Merleau-Ponty: Beauty, Phenomenology, and the ‘Theological Turn’

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Abstract
In a landmark text, ‘The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology’, Dominique Janicaud posits a boundary that sharply divides the legitimate phenomenological tradition from a problematic variant seen to be fundamentally compromised by theology. This article develops an immanent critique of Janicaud’s position. It demonstrates that his boundary relies on the mature work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a constitutive exemplar of the tradition, that this work is centrally concerned with beauty, and that its notion of beauty is irreducibly theological. Merleau-Ponty himself will thus be shown to enact his own version of the theological turn. I shall consequently propose a reconstrual of the boundary of phenomenology. My argument relies fundamentally on Merleau-Ponty’s essay, ‘Eye and Mind’, and includes a critical restatement of Galen Johnson’s reading of this text. In addition to its direct relevance to phenomenology, this article bears upon broader concerns, including the relationships between theory, the body, aesthetics, and the post-secular.

Keywords
aesthetics, contemporary theology, Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, post-secularity

Introduction
This article will reflect upon the significance of beauty, as formulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for our understanding of the limits of phenomenology. In particular, it will address the gulf that Dominique Janicaud posits, in his ‘Theological Turn of French Phenomenology’, between a legitimate tradition and its purportedly dubious offshoot, dubbed the ‘theological turn’. In this landmark text, Janicaud maintains that a number of prominent French phenomenologists, having taken such a ‘turn’, have thereby egregiously breached the limits of the discipline. While it seems obvious enough that a riposte to Janicaud might defend this turn on the basis of theological a prioris, it is rather less apparent...
that it could be grounded on his own presuppositions. My argument, accordingly, unfolds itself as an immanent critique of Janicaud's own hermeneutic. It seeks, therefore, to keep his fundamental commitments, but to demonstrate that a different set of conclusions follow therefrom. One such conclusion is the legitimacy, in principle, of the theological turn. While the debate engaged here is, in the first instance, a particular concern of a specialist discipline, it also bears significantly upon a number of broader issues. These include the topical and contentious intersections of theory, the body, aesthetics, and the evolution of the post-secular.¹

My argument begins by addressing Janicaud's construction of the proper limits of the discipline of phenomenology. Here, I seek principally to demonstrate that he relies on Merleau-Ponty’s mature thought as a constitutive exemplar of the tradition. I shall then proceed to address this body of thought, with a particular focus on the essay ‘Eye and Mind’. This focus reflects the judgements of Galen Johnson, who argues that the essay represents ‘the key to Merleau-Ponty’s late philosophical itinerary’ (2010: 15), and Jean-Paul Sartre, who similarly maintains that the work ‘says it all providing one can decipher it’ (1965: 222). ‘Eye and Mind’, in short, is centrally concerned to understand the phenomenology of vision. It is poetic and allusive in character, and understands the visible to be lined by, and intertwined with, the invisible. Its concern with visibility is inextricably connected to its equally fundamental concern with beauty. Indeed, Johnson argues, on the basis of this essay, that Merleau-Ponty’s thought just is ‘about the beautiful’ (2010: xvii). In this sense, Janicaud’s boundary can be seen ultimately to be grounded on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of beauty.

My own engagement with ‘Eye and Mind’ is significantly influenced by Johnson’s reading of this text. As the latter is both insightful and extremely problematic, I shall address it in some detail, seeking both to extend and to criticize it. The aspect of extension will include a consideration of the ways in which the phenomenology of vision, the body, and even the phenomenological reduction itself are configured with respect to beauty. It will also address the significance of the aesthetic form of the text, effectively its ‘body’, with respect to its discursivity. In the course of making these arguments, I hope to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty’s model of beauty is irreducibly theological. This leads to the aspect of critique of Johnson’s reading, which will principally address his handling of theology. Like Janicaud, he seeks to prevent any such incursions into the domain of phenomenology. But this means, as I shall argue, that he also misses some of the crucial features of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of beauty.

Janicaud and Johnson also share a problematic sense of embodiment. As we shall see, Merleau-Ponty uses Cartesian dualism as a foil with which to accentuate his own position on embodiment. René Descartes
construed mind and body as two separate substances. In rejecting this stance, Merleau-Ponty does not swing to the other extreme and reduce mind to body, but focuses on the complexities which are entailed by – in his own words – the ‘union of soul and body’ (1993a: 137). There are theological and anti-theological correlates to all three of these stances. The Cartesian, or dualist, stance would emphasize divine transcendence as separate from the immanence of the world; the second, broadly physicalist, stance would negate transcendence as such; while the third, that which is closest to Merleau-Ponty, tends to develop an understanding of transcendence-in-immanence. His stance on the body could be seen as the paradigm for his understanding of transcendence and immanence in other domains. This would include his configuration of the relationships between divinity and nature, and theology and philosophy. A focus on beauty brings the complexities entailed by this construal into the foreground. In contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s stance, Johnson and Janicaud, somewhat ironically, rely on what is essentially a Cartesian dualism in their readings of his corpus. I shall develop and justify these claims below.

My argument culminates in the view that Merleau-Ponty enacts his own version of the theological turn. From this point on, it is not possible both to hold on to Janicaud and to reclassify Merleau-Ponty with the deviants of the tradition. For, given his role in Janicaud’s argument, he is the basis of phenomenological legitimacy itself. Although his oeuvre does not fit into either of Janicaud’s camps, neither does it simplistically erase his boundary. Rather, as I shall argue, his stance constitutes a permeable, liminal, and fertile corridor. My essay will draw to a close with some suggestions as to the further outworkings of this conclusion.

