically experience our bodies in these quantitative terms. We typically experience our bodies implicitly in space and in terms of action; I primarily experience my height in experiencing *the door* in front of me as being tall enough that I can walk through it, not in terms of objective measurement. Similarly, while we are able to contemplate language and its structure (as we seem to be doing in our own study of language), that is not how we typically experience language in our everyday lives. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty argues that language is principally experienced as a power through which we both able to express ourselves and receive access to the expression of others.

In short, we can see that language, like our other intersubjective powers, must be understood as a habitually developed, perceptual power. Just like our relations with others, our power to employ language is habitually developed and integrated into our experience of the world. And just as our experience – and implicit interpretation – of other people is given to us by our intersubjective powers, the significance embedded within language is also given to us by our linguistic powers. Most importantly, we can conclude that language is primarily a perceptual power rather than a perception: language changes the form of our experience of the world by providing new possibilities for action, and thus imbuing the same content of experience with novel meaning. To understand language as an object, then, is to neglect the impact it has on our experience – it is to deny that language opens us up into the expansive linguistic world.

3. The Pre-Established Nature of Language

There is another striking similarity between language and our other intersubjective powers: both language and the intersubjective worlds (i.e. the familial and social worlds) through which we develop our sense of self were established by others and prior to our experience of them; we are thrown into these intersubjective worlds without having a say in the matter, and these pre-established worlds, for the most part, exist independently of our influence. As we discussed, the primary implication of the pre-established nature of our familial and social worlds is that our interpretation of the world (which we acquire through these intersubjective worlds) is defined by other people and not by ourselves alone. Additionally, the pre-established nature of these intersubjective worlds means that the historically determinate world in which we were raised will determine the parameters of our intersubjective experience. In other words, the specific familial or social narrative that we are born into will have significant influence on our own perspective of the world, including our sense of self. As we will see, language is similarly pre-established, and, consequently, the same implications that arose from the pre-established nature of our familial and social worlds will apply to our experience of language as well.

Language, of course, existed prior to our existence in the world. And the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of the language we employ is socially developed and defined. So, we can already see a strong similarity between our intersubjective worlds and language. Language, like our familial and social interpretation of the world, is a fundamentally shared element of experience that is not under the direct influence of any one individual.

Russon points this out explicitly in *Bearing Witness to Epiphany* when he writes, “Language is meaningful – is language – only insofar as it can be taken up by others, repeated in

contexts other than the unique one in which I utter it. It is this shared character that allows it *say* something, and that thus allows me to say something to myself." (BW 103) The shared nature of language, then, is critical to our experience of language as meaningful. But there are two additional conclusions than can be drawn from Russon's understanding of language as a fundamentally shared experience. First, the shared quality of language is contingent upon its pre-established nature. We always aim for language to be universal: we desire for language to be expressive in any context, in any circumstances, and to any person who speaks the language. For language to apply universally, however, it must transcend the immanence of one specific, determinant person. The pre-established nature of language allows language to transcend the immanence of one moment or one person; therefore, the pre-established nature of language can be seen as a consequence of this universal aim.

We can see a similar universal aim in our intersubjective experience of social norms. Our social norms are intended to be applied universally, and their universal aim is essential to what it is to be a norm. For example, the expectation that you are to keep a certain distance away from others (i.e. not invade someone's "personal space") can vary from culture to culture, but in every culture, there is an approximate distance that is appropriate for *everyone* to maintain. I emphasize everyone because, as we have said, the norm would not be a norm if it only applied to some people but not others. That is not to say, of course, that we cannot have social norms that apply to one category of people and not to another. For instance, different social norms may apply to men and women (i.e. gender norms), but the fact of the matter is that each "category" of person (however arbitrary) has a norm that applies universally to that category of people. So, as Russon points out, language shares this universal aim with our other social norms. And more than simply share it, Russon states that the universal aim is essential to our experience of language. If

language did not have this universal aim, we simply would not be able to express ourselves to the same degree. Similarly, we can see that social norms need to have a universal aim, or else they are really just individually defined expectations.

We must be careful here to note that while language – and social norms – *aim* to apply universally, that is not to say that that they are universal. There is no truly universal language. Each determinate language maintains its own integrity and offers its own routes to signification.[7] The pre-established nature of language brings language closer to its universal aim, but it does not completely actualize it. Therefore, as we discuss the pre-established nature of language and language's universal aim, we should keep in mind that this aim will never fully be realized by any one language. However, that does not take away from the fact that language still aims for universality, even if it will never reach its goal.

The second conclusion we can draw from Russon's analysis of language is that the linguistic world that we are thrown into defines our expressive possibilities. The pre-established structure of language quite literally defines the parameters for linguistic expression. Language gives the pre-established terms of our linguistic power (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, and syntax). In a parallel structure, our social narrative defines the parameters of our interpretation of the world by giving us a pre-established, communal understanding of the experience.

