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# The Elemental Past

*Ted Toadvine*

University of Oregon

## Abstract

In a 1951 debate that marked the beginnings of the analytic-continental divide, Maurice Merleau-Ponty sided with Georges Bataille in rejecting A. J. Ayer's claim that "the sun existed before human beings." This rejection is already anticipated in a controversial passage from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he claims that "there is no world without an Existence that bears its structure." I defend Merleau-Ponty's counterintuitive position against naturalistic and anti-subjectivist critics by arguing that the world emerges in the exchange between perceiver and perceived. A deeper challenge is posed, however, by Quentin Meillassoux, who argues that the "correlationism" of contemporary philosophy rules out any account of the "ancestral" time that antedates all subjectivity. Against Meillassoux, and taking an encounter with fossils as my guide, I hold that the past prior to subjectivity can only be approached phenomenologically. The paradoxical character of this immemorial past, as a memory of the world rather than of the subject, opens the way toward a phenomenology of the "elemental" past. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the absolute past of nature and the anonymity of the body, as well as Levinas' account of the elements at the end of the world, I argue that our own materiality and organic lives participate in the differential rhythms of the elements, opening us to a memory of the world that binds the cosmic past and the apocalyptic future.

## Keywords

Bataille – elements – Levinas – Meillassoux – memory – Merleau-Ponty – nature – time

In a lecture to the Collège philosophique on 12 January 1951, Georges Bataille recounts a barroom debate held the night before with British philosopher A. J. Ayer, who was at that time stationed at the British Embassy in Paris and had presented a lecture to the group that previous day. The topic of the debate,

in which Maurice Merleau-Ponty and atomic physicist Georges Ambrosino also participated, is described by Bataille in the following terms:

We finally fell to discussing the following very strange question. Ayer had uttered the very simple proposition: There was a sun before men existed. And he saw no reason to doubt it. Merleau-Ponty, Ambrosino, and I disagreed with this proposition, and Ambrosino said that the sun had certainly not existed before the world. I, for my part, do not see how one can say so.<sup>1</sup>

Although Bataille suggests that a compromise was finally reached at around three in the morning, he says nothing about its terms. Instead, his lecture takes up Ayer's proposition as an example of "nonknowledge," *non-savoir*, since, even though it is "logically unassailable," it is nevertheless "mentally disturbing, unbalancing." This disturbing character is a consequence of the proposition's violation of the requirement for both a subject and an object, since what we find in this case is "an object independent of any subject"—and, consequently, "perfect non-sense."<sup>2</sup>

This may seem little more than an interesting anecdote, but Bataille's account of his debate with Ayer has been identified by Andreas Vrahimis as "the first explicit announcement, in the twentieth century, of the division between Anglophone and Continental philosophy."<sup>3</sup> As Bataille puts it, the conversation with Ayer "produced an effect of shock. There exists between French and English philosophers a sort of abyss which we do not find between French and German philosophers."<sup>4</sup> I suggest that this remark concerning the parting of ways of philosophical traditions is of more than merely historical

1 Georges Bataille, "Le conséquences du non-savoir," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 190; translated by Annette Michelson as "Un-knowing and Its Consequences," in *October* 36 (1986): 80. An alternative translation by Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall appeared as "The Consequences of Nonknowledge," in Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 111.

2 Bataille, "Le conséquences du non-savoir," 191, 190; "Un-knowing and its Consequences," 81, 80; "The Consequences of Nonknowledge," 112, 111.

3 Andreas Vrahimis, "Was There a Sun Before Men Existed? A.J. Ayer and French Philosophy in the Fifties," *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 1, no. 9 (2012), 11. See also Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 36.

4 Bataille, "Le conséquences du non-savoir," 191; "Un-knowing and its Consequences," 80; "The Consequences of Nonknowledge," 111–12.

interest. The debate over the sun's existence prior to human beings anticipates and even enacts the split between analytic and continental philosophy because it already sketches out what is at stake philosophically in this split, namely, the fate of naturalism. To any naturalist, and especially to the inner naturalist of common sense, the position taken by the "continental" thinkers in this debate is so absurd as to function as a *reductio* of their position. Even for those whose sensibilities align with the "continental" side of this debate, or at least for many of them, it will be Bataille's position that seems shocking rather than Ayer's.<sup>5</sup> How, today, could anyone—continental thinkers included—deny the anteriority of the sun to human existence? Indeed, it is precisely by criticizing such absurdities that Quentin Meillassoux's speculative realism has attracted attention.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is my intention here to reanimate this old debate and to argue on behalf of the "continental" position: the sun exists only within a world, and a world emerges only at the confluence of a perceiver and the perceived. But this does not deny the insistence of a time before the world, a primordial prehistory that haunts the world from within, which is the truth of the naturalist's conviction about a time prior to humanity. Yet only the resources of phenomenology can clarify this encounter with an elemental past that has never been for anyone a present.