**Janicaud and the ‘Theological Turn’**

In setting out clearly to isolate the legitimate tradition of phenomenology, Janicaud (2000) aims at the demarcation and defence of a boundary line between this discipline and theology. His line is based on the articulation and justification of key principles which are drawn from exemplars of the tradition. In abstract terms, these principles would be ‘presuppositionlessness’, ‘universality’ and ‘manifestation’. On the basis of this line, and the associated principles, he sifts the field, thereby demonstrating the shortcomings of its theological practitioners. This latter group is found to include Emmanuel Lévinas, Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and Jean-Luc Marion.

It is evident that Merleau-Ponty’s mature thought functions here as the key exemplar, or ‘paradigm’ of the discipline, corresponding to Thomas Kuhn’s understanding of the development of such paradigms in the natural sciences (Kuhn, 1996: 43–7). In this sense, for Janicaud, his corpus does not merely illustrate but actually constitutes the ideals of the
discipline. Janicaud refers most frequently to his unfinished text, The Visible and the Invisible. ‘Eye and Mind’ could be seen as a fuller articulation of that work’s concerns (Johnson, 2010: 14–15). Thus, as noted above, a focus on the latter text is essentially consistent with Janicaud’s prioritized sources.

All of the above-noted principles, in one sense, significantly predate Merleau-Ponty. But Janicaud relies on specific nuances and emphases that can be traced to his particular instantiation of them. Regarding the first ideal, presuppositionlessness, he finds that Merleau-Ponty’s way ‘presupposes nothing’ but a ‘desire for elucidation of that which most hides itself away in experience’ (2000: 27). Regarding the second, universality, Merleau-Ponty’s approach is presented as a ‘moving quest’ to find ‘the very words to approximate the richness of an experience each and everyone can undergo’ (2000: 26). One can identify these as more than examples if one considers how the interaction of visibility and invisibility, the focus of Merleau-Ponty’s later work, is taken to be exemplary of phenomenality as such, the latter being the third key ideal which Janicaud’s argument upholds. While a generic focus on ‘that which most hides itself’ could be traced to the Heideggerian exemplar, Janicaud’s shift in emphasis towards visibility and invisibility reflects Merleau-Ponty’s centrality. For the latter, it is a ‘lining of invisibility’ which is ‘the hallmark of the visible’ (1993a: 147). In addition to a focus on visual perception, Merleau-Ponty gives Janicaud resources to nuance his boundary. Thus, he rebuffs the theological turn by asserting, through quoting Merleau-Ponty, the legitimacy of a specific kind of invisibility: ‘the invisible of this world’ (Janicaud, 2000: 34; Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 151).

Two similar shifts, with reference to Husserl, underscore Merleau-Ponty’s primacy. The first relates to the Husserlian ideal of scientificity. While Merleau-Ponty does retain this ideal, he also shifts towards and ultimately prioritizes artistic practice (1993a: 121–3). Janicaud similarly tempers his Husserlian fidelity as follows: ‘Can we [affirm] the resolve to make all philosophy pass through the Caudine Forks of a scientifically rigorous project? We do not believe so’ (2000: 87). Admittedly, Janicaud does not focus solely on Merleau-Ponty in this regard, but observes a general tendency – which includes Merleau-Ponty – to ‘open up phenomenology from within’ (2000: 91).

The second shift takes place in his understanding of the phenomenological reduction. Husserl’s method involves a ‘reduction’ which brackets the thesis of the existence of the world. This entails a ‘clean’ separation of phenomenality from ontology. This construal of the reduction is related to the ideal of presuppositionlessness; that is, it brackets the assumption of a mind-world correlation. But in another testament to his essentially medial posture, Merleau-Ponty at once upholds the reduction as an ideal, while yet maintaining that it is not fully possible. As he states in a well-known passage: ‘The most important lesson of the reduction is the
impossibility of a complete reduction’ (2012: lxxvii). Thus, for Merleau-
Ponty, phenomenology and ontology are inextricably intertwined. One
again finds echoes of this reconfiguration in Janicaud: ‘the relation
between phenomenology and metaphysics is more open and complex
than Marion’s presentation of the problem would have us believe’
(2000: 56). The qualities of openness and complexity, in particular,
here suggest Merleau-Ponty, more than Husserl, as exemplar.

Janicaud uses these ideals and emphases to select ‘bad exemplars’ from
the theological domain, thereby further reinforcing his boundary. Thus,
he quotes Luther as representative of theology’s stance on invisibility:
‘Faith consists in giving oneself over to the hold of things we do not see’
(2000: 103). The phenomenologists of the ‘theological turn’ are found, in
similar fashion, to breach his other ideals: rather than presupposition-
lessness, he finds that the ‘dice are loaded and choices made [...]
All is acquired and imposed from the outset’ (2000: 27). Likewise, instead of
the investigation of the manifest, he identifies a puzzling affirmation of
the unmanifest, purely exterior, and ‘absolutely ungraspable’ (2000: 41,
emphasis in original). He consequently posits a radically divided field:
‘Between the unconditional affirmation of Transcendence and the patient
interrogation of the visible, the incompatibility cries out; we must choose’
(2000: 26). Thus, he posits an absolute gulf in closing his argument:
‘phenomenology and theology make two’ (2000: 103). Janicaud’s
argument represents a necessary link between the failure to observe the
severity of this boundary and a consequent breach of the ideals of the
discipline (my argument will ultimately work to dissolve this link by
noticing the ways in which Merleau-Ponty, while upholding these
ideals, simultaneously presupposes a porous boundary).