Russon elaborates on this point, writing, "As we grow into a language, we grow into the ability to give voice to ourselves, to articulate ourselves to others and *to ourselves*. Our language is thus the medium of self-apprehension, our self-reflection, our self-experience." (BW 103) Here we can see how just like the pre-established familial and social worlds defined how we understand ourselves, the pre-established structure of language has the same effect. Russon notes

[7] Merleau-Ponty further explicates this argument in *Phenomenology of Perception* 193-195

that it is through language that we come to understand ourselves. But the terms of language are, of course, acquired from others. Thus, the determinate structure of our language – the routes to expression which are available to us – are for the most part pre-established; the possibilities we have for expressing our sense of self are largely defined by the language we are born into. The pre-established nature of our language, then, like our other intersubjective powers, has significant influence on how we develop our sense of self; language largely defines our possibilities of expression, and therefore, influences how we understand ourselves.

4. Expressive and Integrative Powers of Language

In the preceding chapter we examined our experience of our bonds with others. We established that our bonds have a two-sided power: they allow us to express our sense of self to others, and at the same time, they draw us into the world of others and integrate our perspective with theirs. Both of these powers – the expressive and integrative powers as I called them – are critical to the development of our sense of self. By expressing our sense of self, we make ourselves vulnerable to the judgements of others; we open ourselves up to the affirmation or rejection from our companions. On the other hand, by integrating our perspective of the world with our companions, we adopt our companion's perspective of the world, including their interpretation of who we are. Even earlier in our study, we saw the same two sided expressive-integrative dynamic embedded within our familial and social worlds. In the family, we found that our sense of self is formed by the affirmation of our family members, and at the same time, that our perspective of the world is integrated with the familial narrative. Likewise, in the social world, we can see the same dynamic at play. Therefore, this expressive-integrative dynamic has

been consistent theme throughout our study of the self and other; the expressive-integrative dynamic seems to be fundamental element of our intersubjective experiences.

If we turn to closely examine our experience of language, we will find the very same dynamic. Language maintains a two-sided, expressive-integrative power that is congruent with our previous analysis. This can, of course, be partially attributed to the fact that language is a critical element of our intersubjective experiences. Language is prevalent throughout our experiences of other people, whether it be in our families, our social worlds, or our bonds. In other words, our language cannot be entirely separated from any of our intersubjective experiences. But what I hope to demonstrate is that this expressive-integrative power is not just a product of these other intersubjective experiences, but an inherent part of our experience of language itself. Let us turn, then, to further examine how the two-sided, expressive-integrative dynamic manifests itself in our experience of language.

We can begin our analysis of language's expressive power by returning to Russon's notion of behavioral expression. Recall that we found that through our bonds we are able to behaviorally express ourselves to our companions. Behavioral expression, we said, could be thought of as a "theme" of a bond: it is not defined by any one act of expression, but rather, by a coherent attitude we adopt towards a companion and our bond with them. Therefore, behavioral expression can be comprised by a series of expressive actions: a shared look, body language, actions either taken or untaken, etc. Recognizing the significance of behavioral expression (i.e. the holistic sum of many expressive actions) is critical to understanding the expressive power of our bonds. But at the same time, we cannot neglect the specific role language plays in our experience of behavioral expression. While we need to understand that we have many potential

modes of expression beyond language, we must also recognize that language is a critical medium for self-expression.

Linguistic expression is particularly powerful because of its relative clarity in contrast to other forms of expression. The pre-established, universal nature of language that we just discussed lends itself to communication better than most other modes of expression. We can see this illustrated throughout our bonds with others: an action I take can be *misperceived* by my companion. Misperception in this sense occurs when my companion interprets my actions in a very different manner than I perceive them. For example, perhaps I am particularly busy one week and forget to return the call of my friend whom I have not seen recently. My friend could, perhaps rightfully so, perceive this action (or in this case, lack of action) as me expressing that I do not want to spend time with him. On the other hand, I would not have interpreted my inaction in the same way, and instead, I might see my inaction as a reflection of the stressful workload I have taken on rather than my feelings towards my friend. Regardless of the specific interpretations, my friend and I would probably resolve this misunderstanding through discussion – through linguistic expression. We would turn to language to clarify our respective interpretations of my inaction because of language's pre-established nature. This example illustrates that linguistic expression is particularly powerful because it leverages language's universal aim to achieve a level of clarity that is often difficult to find in other modes of expression. However, there are two critical clarifications we must recognize in this understanding of language in order to better describe our experience of it.

