# Halo of Identity:
# The Significance of First Names and Naming

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> It is not merely a linguistics of proper names which is needed but an erotics as well: names, like voices, like odors, would be the terms of a languor: desire and death: 'the last sigh which remains of things,' says an author of the last century.
>
> Roland Barthes[1]

'What does it mean to name a person, to be given a proper name?' This is not a question often addressed within philosophical literature, and yet, it seems to be a rather important question to pose given the fact that people constantly name other people every time an infant is thrust from the womb into the world. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand not only what it means to name any given thing, but also what it means to use language within this world into which we are thrust. To do this, a connection must be made between the perceptual world into which one is thrust, and the linguistic world in which one becomes both a self and a member through receiving a name. This connection between the world of perception and the world of language is perhaps best examined and explained by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his brief oeuvre, wherein he was constantly grappling with the intersection between these two worlds.

In this essay I attempt to offer a theory regarding the significance of first names with the aid of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language. First, I explain Merleau-Ponty's ontology of language, paying especially close attention to perception and the flesh as the foundations of language. Second, I expound upon Merleau-Ponty's theory of language as thought, exploring the implications this has for language users. Third, and finally, I propose, utilizing Merleau-Ponty's theories, that 'first-naming' is not only significant, but performs a very specific function within language use that implies dynamics of power and identity insofar as the first name not only grants one a specific identity as a language user, but

also directs who that person is and will be through the name's physiog-
nomy and reference to the world.  The name is both a liberation through
identity and a powerful order of limitation through its physiological
and referential bondage.

I.         I do not so much perceive objects as reckon with an environ ment; I seek support
           in my tools, and am at my task rather than confronting it.
                    Maurice  Merleau-Ponty[2]

    If one is to understand language, one must first understand that
upon which language is grounded, for one does not first emerge within
the world as a language user, but rather, as a body that perceives.  As a
body within the world that perceives, one begins with a "*pre-objective*
view which is what we call *being-in-the-world*."[3]  In fact, it is impossible
to imagine being-in-the-world without perception, thereby leading to
what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the "perceptual faith" in the pre-objec-
tive.  Being conscious, i.e., a perceiver, in the world is an openness that
allows one to both be in the world while experiencing the world as a
horizon.[4]  Although some perceptions of the horizon may be false (for
example, in the case of hallucination), each perception belongs to the
same world, entailing our belongingness, through being perceivers, to
the same world.[5]  However, the pre-objective world one both embodies
and is embodied by is a 'mute' world, and, according to Merleau-Ponty,
one is first thrust into a confused world with a "silent consciousness"; a
world "to be thought about."[6]  Just as the perceiver's world before lan-
guage-use is pre-objective, it is also pre-reflective; thereby entailing that
one is nothing more than awareness, i.e., an experience, of the world
through perception.  In order to know the world, to reflect upon the
world and thereby gain knowledge of the world of meaning, one must
make the world 'visible' through the use of speech.[7]  Only through one's
status as "flesh" is one able to reflect upon the world, inserting "speaking
and thinking in the world of silence."[8]  In order to understand how
speaking and thinking are inserted into the world, it is first necessary to
explore the notion of flesh Merleau-Ponty discovers, and upon which he
grounds the advent of language use.
    According to Merleau-Ponty, the human person is composed of
"flesh," which "is not matter, is not mind, is not substance."[9]  Rather,
the flesh is to be thought of as an element, similar to the original four

elements of the Greeks.  Flesh is a substance in the same sense the Greeks considered air, fire, water, and earth; it is both an ontological substrate that is the 'element' from which the human person is composed and the way in which that individual is composed as a body.[10]  Merleau-Ponty refers to the flesh as "a general thing, midway between spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being."[11]  Flesh is first of all a way of existing within the world as a body, but it is also that which allows perception and language.  The body is not simply sensation, according to Merleau-Ponty, but "a way of systematically going towards objects."[12]  As Dillon notes, "Perception is now the anonymous folding back of the flesh of the world onto itself which renders the world visible: it no longer need be conceived dualistically as a relation of immanent subjectivity to transcendent thing."[13]  Flesh is then a mode of contact with the world while being within the world, and it is this interaction with the world actualized through the flesh in the form of the perceiving body that speech is possible.