In this hermeneutic, Janicaud constitutes a false dilemma between
an affirmation of transcendence and an interrogation of immanence.
This dilemma forecloses any consideration of transcendence-in-imma-

nence, which is a fundamental concern for Merleau-Ponty. Consider,
for example, his view that: ‘Transcendence no longer hangs over human-
ity: we become, strangely, its privileged bearer’ (1993b: 108). When
Janicaud does address such construals within the ‘theological turn’ he
interprets them as a simple negation of transcendence. A case in point is
his response to Michel Henry. Janicaud notes that Henry retained, from
Meister Eckhart’s teaching, a conviction as to ‘the immanence to our soul
of divine revelation, an immanence that is so intimate that the essence of
the soul merges with that of God’ (2000: 76). This is thought to entail the
‘exclusion of all relation of transcendence’ and thus ‘a moment of athe-
ism’ (2000: 77). But this would only follow if one assumed a quite
Protestant construal of transcendence, rather than the more Catholic
stance evident in Merleau-Ponty.

A rejection of this false dilemma, which wrongly construes Merleau-
Ponty’s ‘invisible of this world’ as a pure natural immanence, allows a
noteworthy correlation between his phenomenology and medieval theological aesthetics to come into view. The latter’s understanding of beauty, according to John Milbank, is characterized by an ‘aura of invisibility hovering around the visible’ (2003: 3). This construal is evidently of remarkable similarity to the French philosopher’s understanding of a ‘lining of invisibility’ as ‘the hallmark of the visible’ (1993a: 147), as Milbank goes on to imply (2003: 26).

One should still agree with Janicaud, however, that a consideration of transcendence as such is indeed a breach of phenomenology. It is apparently excluded by Merleau-Ponty too, though in a kind of methodological bracketing reminiscent of phenomenology’s own bracketing of the thesis of the existence of the world. Thus, as he states: ‘[t]he question for a philosopher is not so much to know if God exists or does not exist [. . .] as to know what one understands by God, what one wishes to say in speaking of God’ (1992: 66, emphasis in original). But phenomenological bracketing is not the same as outright scepticism; neither is a concern for the meaning of ‘God’ consistent with Janicaud’s insistence on atheism.

Having placed Merleau-Ponty at the centre of Janicaud’s position, and having begun to problematize the latter, I shall now turn to Merleau-Ponty’s ‘Eye and Mind’ in order to further this argument. Here, I shall begin by critically engaging Johnson’s reading of this essay, then proceed to unfold its broader implications for Janicaud. While I am not aware of any other analysis of the theological character of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of beauty – the thesis I intend presently to defend – my reading could nevertheless be situated in relation to various theological engagements with his wider oeuvre. This can be done by addressing the similarities and differences in hermeneutical approach. My approach is similar to these engagements insofar as both explore the ‘deep resonance’ (Simpson, 2014: ix) between his thought and the theological tradition. Here, Richard Kearney addresses Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the flesh, highlighting the ‘importance of the Christian and indeed Catholic tradition to [his] work’ (2010: 147). Our approaches diverge insofar as this group of studies invokes his thought for the enrichment of an extrinsic theological enterprise. Here, Andreas Nordlander finds him to be an ideal ‘dialogue partner’ for Christian theology (2013: 106), Christopher Simpson develops a ‘theological appropriation’ of his corpus (2014: 91), and John Milbank, while assimilating his thought on the soul, nevertheless finds that it requires a ‘theological reworking’ (2003: 9). In contrast to this latter approach, but consistent with Kearney, the hermeneutic which I shall pursue places the emphasis squarely on Merleau-Ponty himself. It focuses, therefore, upon the ways in which he uses theology for his own phenomenological purposes, while also addressing the implications of having done so. This emphasis follows necessarily from the methodology of my argument (i.e. immanent critique).
Beauty in ‘Eye and Mind’

In his important reading of ‘Eye and Mind’, Johnson finds that beauty is presented as the ‘depth, rhythm, and radiance of Being itself’ (2010: xvii). One should note here that the ‘radiance of being’ is a further characteristic feature of the medieval construal of beauty. In addition to this important formula, the outstanding contribution of Johnson’s hermeneutic is its demonstration that the text has deep roots in historical strata of art, poetry, and philosophical aesthetics. Through tracing these sources, he facilitates an understanding of some otherwise gnomic utterances.

Johnson focuses on the influence of Paul Cézanne, Auguste Rodin, Paul Klee, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Charles Baudelaire on the essay. He finds that their thought on beauty is ‘stitched into’ its structure (2010: xix). Thus, for example, he argues that Rodin understood beauty as a mixture of various doubles: ‘classical and modern, empirical and transcendental, immanence and transcendence, temporal and eternal, eros and corruption, pleasure and pain, banal and transgressive, power and impotence’ (2010: 71). He then demonstrates that this understanding of beauty is reflected in the essay’s construal of movement, and the ‘erotics of the flesh’ (2010: 72, 74). Baudelaire’s influence on Merleau-Ponty, in turn, is traced via Rodin. Johnson notes that the French poet’s understanding of beauty was, similarly, ‘always and inevitably of a double composition’ involving an ‘eternal, invariable element’ and a ‘relative, circumstantial element’ (2010: 89). Even though it is not the focus of Johnson’s analysis, these sources indicate a concern with theological categories: eternity in relation to time, and transcendence in relation to immanence. Yet the Baudelairean tributary would emphasize that this is not limited to theology conventionally construed. In addition to these artistic sources, Johnson identifies important Kantian dimensions to the essay. Thus, when Merleau-Ponty posits a ‘Logos of lines, of lighting, of colors’ that make for ‘a nonconceptual presentation of universal Being’ (1993a: 142), Johnson rightly finds a response to Kant’s notion that beauty pleases ‘without a concept’ (2010: 41; Kant, 2008: §6).