First, linguistic expression is not just what is said, but it is also what is left *unsaid*. Recall that in my previous example, it was my lack of action that was the object of misinterpretation: my friend took the absence of my phone call as expressive. Merleau-Ponty writes at length about

the expressive power of what is not said in his essay titled *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*. At the beginning of the essay he notes, “The absence of a sign can be a sign, and expression is not the adjustment of an element of discourse to each element of meaning, but an operation of language upon language which suddenly is thrown out of focus towards its meaning.” (IL 81) To illustrate this point, Merleau-Ponty examines two sentences in French and English: the English sentence reads, “The man I love,” while the French reads, “l’homme *que* j’aime.” (IL 80) He argues that the English sentence is not “less complete” than the French one, but rather, the relative pronoun (in English, “who”), “Passes into the language by means of a blank between the words.” (IL 81. Thus, we can see at the sentence-level how the absence of a word can be equally expressive as the presence of a word itself.

Taking this idea further, we can also see that the same understanding of linguistic expression applies on a larger scale. The lack of expression can also express meaning. So, when we discuss the power of linguistic expression, we have to recognize that this power exists in both the presence and the absence of words. That being said, “negative expressive power” (i.e. the ability to express meaning through the absence of language) is only made possible by a pre-existing set of expectations. At the sentence level, the English sentence retains the personal pronoun (“who”) because it is embedded within the pre-established meaning of the words and grammatical structure. At a higher level, the absence of my call to my friend is only expressive because there is a pre-established expectation for me to return a call. The implication of this is that the “negative expressive power” is contingent upon the “positive expressive power”; the *potential* for linguistic expression creates the possibility of “negative expression”, and therefore we must consider language’s positive expressive power as prior to its negative.

The second clarification we have to make in our analysis of the expressive power of language has to do with the relation between language and our sense of self. When we say that the expressive power of language shapes our sense of self through the affirmation of others, it is perhaps easy to imagine forms of expression that explicitly reference the self. For example, in response to an alleged action of mine I could say, “I’m not that kind of person.” Here, I explicitly assert a sense of self, and it is clear that how others interpret this assertion (whether they affirm or reject it) will influence my sense of self. But we rarely express our sense of self in such an explicit manner. Instead, we often implicitly express our sense of self by expressing our relation to the world. For example, I might say, “I need to focus on my philosophy reading,” to a friend who is distracting me at the moment. While I never explicitly reference my sense of self, it is embedded within my statement (e.g. we could say this statement expresses that I understand myself as a studious person).

When we say that we assert a sense of self through linguistic expression, it is almost always implicitly rather than explicitly. And to follow this example further, my friend could implicitly affirm or deny my sense of self: he could urge me to go to an event with him and thereby reject my assertion that my studies matter to me, or he could acknowledge that I am busy and make plans for later that evening, thereby affirming my sense of self as a studious person. Again, his affirmation or rejection would be implicit. My friend would not explicitly say, “No, I do not take you to be a studious person,” but he could express it implicitly through either words or actions. Ultimately, this understanding of language as an often implicit expression of our sense of self reinforces our broader understanding of behavioral expression, of which we must recognize linguistic expression remains just one critical element.

With this account of the expressive power of language, we can now turn to explore language's integrative power. Just as we are drawn into the world of our companions through our bonds, we are similarly drawn into the world of others through language. Language has the power to change our perspective of the world by integrating it with the perspective of others. We can notice the integrative power of language in many different instances: in an engaging conversation, in a powerful testimony, in the moving lyricism of a poem, or in an immersive book. Let us focus on the experience of an immersive book – the experience of being drawn into the writing of another – to further explore the integrative power of language. Note that while I've chosen to study the experience of reading an immersive book because it is perhaps the most recognizable example of language's integrative power, the same power can be found throughout our experience of language more broadly.

Russon writes in detail about the experience of an immersive book in *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*, and his analysis highlights the ability for books to draw us into the perspective of another. This ability, we will see, is a primary manifestation of language's integrative power. Russon describes the experience of reading an immersive book, writing,

> "The experience of the book-as-art, that is, as epiphany, comes through the process of reading, but it is not exhausted in this activity. The identity of the book enters into one's very self – through the effort of reading one has appropriated the book – and it lingers, it reappears, and it resonates in and structures future experience. One comes to experience *through the book*, through the powers its determinacy of expression have afforded one." (BW 102)

The experience of an immersive book is different than most other ordinary perceptions. The book draws us into a novel world. The immersive book changes our perspective by integrating our interpretation of the world with its own. In doing so, the immersive book changes how we perceive the world, even after we are no longer experiencing the book in that moment. The

immersive book extends beyond the immediacy of the moment in which we read it, and it restructures how we perceive the world going forward.

We must recognize that the book is not a purely visual object, and that it is principally an intersubjective one. The meaning embedded within the book, which after all is what affects us so deeply, is given to us by our linguistic capabilities. And the integrative power of the book, then, ultimately emanates another person. The immersive book must be seen as an entry point, if you will, into the perspective of its author; language, therefore, is the underlying pathway through which the author is able to express him or herself, or, conversely, through which we are drawn into the author's perspective.