Close readers of Merleau-Ponty will immediately recognize that the debate over the sun's existence echoes an infamous passage at the end of the "Temporality" chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty considers the objection that the world existed "prior to man."<sup>7</sup> In response to Merleau-Ponty's claim that "there is no world without an Existence that bears its structure," his imagined critic counters that "the world preceded man," since "the earth emerged from a primitive nebula where the conditions for life had not been brought together." Merleau-Ponty nevertheless insists that "[n]othing will ever lead me to understand what a nebula that could not be seen by anyone might be. Laplace's nebula is not behind us, at our origin, but rather out in front of us in the cultural world" (*PP*, 494/456).

5 See, for example, Étienne Bimbenet's efforts to reconcile phenomenology with the realist perspective in *L'animal que je ne suis plus* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 136–46.

6 Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2006); translated by Ray Brassier as *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008); hereafter cited as *AF*, with French preceding English pagination.

7 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 494; translated by Donald Landes as *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 456; hereafter cited as *PP*, with French preceding English pagination.

Now, for reasons that we have suggested above, this remark has been controversial in recent Merleau-Ponty scholarship. Some, like Thomas Baldwin, see in it merely a confused theory of linguistic meaning that has long since been debunked.<sup>8</sup> Others might take this remark as an unfortunate vestige of Merleau-Ponty's early commitment to Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, which, they will say, prevents his account of time in *Phenomenology of Perception* from truly escaping a "philosophy of consciousness." Going farther still, Graham Harman in his *Guerrilla Metaphysics* cites the nebula passage as evidence that Merleau-Ponty "retains all of the antimetaphysical bias that typifies phenomenology as a whole." By denying that there can be any genuine interactions between things in their own right, unmediated by humans, Merleau-Ponty "artificially limits the scope of the cosmos to that of human awareness."<sup>9</sup> In short, Harman's assessment is that Merleau-Ponty's ontology remains fundamentally anthropocentric and incapable of thinking the world of things on their own terms. Harman's own "object-oriented ontology" is quite close to the "speculative realism" of Quentin Meillassoux, who argues in *After Finitude* that the post-Kantian "correlationism" of phenomenology, by which thinking and being may only be understood in their relation and never independently of the other, makes it impossible for phenomenology to speak meaningfully about "ancestrality," that is, about a time anterior to the emergence of thought or life in the cosmos. For the correlationist, according to Meillassoux, statements about such an "ancestral" time—a time prior to all manifestation—are strictly meaningless. It follows that phenomenology is incapable of providing a meaningful foundation for the sciences, which should motivate us to revise its fundamental commitment to the correlation of thought and being.

Starting from these three critiques, we can specify more precisely what is at stake in the question of whether the sun existed before human beings. At stake, first of all, is phenomenology's rejection of realism or metaphysical naturalism, and therefore its fundamental incompatibility with the dominant strands of analytic philosophy. If any détente or compromise is possible between phenomenology and naturalism, it will turn on the treatment of time.<sup>10</sup> Second,

8 Editor's Introduction, in *Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), 20.

9 Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 52–53.

10 David Wood calls for such a détente, and the "plexity" of time is key to his account. See Wood, "What is Eco-Phenomenology?," in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, ed.

then, what is at stake is the phenomenological account of the time of nature—of the cosmos, of the elements, and of the evolutionary history of life—and the relationship of this time to that of cultural and personal history. We will need to investigate here Merleau-Ponty's remarks in *Phenomenology of Perception* about the absolute past of nature, as a past that has never been present, as well as the references in his later writings to nature as the "Memory of the world." As we will see, Merleau-Ponty's rejection of a sun before human beings rests on his commitment to the ontological primacy of the perceived world. We might say, then, that just as the earth does not move, the sun does not endure; it does not age. As the lived basis for time, it remains outside of time, at its beginning or at its end. But our embodied immersion in the Memory of the world tears us apart, scattering us across an incommensurable multiplicity of temporal flows and eddies. We encounter, then, an asubjective time, a time without a world, at the heart of lived time. This worldless prehistorical time, independent of any subject, is precisely the time of the elements, of ashes and dust. The experience of such a mythical "time before time," as Merleau-Ponty tells us, is one that "remembers an impossible past" and "anticipates an impossible future."<sup>11</sup> This impossible future is surely a return to the elements, of dust to dust; in other words, it is the apocalypse to come.