His argument is, however, fundamentally problematic on at least five fronts. First, he argues that ‘Eye and Mind’ retains only ‘[a] remnant of the epoché’ (2010: 16). I shall argue that this is a misreading, and proceed to identify further instances of the reduction, demonstrating its fusion with a Kantian construal of beauty. This point is important for my broader thesis, for if ‘Eye and Mind’ were only residually phenomenological, then it would be unable to ground a debate on the limits of phenomenology as such. Secondly, it is not clear where Johnson transitions from interpreting Merleau-Ponty to an outright project of reconstruction for which his corpus merely provides the ‘matter’. This vagueness is connected to a puzzling episode in which Johnson
strangely baulks at the climactic moment of his argument. The proximate cause of this loss of nerve is the fact that Merleau-Ponty uses the word beauty (‘la beauté’) only once in the essay. Johnson thus finds an ‘aching absence of beauty in “Eye and Mind”’ (2010: 36). For this statement not to contradict the rest of his book, one must assume that he refers to the explicit mention of the word. In another problematic step, he infers that this supposed anomaly ‘should not deter us from seeking to unfold for ourselves a retrieval of the beautiful by thinking through and thinking by way of Merleau-Ponty’s ontological and aesthetic architecture’ (2010: 36). Hence the slippage between interpreting and reconstructing. I shall argue, conversely, that if we attend to the aesthetic and theological qualities of the essay, we discover that the word beauty is situated in a place of such significance, indeed is so integrally woven into the structure of the essay, that one can far more confidently assert its centrality.

A third important problem is that Johnson does not adequately consider whether these multiple sources ultimately result in a coherent position. He considers the principles of unity and multiplicity as follows: ‘We speak of an architecture of the beautiful rather than a system, hierarchy, or architectonic […] As architecture, there are openings, hinges, windows and doorways, nooks and hollows. We want to live in the house of beauty and make it our home’ (2010: 145–6). But in Merleau-Ponty’s text, the manifold is obvious enough. What requires demonstration is the much less apparent principle of unity. There is very little argument to this effect, and Johnson effectively settles for mere assertion. Thus, the rather gushy architectural description seems to be rhetorical in a bad way, for it does not here complement reason but masks the absence of a demonstration of unity. I shall therefore address the principle of unity below. Fourthly, Johnson makes Plato, and Kant to a lesser degree, ‘straw men’ for his argument. But this forecloses the possibility of adequately addressing these elements in the essay. Indeed, as I shall argue, Platonic and Kantian tropes are key to understanding its structural coherence. Fifthly and lastly, as already noted, Johnson is overly anxious to bracket Merleau-Ponty’s theological sensibilities.

In order to develop these contentions, I shall further consider the relation between artistic, theological and poetic features of this essay. I shall focus initially upon its embodiment of rhythm and repetition, and the emphasis which they place on the world ‘beauty’. This emphasis is evident on at least three levels: that of the word itself, that of the sentence in which it appears, and lastly that of the paragraph. Thereafter, I shall argue that this pattern is reinforced both by the essay’s inflection of the theological topos of ‘faith and reason’ and its attempt actually to embody painting (rather than merely to be about it). The implications of this position for both Johnson and Janicaud will be given.

A significant embodiment of rhythm and repetition is evident in the essay’s use of two words: ‘radiate’ (‘rayonner’) and ‘emanate’ (‘émaner’).
It is not only their frequency of use – in a fairly brief essay of 29 pages, these closely related words are mentioned eight times – nor their concentration in the middle three of the essay’s five sections, but also the fact that they appear at important moments. Thus, in discussing the exemplary quality of Klee’s colours, Merleau-Ponty notes that they seem ‘to have emanated [émanées] from some primordial ground’ (1993a: 141). Similarly, in a crucial passage that considers the play of light and water, Merleau-Ponty concludes: ‘This inner animation, this radiation [rayonnement] of the visible, is what the painter seeks beneath, the words depth, space and color’ (1993a: 142). Both words hint at the Platonic motif of emanation, associated with that tradition’s imagery of the sun. Merleau-Ponty’s refrain builds up to a point at which the platonic image is explicitly given: ‘The eye accomplishes the prodigious work of opening the soul to what is not soul – the joyous realm of things and their god, the sun’ (1993a: 146). This passage, something of a confirmation of the earlier hints, occurs near the end of part four, in the same paragraph as the essay’s single mention of beauty.

This pattern confers a centrality on the paragraph in question. It also creates an interpretative dilemma. On the one hand, it is highly unlikely that Merleau-Ponty is simply restating the ancient metaphysics. Rather, he seems to be using the grammar and symbols of that tradition for their descriptive potency. On the other hand, however, it would seem inaccurate simply to neutralize the clearly theological dimension in this reference. That its sense of radiance is indeed theological is underlined by Merleau-Ponty’s conception of God, in *Signs*, as ‘the element of joy or love in the sense that water and fire are elements. Like sentient and human beings, He is a radiance, not an essence’ (1964b: 190). As one of the key elements of beauty, radiance is articulated not only in terms of physical light, but also in terms of joy and divine light.

This sense of divinity can be seen as one manifestation of his understanding of transcendence-in-immanence. Here, the divine sun of Plato ‘no longer hangs over’ the world, but is made immanent to its flesh. He states as much, quite explicitly, in ‘Eye and Mind’: ‘All flesh, and even that of the world, radiates beyond itself’ (1993a: 145). This configuration appears to involve the application of a Christian notion of divine incarnation to the Platonic sun, rendering it imminent to the flesh of the world. Although I have not further pursued the issue here, one could surely argue that these invocations are eccentric, and therefore ask just what it is about our experiences of beauty, light, and visibility that might give such categories a claim to accuracy.