Merleau-Ponty also writes about the integrative power of language, and specifically of literature in *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*. He writes that, "[Language] introduces us to unfamiliar perspectives instead of confirming us in our own … the writer transports us without transitions or preparations from the world of established meaning to something else." (IL 114) Writers calls upon us – they place demands upon us – to enter their worlds – often only for a moment, but sometimes for long after we put down their books. Our habitually developed linguistic powers allow us to perceive this demand, and in fact, push us to follow it. It is through language that we are able to so seamlessly enter the perspective of a writer, and it is this habituated capacity to feel the draw of a book that ultimately gives language its integrative power.

Just as we saw in our bonds, the integrative power of language influences our perception of our world: as our perspective is integrated with another's, we come to understand and at times, embrace their interpretation of the world. But most importantly for our study, the other's world includes their sense of who *we are*. Language, then, allows us to see ourselves differently – it

allows us to come to see ourselves from a novel perspective. This makes intuitive sense when reflecting upon our experience of language in conversation. For example, if a friend enthusiastically asks me to start a business with her, I may find my perspective of the world integrated with hers – a world where perhaps my friend sees me as a sound business partner. But how does this integrative power of language effect our sense of self when it comes to writing, where the author does not know his or her readers? Of course, the author does not know me personally, but this does not mean his or her perspective of the world does not apply to me; it does not mean I cannot enter his or her perspective. The beauty of immersive writing is in fact its ability to move us – to *speak* to us – even when the author does not know us as an individual. This experience of being spoken to by an immersive book highlights the integrative power of language to a remarkable degree: it demonstrates language's power to draw us into the perspective of others, even when that perspective does not include a specific view of its readers.

We've now seen how the expressive-integrative dynamic which we saw in our bonds is similarly reflected in our experience of language. But there is a nuance here that we can further clarify: are the expressive and integrative powers of language actually one and the same power? That is, when I express myself to another, am I not simultaneously drawing the other into my world and integrating our perspectives? In its simplest terms, yes, we can say that the expressive and integrative powers of language, and for that matter, of our bonds, are two sides to the same coin. That is why they can be understood as a "two-sided" power as I put it before. But the distinction between expressive and integrative is still important to recognize. When I employ the expressive power of language, I am the one actively asserting – or claiming if you will – my perspective, which, for the other, can have an integrative draw. On the other hand, when I experience the integrative power of language and am drawn into the world of the other, the other

experiences his own language as expressive. So, while the expressive-integrative power *is* the very same power, the distinction between expressive and integrative indicates *how* we experience the phenomena.

One final clarification we must make about the expressive-integrative power of language is that, as we noted earlier, we can never fully distinguish between our experience of language and our other intersubjective experiences. Because language is an intersubjective experience, we always experience language within an intersubjective context – in a familial world, a social world, or a bond. Examining the expressive-integrative power of language, then, presents a challenge because we cannot study language in isolation. Our experience of language is always intertwined with our intersubjective experiences.

It can be tempting to ascribe the expressive-integrative power of language to our other intersubjective powers. For instance, one could argue that the expressive power of language is really just the same expressive power of our bonds analyzed in a different light. This argument is true at one level: we cannot truly separate our experiences of language and our bonds, and so the expressive power that we have noted cannot be fully attributed to either language or our bonds. But it also seems that that our experience of language can change our experience of our bonds. Perhaps by exploring how language changes our experience of our bonds, we can then at least partially distinguish between the powers of language from the powers inherent to our bonds themselves.

One way to explore how language changes our experience of our bonds is to examine our bonds with others where there is no shared language. This is a common experience for travelers in a foreign nation. For instance, I studied in Spain over one summer, where I had the opportunity to live in a "homestay" for one month. I lived in the apartment of a Spanish woman

who did not speak a word of English. At the same time, I spoke only basic Spanish. For all intents and purposes, we shared no common language. The language barrier between us came to bear on our bond quite quickly: asking even functional questions, such as where to do laundry, was a challenge. As kind as this Spanish woman was, and I really did find her the most accommodating host, we could not establish a deep bond between us because of the language barrier. As I developed my ability to speak Spanish, however, our bond developed quickly and we grew quite close. Being able to express myself as well as my hosts ability to draw me into her world made all the difference.

At the start of my homestay, I essentially experienced a bond without the effects of a shared language. And I found this bond severely lacking in depth and quality. As I developed my linguistic abilities, I saw my bond with my host develop at a rapid pace. From this example we can see that language adds something remarkable to our bonds. Thus, the integrative-expressive powers of our bonds may be interconnected with the powers of language, but they are at the same time distinct from one another. Language, it seems, allows for a richer, deeper, and more meaningful bond to develop between oneself and another; therefore, we can conclude that the expressive-integrative power of language strengthens the expressive-integrative power of our bonds. Language builds off of the same intersubjective powers that we have been discussing, taking the same expressive-integrative capabilities and further heightening them to an incredible effect.