Let us begin with the three critiques of Merleau-Ponty, starting with Baldwin, who exemplifies the perspective of the naturalistic philosopher intent on appropriating Merleau-Ponty's descriptions outside the context of transcendental phenomenology. Baldwin argues that Merleau-Ponty's position "can no longer command serious assent," thanks to its

commitment to a foundationalist theory of meaning which ties the meaning of our words, even 'nebula', back to some 'pre-scientific experience' in such a way that the 'valid meaning' of sentences about nebulas includes a reference to the pre-scientific life-world. . . . The meaning, or reference (there is no significant distinction in this case), of 'nebula' is a type of stellar system, and in coming to understand what nebulas are one also learns that the existence of nebulas is wholly independent of that of human beings, and indeed of any intelligent consciousness. So the realist,

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Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 211–33.

11 Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 296, 163; translated by Alphonso Lingis as *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 243, 123; hereafter cited as *VI*, with French preceding English pagination.

having noted Merleau-Ponty's dependence upon this untenable theory of meaning, can pass on unmoved.<sup>12</sup>

Here Baldwin plays the part of a present-day Ayer, interpreting the argument as about linguistic meaning while failing entirely to recognize that his naturalistic interpretation is incompatible with Merleau-Ponty's ontology. As Bataille admits, Ayer's proposition is "logically unassailable."<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty makes the same point by describing Laplace's nebula as "out in front of us in the cultural world," the world within which linguistic formulations are learned and deployed. The issue is not, then, whether the signification of the statement is valid, which Merleau-Ponty admits, but rather the tacit framing of all language and concepts by the structures of human perceptual experience. The issue, once again, is not one of understanding the word *nebula* but of understanding what a nebula *not seen by anyone* might be. And here it is significant that the lineage of thinkers that Baldwin cites in his favor—the Vienna Circle, Quine, Putnam, Kripke—does not include Husserl, whose account of the technicization of the objective sciences in the *Crisis* is intended to demonstrate their ongoing tacit dependence on the structures of lifeworldly experience, even as they presume to downgrade such experience to the merely "subjective-relative."<sup>14</sup> This is why Husserl can unabashedly pronounce that, despite Copernicus, the earth of our perceptual lives does not move, precisely since it is the very foundation for the movement or rest of objects.<sup>15</sup> Such a "transcendental earth" can neither be the object of scientific investigation nor refuted by

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12 Baldwin, "Editor's Introduction," 20.

13 Bataille, "Le conséquences du non-savoir," 191; "Un-knowing and its Consequences," 81; "The Consequences of Nonknowledge," 112.

14 Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), §34; translated by David Carr as *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), §34.

15 Edmund Husserl, "Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum phänomenologischen Ursprung der Räumlichkeit der Natur," in *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 305–25; translated by Fred Kersten and Leonard Lawlor as "Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature: The Originary Ark, the Earth, Does Not Move," in Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 117–31.

it, since scientific inquiry necessarily presupposes this same earth-basis in defining its proper scope and methods.<sup>16</sup>

In emphasizing Merleau-Ponty's proximity and debt to Husserl, however, we have perhaps played into the second critique, namely, that Merleau-Ponty's remarks concerning the world prior to human beings, coming as they do at the end of the temporality chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, are symptomatic of this text's failure to escape a philosophy of consciousness. It is in this chapter, after all, that Merleau-Ponty equates time with the subject, both understood in terms of auto-affectation (*PP*, 487/449), thereby reproducing the classic formulation of phenomenological presence as, in Derrida's words, "self-proximity in interiority."<sup>17</sup> We might hope, then, that in Merleau-Ponty's later work, which in many ways complicates the subjectivist tendencies of this earlier text and especially its treatment of time,<sup>18</sup> his remarks concerning the world before humans would not stand without at least some qualification. But in fact, we know that Merleau-Ponty takes up again the theme of the nebula a decade later, in his 1954–1955 course on passivity, where he unambiguously reaffirms his earlier conclusion: "If there is emergence, this means that humans will never be able to think a nature without humans, and ultimately that the pure in-itself is a myth. Every cosmogeny [is thought] in perceptual terms."<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, if truth is not prior to us, neither is it through us alone—a position that Merleau-Ponty here attributes to the "philosophy of consciousness" of his teacher Léon Brunschvicg, whose thesis, *La Modalité du jugement*, opened with the assessment that "knowledge constitutes a world that is for us *the* world. Beyond this, there is nothing: a thing that would be beyond knowledge would be by definition inaccessible, indeterminable, that is to say equivalent for us to nothing."<sup>20</sup> Now, Merleau-Ponty is clearly distancing himself

16 For a very clear exposition and defense of Husserl's position, see Juha Himanka, "Husserl's Argumentation for the Pre-Copernican View of the Earth," *The Review of Metaphysics* 58 (2005): 621–44.

17 Jacques Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), 83; translated by David Allison as *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 75. See also Leonard Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (London: Continuum 2003), 28.