Johnson’s hermeneutic forecloses the possibility of seriously addressing Merleau-Ponty’s sun because it uses Plato as a foil. He finds that, for the French philosopher, ‘[p]lurivocity, porosity, and pregnancy replace the Platonic trilogy of purity, perfection, and permanence’ (2010: 159). There is perhaps a glimmer of truth in this statement, but Johnson has
missed the fact that Plato, like Merleau-Ponty, articulates beauty through a grammar of light and visibility. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Socrates states that the beautiful is ‘radiant’ and that we ‘grasp it sparkling through the clearest of our senses’. The latter is understood to be vision, and so ‘beauty alone has this privilege, to be the most clearly visible and the most loved’ (1997: 250d–e). For all their differences, Merleau-Ponty is here still within the Platonic tradition.

The emphasis on the radiance of flesh raises the question of eros, a theme which is addressed but largely misconstrued in both Johnson and Janicaud. For the former, Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics is thought to include the view that, in ‘desiring the beautiful’, one ‘is being interrogated by the world’ (2010: 153). This aspect of Johnson’s reading is essentially accurate. His argument is, however, still hampered by the need to make a foil of Plato. He does note that amongst beauty’s ‘greatest philosophical spokespersons […] only Plato grasped the link between desire and the beautiful’. He opines, however, that Plato ‘construed the meaning of desire negatively as a lack or neediness, thus rendering beauty vulnerable to its critics’ (2010: xviii).

Johnson evidently understands Plato in quite negative terms. One could note here, with Richard Bernstein, that two very different Platons have emerged from the long tradition of interpreting his thought. On the one hand, there is the ‘villain’ of western philosophy associated with the ‘denigration of corporeality’; and, on the other hand, ‘the great defender of the spoken and written dialogue – which is always open to novel turns and which knows no finality’ (1991: 50, emphasis in original). John Dewey similarly questions the former representation of Plato, which he regards as ‘the artificial Plato constructed by unimaginative commentators who treat him as the original university professor’ (1998: 18). While Johnson understands Plato in these unfortunate terms, Merleau-Ponty himself appears to draw on a more positive construal of his thought. Indeed, what Johnson so often finds to be an exemplary rebuttal of Plato could equally be seen as a Merleau-Pontian inflection of this other Plato. Johnson’s argument, for example, that Merleau-Ponty’s beauty involves being ‘interrogated by the world’ is arguably itself a Platonic position, as Chretien observes, with respect to the *Phaedrus* (2011: 27).

This dispute matters for more than merely genealogical reasons, for the stance on Plato plays an important role in the structural coherence of the essay.

Similar problems emerge through making a foil of Kant. Johnson rightly observes that the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgements for Kant is not based on desire or need. But this slides into the view that it therefore has ‘nothing to do with desire’ (2010: 146). The latter is simply false. What is at stake, here, is the difference between ‘self-regarding concern’, on the one hand, and ‘interest’ as desire or fascination that is not simply the product of such extrinsic incentives (see Guyer, 2014:...
It would be entirely consistent, from a Kantian perspective, to make a disinterested judgement that something is beautiful (the former sense of ‘interest’), and thereafter to become very interested in it (the latter sense). This point is important because it speaks to Janicaud’s concern with universality. Disinterestedness in Kant is one of the conditions of possibility of universal aesthetic judgements. Thus, it is important to see that even though Merleau-Ponty introduces eros into his discourse on the beautiful, this does not necessarily contradict the dimension of Kantian disinterestedness.

In Janicaud’s argument, eros is understood in a way that also clashes with Merleau-Ponty’s stance. In his critique of Lévinas, Janicaud opposes the ‘confounding [of] the libidinal with the ideal’ (2000: 42). One could surely agree that these should not be ‘confounded’, though for Merleau-Ponty, as for Plato, they are nevertheless deeply connected. This questionable separation works its way into his description of the exemplar of presuppositionlessness. Here, as noted above, Merleau-Ponty is thought to exhibit an approach which ‘presupposes nothing’ but a ‘desire for elucidation of that which most hides itself away in experience’ (2000: 27). To speak of desire in this way is surely to enter somewhat speculative territory. With this caution in mind, however, I would argue that it makes more sense to believe that Merleau-Ponty interpreted this desire as itself containing a degree of intellectual content. If instead one sharply separated desire and intellect, then one essentially posits the aporetic; that is, that Merleau-Ponty’s profound and painstaking carefulness was motivated by mere impulse.

Just as Merleau-Ponty appears to mediate Kantian disinterestedness and Platonic eros, so he also connects the Husserlian reduction to the manifestation of beauty understood in Kantian terms. The latter is evident in his descriptions of painting. He states that painting ‘break[s] the “skin of things” to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world’ (1993a: 141). Thus, he notes that Klee’s holly leaves, ‘at first glance’, are ‘thoroughly indecipherable’; while ‘Matisse’s women […] were not immediately women; they became women’ (1993a: 144). On one level this involves a phenomenological reduction, as the ontic falls away, revealing the phenomenal richness of being itself from which objects emerge. At the same time, however, this reduction is seen to result in a specific form momentarily losing its specificity, thus approaching the ‘bare form of purposiveness’ that characterizes the third moment of Kant’s analytic of the beautiful (2008: §11). Kant suggests that all ordinary perception includes something of a ‘fossilized’ layer of beauty, insofar as schematism itself depends on the feeling of pleasure associated with harmony, even to get started (2008: 22):

It is true that we no longer notice any decided pleasure in the comprehensibility of nature, or in the unity of its divisions into genera
and species, without which the empirical concepts, that afford us our knowledge of nature in its particular laws, would not be possible. Still it is certain that the pleasure appeared in due course, and only by reason of the most ordinary experience being impossible without it, has it become gradually fused with simple cognition, and no longer arrests particular attention.