5. The Creative Power of Language

Perhaps the most significant similarity between language and the other intersubjective powers we've discussed is that language maintains an immense creative power. This creative

power is most similar to the creative potentiality we saw in our bonds with others. Earlier we discussed how we can achieve creative co-definition through our bonds by redefining and reinterpreting what our bonds mean to us. Ultimately, the criteria of evaluation – of interpretation – of our bonds is determined my companion and I, giving us a shared creative power. And because it is through our bonds that we are able to redefine our sense of self – by changing the terms of evaluation within our bonds – we also are able to transform how we understand ourselves. The implicit freedom of our bonds – the fact that our interpretation of them is up to us and our companions – provides this creative potential. But we also noted that this freedom and creativity is frequently taken for granted. It is very difficult to recognize (and perhaps fully embrace) the freedom of our bonds, as we all too often simply accept the pre-established set of interpretations. As we will see, there is a parallel structure reflected in our experience of language: we are absolutely free to employ language in any way that we would like, and yet at the same time, we often fail to recognize this freedom and instead embrace the norms of expression given to us by society.

Merleau-Ponty discusses this dynamic between the pre-established and creative aspects of language in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. He explicitly highlights this element of our experience of language in his distinction between what he calls "speaking" and "spoken" speech. It is worth exploring this distinction in order to provide a more comprehensive account of language's creative power. In speaking speech, Merleau-Ponty states, "Existence seeks to meet up with itself beyond being, and this is why it creates speech as the empirical support of its own non-being. Speech is the excess of our existence beyond natural being." (PP 202, 203) In other words, speaking speech is expression that brings novel meaning into the world. It is the ultimate reflection of language's creative potential. A child's first words, the work of a writer, and the

construction of a new word or concept are all examples of speaking speech according to Merleau-Ponty (PP 203). We can note that all of these examples are considered difficult to accomplish. But for the speaking subject, the subject who brings novel meaning into the world through language, there is no other option: the world calls upon the poet to express himself, but the poet cannot do so without turning to something novel, and so he attempts to despite the difficulty he faces.

Spoken speech, on the other hand, does not bring novel meaning into the world. Merleau-Ponty describes spoken speech as that which, "Enjoys the use of available significations like that of an acquired fortune." (PP 203) Almost all of our experience of language is spoken speech. For instance, when I greet my taxi driver, when I order a coffee, when I make small talk with colleagues, I am using spoken speech; spoken speech is pervasive throughout our experience of the world, and its importance to our study should not be overshadowed by the fact that it relies upon pre-acquired significations. One could only image how difficult navigating our intersubjective world would be if every instance of interaction required novel expression from us (i.e. if there were no language). Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty asserts that spoken speech is contingent upon speaking speech because speaking speech creates the pre-acquired significations that spoken speech relies upon. He writes, "Such a function is revealed through language, which reiterates itself, depends upon itself, or that like a wave gathers itself together and steadies itself in order to once again throw itself beyond itself." (PP 203) Language, then, is self-transcendent of its own pre-established structure. The poet draws upon previously acquired significations (which were at one time novel significations) and, through the creative power of language, transforms them into a novel expression of meaning. In turn, this novel meaning becomes the pre-acquired signification for another.

We can see this dynamic illustrated most clearly in analogical phrases like the "mouth" of a bottle. This is clearly an analogy: we could call the opening of a bottle the "rim", "hole," or "opening", but we often refer to it as the mouth of a bottle in reference to our own mouths. At one time, however, there was a person who first came up with calling the opening of a bottle a "mouth". In doing so, he or she created novel meaning through the use of speaking speech. Overtime the phrase was incorporated into our pre-established linguistic structure – it was used so often that it became banal – and now I can call upon the phrase in spoken speech. However, I may use the phrase to create a new meaning (e.g. in a philosophical text that aims to express a novel concept), and thus begin the process all over again. We can now see Merleau-Ponty's wave analogy fits quite well here. Language, comprised of both speaking and spoken speech components, has a self-transcendent structure through which it continuously moves towards providing a richer sense of expression.

With this distinction in mind, however, let us explore the creative power of language in more detail by examining our experience of speaking speech. As previously acknowledged, expressing oneself with speaking speech is an arduous task – as any writer would likely attest – but we still see people persevere through the challenges. What could explain this perseverance? One answer, which Russon proposes in *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*, is that we experience the demand of the world to express something that we do not have the current linguistic "tools," if you will, to express. He writes, "The inherent exigency of our nature ... Thus propels us beyond art-as-religion to art-as-dialogue, that is, to expression as an explicitly creative redefinition of the parameters of our co-witnessing." (BW 66) For Russon, experience consists of a series of demands. From the most basic physical demands of our lives to the demands for intellectual growth and ethical action, Russon argues that we cannot escape from the demands of our world.