18 See Ted Toadvine, "Natural Time and Immemorial Nature," *Philosophy Today* 53 (2009): 214–21.

19 Merleau-Ponty, *L'Institution, La passivité* (Tours: Belin, 2003), 172; translated by Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey as *Institution and Passivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 129; hereafter cited as *IP*, with French preceding English pagination.

20 Léon Brunschvicg, *La modalité du jugement*, 3rd edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), 2 (my translation).

from Brunschvicg's position, precisely because the world for Brunschvicg is constricted to what knowledge discloses, whereas for Merleau-Ponty it is the perceptual exchange, the exchange "between a world ready to be perceived and a perception that relies upon it," that is the starting point for ontology. Significantly, Merleau-Ponty elucidates his position here with explicit reference to Husserl's claim that the earth does not move. "Objectivist ontology cannot be maintained," he writes, because "there is no objectivity without a point of view, in itself; i.e., an observer is necessary, with his 'levels,' his 'soil,' his 'homeland,' his perceptual 'norms,' in short, his 'earth'" (*IP*, 173/129). And the lived correlate of such an earth, as John Sallis' recent investigations demonstrate, is the elemental sky.<sup>21</sup> Sallis refers us back to Heidegger's remark in *Being and Time* that "'Time' first shows itself in the sky, that is, precisely there where one comes across it in directing oneself naturally *according to it*, so that time even becomes identified with the sky."<sup>22</sup> "This time of the heavens," as Sallis notes, "is measured out by the course of the sun and, first of all, as the alternation between day and night."<sup>23</sup> In parallel with the claim that the earth of our primordial experience does not move, then, we might similarly insist that the sun does not endure; it is not an object within time but fundamentally the primordial measure of time. We find a similar insight in Claudel's *Poetic Art*—a text to which Merleau-Ponty repeatedly returns in his own examinations of time—where Claudel describes "the whole universe" as "nothing but a time-marking machine," with the sun as its weight and movement as its flywheel.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's continued insistence on our inability to think a world prior to humans seems to play directly into the third criticism of his position, namely, Meillasoux's critique of correlationism. For the correlationist—and Meillasoux believes that "every philosophy which disavows naive realism has become a variant of correlationism" (*AF*, 18/5)—thinking and being can only be considered in their correlation, never separately. The relation itself is primary, whether we call this relation intentionality, *Ereignis*, language, or flesh. But this leaves us, Meillasoux argues, with a "strange feeling

21 See John Sallis, *Force of Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) and *Logic of Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

22 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1963), 419; translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson as *Being and Time* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962), 471–72, quoted in Sallis, *Force of Imagination*, 195.

23 Sallis, *Force of Imagination*, 194.

24 Paul Claudel, *Art Poétique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1929), 34–35; translated by Renee Spodheim as *Poetic Art* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 20–21.

of imprisonment or enclosure" (*AF*, 21/7), insofar as the only exteriority that we can encounter remains relative to thought. And so, what correlationism has lost, and what speculative realists and object-oriented ontologists claim to recover, is (in Meillassoux's words) "the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside [le *Grand Dehors*, le *Dehors absolu*] of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not" (*AF*, 21–22/7). Now, if we want to give the lie to this exclusion of the great outside, Meillassoux argues, we need only demand an account of a time prior to all thinking, prior to all manifestation—and, we might add, prior to all perception. For surely we encounter the traces of such a prior time in the radioactive decay of isotopes or the emissions of a distant star. And what such "arche-fossils" confront us with is "ancestrality," the time prior to the emergence of human—or any—life in the cosmos. While Meillassoux's own examples do not include the sun or Laplace's nebula, and he never mentions Bataille or Merleau-Ponty by name, his argument seems intended precisely to intervene on Ayer's side of the debate, and at a more profound level than does Baldwin.

Nevertheless, like Baldwin, Meillassoux fails to thematize the problem of time, which for him seems to be reducible to a formula for designating the properties of an event, much as it would be, in his example, for a scientist using thermoluminescence to date the light emitted by stars. What requires explanation, on his account, is the truth of such scientific conclusions about the "date" of pre-human events, or the "age" of the universe, and such dates are designated by numbers on a line (*AF*, 24/9). Furthermore, the problem of how to understand these numbers and this line first confronts us only in the era of modern science, since for him the ancestral past is a past that we come to know primarily or exclusively through scientific investigation (*AF*, 39/28). In fact, although Meillassoux does not mention this, it was just over a century ago, in 1913, that Arthur Holmes published his famous book, *The Age of the Earth*, that proposed the first absolute dates for the geological time scale based on radiometric methods.<sup>25</sup> But clearly such scientific research makes no claim to explain what is meant by "past," nor can it do so, since it takes for granted our lived, pre-scientific experience of time (*IP*, 171–72/128). If the geological scale of time means anything more to us than numbers on a line, this is because our experience—our levels, our perceptual norms, our earth—opens us to a past, and even to an incomprehensibly ancient prehistory. It does so because, as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes in his reading of Whitehead, we are ourselves embedded, mind and body, within the temporal passage of nature; its pulsation