The form of perception that the individual is, and the world which the individual experiences, constitutes what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the 'world of silence,' which is pre-philosophical and, therefore, pre-reflective.  Only when language is inserted into the 'mute world' is the world made visible to the individual; only at this point does truth become part of the world where only ambiguous, meaningless experience existed before.  This pre-objective experience is akin to Bergson's conception of an "instinctive flow" of "fluid concreteness" before the static representation and abstraction of language.  Such experience is ungraspable, for before language there is no faculty through which to conceptualize and thereby understand the world.[14] The perceptual world becomes visible through language, which is an invisible world.  It is important to note, as Merleau-Ponty does, that the invisible world of language is "*of* this world, that which inhabits the world," and is therefore not separate from the visible world, but rather inextricably connected to it.[15] In fact, "language lives only from silence"; in other words, the invisible world of language is grounded in the ambiguous world of perception that is made visible and therefore less ambiguous by language.[16] The invisible world of language, then, is a world of "being to the second power," "since it speaks *of* being and *of* the world therefore [redoubling] their enigma instead of dissipating it."[17]  Language does

not negate the flowing experience of the perceptual world; it merely frames that world and calls experience forth into the realm of under-standing.

Language is not, however, a *second* world that is ambiguous; this is perhaps one of the most important points Merleau-Ponty makes in his theory of language.  From the world of perception, language is called into being as an attempt to grasp the world one experiences, for the world of *perception* is ambiguous.  It is only through signification through thought that the world, in fact, may be grasped as the truth.[18] This is because "[t]ruth allows itself to be reached only through a sort of dis-tance."  Language is then a movement towards truth, while simulta-neously a distancing from truth.[19]  What this distance leaves the indi-vidual with is not the entirety of truth itself, but rather, a *trace* of mean-ing that leads one towards the truth while organizing meaning through language.[20]  The world of language is the world of thought, and there-fore, an approach towards the world of truth.

II.      The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world.
                 Maurice Merleau-Ponty[21]

For Merleau-Ponty, the word expresses thought, for speech is thought. The speaking subject takes a position within the world that is significant, and therefore, the subject becomes meaningful through lan-guage.[22] Without speech, the world has no meaning, but simply is.  It is speech that introduces and uncovers meaning in the world, thereby en-tailing a movement towards truth.[23] Merleau-Ponty indicates that the ability to introduce thought into the world is because of the individual's 'style' of being-in-the-world.  When speech is introduced into the world through the body, the speaking subject becomes aware, not in the gen-eral sense of perception, but of specific objects in the world as figures upon a field.[24]  As stated in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, language use is a multiplicitous way of "singing" the world, i.e., of bringing the essence, or 'thingness,' of things into the world.[25]

Language is not simply a labeling of objects within the world, but rather, a "double of being," bringing both objects and ideas into the world.[26] This view of language and objects is a dramatic turn in the history of thought, for unlike idealism or empiricism, which depend upon a universal substratum that reveals itself to subjects through ob-

jects, the speaking subject reveals the objects themselves to itself through language. "Thus we refute both intellectualism and empiricism by simply saying that the word has a meaning."[27] In other words, "the meaning inhabits the word, and language 'is not an external accompaniment to intellectual processes.'"[28]

As mentioned above, the advent of language use makes the world visible to the individual in his or her interaction within the world. From this we should recognize that Merleau-Ponty is not concerned with upholding traditional views of the subject-object dichotomy that is formulated as existent apart from experience. Rather, what Merleau-Ponty introduces with his theory of language is an analysis of how meaning is achieved in the world through the individual's interaction within the world. The interaction within the world through language use does not become an appearance of thought within the world, but thought *itself*; the linguistic interaction the individual introduces is itself the body of thought.[29] The traditional subject-object dichotomy is shattered by the claim that thought is not 'internal,' but consists of the contact between the world and words.[30] In order to understand this contact, it is necessary to understand the words which bring thought into the world; therefore, it is necessary to understand what types of language there are.