One of the most critical demands, he argues, is the demand for expression that the speaking subject faces. This demand, then, can be seen as the source of speaking speech. Because we live in a pre-established linguistic world, we do not often have to rely upon speaking speech to fulfill this demand. If I feel excited at the surprising presence of a friend, I can shout “hello!” without creating new meaning. But perhaps I feel that my greeting, which relied upon pre-acquired significations, is inadequate – that it does not truly express just how excited I am to see my friend. This inadequacy would represent the true source of speaking speech. When we experience our current linguistic capabilities as inadequate, when we feel that what has been said is not enough, that is when we experience the demand for speaking speech.

Merleau-Ponty gives a concurring account of the demand of speaking speech in his discussion of writing. He states, “The expressive word does not simply choose a sign for an already defined signification, as one goes to look for a hammer in order to drive a nail or a claw to pull it out. It gropes around a significative intention which is not guided by any text, and which is precisely in the process of writing the text.” (IL 83) When we experience the simultaneous demand of expression and the inadequacy of our pre-acquired language, when we experience the call for speaking speech, it is not as if the “signification,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it, is available to us and we are just looking for the right word that matches with it, but rather, we are in the process of creating novel meaning in itself; speaking speech is the act of creation. Through it, we creatively bring forth novel meaning that did not exist prior to expression. Now we can see the creative power of language a little more clearly. It is not the mere construction of an arbitrary assortment of characters that better expresses a previously existing significance, but the actual creation of significance in one’s world.

There is a parallel here to the creative power of our bonds, although it is perhaps subtler than the similarities we have already discussed. When we spoke of the creative power of our bonds, we said that the creative power manifested itself in the creation of new terms of evaluation; we created novel criteria for interpreting and judging the behavior of our companions which was different than what had been previously established by the social world. We can see the same dynamic unfolding in our experience of language. Both speaking speech and the creative power of our bonds answers the same fundamental demand of experience that Russon describes: the experience that what has already been established – whether in the social world or the pre-existing linguistic structure – is inadequate. And further, both speaking speech and the creative power of our bonds *create* novel significance, albeit in different ways and with different implications. The takeaway, however, is that even here there is a subtle but consistent similarity between the creative power of language and the creative power of our bonds.

6. The Clarity of Language

Let us review what we've accomplished thus far in our study of language. We've focused on examining language and drawing out its commonalities with our other intersubjective powers. First and foremost, we've established that we primarily experience language as a habitually developed perceptual power, rather than an object of experience. We've also seen how language is pre-established by others and maintains a universal aim, just like the familial and social worlds. We went on to explore the expressive-integrative power of language, juxtaposing it with our prior analysis of our bonds. And lastly, we discussed the creative power of language and its parallels to the creative power of our bonds that we examined in the previous chapter.

In light of all these commonalities, then, it seems clear that we must understand language as an intersubjective power. We have been able to draw significant parallels between language and our other intersubjective powers. Furthermore, we also saw how language is intertwined with our other intersubjective experiences: we saw how it is impossible to fully separate our experiences of language from our experiences of our families, our social worlds, and our bonds with others. In fact, language plays such an important role in these intersubjective experiences that any account of them would be insufficient if it did not address the role of language. By understanding language as an intersubjective power, then, we can provide a more comprehensive account of our intersubjective experiences. But language is also distinct from other instances of our intersubjective powers. There is something powerful about language that makes it integral to our study of the self. Up and to this point we've explored the similarities between language and our other intersubjective powers but let us now turn to examine its differences and the implications on our study of the self.

Towards the end of *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*, Merleau-Ponty juxtaposes language and painting as two forms of expression – and therefore, as two forms of our intersubjective powers (IL 116-119). Merleau-Ponty notes that language has an apparent "clarity" in contrast to painting (IL 119). Language seems to have the power to express meaning more clearly than other forms of expression. There is a sense of transparency with language – a sense that we can close the gap between sign and signified more easily. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "Man does not paint painting, but he speaks about speech." (IL 117) Other forms of expression such as painting do not give us the same degree of clarity in our expression. We can extend this argument and apply it to Russon's notion of behavioral expression. While certainly significant to our bonds, and not any less meaningful than language, we have to recognize that

behavioral expression does not maintain the same degree of clarity in its terms as language does. Language's degree of clarity, then, fundamentally distinguishes it from our other intersubjective powers.

Merleau-Ponty, however, does not consider language a superior form of expression despite its clarity (IL 115). Merleau-Ponty argues instead that the apparent clarity of language can actually be detrimental to expression. The clarity of language makes us believe that we can reach the "thing itself", as Merleau-Ponty puts it, whereas he believes language could only accomplish this if it "Ceased to be in time and situation." (IL 118). In other words, the apparent clarity of language leads us to believe that we can transcend the limits of our determinant perspective –that we can express ourselves universally; But, as Merleau-Ponty points out, this notion can never be actualized. Painting on the other hand, Merleau-Ponty argues, never pretends to apply universally (IL 118). We should not, therefore, understand language as superior to other manifestations of our intersubjective powers. The clarity of language is unique, and it is important to our study, but it does not make language superior because language is never fully transparent in the way that we often understand it to be.