For Kant, this layer of buried pleasure, evidently associated with beauty, is deduced transcendentally. In Merleau-Ponty’s case, however, the submerged dimension of Kantian beauty is actually made phenomenologically manifest. This is crucial, for it demonstrates that beauty in ‘Eye and Mind’ is of a piece with its dialectic of visibility and invisibility. It emphasizes that Merleau-Ponty’s ‘reduction’ is connected to the manifestation of a latent kind of beauty, otherwise invisible. The purpose of this digression through Kant is to emphasize that the phenomenological reduction is not merely residual – as Johnson maintains – but is being re-imagined with reference to a fundamental concern with beauty.

The second important theme upon which I shall focus is the essay’s use of the theological topos of faith and reason. In Merleau-Ponty’s reworking of this topos, artists provide the revelation which phenomenology seeks by reason. Thus, the artist is presented as inspired; his ‘fleshly eyes’ have ‘the gift of the visible, as we say of the inspired man that he has the gift of tongues’ (1993a: 127). The pattern of reason seeking to understand the insights of faith is evident in the essay’s modulations between phenomenological exposition, which argues for its conclusions, and the convergence of these conclusions onto the insights of ‘faith’. The paragraph which I have maintained is so central to his essay is a case in point. Having brought an argument to its culmination in the preceding paragraph, Merleau-Ponty begins the next by stating that ‘Painters have always known this’ (1993a: 146). This is his transition from ‘reason’ to ‘faith’. He then proceeds to a medley of quotations from Rilke and Leonardo da Vinci, something of a ‘scriptural’ confirmation of the preceding exposition. This development is structurally identical to what one finds in Thomas Aquinas, where a philosophical argument is presented such that it converges on an article of faith.

At the centre of this key paragraph one finds the following quotation of da Vinci: ‘The eye [...] through which the beauty of the universe is revealed to our contemplation’ (1993a: 146). Here, then, is the essay’s single explicit reference to beauty. Note that this sentence echoes the title of the essay, insofar as it begins with ‘the eye’ and ends with a reference to mind (‘contemplation’), but with ‘beauty’ centrally interposed. For Johnson, the fact that it is a quotation only further weakens the essay’s association with the word ‘beauty’ (2010: 36). In my reading, the quotation has the opposite effect insofar as it invokes the inspired authority. Johnson is again not able to explore this possibility, given his
commitment to detheologizing Merleau-Ponty. It appears that both he and Janicaud have made a narrow dogmatism the hallmark of the theological, and are thus blinded to the kinds of creative reformulations of this tradition that are evidently being deployed.

But what to make of the fact that Merleau-Ponty only mentions beauty once in this essay? In my view, this is much less of a puzzling aporia than it is for Johnson. It appears that one could claim quite straightforwardly that the essay’s concern is with the radiance of being itself. Whatever Merleau-Ponty chose to call that, it is, in effect, what the long tradition of Platonism, including its Medieval and Romantic inflections, would call beauty. But we do have reasons to believe that Merleau-Ponty did indeed make this connection. Johnson himself has noted his remark that the viewer of a ‘work of beauty’ is left with ‘a radiant image, a particular rhythm’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 74; Johnson, 2010: 39).

In addition to these considerations, one could argue that the single mention reflects an aesthetic judgement. This becomes apparent if one takes Merleau-Ponty’s prioritization of the artist seriously, and consequently reads the essay itself as a kind of philosophical painting. In doing so, we might interpret the single mention as something of a keynote to his canvas. The Victorian art critic, John Ruskin, has argued that such a keynote should be ‘about as large as a minute pin’s head’ (1971: 67). Yet this tiny speck is also found to illuminate the whole canvas, as he finds in J.M.W. Turner’s sky, in *Mercury and Argus*:

> throughout, there is not a grain of pure blue; all is subdued and warmed at the same time by the mingling grey and gold, up to the very zenith, where, breaking through the flaky mist, the transparent and deep azure of the sky is expressed with a single crumbling touch; the key-note of the whole is given, and every part of it passes at once far into glowing and aerial space. (1906: 176–7)

Note that Ruskin was an important influence on both the Impressionists and Marcel Proust, who in turn decisively influenced Merleau-Ponty.® Further, Ruskin understood his own system to be that of da Vinci (1971: vii), who is the ‘inspired’ voice at this particular moment of ‘Eye and Mind’.

Merleau-Ponty’s use of the word ‘beauty’ is part of a complex structure of aesthetic and theological tropes that give the word a particular prominence. These tropes do not represent a decorative flourish that has been added to an otherwise scientific core of phenomenological truth. Rather, the very force and logic of the argument relies on these features.

**Revisiting Transcendence-in-immanence**

I noted earlier that Janicaud posits a false dilemma between transcendence and immanence, thereby foreclosing Merleau-Ponty’s ontological
concern with transcendence-in-immanence. Johnson evidently makes the same move. He argues that the ‘primary meaning of “transcendence”’ in Merleau-Ponty’s thought ‘is horizontal and refers to our reach toward the outside [...] a beyond, therefore, that does not necessarily invoke an otherworldly “above,” but is the thrust of life itself’ (2010: 131). The problem with such statements is that an ‘otherworldly “above”’ is something of a bogeyman and not what is at stake in a theological understanding of transcendence. This false dilemma excludes what is central to Merleau-Ponty, such as his view that: ‘The Incarnation changes everything’ (1964a: 174). Here, he uses the word ‘Incarnation’ in a specifically Catholic sense. At this point, one could note Kearney’s convincing argument that, ‘[l]ike St. Francis, Merleau-Ponty expands the range of natural objects that can represent God manifest in this world’ (2010: 161, emphasis in original).