According to Merleau-Ponty there are two types of language. The first type of language, which is the first experienced, is that of a language already existing. By no means does Merleau-Ponty suggest that each individual language user invents language itself. Rather, the individual is born into a world of language that it must learn. Language is always already a pre-existing "institution" that must be deciphered. The second type of language, which is secondary in terms of experience, is 'authentic' speech. Through speech, i.e., expressive action, the individual posits meaning into the world through signs that have not been used in quite the way the individual uses them. In other words, this second type of language "creates itself in its expressive acts."[31] This is what is also referred to as the " 'languagely' meaning of language" which calls thought into existence from "unspeaking intention."[32] Only through the use of speech can one know what is intended from within mute experience, for speech provides a framework or bracket through which the unimpeded flow of experience is both 'stopped' and conceptualized.[33] Again, thought is called forth from the silent world so that one may grasp experience.

Authentic speech also occurs, according to Merleau-Ponty, because the repetitive use of language eventually leaves words without meaning, thereby causing individuals to 're-express' terminology in a fashion that creates meaning.  The individual re-introduces thought into the world through a creative use of language.[34]  This creative language is a language that "leads us to the things themselves to the precise extent that it is signification before *having* a signification."[35]  Things that words meant at one time, before having their meaning 'effaced,' must once again be brought into the world through thought, i.e., through signification.  As Merleau-Ponty notes, ". . . we cannot conceive of an object or idea that comes into the world without words."[36]  This particular notion of 'creative language' is what will bring significance to 'first-naming' beyond merely calling an object into being; for when one attaches a first name to an individual *person*, one calls forth a subject into the world.  In the next section, it will be shown that Merleau-Ponty develops a subset of the two types of language listed above in order to account for this significant phenomenon regarding the development of 'self.'  Before moving onto a consideration of the significance of first names and naming, let us first consider the implications that Merleau-Ponty's theory of language has on language users themselves.

If we analyze our experience of language, we recognize that language itself is a world that we are embedded within, just as we are embedded within a world of objects.  Over time, given the acquisition of language use, we not only learn what words designate what things, but also actually 'call' things into existence *for us* through the use of language.  Language thereby designates objects as both objects within the world and objects of thought, for our experience does not separate language from thought, but rather presents both as being the same through its organizational mediation through which things become recognizable as specific meaningful entities within our field of perception.

Seemingly, language use grants its user the power to call objects into existence within a solipsist framework.  However, Merleau-Ponty resists falling into such a framework through his insistence upon the interaction of the world of perception and the perceiver as providing a horizon from which language use arises.  This dependence upon the world we perceive undermines the solipsist framework because it exists apart from the speaking subject *in-and-of-itself*.  For Merleau-Ponty, the subject does not exist in-and-of-itself, but rather first exists as merely a

part of the world it perceives.  It is only through the status of being flesh 'folded back upon itself' that the subject emerges within the world of perception because its 'style' of being, i.e., its way of being – its posture within the world - caters to the development of language.  It is through the development of language, i.e., thought, that the subject comes to exist within the world of thought just as other entities exist within the world through the advent of language.  Because the body within the world is a language user, however, there exists a chiasm in which the status as object and the status as subject are inextricably linked.[37]  What Merleau-Ponty has done by indicating this two-fold nature of the body is not formulate a dualist ontology, but rather has revealed how dualism is a misapprehension of the body's two functions designated through its existence within, first, the world of perception as an object, and second, within the world of language as a subject.  This viewpoint therefore leaves the body as silent as the rest of the 'pre-objective' world until it is called into existence as first a thing that perceives, and then as a subject that speaks, through its membership within a community of language.  It is within this community of language that we find the significance of the first name and 'first-naming' in making bodies into participating members of that community.