However, let us continue focusing on Merleau-Ponty's notion of the apparent clarity of language – not in order to argue that language is superior because of it, but instead to further explore what makes language distinct from other forms of our intersubjective powers. Our understanding of the clarity of language could also be described as a capacity for precision: language gives us the power to be very specific in how we express ourselves. For instance, we discussed how we often turn to language to resolve misunderstandings within our bonds with others. Language allows us to express ourselves with a unique degree of specificity, and it is this specificity that that makes language useful for clarifying our misunderstandings. Other forms of

expression, while certainly significant in our experience, do not offer the same degree of precision. For example, through behavioral expression, we can clearly express that we feel angry. But without language, it is very difficult to express what kind of anger we feel (frustration, resentment, betrayal, rage, irritation, etc.). These linguistic terms characterize affective states that are very different from one another, but that are often expressed the same way through behavioral expression.

The clarity of language enables us to better express ourselves to a unique degree of specificity. This clarity – this capacity for precision – is inextricable from the critical elements of language which we have already discussed: the clarity of language is interconnected with its pre-established nature, its creative capabilities, and its expressive-integrative power. Let us now return to examine these three elements of language with our notion of clarity in mind.

We should begin by reexamining the pre-established of nature. In many ways, it is language's pre-established nature that allows for language to take on such a high degree of clarity. The structure of language (i.e. grammar and syntax) lends itself to pre-establishment in a particularly powerful way. Grammar is remarkably economical: just a few morphemes, which can be considered the basic "signs" of language, can drastically alter the meaning of a sentence. Eva Maria-Simms points this out in her book *The Child in the World* when she analyzes the child's development of language. "The miracle of grammar," she writes, "lies in the economy and flexibility it gives to words." (CW 189) She goes on to demonstrate that even a simple sentence such as, "Lea sees a dog," can be remarkably transformed with just a few letters. "Lea sees dog*s*," adds a plurality of dogs to the image; "Lea *saw* dogs," now refers to the past not the present; "*Did* Lea see the dogs?" adds further complications (CW 189). Language's pre-established grammatical structure enables us express details of our world that other forms of

expression simply cannot. We have, for example, very limited means for expressing notions of past and present through non-linguistic expression. The clarity of language, then, is contingent upon its pre-establishment; it is because language is so clearly defined by its pre-established nature that we are able to achieve such a remarkable degree of precision with it.

We then can turn to explore the creative power of language with its relation to the clarity of language in mind. Recall that we earlier described a cyclical dynamic between speaking and spoken speech – that is between the creative and non-creative use of language. When we employ speaking speech, we create meaning in excess of our pre-acquired significations, but this novel meaning is subsequently recast as common language, and it becomes a pre-acquired signification in itself. This cyclical dynamic, then, is critical to the clarity of language. We attributed the clarity of language to its pre-established nature. But we therefore need to also credit language's creative power for its clarity as well. For it is only through the creative power of language – through speaking speech – that the pre-established nature is established in the first place. The creative power of language, then, can be seen as the continuous refinement of language. By creating novel meaning in our worlds, and subsequently adding this novel meaning to our set of pre-acquired significations, language is able to develop its remarkable degree of specificity. And it is this capacity for precision, after all, that gives language its sense of clarity

As we've noted, the clarity of language allows us to express ourselves to an unmatched degree of precision. The clarity of language, then, will have a significant impact on the expressive-integrative power of language. By enabling us to express ourselves in increasingly specific and precise ways, language improves our expressive capabilities; the clarity of language strengthens its expressive power. The ability to express, for instance, that one is only frustrated, not resentful, can only be attributed to the clarity of language. At the same time, this degree of

precision must be seen as an improvement to our expressive capabilities. On the other hand, increasing the precision of our expressive capabilities also strengthens the integrative power of language. When others express themselves with more specificity, I am drawn further into their world. To follow our example, if my friend tells me he feels frustrated, I am immediately drawn into his world through the integrative power of language in ways that would not be available without the clarity of language. We can see on both sides of the expressive-integrative power, then, the clarity of language enrichens our intersubjective experience by expanding either our ability to express ourselves or the ability for others to integrate their perspectives with our own.

In sum, then, we can see that language is distinct from other forms of intersubjective powers because it maintains a remarkable degree of clarity. Language allows us to signify to a degree of precision that few other modes of expression can match. Furthermore, we’ve found that this quality of clarity is driven by the three key elements of language we have analyzed so far. The pre-established nature of language allows for such a high degree of specificity in language. The creative power of language, in turn, enables us to continuously refine and enrichen the pre-acquired significations which we draw upon. And the clarity of language ultimately improves the strength of language’s expressive-integrative power, making it the unique form of expression that we have recognized throughout our analysis. We have developed a comprehensive account of language so far, both describing in detail its similarities to our other intersubjective powers, while also noting and exploring its unique quality of clarity. But we’ve yet to discuss the implications of this view on our understanding of the self. Let us now do so.