25 Arthur Holmes, *The Age of the Earth* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1913).

runs across us.<sup>26</sup> And this pulsation transcends the past-present distinction in such a way that past and present are enveloping-enveloped, *Ineinander*, each moment entering into relations of exchange and identification, interference and confusion, with all the others (*VI*, 321/267–68; *IP*, 36/7). This is why Merleau-Ponty identifies time as the very model of institution and of chiasm (*IP*, 36/7; *VI*, 321/267), and calls nature the “Memory of the world” (*N*, 163/120; *VI*, 247/194). On the one hand, this is the truth of Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of a time “in itself” that would be entirely purified of any point of view, since we cannot think time apart from our own emergence within it and our subsequent reconstruction of it. On the other hand, this entails no reduction of time to a correlate of thought, since institution here is nearly the opposite of constitution: whereas “the constituted makes sense only for me,” “the instituted makes sense without me” (*IP*, 37/8). Simply put, just as institution is nearly the opposite of constitution, chiasm is nearly the opposite of correlation.

Yet this ontological response, even if it meets Meillassoux’s challenge, remains abstract; it guarantees only the *possibility* of a phenomenology of the prehistoric, the geological, and the cosmic past. For what characterizes the experience of the deep past is precisely its unsettling, vertiginous character, the loss of all common markers and measures. It is our ability to open onto a past that was never our own possibility, never our own memory—an impossible and immemorial past—that makes any scientific investigation or mathematical representation of such a past possible. Now, it is only through phenomenology that we can investigate this impossible immemoriality, this memory that belongs to the world rather than to us; and, to my knowledge, this phenomenology remains to be carried through. We cannot find it elaborated in Merleau-Ponty’s writings, although I think we can take our start from several hints there. Let us begin, though, not with the cosmic time of the sun or of Laplace’s nebula, but rather with something that is literally dug from the earth, that is, with a fossil. Phenomenology has generally avoided the fossil. You may recall that Husserl uses the example of “fossil vertebrae,” in the first of the *Logical Investigations*, as illustrative of an indication, since such fossils are signs “of the existence of prediluvian animals.”<sup>27</sup> This means that, for a thinking being, belief in the reality of the fossil motivates belief in another reality, namely, the

26 Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1995), 159–62; translated by Robert Vallier as *Nature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 117–19; hereafter cited as *N*, with French preceding English pagination.

27 Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, Second Book, First Part, 4th ed. (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1928), 24; translated by J. N. Findlay as *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2001), 184.

past that it indicates. But here we are still at the level of the cognitive content of the fossil, while what makes it phenomenologically interesting is, rather, the way that it explodes our efforts to fill out its content. A nondescript, grapefruit-sized lump of brown sandstone found on the beach at Fossil Point, near Coos Bay on the Oregon coast, breaks neatly in half to reveal the shell of a scallop. Based on the surrounding geology, paleontologists date this sandstone formation from the Pliocene, roughly three million to five million years before the present. But does our wonder at this strange object arise only from this ungraspably large number, affixed like a price tag to what is otherwise one object among many? Or is it rather that the fossil, in our very perceptual encounter with it, already possesses the hint of paradox and the beginnings of vertigo? The stone itself is worldless. Yet, inhabiting it as a part of its very substance is the trace of a life and the intimation of a world always already closed to us. There is an invitation in this very refusal, an invitation to which only our imagination, ill equipped for the task, can respond. Furthermore, this invitation and refusal are intensified by the paradoxical intersection of two different pulses of time, that of the evolutionary past of life, on the one hand, and that of the rock, of the elements themselves, on the other. The fossil therefore embodies the very paradox of our encounter with the immemorial past, and it does so before our scientific explanations gain traction. If this were not so, how could Xenophanes and Aristotle each have recognized fossils as the remains of ancient life?

Now, my point is not that our scientific account is somehow already contained within the sensible encounter with the fossil, nor that we can, today, purify how we perceive this object of all that we have been taught about it and about how to perceive it. My claim is, rather, that we are first motivated to provide an account of the fossil—as have been many other people, in different ways, throughout history—precisely because it confronts us perceptually, viscerally, with an immemorial past that both invites and refuses us. If I am right that this confrontation is embodied in the fossil itself, then the question becomes: what makes it possible for me to resonate with this ancient past, to catch a marginal and brief glimpse of its abyssal expanse? How is such an incomprehensible time already sketched out within my own being such that it prepares me for this encounter?