III.     As has often been said, for the child the thing is not known until it is named, the
         name is the essence of the thing and resides in it on the same footing as its colour
         and form.
                   Maurice Merleau-Ponty[38]


    The human person is born into a world that includes both language and a community of language users.  Upon being thrust into the world, however, the individual does not immediately exist as a member of such a community.  Rather, s/he must become a member of that community through the acquisition of language.  The acquisition of language does not simply involve gaining the ability to *use* language, but also being deemed a member of the community of language users itself.  In other words, one must be named before one is allowed to gain access to the community.

    At the end of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty notes that naming is the visible side of the threat of non-recognition, which is the invisible side of naming.  To name is to "accredit *objectivity*, self-identity,

positivity, plenitude."[39]  Although one may understand this to pertain to objects and thoughts in general, it also pertains specifically to the individual person, whose existence as a 'self' is dependent upon passing through "the detour of names."[40]  Acquiring a name, although acting as an invitation into the community of language users, does not automatically thrust one into the usury of language, meaning that one cannot immediately engage in meaningful communication with others.  One must first engage in Merleau-Ponty's subset of language; what he refers to as *egocentric language*.

Egocentric language is "more a means of self-expression than of communication with other people," according to Merleau-Ponty.[42]  The use of such a language indicates the child's attempt to penetrate the world of language, and therefore the world of thought, through a constant linguistic positing upon the world of perception.  Through egocentric language, the child emerges within the world of language as a 'self,' although at first not distinguishing between itself and others.  This confusion is revealed through "the confusion of pronouns, the predominance of other people's names over his own, etc."[43]  It is the predominance of the other over itself that indicates a two-fold movement within the development of language.  First, the child is attempting to 'make itself known' within the world of language.  Second, the child re-enforces the membership of others within the community through the repetition of their names.  The attempt at grasping onto language through its egocentric use, even to the point of echolalia, with the addition of the child's use of others' names, indicates an initiation into the community of language users.  Not only is this a move into the community, but it is also a movement that requires the power of a name.

The child uses its own name as a self-reference much later than it uses the names of others.  The child's own name becomes, above all, a movement that signifies an attempt to "mark" the child's "place besides others."[44]  In other words, the child makes use of its own name as a play of power in order to become a significant member of the community.  What this utilization of the name reveals is that the name is what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as an "order-word," which is both a command and a social obligation.[45]  The name as order-word removes any possibility of 'absolute individuality,' forcing the named to become a specific type of subject/object within the world.  Merleau-Ponty points this out generally in his statement, "For to name a thing is to tear oneself away from

its individual and unique characteristics to see it as representative of an essence or category."[46]  Just as the object is brought into existence through naming, thereby *becoming* the name, so too the individual *becomes* its name; the name determines what the individual *is*.

IV.      What I can name cannot really prick me.  The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.
                    Roland Barthes

   The word is not simply a label; rather, it carries within it a meaning that is infused into the object which it names.  The word extracts and expresses the "emotional essence" of the object, and therefore, the name itself, through its physiognomy and reference to the world, expresses this same type of meaning when given to the individual.[48,49] The name *itself* is "pregnant with a meaning."[50] The giving of first names not only allows an individual to be 'grasped' as an object of knowledge, but determines what that object of knowledge is through the emotional essence of the name that is delivered onto the individual.
   The practice of first naming is then a kind of *enantimorphosis* because of its determination of the individual.  Deleuze and Guattari define enantimorphosis as

   a regime that involves a hieratic and immutable Master who at every moment legislates by constants, prohibiting or strictly limiting metamorphoses, giving figures clear and stable contours, setting forms in opposition two by two and requiring subjects die in order to pass from one form to the other.[51]

The 'regime' of first naming involves a judgment and type of psychosociological bondage, which sustains the personality and idea of an individual as a s*pecific type of  individual* within the community in which one is named.  Just as "I is an order-word" in a general sense[52], so too is the first name an order-word, but in a much more specific sense.  The first name, when placed within the individual, becomes a dictum that states, "You are this" and "You are not that."
   For example, the girl named 'Madeleine' will be stamped with both the connotations of her name and the affects of the name's physiognomy. The formerly unnamed, ambiguous infant is called into existence

as being associated with the wife of Gide, teacups and madeleines of Proust, gastronomy, and French culture in general and all connotations that are carried with it. In addition is the sound of her name, which is multi-syllabic, and therefore of an upper class, as well as being both 'mad' while 'in line' or 'lean.'  Underneath these considerations are the phonetic connotations of her name that bind her to every word that sounds remotely similar, and the connotations that follow. From the point[53] of naming onward, the girl is not only *named* Madeleine; she *is* (a) Madeleine.