7. Language and the Self

Now we can return to focus on our principal inquiry: developing a more accurate account of the self. Through our analysis, we've found that our sense of self is fundamentally an intersubjective accomplishment. We established that our sense of self is created, developed, and continuously redefined through intersubjective experiences. One consequence of this conclusion is that our intersubjective experiences gain a new level of significance. In recognizing our sense of self as an intersubjective accomplishment, we have also come to understand that our intersubjective experiences are critical to our sense of self. We can no longer consider our relations with others as separate from our experience of the self, but rather, we must understand them as two inextricable elements of the same intersubjective experience. In this chapter, we have established that language should be seen as an intersubjective power. Going further, we explored how the clarity of language makes it a unique form of our intersubjective powers that significantly effects our intersubjective experiences.

Putting these ideas together – that our sense of self is an intersubjective accomplishment and that at the same time, that language deeply effects our intersubjective experiences – we must then conclude that language is integral to our sense of self. We can no longer consider language as an object of experience – as external and separate from our structure of experience as we so commonly do. Language can no longer be understood as something through which we transmit our sense of self to others, but rather we must understand it as something through which our sense of self is forged. Consequently, we have to appreciate the immense influence language holds over how we understand ourselves. There are three key implications of this understanding of language, each related to the three elements of language which we have been focusing on.

First, if we understand language to be interconnected with our sense of self, then the pre-established linguistic world which we are thrown into becomes important to our study of the self. The language we speak defines, at least in part, how we experience ourselves. We can find a common example of this phenomena in the use of gendered words. For example, people commonly use the word “fireman” instead of the non-gendered “firefighter”. Up until relatively recently, people would only use the word “fireman” because it was part of the pre-established linguistic world they were initiated into. But when we understand language and our sense of self as interconnected, we begin to see the problematic nature of using gendered nouns. Language directly influences our sense of self. In this example, the use of a gendered noun implies that women cannot be firefighters. The use of gendered nouns is just one clear example, but we can find similar themes throughout our use of language. Because the linguistic power we use to express ourselves is largely pre-established, and expression is critical to our sense of self, then we must conclude that our very parameters for self-perception at least in part reflect the pre-established nature of our language.

Another critical implication we must consider is that the expressive-integrative power of language has a direct influence on our sense of self. We said that the clarity of language allows us to express ourselves to a remarkable degree of precision. If we understand the expressive power of language as interconnected with our sense of self, then this precision takes on a new level of significance. When we are able to express our world to another in more precise terms through the clarity of language, then we are able to define our sense of self in more detail. In other words, the precision of language enables us to reveal a more detailed sense of self to the interpretation of others. This brings a heightened level of vulnerability, but it also allows for us to understand ourselves in more nuanced ways. Language, then, enables us to develop a richer

sense of self than we otherwise would have been able to accomplish. On the other hand, the clarity of language allows others to draw us into their world to a more detailed degree. Language integrates our perspective with a richer, more detailed, and more comprehensive world of the other. As we have established, the perspective of another always includes how they understand us. Therefore, language allows us to develop a richer sense of self through its integrative power as well as its expressive power.

Lastly, but most importantly, understanding language and the self as interconnected makes the creative power of language instrumental to developing our sense of self. The creative power of language allows us to move beyond the pre-established linguistic world we are thrown into. While we recognized the tremendous influence the pre-established nature of language has on our sense of self, we also have to acknowledge that by employing language creatively, we can move beyond these pre-established parameters for self-perception. When we create new meaning in the world, then, it is not some external significance with no tangible influence on our world, but instead it offers the potential to redefine how we understand ourselves. Again, we can return to the use of gendered language as it seems to illustrate the dynamic at play here most clearly. The use of the word “firefighters” instead of “firemen” could be seen as a creative use of language. But it does more than create meaning in excess of the pre-established linguistic world. The creative use of language, in this case, potentially redefines how we can understand ourselves – perhaps including the possibility of being a firefighter. Of course, this is a relatively simple example. But we can clearly see that if we understand language as integral to our sense of self, then by expanding our use of language through the creation of novel meaning, we also expand our sense of self.

Understanding language and our sense of self as inextricably interconnected charges our account of language with new-found significance. Instead of viewing language as something external to ourselves, as the representational views hold, we have instead found the exact opposite: we cannot fully understand the experience of our sense of self without also understanding our experience of language. Therefore, the prior analysis of this chapter, which aimed to explore our experience of language, should not be considered separate from our study of the self, but an integral component of it. Our study of language as an intersubjective power, then, further demonstrates the integral interconnection between self and others and, ultimately, completes our phenomenological account of the self.

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