Before we investigate this question directly, let us take a moment to retrace the steps that have brought us to this point. Our guiding question, posed to phenomenology, concerns whether there is a nature that precedes and conditions the emergence of the experienced world while remaining inaccessible to it. Merleau-Ponty's response to this question is both counterintuitive and enigmatic, since he apparently denies that we can speak meaningfully about such an objective ancestral past, and this denial marks a singular point in the

subsequent divergence of philosophical traditions. To clarify what is at stake in this question, we considered three critical responses to Merleau-Ponty's position: the naturalist critique, the rejection of phenomenology as a philosophy of consciousness, and the speculative realist charge against correlationism. In response to the naturalist, we reaffirmed the primacy of the lifeworld as the unacknowledged ground for scientific objectivity. In response to the second charge, that Merleau-Ponty's position is the unfortunate vestige of a philosophy of consciousness, we noted that his denial of any pure in-itself rests on an understanding of the world as emerging through perceptual exchange rather than as derivative from consciousness. Every ontology therefore presupposes a transcendental earth that does not move and a transcendental sun that does not age; every ontology, in other words, presupposes elementals. Finally, we considered the most challenging objection, namely, that phenomenology's correlationism rules out any encounter with ancestral time. This objection truly brings us to the heart of the matter, that is, to whether phenomenology can genuinely claim to encounter nature without lapsing into naturalism. Our response to this objection has two moments. The first is that the ancestral past is indeed meaningful within our lived, pre-scientific experience of time—and, furthermore, that the deep evolutionary, geological, and cosmic dimensions of the past gain their true sense *only* in relation to experience. Speculative realism effectively flattens time while claiming to deepen it, which is a strategy that it shares with garden-variety naturalism. The consequence of this first point is that phenomenology, far from ruling out an encounter with the ancestral path, is the only fruitful method for investigating it. This anticipates the second point in response to the charge of correlationism, which is that phenomenology has never been content with correlationsim in Meillassoux's sense. According to Meillassoux, the "paradox of the arche-fossil" is expressed by the question "how can a being manifest being's anteriority to manifestation?" (*AF*, 37/26). On his view, correlationism cannot take such a question seriously because it is inherently contradictory: "being *is not* anterior to givenness, it *gives itself* as anterior to givenness" (*AF*, 32/14). And yet, far from dismissing the anteriority of the world as self-contradictory or as a mere illusion, phenomenology has doggedly pursued it precisely by embracing the contradiction as constitutive of our experience of the world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, there is a significant distinction between "the sterile non-contradiction of formal logic" and "the justified contradictions of transcendental logic," that is, the contradictions that are constitutive of the perceived world.<sup>28</sup> Our task as phenomenologists is precisely not to resolve or dismiss such contradictions

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28 Merleau-Ponty, "Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophique," *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* 49 (1947): 126; translated as "The Primacy of

but to recognize in them an encounter with what strains the very limits of conceptual elucidation, with what can be encountered only through experience even as it outstrips that very experience. Such encounters with what is constitutive of experience while haunting it from the margins of sense have in fact been phenomenology's perennial concern, and the past that we encounter embodied in the fossil is just such a transcendental contradiction, the paradoxical character of which is what marks it precisely *as* the elemental past.

We return, then, to the question of how this elemental past, as a past prior to all manifestation, is sketched out in our very being and in the being of the world. Even though Merleau-Ponty never thematizes this question in our terms, several of his analyses nevertheless provide us with crucial hints. The first can be drawn from the gestalt ontology of his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, where matter, life, and mind are described as a nested hierarchy of gestalts that compose reality. Life is emergent from matter, and mind from life, in an ontologically continuous manner, each new level reorganizing its antecedents and yet carrying them along like the residue of its own crystallized history. Human consciousness takes up and reconfigures organic life on its own terms, just as organic life animates the matter of which it is composed. But this hierarchical emergence is never complete and never without remainder, so that consciousness always finds trailing in its wake the inertia of those subordinated gestalts that lend it substance. Our bodies continue to lead lives of their own that reflection can never equal, and at moments even our materiality can exercise its own resistance to our projects as an index of its autonomy. The clue here concerns the interpretation of the relationship between these gestalts in terms of time, since organic life is the forgotten past of consciousness, a past that we never cease to carry within our own substance, while our materiality is our liability to the forgotten past of the elements themselves. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, for the gestalts of life and mind "there is no past which is absolutely past. . . . Higher behavior retains the subordinated dialectics in the present depths of its existence, from that of the physical system and its topographical conditions to that of the organism and its 'milieu.'"<sup>29</sup> In other words, there is truly no moment of cosmic or geological history, however remote, that is not still borne by our own material bodies and by consciousness itself.

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Perception and its Philosophical Consequences," in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 18–19.

29 Merleau-Ponty, *La Structure du comportement* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1942), 224; translated by Alden Fisher as *The Structure of Behavior* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983), 207–8; hereafter cited as *SB*, with French preceding English pagination.