Through Merleau-Ponty's analysis of language, we find that this determination of the individual is necessary. The named person is contained, to a certain degree, by their given name.  However, in order to be a person, which involves being a discernible object and the member of a community, it is necessary that the person is named, and therefore determined.  The act of first naming thereby allows the freedom of personhood through its determination, just as the mute world of perception allows the cacophony of thought and just as the body is granted its intentionality through its status as flesh within the world.

*Notes*

[1] Barthes, R. *Barthes by Barthes*. Trans. Richard Howard. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1994.  51.

[2] Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Smith, C. (New York: The Humanities Press), 1962. 416.

[3] Ibid., 79.

[4] Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Ed. Lefort, C. Trans. Lingis, A. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 1968. 100.

[5] Ibid., 41.

[6] *Phenomenology of Perception*. 404.

[7] Dillon, M.C. *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology, 2nd ed.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 1997. 186.

[8] *The Visible and the Invisible*. 144-5.

[9] Ibid., 139.

[10] Alphonso Lingis explains Merleau-Ponty's use of the term element as "a medium where every particular position in a space and a time generalizes itself into a schema engendering a specific range of variations." [Lingis, A. *Foreign Bodies*. (New York: Routledge), 1994. 14.].

[11] Ibid., 139.

[12] Merleau-Ponty, M. *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*. Trans. Silverman, H. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 1973. 31.

[13] *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology, 2nd Ed.*, 213.

[14] Levin, H. *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1963. 395.

[15] *The Visible and the Invisible*. 144-5, 151.

[16] Ibid., 126.

[17] Ibid., 96.

[18] Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Prose of the World*. Ed. Lefort, C. Trans. O'Neill, J. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 1973. 125.

[19] Ibid., 129.

[20] Merleau-Ponty, M. "On the Phenomenology of Language," *Signs.* Trans. R. McCleary. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 1964. 89.

[21] *Phenomenology of Perception*. 184.

[22] Barral, M. *Merleau-Ponty: The Role of the Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations*. (Pittsburgh: Duquense University Press), 1965. 195.

[23] *Prose of the World*. 129.

[24] Ibid., 98.

[25] *Phenomenology of Perception*. 90.

[26] *Prose of the World*. 5-6.

[27] *Phenomenology of Perception*. 177.

[28] Ibid., 193.

[29] Ibid., 178, 182.

[30] Ibid., 183.

[31] *The Prose of the World*. 10.

[32] "On the Phenomenology of Language," *Signs*. 88.

[33] Ibid., 90.

[34] *Prose of the World*. 36.

[35] Ibid., 14.

[36] Ibid., 5-6.

[37] *The Visible and the Invisible*. 137.

[38] *Phenomenology of Perception*. 177-8.

[39] *The Visible and the Invisible*. 162.

[40] Ibid., 162.

[41] *Consciousness and the Acquisition of  Language*. 53.

[42] Ibid., 53.

[43] Ibid., 37.

[44] *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*. 38.

[45] Deleuze, G. and Felix Guattari. "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Language." *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. B. Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1987. 79.

[46] *Phenomenology of Perception*. 176.

[47] Barthes, R. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* Trans. R. Howard. (New York: Hill & Wang), 1981. 51.

[48] Ibid., 187.

[49] *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology, 2nd Edition*. 189.

[50] "On the Phenomenology of Language." *Signs.* 88.

[51] "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Language." *A Thousand Plateaus*. 107.

[52] "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Language." *A Thousand Plateaus*. 84.

[53] One may consider this as a *point de capiton*, a "quilting point," wherein one is pierced with a name that is thereby attached.