Johnson proceeds to posit a ‘second meaning’ of transcendence which involves depth and descent, as suggested by the neologism ‘trans-descendence’ (2010: 131). The latter he rightly connects to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the ‘postural latencies of the body’ (Johnson, 2010: 131; Merleau-Ponty, 1993a: 147). Recall that depth is one of the key elements of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of beauty. Johnson uses this second meaning of ‘transcendence’ further to block the possibility of a theological construal. Yet again, however, Merleau-Ponty’s own notion of depth, which is partly theological, would be excluded by this reading. Thus, as he states in ‘Eye and Mind’: ‘God’s being is for us an abyss’ (1993a: 137). This quotation occurs in an argument in which Merleau-Ponty positions Descartes as a foil. He continues as follows: ‘for Descartes it is just as futile to plumb that abyss as it is to think the space of the soul and the depth of the visible’ (1993a: 137). The implication of this being that Merleau-Ponty himself considers it worthwhile to investigate these dimensions of depth. His genuinely undogmatic stance is evident when he then concludes: ‘All the enquiries we believed closed have been reopened. What is depth, what is light, τί το ὅντας’? (1993a: 138). Here, he is closer to the ideal of presuppositionlessness than Janicaud.

It appears that some of the confusion around ‘transcendence’ and ‘immanence’ stems from the fact that both words have related yet distinct phenomenological and ontological meanings. Thus, phenomenologically, one could speak of the transcendence of objects, out in the world, which are intended by consciousness. Correspondingly, the phenomenological reduction aims to bracket the thesis of the existence of the world, and the associated rays of intentionality, leaving a ‘pure’ and thus immanent consciousness. In this sense, transcendence could be invoked without any theological implications.

Ontologically, one could draw many such distinctions, such as that between minds and bodies, or where an interface between flux and stable
structure is involved. In a more theological register, such a distinction could be made between an immanent temporal word and a transcendent eternal domain. But these categories could also be seen to be related. When asked in an interview, ‘Eternal life, what is it for you?’, Paul Ricoeur responded as follows:

It would certainly be a myth if we thought of it only as ‘after’, as ‘beyond’. It is firstly a category of the present. I think that we create experiences of eternity every time that we live an experience where we have the impression of a ‘founding’ [...] there are instants of a quality so intense, that are grains of eternity, and in a time which passes.6

Like Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur here posits an intersection of these domains which has been referred to, in this essay, as ‘transcendence-in-immanence’.

For Merleau-Ponty, transcendence-in-immanence is evident both in non-theological and theological forms. One could illustrate the former with reference to his understanding of the body. Here, I would neither be a soul that is separable from my body, nor would I be reducible to my body. In ‘Eye and Mind’, as noted above, he speaks of ‘the union of soul and body’ (1993a: 137). My relationship to my body is therefore best described as transcendence-in-immanence. This configuration responds to the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. Both the Cartesian and the Merleau-Pontian stances have theological analogues. In Merleau-Ponty’s case, this would be – approximately – the transcendence-in-immanence’ of the Catholic tradition, as reflected by his conception of divine incarnation. Cartesian dualism, by contrast, would correspond to a theological position that bifurcates transcendence and immanence. Ironically, this is the very position that seems to undergird both Janicaud’s and Johnson’s responses to the theological in Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre.

Merleau-Ponty is quite forthright about the difficulty, or even impossibility, of thinking this union of transcendence and immanence: ‘it is absurd to submit to pure understanding the mixture of understanding and body’ (1993a: 137). His associated contention that these ‘would-be thoughts’ of union are ‘not held to produce a concept’ (1993a: 137) indicates the Kantian dimension of the essay’s aesthetic. It is crucial to note that the problematic of mind and body is formulated, at least in part, by means of Kant’s account of the beautiful. Both incarnations, the divine in the flesh of the world, and the human mind in relation to the body, are articulated in terms of beauty.

Having attempted to limit Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of ‘transcendence’ to the two meanings noted above, Johnson proceeds to construe his theological sensibilities as a bare residual from a Catholic
upbringing: ‘Nevertheless, while we stress these two meanings of “transcendence” […] we would not give Merleau-Ponty’s thought its full due if we were to omit all sense of “sacramentality” in this philosophy of the beautiful’ (2010: 131). From here, the account is mangled with inconsistency as it attempts to weave Merleau-Ponty’s reverential effusions on faith, incarnation, and divinity into a narrative arc which deposits the philosopher on the very brink of atheism: ‘Though Merleau-Ponty broke with his Catholic upbringing […] still, [he] would never declare himself an atheist and remained deeply attached to the thought of the incarnation’ (2010: 131).

This tension is clearly evident when Johnson criticizes Merleau-Ponty’s gloss of Hegel. The French philosopher finds that the latter’s thought attests to ‘something like a grace in events which draws us away from evil toward the good’ (1964b: 73). This is a valuable glimpse of his stance on transcendence-in-immanence. But Johnson proceeds to respond as follows: ‘the religious imagery, suggestive though it may be, must be brought down to earth’ (2010: 132). This statement is tellingly problematic on at least three levels: first, how could one interpret a ‘grace in events’ to be separate from the earth in the first place? This underscores the tendency, shared with Janicaud, to take all things theological as evidence of ‘otherworldliness’. Secondly, to tag it as ‘religious’ artificially isolates some ‘ontic’ pocket of experience, when Merleau-Ponty refers here to something ontological. Thirdly, it indicates that Johnson is again sliding into ‘correcting’ Merleau-Ponty, rather than clarifying his actual position. These awkward manoeuvres do not reflect issues of phenomenological method, but rather extrinsic theological positions that grate against those held by Merleau-Ponty himself. Even though he strains against them, it is to Johnson’s credit that he clearly documents these theological moments. Janicaud, by contrast, omits all mention, and is content to describe the oeuvre as exemplary of ‘atheist phenomenology’ (2000: 17).