Furthermore, to be embodied is precisely to remain indebted to this prehistory, since our own materiality is never merely an object for us but instead “a presence to consciousness of its proper history and of the dialectical stages which it has traversed” (*SB*, 225/208).<sup>30</sup>

Through this lens, we can see that the many analyses of the “anonymity” of the body that Merleau-Ponty develops in his sequel, *Phenomenology of Perception*, continue this concern with our liability to a forgotten past, now more precisely at the level of organic life. The “someone” within me who is the agent of my sensing body, and who is distinct from the personal self of my reflective consciousness, lives in a “prehistory,” the “past of all pasts,” which is the time of our organic rhythms, such as the beating of the heart (*PP*, 277, 293, 100/250, 265, 87). Merleau-Ponty refers to this cyclical time as “the time of nature with which we coexist,” an “absolute past of nature” incommensurate with the narrative, linear time of the personal self (*PP*, 517, 160/479, 139). If we understand the phrase “elemental past” to refer broadly to this “absolute past of nature,” then one of its dimensions is our own biological life, our animality, insofar as this is lived as an anonymous and immemorial past in relation to the narrative history of our personal lives.<sup>31</sup> Since this past is anterior to the distinction between subject and object, or between human and nonhuman, anonymous sensibility cannot be a conscious experience; it cannot occur within personal time, the time of reflection, insofar as it makes such time possible. Sensibility as an organic inheritance is therefore the generative ground of experience, even as it remains for each of us, in our reflective lives, a past that has never been present.<sup>32</sup> As Gary Madison has already noted, Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions here locate a “prehistory” at the heart of personal and reflective existence.<sup>33</sup> This prehistory is fundamental to understanding our biological continuity with and difference from other forms of life, as I have argued elsewhere, since it is due to the lateral kinship of this organic prehistory that other animals speak through our voices and gaze out through our eyes.<sup>34</sup>

30 See chap. 1 of Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

31 See *ibid.*, chap. 2.

32 Alia Al-Saji has developed this interpretation of sensibility as the generative past in “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal,” *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008): 41–71.

33 Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 158–59.

34 Ted Toadvine, “Le temps des voix animales,” *Chiasmi International* 15 (2013): 269–82.

The sensibility, sedimented habits, and organic rhythms of our bodies offer the most proximal and constant encounter with the immemorial past—by which I mean an anonymous and asubjective prehistory that haunts and conditions my present, without this past ever having been present for me. And yet this organic time of the body does not exhaust the dimensions of the immemorial past. In sensibility, I not only reenact my own animality, but I also, through my participation in the elementality of things, take up at the heart of my existence the entire history of the universe. The phenomenological encounter with the vertigo of deep time, of which I catch a glimpse in the fossil, is the echo within my body of an asubjective time of matter, of an unfathomably ancient passage that haunts the heart of the present. Beyond organic time, we encounter that dimension of our existence that resonates with the pulsation of the geological and the cosmic, that is, with elemental time in its broadest registers. Recall Bataille's insight that talk of the sun prior to human beings is "mentally disturbing, unbalancing—an object independent of any subject."<sup>35</sup> It is not the violation of logic that makes this claim unbalancing but indeed the dissolution of subjectivity into the worldlessness of the elemental. Our best guide for such an encounter with the elemental remains Levinas' *Existence and Existents*, where he describes how "the anonymous current of being invades, submerges every subject, person or thing."<sup>36</sup> What is left after the world has come to an end, after the dissolution of the world into the elemental *There is . . .*, is not pure nothingness but also no longer this or that, no longer something. As Levinas writes:

this universal absence is in its turn presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence. It is not the dialectical counterpart of absence, and we do not grasp it through a thought. It is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us but this silence; the voice of this silence is understood and frightens like the silence of those infinite spaces Pascal speaks of. *There is*, in general, without it mattering what there is, without our being able to fix a substantive to this term. *There is* is an impersonal form, like in it rains, or it is warm. . . . The mind does not find itself faced with an apprehended exterior. The exterior—if one insists on this term—remains uncorrelated with an interior. It is no longer given. It is no longer a world. (*EE*, 94–95/52–53)

35 See note 2 above.

36 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Fontaine, 1947), 94; translated by Alphonso Lingis as *Existence and Existents* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 52; hereafter cited as *EE*, with French preceding English pagination.

The vertigo of deep time has its source in the disruption of any correlation between self and world, in the impersonal worldlessness of the elements. And here the anonymity of the elemental bends around time; it is both the prehistoric, ancestral past and the eternity of an unimaginable future. The “eternal silence” of “infinite spaces” invoked by Pascal concerns the “eternity that lies before and after” the short duration of our lives, that “infinite immensity” of time that engulfs us while we remain ignorant of it—and it of us.<sup>37</sup> This mirroring of a past and a future without us is also recognized by Meillassoux, for whom the *ulteriority* of human extinction poses the same problems as the *anteriority* of the ancestral past, requiring us to consider the meaningfulness, on his example, of “hypotheses about the climatic and geological consequences of a meteor impact extinguishing all life on earth” (*AF*, 155–56/112). In short, the time before the world is inseparable from, perhaps indistinguishable from, the time after the world’s dissolution. If along one dimension, we are beings-toward-death, then along another—anonymous and asubjective—dimension, we are beings-toward-the-end-of-the-world, already hearkening to the eternity of silence that waits to swallow all that we are and know and can imagine. “World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone,” Heidegger reminds us; and, we might add, neither can they be deferred.<sup>38</sup> The apocalyptic imagination that obsesses contemporary culture is not a *consequence* of our technological domination of the planet and ourselves, therefore, but is only made possible by the revelation within our hearts of an impossible future that outstrips every imagination.<sup>39</sup> To truly encounter the very materiality of our own minds and bodies is to fall into the abyss of such elemental time, which means to rediscover it at the kernel of organic and personal time. We do not need science to first encounter such a time, as it constantly haunts us; it is one of the ways that our subjectivity is caught up in the cosmic pulse of nature. Furthermore, to be caught up in the confluence of the immemorial past and future—in its cosmic, geological, evolutionary, and organic trajectories, each with its own rhythm and duration—is to endure the incommensurability of these durations, and so to find oneself never simply self-present but always

37 Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 64, 22.

38 Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 41.

39 I have developed the apocalyptic implications of the elemental past, in contrast with Bachelard’s notion of cosmic imagination, in my essay “Apocalyptic Imagination and the Silence of the Elements,” in *Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment: The Experience of Nature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch and Fernando Castrillón (Berlin: Springer, 2014), 211–22.

untimely. In this respect, we are like the fossil, caught up in the fault-line between temporal flows, unable to hold our world open or to let it close.

Perhaps this takes us some way toward understanding the strange and ancient human obsession with fossils that has become apparent to paleo-anthropologists just over the last few decades. Several specimens of Early Paleolithic Acheulian hand axes produced some 400,000 years ago by *Homo heidelbergensis* feature fossilized bivalves or sea urchins. These hand axes were the first bilaterally symmetrical human tools, and in each case the implement was painstakingly crafted so that the fossil would be symmetrically centered. *Homo heidelbergensis* is the immediate ancestor of both *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens*, and our Neanderthal cousins alongside our own ancient forebears collected fossils in abundance—scallop shells, brachiopods, ammonites, trilobites, crinoids, and corals—which they carved into tools, perforated for threading onto necklaces, or engraved with human faces. One of the few artifacts discovered at Lascaux was a fossilized gastropod shell with a carefully sawed slit for threading. Yet it is the petrified sea urchin, circle-shaped with a distinctive five-pointed star, that has received the greatest interest over these hundreds of thousands of years and across much of the world. Kenneth McNamara goes so far as to suggest that the ubiquity of the stylized five-pointed star in current culture may be a consequence of our long co-evolution with these fossils, which were its original template and came to be associated with the stars of the heavens only through our ancestors' imaginations.<sup>40</sup> Earth and sky, elementals bound together in the figure of the fossil. Furthermore, from the time of the Cro-Magnons until just a few thousand years ago, these fossil sea urchins were commonly buried with the dead, sometimes singly, sometimes in quantities that number in the hundreds or even the thousands. In a world that both invites us and remains closed to us, our ancestors contemplated a world that both invited and refused them, linking in their own imaginations the incomprehensible past with the impossible future.

The sea where this fossilized creature once lived its life, the world where our ancestors once lined the graves of their dead with fossils, the future of those generations to come after we have long since passed into dust, all these we can greet only in the eternal silence of Pascal's infinite spaces. In a famous working note in *The Visible and the Invisible* from February 1959, Merleau-Ponty makes allusion to "Sigē the abyss" (VI, 233/179). Sigē was the Gnostic goddess of silence—the silence that precedes the world and that welcomes it at its end.

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40 See Kenneth McNamara, *The Star-Crossed Stone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), especially the Introduction and first two chapters. All of the examples cited in this paragraph are discussed by McNamara.

Merleau-Ponty borrows this reference again from Claudel, who concludes his investigation of time in *Poetic Art* with these words:

Time is the means offered to all that which will be to be, in order to be no more. It is the *Invitation to Death* extended to each sentence, to decay in the explanatory and total harmony, to consummate the word of adoration, whispered in the ear of Sigē, the Abyss.<sup>41</sup>

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41 Claudel, *Art Poétique*, 57; *Poetic Art*, 35.