The crucial issue here has been to determine whether Merleau-Ponty’s own theological sensibilities are ultimately constitutive of his mature oeuvre. I have argued that they are, and consequently that this oeuvre is indeed irreducibly theological. I have not considered whether this conclusion can be extended to his earlier writings, principally because Janicaud relies on his mature thought, and so a defence of any such extension – however significant in itself – is not strictly necessary to an immanent critique of his position.

**Redrawing Phenomenology’s Boundary**

The foregoing reflections suggest that the boundary between phenomenology and theology should be understood not only as a barrier, but also as a corridor of fertile communication. This is a more complex construal,
recognizing the need both for disciplinary integrity, and an awareness of the potential for multifarious theological traditions to contribute to phenomenology’s unique concerns.

It is true that Merleau-Ponty does not use phenomenology to defend theological positions, such as Janicaud finds in his negative exemplars: ‘Phenomenology is used as a springboard in a quest for divine transcendence’ (2000: 70). Thus, at least at first, he brackets certain questions that would properly occupy the theologian, such as the existence of God. He does, however, use theological grammars, symbols, and ontological categories, for phenomenological purposes. But if his phenomenology thus finds itself reaching for theological categories as the best available terms with which to describe these experiences of beauty; and, furthermore, if it is understood to be inextricably intertwined with ontology – ‘the impossibility of a complete reduction’ – then it does eventually arrive in quite theological territory, even though it did not start there. One might thus infer that the principle of ‘bracketing’, whether of the world or of the theological, governs the start but not the end of such an enquiry. His thought indicates that phenomenology, by its very nature, overflows the methodological limits which govern its beginning. There is thus a significant sense in which Merleau-Ponty himself makes a ‘theological turn’, though it is one which emerges from his own – recalling Janicaud’s phrase – ‘patient interrogation of the visible’.

A defender of Janicaud’s position might riposte that this all merely reflects the aesthetic form of his articulation, and that it could have been expressed otherwise, in non-theological terms, without a loss of meaning. But that would entail positing a core of metaphysical truth that is distinct from the ‘mere’ surface which eccentrically deploys theological diction. Such a riposte would, of course, be deeply problematic. It would contradict Merleau-Ponty’s careful selection of grammar for descriptive purposes, which Janicaud himself acknowledges: ‘Merleau-Ponty’s way has a most heuristic fragility: it is a moving quest, searching for the very words to approximate the richness of an experience’ (2000: 26). But such a riposte would also be an eminently unphenomenological move, and pointedly so for Janicaud, who closes his essay with the following quotation of Goethe: ‘There is nothing to look for behind the phenomena; they are themselves the doctrine’ (2000: 103).

That Janicaud’s exemplar takes such a turn indicates that the invocation of theology does not automatically entail a breach of the discipline’s principles. It does not indicate, however, that any use of theology within phenomenology should now be immune to critique. It would still be necessary, then, to sift the broader field of practitioners on the basis of this reconfigured boundary. In light of the highly idiosyncratic quality of each of Janicaud’s ‘bad exemplars’, the outcome of this latter process remains something of an open question. One could illustrate some of this
idiosyncrasy by situating a few aspects of Chrétien’s *L’effroi du beau* in relation to Merleau-Ponty.

In this text, Chrétien argues that the experience of beauty has the character of a personal encounter with an ‘other’. This argument begins as a critical dialogue with the works of Lévinas, Sartre, and Martin Heidegger (2011: 7–26). Towards the latter part of his enquiry, however, Chrétien’s ‘other’ increasingly resembles divinity itself (2011: 60–71). My engagement with Merleau-Ponty has underscored the fact that a phenomenological enquiry may indeed find itself broaching theological territory without thereby compromising its legitimacy. Chrétien himself articulates the logic of this transition, based on his interpretation of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, as follows: ‘it is not from our knowledge and preliminary comprehension of the divine that we can discern the beautiful, the wise, and things of this kind, but only from our vision of beauty, of wisdom and of things of the same kind that we can discern the divine’ (2011: 37). Here, Chrétien is evidently more theologically committed than Merleau-Ponty, insofar as he accepts, *a priori*, a connection between beauty and divinity. Yet, by this account, it is the phenomenology of beauty which is seen to fill out the sense of divinity, rather than the converse. This latter trajectory, in which theological reflections emerge from phenomenological attentiveness, is significantly closer to that of Merleau-Ponty. It would seem, therefore, that the reconfigured boundary runs through the middle of Chrétien’s text, and consequently that one cannot simplistically reject or embrace it on purely phenomenological grounds. There is much more that should be said about the interplay of phenomenology and theology with respect to Chrétien’s subtle reflections, and indeed the whole gamut of the ‘theological turn’. Merleau-Ponty’s thought, by exemplifying the coincidence of theology and rigorous phenomenology, opens the way to a fresh engagement with this evidently fertile domain.

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**Notes**

1. On the significance of phenomenology for our understanding of the post-secular, see Staudigl and Alvis (2016).
2. See Maritain (1920: 64); Sevier (2015: 190–1).
3. See Merleau-Ponty (1993a: 124, 126, 129, 141, 142, 144, 145).
4. In-text translations of Chrétien are my own.
5. See Merleau-Ponty (1993a: 147).
6. *Paul Ricoeur: Death and Eternity [English Subtitles]*, 2012, 00:00:39–00:01:27.
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